This essay, part of an ongoing project on Shakespeare and Montaigne, suggests that cruelty, sovereign power, and commitment to abstract principles are linked in King Lear and that this link is proposed in Montaigne’s Essais.

Sovereignty is intimate with the power to inflict cruelty. In the abstract case of absolute sovereignty, the unqualified service that subjects owe sovereigns permits cruelty; to modern eyes it may even seem in itself cruel. Sovereigns may suffer cruelty themselves in several ways: two prominent areas of sovereign vulnerability are the erotic and the political. So a study of a suffering, hitherto absolute sovereign like Lear offers rich representation of different kinds of cruelty that may amount to an analysis of cruelty. I think it does. This essay links King Lear’s analysis of cruelty to Montaigne’s. Like other such studies, it finesses the question of direct influence. But it argues that, as Montaigne does, King Lear investigates the intimacy between abstract ideas of right and wrong and the cruel infliction of pain on human bodies and minds. After initial discussion of Montaigne on cruelty, and the cruelty of the opening scene in Lear, the essay shows that a key moment in the play, the blinding of Gloucester and the killing of Cornwall by his servant, turns on just such a concatenation of abstract principle (in Shakespeare’s case political as well as moral) and physical cruelty.

I said above that this essay finesses the question of direct influence, resembling in this Hugh Grady’s excellent Shakespeare, Machiavelli, and Montaigne and, indeed, most critical work on Montaigne’s relations to Shakespeare plays other than The Tempest (my own Montaigne essays on All’s Well and on Measure for Measure also avoid direct influence claims). Leo Salingar, however, offers a persuasive argument that Florio’s Montaigne influenced King Lear directly and deeply, basing his claim on Kenneth Muir’s analysis of words that appear in Florio and only or first in Lear among Shakespearean plays, and
on thematic similarities between *Lear* and a number of essays, most notably "Of the affection of fathers for their children." Hugh Craig, Arthur Kinney, and graduate students at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst are working on a comprehensive statistical study of the Montaigne–Florio–Shakespeare relationship, and we can look forward with interest to an account of the matter from scholars who have no personal stake in the substance of that relation. I predict, for what it is worth, that their study will bear out the arguments of Salingar and Kenneth Muir that Shakespeare was heavily influenced by Florio's Montaigne as he wrote *King Lear*.

Salingar, however, suggests that when Shakespeare moves in *Lear* to the most extreme representations of cruelty (such as the blinding of Gloucester) he leaves Montaigne behind:

Montaigne has fine and deeply felt things to say about cruelty, from his reading about the conquest of the New World and his experience of the civil war. But he remains too firmly rational, too civilised – in spite of his primitivist sympathies – to submit to the imaginative pull of evil subjectively.

I believe Salingar errs here, and I will suggest that there is an important aspect of Montaigne's treatment of cruelty that Salingar overlooks. This aspect – the relation between cruelty and the application of abstract moral categories to persons – is crucial at key moments of *King Lear*. Before proceeding to this specific argument, however, I want to reflect briefly and generally about what it means now and meant in Montaigne and Shakespeare's time to be "against cruelty."

Cruelty is a peculiar and rather ill-studied category. Considered in its root form, as the infliction of physical pain on other sentient beings who are helpless to prevent it, it is certainly a kind of behavior toward which prevailing social attitudes have shifted over time. Our own culture is notably harder on cruelty than early modern culture was, and institutions like the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, founded in the early nineteenth century, or the Eighth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (with its prohibition on cruel or unusual punishments), passed in the late eighteenth, mark steps toward modern anti-cruelty attitudes. Whether or not such attitudes have done anything to diminish cruelty overall is a question that is hard to answer, they have, certainly, made it relatively easy to remonstrate against the cruelty of others in a variety of situations in which such remonstratio was more limited in past times (though, as Montaigne and Shakespeare show, such remonstratio was not absent).

