“MY MASTER CALLS ME”: AUTHORITY AND LOYALTY IN
KING LEAR

*KING LEAR* depicts a crisis of royal authority, but it also illustrates ways in which a king’s subjects can respond to such a crisis. As Lear falls from power, his subjects must decide whether to preserve their loyalty to him in spite of his adversities or jettison that loyalty and attach themselves to the new authorities who replace him. As events unfold, the characters in the play sort themselves into two groups. There are some who view Lear’s kingly authority as defeasible; that is to say, they view his authority as something that can be forfeited, annulled, or given away. There are other characters who view Lear’s authority as indefeasible; that is, they see Lear’s authority as something innate and inalienable.

Goneril and Regan view their father’s political authority as defeasible. They see it as something that can be given away — and that Lear has, in fact, given away. Goneril criticizes her father as an “idle old man, / That still would manage those authorities / That he hath given away” (1.3.16-18). Regan speaks the same language. When Lear moans, “I gave you all,” Regan shoots back, “And in good time you gave it” (2.4.249-50). For Goneril and Regan, as well as other characters in the play, political authority is conceptualized as something defeasible — something that does not persistently adhere in a person but can be transferred from one person to another.

Those who view authority as something defeasible are prepared to accept radical revisions in terms of the status and prestige accorded to individual persons over time. Confronted with Goneril’s servant Oswald, Lear feels that he is not being treated with sufficient respect. He challenges Oswald, demanding, “Who am I, sir?” Oswald replies, “My lady’s father” (1.4.78-79). Lear is infuriated by this response. Although he has delegated the day-to-day responsibilities of government to his daughters, he expects to be acknowledged as a royal figure and treated with residual reverence. Oswald, however, does not oblige. Although Oswald never explains his views, remarks like this make it clear that he takes a strictly positional view of authority: he believes that authority adheres in an office or position, rather than in a person. He views Lear as a man who has given away the royal authority he once possessed, and who is, therefore, nothing more than “my lady’s father” (Shupack 86; Schalkwyk 228-31).
When Oswald refers to Lear as “my lady’s father,” Kent intervenes. He trips Oswald, calls him a “base football player” (1.4.86), and threatens to “teach [him] differences” (1.4.89). It is entirely appropriate that it should be Kent who springs to Lear’s defense at this moment, for it is Kent, more than anyone else in the play, who is guided by a conception of Lear as someone who is inherently different from other men, someone who possesses an innate, indefeasible authority. After tripping Oswald, Kent offers his services to Lear:

\[\begin{align*}
Lear. & \quad \text{What wouldst thou?} \\
Kent. & \quad \text{Service.} \\
Lear. & \quad \text{Who wouldst thou serve?} \\
Kent. & \quad \text{You.} \\
Lear. & \quad \text{Dost thou know me, fellow?} \\
Kent. & \quad \text{No, sir; but you have that in your countenance which I would fain call master.} \\
Lear. & \quad \text{What's that?} \\
Kent. & \quad \text{Authority. (1.4.22-30)}
\end{align*}\]

Kent sees Lear exuding an aura of authority — something Oswald cannot see. It is, in fact, remarkable that Kent should be able to detect an aura of authority at this juncture, for, by this point, Lear has begun to lose much of his everyday authority over those around him. Goneril has just told her servants not to worry about pleasing Lear: “Put on what weary negligence you please, / You and your fellows. . . . If you come slack of former services, / You shall do well” (1.3.9-12). Lear’s own knights have noticed a change in his reception, and not for the better. One of them tells Lear, “to my judgment your Highness is not entertain’d with that ceremonious affection as you were wont” (1.4.57-59). At a time when Lear looks to most observers like a man whose authority is on the wane, Kent insists he still has a special aura of authority, an authority that is not merely an artifact of his position but is innate, natural, indefeasible. According to Kent, Lear has it — and he can’t lose it, even if he himself tries to give it away (Schalkwyk 225-26).

Later in the same scene, Kent gives Lear a summary of his skills, adding “the best of me is diligence” (1.4.35). By this point he has already demonstrated his diligence and dedication by returning in disguise to serve the king who had banished him. He gives additional proofs of his diligence and dedication in the remainder of the play. He stays with Lear on the heath, in the storm, and in the hovel. He preserves his loyalty while Lear suffers a physical and mental breakdown. Kent continues to address Lear as “my lord,” “my liege,” and,
most characteristically, "my master," or "my noble master." He never abandons Lear and never ceases to refer to him in terms that recognize his authority as a king.

Kent is loyalty personified, and in depicting his loyalty to his king Shakespeare drew on political concepts of divine right that were current in his own day. It was, of course, anachronistic for him to do so. After all, King Lear is a set in a pre-Christian society. The characters in the play speak of "the gods." Lear swears by Jupiter, Kent by Juno (2.4.21-22). The concepts and practices of divine right belong to a later, Christian phase of European history. They are out of place in a play set in pagan Britain. And yet they are there. A clear proof of this occurs when Regan seizes Gloucester and demands to know why he has aided Lear. Gloucester replies defiantly:

Because I would not see thy cruel nails  
Pluck out his poor old eyes, nor thy fierce sister  
In his anointed flesh [rash] boarish fangs. (3.7.56-58)

For our purposes, the key word in this speech is anointed. The concept of a king as an anointed being was one aspect of the larger philosophy of divine right. British monarchs were anointed by bishops as part of their coronation ceremonies, in order to show that they were God’s deputies on earth. James I had been anointed at his coronation. So had Queen Elizabeth before him. The word "anointed" is like the tip of an iceberg. It is meaningful by itself, but it also alerts us to the existence of something larger below the surface. It is an indication that Shakespeare drew on seventeenth-century concepts of divine right to characterize the political views of Lear’s subjects.

We usually think of divine right and the debates surrounding it as phenomena of the later seventeenth and the early eighteenth century. Certainly, divine right concepts were most intensely debated in the post-1689 era, after the deposition of James II. James and the exiled Stuarts claimed to have an indefeasible hereditary right to the throne. Those who replaced them on the throne — first William and Mary and later the Hanoverians — claimed that the Stuarts had ruled by a defeasible right, a right which James II had forfeited through misrule in the late 1680s. But these rival concepts of right were not developed in the 1680s. They had been part of British political discourse for more than a century before the constitutional crisis of 1688-89 (Mahlberg 49-51).
In England divine right ideas can be traced back to the reign of
Elizabeth and, indeed, to the earliest years of Protestantism. In Scot-
land, indefeasible right was championed by Bishop John Leslie, while
the rival concept of defeasible right was set out by George Buchan-
an, particularly in his De Juri Regni apud Scotos (1579). Buchan-
an was James I’s tutor and made a valiant attempt to convert the young prince
to his political views, but James proved to be a refractory pupil. In
The True Lawe of Free Monarchies (1598) and Basilikon Doron (1599,
1603), James argued, contra Buchanan, “that monarchy is divinely or-
dained, that hereditary right is indefeasible, that kings are accountable
to God alone and that non-resistance and passive obedience to a mon-
arch are the direct commandments of God” (Quarmby 7). During the
eyear of his reign in England, when King Lear was written and
performed, James was actively promoting these divine right ideas.

James was not the only person who believed in divine right. Many
of his subjects also accepted it. Howard Erskine-Hill has pointed out
that Britons of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century were,
on the whole, no less committed to the doctrine of hereditary indefe-
asible right than their descendants of the late seventeenth century,
“though the events of mid-century [i.e., the Civil War and the estab-
lishment of the Republic] may have sharpened royalist ideology for the
later decades.” (Erskine-Hill, Poetry, 29-45, 253; Clark, passim).

Certainly Shakespeare was familiar with divine right concepts by
the time he sat down to write King Lear. He had produced memorable
blank-verse expositions of the doctrine of indefeasible right in Richard
II, written c. 1595, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth. In that play,
Shakespeare has Richard describe his own indefeasible right to rule:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Not all the water in the rough rude sea} \\
\text{Can wash the balm off from an anointed king;} \\
\text{The breath of worldly men cannot depose} \\
\text{The deputy elected by the Lord. (3.2.54-57)} \\
\end{align*}
\]

Richard’s claim to an indefeasible right is upheld by the church, in the
person of the Bishop of Carlisle. In the play, Carlisle challenges the
king’s rebellious subjects:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{What subject can give sentence on his king?} \\
\text{And who sits here that is not Richard’s subject? (4.1.121-22)} \\
\end{align*}
\]

As Samuel Johnson noted, these passages demonstrate that Shake-
speare was familiar with the concept of indefeasible right and that
his familiarity with the concept dated back to the reign of Elizabeth
(Johnson, 7.434, 446; Davis).\textsuperscript{5}

The notion that, as Richard puts it, "not all the water in the rough rude sea / Can wash the balm off from an anointed king" is put to the test, in a very literal way, in King Lear. Lear is turned out in a great storm and washed, to the point where most of his former subjects eventually conclude that the balm of kingship has been washed away. They no longer recognize Lear as king. Kent, however, is an exception. Having pledged his loyalty to Lear, he preserves it. Storms and straw, madness and nakedness, physical fatigue and intellectual collapse — none of these matter to Kent. There is, literally, no situation in which Lear can be placed that will cause him to seem un-kingly to Kent because Kent views Lear as inherently kingly.