To set cruelty in the context in which Shakespeare and Montaigne approach it, we should note the important fact that for Christians, or at least for early
moderna Christians, the word “cruelty” does not name a sin. In fact the word itself is sparsely used in the Bible, a rather surprising fact given that most accounts of modernity see Christian endorsements of loving-kindness as a factor in the evolution of liberal North Atlantic societies with their categorical distaste for cruelty. To look at the matter statistically, with all awareness of the roughness of the measure involved, there are only five instances of the word “cruelty” in the King James Bible, excluding the apocrypha, and 27 instances of the adjective “cruel”; in the works of Shakespeare, roughly contemporary and of comparable length, there are 22 instances of the word “cruelty” and 75 of “cruel.” We know that the words of the English Bible in slightly earlier versions echoed in Shakespeare’s mind, but there is little strong evidence that biblical uses of “cruel” and “cruelty” influenced him very much: in the biblical uses of the word, cruelty is almost always inflicted by foreign tyrants or wild animals, not by the intimates who so often are cruel in Shakespeare (the Bible never uses the word in connection with the betrayal or the passion of Christ, for instance). The one biblical use that may have influenced Shakespeare, perhaps especially in King Lear, is from the Lamentations of Jeremiah: “Even the sea monsters draw out the breast, they give suck to their young ones; the daughters of my people is become cruel, like the ostriches in the wilderness” (Lam 4:3). The Geneva Bible adds two glosses. On “sea monsters”: “Though the dragons are cruel, yet they pity their young, and nourish them, which Jerusalem does not do.” On “ostriches”: “The women forsake their children as the ostrich does her eggs” (Job 39:17). Albany, horrified at Goneril’s undaughterly cruelty to Lear, prophesies that if heaven does not intervene “to tame these vile offens, / It will come, / Humanity must perforsc prey upon itself” (The History of King Lear 16:46–9). Like many in the play, Albany here seems our baffled and ineffectual spokesman, perhaps with a confused recollection of Lamentations.

More importantly, in Renaissance Christian thought, as in Renaissance social thought, it is not at all clear that cruelty was regarded as categorically wrong. Certainly it was not thought as necessary as it is now to offer elaborate justifications for any infliction of pain involved in a process that was otherwise deemed desirable. Hamlet phrases a resolution not to kill his mother as he approaches his meeting with her after the Mousetrap performance by saying “Let me be cruel, not unnatural” (3.2.365) – that is, let me inflict mental pain, not physical damage. He ends the wrenching interview by saying “I must be cruel only to be kind” (3.4.162). Hamlet may partly mean in both statements that the infliction of mental pain is a Danish royal family trait, so that he is faithful to his natural kind in inflicting it, but he also draws a not-to-be-crossed line at the far edge of “cruelty” (where it shades into “unnatural” Neronic matricide) that
modern liberal culture may be inclined to draw on the near edge. At any rate, it was not for early moderns a sin per se for human beings to inflict pain on other human beings of their own kind, sex, and status, much less on members of other human groups, religious confessions, or classes, yet further less on children or animals. In this early modern Christians had, after all, the best possible models: for Calvinists an inscrutable God inflicted eternal pain at will and everyone deserved it; monarchs and religious leaders stood behind interrogatory and punitive torture, routine practices in trials having to do with religious issues as in those having to do with ordinary crimes; pain was inflicted freely upon children by ecclesiastical educators and godly parents; and so on. We are very used to the idea that early modern authority, religious and secular, manifested itself with terrifying severity and dismissed collateral damage without much perturbation of spirit.

We are, however, less used to mobilizing the array of standard examples of this severity in an inquiry about the status of cruelty in more intimate settings, then or now. But I think it is helpful to do so. A little introspective moralizing—and readers can correct me if I err in generalizing from myself to them—about modern attitudes toward cruelty illustrates how different the distribution of attitudes among the modern intellectuals who read articles on Shakespeare is from the distribution of attitudes we think were held by original audiences for Shakespeare plays. One might hazard an account of a modern majority toward the severe exercise of personal authority as follows. Anyone who exercises personal authority over others—a parent, for instance, or a teacher—soon recognizes that total abstinence from the infliction of at least mental pain on some others some of the time (humiliation, the thwarting of imperative desires, and so on) would be a very unsuccessful practice. Abstinence from pain-infliction would mean that we were poor exercisers of authorities vested in us. We tend to draw a line that is precisely related to our notion of what “cruelty” is: we inflict pain in those intimate and protected settings only when we can explain why it is for everyone’s good, and we describe the infliction of pain in such settings without that justification as cruel. We tend to feel that the infliction of physical pain on students is beyond this line; we vary as to whether or not it is cruel to inflict physical pain on naughty children. Obviously there is an array of practices in contemporary culture with respect to these matters, probably within the readership of this essay, unlikely as it is to make its way into the hands of, say, professional interrogators or baby-seal-harvesters. Some contemporaries, like most or at least many Elizabethan parents and educators, believe themselves charged with the eradication of sin from naturally sinful beings; such people, I suspect, feel encouraged to regard a little (or maybe even a lot) of pain-infliction as salutary rather than boundary-breaking. Obviously,
for modern people working within the set of constraints I have identified, sensitivity to the pain of others becomes an important moral capacity. Modern liberals seek to export or generalize such ideas to the behavior of the state, though with notoriously mixed results. Early modern society, however, seems not simply to have had a stronger stomach for witnessing actual pain (I leave aside our appetite for witnessing simulated pain and violence), but also to have had somewhat different ideas about how to draw lines around permissible uses of superior power, of which more below. It would surely be oversimplifying to say that X's cruelty to Y was, for Early Moderns, something the rest of the alphabet found entertaining rather than disturbing, but the balances there seem to be different from those we have. In their schools one was conditioned by witnessing the physical punishment of one's contemporaries, the painful struggles of animals were popular spectacle, punishments like the stocks invited bystanders to participate in order to enhance the pain of something that was painful already, executions took place before crowds, and so on. Remember Lear's Fool on the stocked Kent: "Ha, ha, he wears cruel garters" (2.2.184).