Kent is actually more consistent in his insistence on Lear's authority than Lear himself. After his experiences on the heath, Lear begins to question the basis of his own authority, and indeed of authority in general. While he sat on the throne, he may have viewed his authority as innate; or, perhaps, he simply took it for granted, without thinking about it at all. After his tribulations, he comes to see that position played a role. Many of his subjects obeyed him because he was in a position of authority, and many of those same people ceased to obey him when he was no longer in that position. In the later scenes of the play, Lear generalizes from his experiences and articulates a political theory that is unillusioned, even cynical, in its emphasis on the importance of position. In fact, he begins to speak as if position explained everything. "A dog's obeyed in office," he says at 4.6.159. "See how yond justice rails upon yond simple thief?" he asks Gloucester at 4.6.150. "Change, places, and handy-dandy, which is the justice and which is the thief?" Kent is not present for these speeches, but we can be confident he would not accept Lear's new vision of the world. Kent does not accept a positional view of authority. If you switched Lear with a beggar, Kent would still follow Lear. In fact, something very similar happens in the play: Lear is turned out to live with the beggars, and yet Kent persists in his loyalty. Shakespeare's Richard II and Carlisle present eloquent theoretical expositions of divine right theory, but Kent should be recognized as setting forth an equally impressive practical demonstration of the doctrine. He regulates his conduct, moment to moment, in accordance with the conception of innate, indefeasible kingly authority articulated by Richard and Carlisle.

In his inflexible adherence to Lear, Kent is the very opposite of the Vicar of Bray, who is so adept at accommodating himself, chameleon-like, to all changes of regime. He is at the opposite end of the flexibility spectrum from Lyndaraxa in Dryden's Conquest of Grenada, who
exhibits a startlingly pure form of opportunism, changing her loyalty minute-by-minute and recognizing as king only that ruler who is able to attract — and retain — the favors of fortune:

A King is he whom Fortune still does bless:  
He is a King, who does a Crown possess.  
(Conquest of Grenada, Part One, 5.1.44-45, in Dramatick Works, 3:81)

Kent can usefully be compared to the nonjurors and Jacobites of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The nonjurors were men who refused to accept the deposition of James II. They declined to swear loyalty oaths to King William and preserved a de jure loyalty to the exiled king and his successors. The nonjurors looked down on "compliers" who set aside the loyalty they had pledged to James II. Such men, the nonjuror George Hickes wrote, "like to summer Flies . . . make a great show and buzz[z] for [their] King in fair weather . . . [but] in the long Night-time or Winter of Adversity . . . say, If he cannot defend himself, let him go." Some of the nonjurors and Jacobites were remarkably stubborn, continuing to uphold the Stuarts' claim into the 1740s and 50s, nothing daunted by decades of defeat and exile.

The similarity between Kent and the nonjurors is not just an accidental similarity. Shakespeare, writing at the beginning of the seventeenth century, drew on the same body of political thought the nonjurors appealed to eighty years later in response to the events of 1688-89. Shakespeare drew on this body of political thought for the purposes of characterization, to depict the unhesitating loyalty of Kent; the nonjurors relied on the same ideas in real life, using them as guides when responding to actual historical events. One of the central ideas of this essay is that we will see Kent more clearly and understand him more fully if we understand him as a character who is animated by seventeenth-century divine-right concepts. Kent can — and, I think, should — be seen as sort of proto-nonjuror, animated by the same ideas of loyalty and indefeasible right that sustained the nonjurors later in the century.

In the opening scene of the play, Kent declares that he is willing to sacrifice his own life to defend Lear:

My life I never held but as [a] pawn
To wage against thine enemies; ne'er [fear'd] to lose it,
Kent proves his dedication to Lear throughout the remainder of the play. He abandons his public identity as a nobleman and risks his life to ensure the safety of the king who has banished him. That would be impressive in itself, but Shakespeare does not leave matters there. He shows that Kent literally *wears himself out* in Lear’s service. In a series of striking passages in Act 5, the playwright goes out of his way to describe Kent’s health decaying as his master, Lear, careens towards his tragic end.

The first reference to Kent’s failing health occurs in Act 5, Scene 3, where Edgar describes an encounter with Kent that took place perhaps an hour or two earlier. Edgar explains that he was still weeping for the death of his father, Gloucester, when Kent appeared and told him a heart-rending story about his experiences with Lear:

\[
\ldots \text{Whilst I} \\
\text{Was big in clamor came there in a man,} \\
\text{Who, having seen me in my worst estate [i.e., as “Poor Tom”],} \\
\text{Shunn’d my abhorr’d society; but then finding} \\
\text{Who ‘twas that so endur’d, with his strong arms} \\
\text{He fastened on my neck and bellowed out} \\
\text{As he’d burst heaven; threw [himself] on my father;} \\
\text{Told the most piteous tale of Lear and him [Kent]} \\
\text{That ever ear received, which in recounting,} \\
\text{His grief grew puissant and the strings of life} \\
\text{Began to crack. Twice then the trumpets sounded,} \\
\text{And there I left him tranç’d. (5.3.208-19)}
\]

In recounting the “piteous” tale of Lear’s suffering and physical collapse, Kent is almost overcome himself. He ends up in a trance, which Edgar diagnoses as grief-induced and life-threatening: “the strings of life / Began to crack.” Kent is obviously not well at this point, but Edgar cannot stay and nurse him back to health. He must answer the trumpet and confront Edmund. Therefore, he leaves Kent in his trance.

Kent recovers from his trance and returns to the stage shortly after Edgar finishes his report. He explains that he has returned for a specific reason: “I am come / To bid my king and master aye good night” (5.3.235-36). Here Kent seems to interpret his recent fit in the same way as Edgar, as an indication of his own impending death. He believes that he is going to die soon, but he is unwilling to die without first taking leave of his master, Lear. He therefore gathers his strength and marches back to the main theater of action.
Shortly after Kent arrives, Lear himself returns to the stage, with Cordelia dead in his arms (5.3.256). The death of Cordelia is too much for the old king, and he dies by her side. Albany addresses Kent and Edgar and suggests that the two of them rule the kingdom jointly: "Friends of my soul, you twain / Rule in this realm, and the gor'd state sustain" (5.3.320-21). Kent declines Albany's offer, explaining, "I have a journey, sir, shortly to go: / My master calls me, I must not say no" (5.3.322-23).

The "journey" Kent speaks of is apparently the journey to the next world. The "master" he hears calling him can only be Lear. In a Christian setting, "master" might refer to God, but in the pagan world of Lear it probably does not. Moreover, as we have seen, Kent habitually calls Lear "master." Just a few lines earlier, he had announced his intent to bid his "king and master aye good night." Kent says that he hears Lear calling him — evidently from beyond the grave. He has never said no to Lear in the past, and he is not going to start now. I noted earlier that Kent’s loyalty to Lear persists, undisturbed by changes in Lear’s situation. He continues to view Lear as his "king and master," even when Lear is out in the storm or ranting in the hovel. Here we see that he continues to view Lear as his king and master even when Lear is dead.

Shakespeare depicts Kent as an exemplar of service unto death, and even beyond the grave. He gives us a Kent whose devotion to and identification with his master are so intense and so complete that he has no interest in — perhaps even no conception of — a life outside of service to Lear. What would Kent do if he lived on in a world without Lear? How would he understand his existence? What would be his purpose in life, his raison d’être? Would it not be better, more fitting, to follow his master into the "undiscovered country"? Surely it would be. However, to describe things in this way makes it sound as if Kent were reasoning all of this out, making a series of rational decisions.

In fact, Kent seems to experience Lear’s defeat and death as a physical crisis rather than as an intellectual dilemma. Edgar says that Kent "told the... piteous tale of Lear... which in recounting / His grief grew puissant, and the strings of life / Began to crack." I think it is no accident that Kent has his attack at the same time he tells the story. Shakespeare seems to want us to believe that the story has precipitated the illness. Kent’s fit is not only post hoc; it is also propter hoc. His identification with his master is so intense that he cannot tell the story of Lear’s sufferings without being overwhelmed with grief, to the point where his own health appears to be in jeopardy. For Kent, the sufferings of Lear are physically painful, even life-threatening. Shakespeare
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is encouraging us to think of Kent as someone whose sense of self is utterly defined by service to Lear, as someone who is linked to Lear, not only politically, but also psychologically, and not only psychologically but also physically — to the point where his own life force actually ebbs in tandem with the life force of his master. The relationship between Kent and Lear seems to be symbiotic and psychosomatic at the same time. When Lear grows exhausted and his life force begins to ebb, Kent also begins to lag. When Kent describes Lear’s heart-breaking experiences on the heath and in the hovel, the “strings” of his own life begin to crack. When Lear dies, Kent feels his own life force ebbing and declares that he will soon follow his master into the afterlife.

In this context, the chess metaphor Kent employs at the beginning of the play, when he speaks of his life as “a pawn,” has a certain rightness about it. In chess the king is the essential piece. The instant the king is lost, the other pieces on the board are rendered useless, powerless, defunct. This is more or less how Kent feels about himself once Lear is lost. He feels — and feels is the right word, much better than thinks — not only that he has no purpose but that he has no life force remaining.