It seems worthwhile to discuss, then, the ways Montaigne and Shakespeare, two early modern authors who were exceptionally interested in cruelty both personal and institutional, relate to one another, bearing in mind the idea that one of the functions of imaginative literature may well be to extend our capacity for the recognition of cruelty as something we need to respond to—to move, as it were, from "Ha, ha" to "O I have ta'en / Too little care of this" (3.4.32–3).5

Montaigne is often credited with being a source for modern liberal attitudes, among them the idea, as Judith Shklar puts it, that "cruelty is the worst thing that we do" (from her excellent book Ordinary Vices, whose title derives from Montaigne's comment in "Of the cannibals" that "Treachery, disloyalty, cruelty, tyranny ... are our ordinary vices"). Shklar, writing in the 1980s, thinks in fact that it is the mark of a modern liberal to "put cruelty first," following Montaigne, to see it as the mark of something gone wrong: "the extreme of all vices."6 Montaigne, however, initially presents his own distaste for cruelty as explicitly not a matter of established principle, but rather a matter of deep impulse or nature. "I have gotten it neither from law, nor from precept, nor from any other apprenticeship," he says of his own good-nature, in which he includes his "soft" reluctance to inflict or witness pain.7

Montaigne, indeed, remarks famously of himself that his opposition to cruelty is as deeply rooted, obsessive, and arbitrary as is the cruelty of others: "I cruelly hate cruelty."8 In "Of physiognomy," Montaigne makes it clear that "when occasions have summoned me to sentencing criminals," this activity has both been influenced by and has influenced Montaigne's idiosyncratic distaste for cruelty:
Ordinary judgments are exasperated to vengeance by the horror of the misled. That very thing calls mine; horror at the first murder makes me fear a second, and hatred of the first cruelty makes me hate any imitation of it.  

In "Of cruelty" he on the whole continues to treat this opposition to cruelty as a contingent aspect of his own constitution, though an aspect from which many important positions flow. In "Of custom" Montaigne links cruelty to disposition shaped by habit, seeing it as very dangerous when a habit of cruelty to animals or social inferiors is allowed to develop unchecked in youth. In "Cowardice, mother of cruelty," Montaigne suggests that a disposition toward cruel violence arises from cowardice. The cowardly, he suggests, are too fearful to engage in the equal combats that show nobility, and thus massacre and torture the helpless in order to compensate themselves in situations where they can feel strong. He also suggests that sovereign power needs to avoid excess in rationalizing painful punishments as deterrents to crime. All that is beyond plain death seems to me pure cruelty. Our justice cannot hope that the man who will not be deterred from doing wrong by the fear of dying on the block or the gallows will be prevented by the idea of a slow fire, or pincers, or the wheel.

It is interesting that Montaigne — who may be thinking partly about heresy here, since the tortures he describes, especially the slow fire, were standard punishments for heresy — does not entertain the justification that governed such punishments in heresy trials. As Katharine Eisaman Maus summarizes, the horror of the prospect was meant to end the crime: "at the place of execution, the convicted heretic is once again offered a pardon on the condition that he or she publicly recant and agree to conform to accepted views." In a religious civil war, of course, procedures established to cure or extirpate heresy pass over into tortures to punish rebellion, and the option of last-minute recantation is absent.