We have seen that Kent has an essentialist idea of kingliness. For him, the king is the king, no matter what. Kingliness is an inalienable trait: it is part of Lear’s essence. To a certain degree, Kent exhibits the same essentialist outlook in his relations with other people. He has a tendency to think of people as remaining the same in essence, or nature, despite changes in station. This attitude is visible, for example, in Kent’s relations with Oswald. In 2.2, Oswald complains that Kent is mistreating him for no apparent reason:

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\begin{align*}
Osw. & \quad \text{Why dost thou use me thus? I know thee not.} \\
Kent. & \quad \text{Fellow, I know thee.} \\
Osw. & \quad \text{What dost thou know me for?} \\
Kent. & \quad \text{A knave, a rascal, an eater of broken meats; a base, proud, shallow, beggarly, three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy worsted-stocking knave; a lily-liver’d, action-taking knave, whoreson, glass-gazing, superserviceable finical rogue; one-trunk-inheriting slave; one that wouldst be a bawd in way of good service, and art nothing but the composition of a knave, beggar, coward, pander, and the son and heir of a mungrel bitch; one whom I will beat into [clamorous] whining, if thou deni’st the least syllable of thy addition. (2.2.11-24)}.
\end{align*}
\]
A student once told me that Kent’s verbal attacks on Oswald reminded him of “playing the dozens.” When two men play the dozens, they trade insults and riff on a particular set phrase in a competition to establish verbal superiority. I was delighted that the student was able to make such a connection. However, after some thought, I decided that the copious name-calling Kent indulges in has a crucial difference with playing the dozens. When two combatants line up to play the dozens, there is an assumption of initial equality, with superiority to be decided in the combat des mots. In King Lear, by contrast, Kent in no way sees Oswald as his equal. In fact, his abuse of Oswald is thoroughly couched in class terms. Although Oswald achieves some upward mobility in the play, Kent refuses to see him as anything but a contemptible serving man. Earlier he called Oswald a “base football player.” Here he calls him “base” and “beggarly.” Oswald is a “whoreson,” or, in canine terms, the son of “a [mongrel] bitch,” not a purebred nobleman. Kent says that Oswald has worsted stockings (instead of the nobleman’s silk) and only three suits — the maximum number a Jacobean serving man would have been allowed in the space of a year. He describes Oswald as an eater of “broken meats” (scraps, leftovers) whose inheritance from his low-born parents can be easily packed in a single trunk. Oswald comes from nothing and, for Kent, he is — and always will be — nothing.

Even the most impressive-sounding detail in Oswald’s “addition” turns out to conceal a class-based slight. Kent calls Oswald a “hundred-pound knave.” A hundred pounds would have been a considerable sum in 1606, much more than a Jacobean serving man could be expected to have to his name. This might lead us to think of Oswald as a person of more substance than would otherwise appear. However, scholars have pointed out that this is probably a reference to the sale of knighthoods during the reign of James I. To raise money, James sold knighthoods to social-climbing Englishmen — typically, for a hundred pounds (Thompson 26-27). Kent is contemptuous of Oswald in the same way that that Jacobean gentlemen from ancient families were contemptuous of these newly-minted, hundred-pound knights. Oswald may think of himself as a man rising in importance. Kent clearly does not. Once a king, always a king; once a serving man, always a serving man.

Later in the same scene, Kent explains that he is furious “that such a slave as this [i.e., Oswald] should wear a sword, / Who wears no honesty” (2.2.72-73). The sword was, of course, one of the badges of a nobleman. In Shakespeare’s day there were sumptuary laws intended to police the boundary between nobleman and commoner, to make
sure that upstarts could not pass themselves off as genuine noblemen. Kent’s abuse of Oswald is inspired by the same aristocratic concerns that led to the passing of these sumptuary laws. Kent is giving voice to his dislike for upstarts and his desire to “teach them differences.” For Kent, it is intolerable that Oswald wears a sword and dresses as a gentleman when he lacks the real attributes of a gentleman. For Kent, the sword at Oswald’s side is an infuriating reminder that the time is out of joint.

Kent has another closely related reason for disliking Oswald. He explains that Oswald is a servant of a particular type, “a superserviceable... rogue,” who would do anything to serve his master and would even “be a bawd in way of good service.” Kent believes that such servants are dangerous:

    ... Such smiling rogues as these,
    Like rats, oft bite the holy cords atwain
    ... Smooth every passion,
    That in the natures of their lords rebel;
    Being oil to fire, snow to the colder moods;
    [Renege.] affirm, and turn their halcyon beaks
    With every [gale] and vary of their masters,
    Knowing naught (like dogs) but following. (2.2.73-80)

Again, this is much more than just random abuse. Kent has an ideal of true courtly service, which can be reconstructed from his description of false service. He believes that noblemen such as himself are, necessarily, the best advisors for a king. Such men have the courage, the stature, and the financial resources to stand up to a king, to speak the truth, and to argue against a course of action that seems unwise, as Kent himself does in the opening scene of the play. When Kent steps forward to try to dissuade Lear from disinheriting Cordelia, Lear cautions him: “The bow is bent and drawn[,] make from the shaft” (1.1.143). Kent refuses to be intimidated, however:

    Think’st thou that duty shall have dread to speak
    When power to flattery bows? To plainness honor’s bound.
    When majesty falls to folly. (1.1.147-49)

Kent not only expresses his own view that Lear is acting foolishly, he also makes it clear that he is acting in accordance with Duty, embracing his responsibility as a good counselor to the king.
When Kent speaks of Oswald as one of those “superserviceable . . . smiling rogues” who follow unthinkingly, “like dogs,” he is suggesting that a social climber like Oswald cannot possibly be a good advisor in the same way that he himself can. A nobleman like Kent has independent means. He has resources he can fall back on if he is driven from court, as Kent is in the opening scene. But a man like Oswald has no such means. Such a man owes his position, his power, and his money to his master. He has nothing of his own to fall back on — nothing beyond what he receives from his master. What are the chances that such a man will attempt the perilous but sometimes necessary task of dissuading his master from an unwise course of action? Is it not more likely that such a man will follow his master’s cues, sniffing which way the winds are blowing and turning like a weathercock, as Kent says? What are the chances that such a servant will attempt to calm his master down when he is transported by fiery anger? Is it not more likely that such a man will add fuel to the fire?

Kent distinguishes between service of the sort he himself offers and superserviceability, which entails a willingness to do anything to please one’s master, even if it means being “a bawd in way of good service.” It is because Kent has such a well-articulated idea of the superserviceable subject and the perils of surrounding oneself with such men that his hatred for Oswald ramps up so quickly, even though he barely knows Oswald. “Why dost thou use me thus?” Oswald asks in bewilderment. “I know thee not.” Kent replies, “Fellow, I know thee.” In a way, both men are correct. Kent does not know Oswald personally, but he does claim to know what sort of person Oswald is. He knows the type and identifies Oswald as an instance of the type. Oswald is an example of a type of servant Kent cannot abide. He is a social climber, a cringer, a fawner, a sycophant, a weathercock, a yes-man. Kent detests men of this sort. He views them as pseudo-noblemen, but he also recognizes that these upstarts threaten to displace the true nobles like himself at court with their pleasing but dangerous flattery and their perpetual nodding of agreement. Kent is acutely aware of the danger that bad counselors may drive out good counselors.

Kent’s hatred for Oswald seems inexplicable to characters who have different conceptions of loyalty and authority. Oswald himself is baffled by it, as we have seen, and so is Cornwall. At one point Cornwall tries to figure out why Kent has attacked Oswald. “What did he do to you?” Cornwall asks Kent. “Why dost thou call him knave? What is his fault?” (2.2.71,89). Cornwall mistakes the issue. He tries to identify a specific action that Oswald has committed that has angered Kent, but the clash has to do not with specific actions but with overarching
conceptions of service. Kent’s outrage is, as Paul Delaney has written, “the outrage of a member of a hereditary class that sees its privileges devalued and its ideals of loyalty superseded” (434). Kent sums up his feelings for Oswald in two lines: “No contraries hold more Antipathy / Than I and such a knave” (2.2.87-88). A modern English equivalent would be, “I hate that man — and everything he stands for.”

The Fool’s views on authority and loyalty are interesting and require some analysis. If we judge the Fool by what he says to Kent, we will probably conclude that he is a strong proponent of defeasible right and “changing with the times.” However, if we judge him by his actions, we may reach a very different conclusion.

The Fool first addresses Kent after Kent has tripped Oswald and Lear has given Kent money in earnest of his service.

Fool. Let me hire him too, here’s my coxcomb.
    [Offering Kent his cap.]

Lear. How now, my pretty knave? How dost thou?

Fool. Sirrah, you were best take my coxcomb.
    [Kent.] Why, [Fool]?

Fool. Why? For taking one’s part that’s out of favour. Nay, and [if] thou canst not smile as the wind sits, thou’lt catch cold shortly. There, take my coxcomb. Why, this fellow hath banish’d two on’s daughters, and did the third a blessing against his will. If thou follow him, thou must needs wear my coxcomb. (1.4.95-105)

Here the Fool articulates the logic of the political realist. From a worldly-wise point of view, it is foolish to preserve one’s allegiance to one who is out of favor. The trick is to “smile as the wind sits.” Anyone who follows Lear in his current condition is a fool and deserves to wear the Fool’s cap, the coxcomb.

The Fool makes the same point a little later in the play, when he finds Kent in the stocks. Kent is surprised to discover that the King is accompanied by only a few men and asks, “How chance the King comes with so small a number?” (2.4.63). The Fool’s reply is memorable:

Fool. And [if] thou hadst been set i’ th’ stocks for that question thou’dst well deserv’d it.
Kent. Why, Fool?
Fool. We’ll set thee to school to an ant, to teach thee there’s no laboring i’ th’ winter. All that follow their noses are led by their eyes

71
but blind men, and there's not a nose among twenty but can smell
him that's stinking. Let go thy hold when a great wheel runs down a
hill, lest it break thy neck with following; but the great one that goes
upward, let him draw thee after. (2.4.64-74)

The Fool suggests that Kent is being obtuse, for anyone can tell that
Lear's star is in decline, and that his servants are abandoning him
for this reason. When a great wheel goes downhill, the sensible thing
to do is to let go. The Vicar of Bray would not need to be told this.
Neither would Lyndaraxa. But Kent is impervious to such common-
sense reasoning. He will not let go of the wheel. His acceptance of the
philosophy of indefeasible right prevents him from thinking opportu-
nistically and makes him ask questions that strike others as preposter-
osously sophomoric. His ideas about innate kingliness will not allow him
to see things with the eye of the political realist.

In his taunts and jibes, the Fool often seems to be articulating a
positional theory of political authority. He tells Lear, "now thou art an
O without a figure. I am better than thou art now:[;] I am a fool, thou
art nothing" (1.4.192-94). In this case, the vehicle of the metaphor is
mathematics, and particularly the concept of place value. Numbers
have both intrinsic value and place value. A 6 is larger than a 5, un-
less the 5 stands in the tens' place, with another digit following, in
which case 50 > 6. No number illustrates this more clearly than zero.
On its own, zero has no value; it has value only if it has another num-
ber (a "figure") standing beside it, as in numbers like 50 and 100. By
calling Lear an 'O without a figure" the Fool seems to be suggesting
that Lear's potency and authority were due entirely to his position,
which he foolishly abdicated, and the support of those who stood beside
him, who have now abandoned him. A zero without other digits beside it
is nothing — a word that reverberates throughout the play. A king on his
throne, surrounded by his subjects, is powerful. Out of place, he is nothing.

The Fool has no illusions about the purity of human motivations. At one point he reminds Lear that fathers who wish to see their
children kind and attentive should take care to keep their wallets full:

Fathers that wear rags
Do make their children blind,
But fathers that bear bags [money bags]
Shall see their children kind. (2.4.48-51)

Nor can servants be relied upon to persevere in their service in times
of trouble:
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That sir which serves and seeks for gain,
And follows but for form,
Will pack when it begins to rain
And leave thee in the storm. (2.4.78-81)

This quatrain is, as William Zak has noted, a “prophetic jingle” (63). The Fool makes an accurate prediction of what does, in fact, happen to Lear later in the play. Most of Lear’s knights turn out to be fair-weather followers. They “pack when it begins to rain” and leave Lear “in the storm.”

Up to this point, the Fool has delivered a witty, rhyming description of the cynical realism espoused by many characters in the play; and, up to this point, we might think that he accepts this outlook himself. However, the next four lines introduce an important new consideration and are crucial for our understanding of the Fool:

  But I will tarry; the fool will stay,
   And let the wise man fly.
  The knave turns fool that runs away;
   The fool no knave, perdie. (2.4.82-85)

The third line of this quatrain is a much-discussed textual crux, and various emendations have been suggested. Samuel Johnson suggested that the speech would make more sense if the words fool and knave were swapped in both the third and fourth lines: “The fool turns knave, that runs away; / The knave no fool” (Johnson 8:678).

My feeling is that Johnson’s emendation for the third line is excellent and should be accepted, but his emendation for the fourth line is unnecessary and should therefore be set aside. The general sense of the passage is, I think, tolerably clear, even without the proposed emendations. The Fool is distinguishing himself from the “wise men” who are abandoning Lear. He makes a distinction between fools on the one hand and knaves on the other, and a parallel distinction between folly and wisdom. If one is a “wise man” — in the sense of following “the wisdom of the world” — one will understand that Lear has lost his authority and promptly abandon him. But to do this — to abandon the king in his hour of crisis — would be a knavish, morally objectionable thing to do, and the Fool states that he himself will not do this: “I will tarry; the fool will stay.” What the Fool is doing is setting out his own position and pleading not to be one of those “wise” men who serve only “for gain” and pack it in when it begins to rain (Bevington 128-29).
Johnson clearly understood the passage in this way. His emendations to the third line make this clear. "The fool turns knave, that runs away": that is, what makes a person a knave is running away when things take a turn for the worse; thus, a Fool who abandoned his master in time of crisis would be making a knave of himself. 

Johnson's emendation for line 4 also makes sense. "The knave no fool": that is, the worldly-wise knave is no fool; he knows when it is time to run away and save himself. However, this emendation is not necessary, because the original line makes perfect sense, too. "The fool no knave": that is, the Fool is not a knave; he will not run away. Here the Fool is apparently referring to himself and repeating the promise he made in the first line of the quatrains. I will not run away, he says in the first line; I may be a fool, but at least I am not a knave, he says in the fourth. These two remarks are logically intertwined because the way a man proves he is not a knave is by not running away. In short, I believe that the existing reading for the fourth and final line of the quatrains is preferable to Johnson's rewritten version because it is more consistent with the overall spirit of the quatrains, which I would describe as the spirit of promise and self-definition. The Fool is taking a stand in this quatrains. He is making a pledge regarding his future conduct. He is promising to stick around and not indulge in the knavishness of running away, and he seals his pledge with an oath. "perdie," derived from the French, "par Dieu" (Variorum 145).

The "no knavery" speech forces us to re-evaluate our assumptions about the Fool. Prior to this speech, it seemed that the Fool was criticizing Kent for perseverence in his loyalty and promoting hard-headed realism as a sensible alternative. But the "no knavery" speech forces us to look at things in a different light. It helps us see that the Fool has more in common with Kent than would at first appear. If we judge the Fool based on what he says to Kent prior to this speech, we might well conclude that he is play's most eloquent advocate for a defeasible view of kingship. But the "no knavery" speech helps us see that his actions are not consistent with this way of looking at the world. He tells Kent that it is foolish to follow the king: "Let go thy hold when a great wheel runs down a hill, lest it break thy neck." And yet the Fool does not follow his own advice. He does not let go of the wheel that is heading downhill. Nor does he grab hold of any of the various wheels that seem to be going uphill. He taunts Kent and repeatedly calls him a fool, but he stays with Lear as his entourage falls away, just as Kent does, and in the "no knavery" speech he gives a rationale for his behavior. He defines himself as a "foolish" loyalist, in the style of Kent, and declines to be counted among the more numerous party of "knaves"
who run away. Prior to the “no knavery” speech, it seemed that the lesson the Fool was teaching was that it is foolish to cling to a great wheel going downhill. After the “no knavery” speech, we can see that he is teaching a lesson in two parts: it may be foolish to cling to a great wheel going downhill, but it is better to be a fool than a knave. ①

In conclusion, we might say that, although Kent and the Fool both choose to remain loyal to Lear, they do so for different reasons. Kent’s loyalty to Lear is based on an essentialist political vision of the world and a conception of Lear as a man with a permanent, indwelling, indefeasible royalty. The Fool’s loyalty to Lear does not seem to be based on any comparable metaphysical notions. He simply thinks that, in a world gone mad, in which men are forced to choose between foolishness and knavery, it is better to be a foolish loyalist than a knavish opportunist.
1 All citations are to The Riverside Shakespeare. It seems to me the arguments I make here apply to the folio, the quarto, and combined versions of the play. I would like to thank Arthur Kirsch, Paul Cantor, Benjamin Lockerd, and John Curran for comments on earlier versions of this essay.

2 A. C. Bradley noted that the characters in King Lear tend to sort themselves into two opposed groups: “Here we have unselfish and devoted love, there hard self-seeking. On both sides . . . the common quality takes an extreme form.” (263). See also Kirsch (109ff); Neill (29); Strier (115).

3 The words defeasible and indefeasible were in use when Shakespeare wrote King Lear. The earliest citations in the OED are 1586 (defeasible) and 1548 (indefeasible).

4 On Kent, see McDonald (63ff); Elton (285ff); Barish and Waingrow (348-50, passim); Neill (31-37); Schalkwyk (222-45); Strier (113-23).

5 Kantorowicz analyzed Richard II as a depiction of the dissolution of the “persona mixta,” the tragic separation of two beings that are supposed to be inseparable — the king’s “body natural” and the king’s “body politic.” These terms can also be applied to King Lear. Kent will not allow any separation of the king’s “two bodies.” He sees those two bodies as inseparably linked, despite Lear’s reassignment of governance; by contrast, Oswald takes Lear’s reassignment so seriously that he can see only the king’s “body natural” — a body like any other.


7 Spiekerman argues that Shakespeare was a political realist and a critic of divine right. He bases his argument largely on Richard II. I would argue that Shakespeare’s depiction of Kent in King Lear presents divine right political ideas in a more positive light. If Shakespeare depicts Richard as a bad king inspired by divine right concepts, he also depicts Kent as a good and loyal servant whose loyalty is grounded in his ideas about the king’s indefeasible authority. On King Lear, authority, and anxieties about success, see Hopkins (7-9, 31-34).

8 On the tension between Oswald and Kent, see Barish and Waingrow (353); Burnett (172-73); Neill (29); Schalkwyk (222, 229).

9 If one reads the Fool’s “no knavery” speech as a pledge to remain loyal to Lear (as I do), then one can only feel dismay (as I do) when directors have the Fool deliberately abandon Lear later in the play. Although it is not clear what happens to the Fool, I think it gratuitously and unnecessarily pessimistic to have him choose the knave’s option, in opposition to his pledge.

10 The Fool’s “no knavery” speech can be seen as a delayed reply to a speech made by Goneril earlier in the play, where she characterized him as more knave than fool (1.4.305).

11 On the Fool, see Welsford; Elton (305ff); McDonald (72ff); Graham (457-58); Wood; Buechner (137); Zak (63); Barish and Waingrow (351ff); Schalkwyk (228-30); Strier (115,123).
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