This example crosses over into Montaigne’s critique of systematic cruelty and its relation to abstract morality. In a fine chapter in Montaigne and the Quality of Mercy that anticipates much that I have just been arguing, David Quint demonstrates how persuasively "we may ... read the whole essay of 'De la cruauté' as a steady retreat from the cruelty of virtue," this is part of Quint’s general historicizing argument that the essays seek "to persuade a war-loving aristocracy ... to forswear cruelty." Agreeing with and learning from Quint that Montaigne has a message for the warring nobles of his time, I want also to suggest that Montaigne’s reaction to the loosening of cruelty by Reformation and Counter-Reformation thought has a more intellectual dimension as well. Indeed, one of Montaigne’s great contributions to the study of cruelty — one of his great insights about his own time, sparked by his meditations on the con-
quest of America and on the religious wars in France—is that cruelty is not only an aspect of individual temperaments, but can be a systematic product of the institutionalization of abstract ideas about right and wrong. As he writes at the opening of “Of freedom of conscience.” “It is ordinary to see good intentions, if they are carried out without moderation, push men to very vicious acts.” This insight is particularly marked in four well-known essays, “Of the cannibals,” “Of coaches,” “Of physiognomy,” and “Of experience.” In the first three Montaigne recounts European cruelty in the Americas and in the religious wars of Europe and meditates on its relations to Renaissance Christian culture. In “Of experience,” the last of the essays, Montaigne sees cruelty as often connected with a way of conceiving human life as disembodied, and of treating human meaning as transcendent rather than immanent. Taking abstract ideas seriously can not only provide a release or screen for the cruelty present to varying degrees in human beings, it can also produce cruel systems. Montaigne clearly fears that Christian universalism, as exported to the Americas by the conquistadors, has become part of such a system. From this he derives a profound observation about the dangers of placing an abstraction about the general good above the pain of particular bodies: “Between ourselves,” Montaigne confides in “Of experience,” “these are two things that I have ever found to be in singular accord: superelevated thoughts and subterranean conduct.” In “Of physiognomy,” the penultimate essay, commenting on the violence of the French religious wars, Montaigne says:

Ambition, avarice, cruelty, vengeance, do not have enough natural impetuousity of their own; let us spark them and fan their flames by the glorious title of justice and piety. No worse state of things can be imagined than where wickedness comes to be legitimate and, with the leave of the authorities, assumes the cloak of virtue. Nothing is more deceptive in appearance than a depraved religion, in which the will of the gods is offered as a pretext for crimes [Livy]. The extreme of injustice, according to Plato, is when what is unjust is held to be just.

Compare his well-known comment on Christian absolutism at the beginning of the “Apology for Raymond Sebond”:

There is no hostility so excellent, as that which is absolutely Christian. Our zeal worketh wonders, when ever it secondeth our inclination toward hatred, cruelty, ambition, avarice, detraction, or rebellion… our religion was ordained to root out vices, but it shrowdeth, fostreth and provoketh them.

Montaigne follows a somewhat similar line in his equally well-known questioning of the dogmatic condemnation of witches in “Of cripples,” where he endorses Saint Augustine’s opinion “that it is better to lean toward doubt than toward assurance in things difficult to prove and dangerous to believe.”
Montaigne says that the convicted and in some cases confessed witches awaiting execution he was shown by a “sovereign prince” who sought to “beat down [Montaigne’s] incredulity” seemed to him not guilty but possibly insane: “in all conscience, I would have prescribed them rather hellebore than hemlock.” In each of these cases, Montaigne sees the confluence of power with dogmatic conviction as productive of cruelty, and indeed in “provoking” cruelty even in those who are not dispositionally cruel. Montaigne does not, for instance, accuse his unnamed sovereign prince of a cruel temperament, but his account of the incarcerated old woman makes it clear that he feels they are being mistreated in accordance with a cruel set of beliefs.

Montaigne is not, of course, accusing abstract thought of being in itself cruel or mistaken. But while he, unlike Stephen Dedalus, does not seem to fear those big words which make us so unhappy, he offers an analysis of how dogmatic conviction, confronting the resistant variety of experience, becomes cruel.

It should be noted, given that we will turn shortly to a discussion of cruelty in King Lear, that Montaigne’s treatment of cruelty is both humanist and anti-essentialist: that is, it proposes an identification with lived human experience as the hardest and best task human beings take on, and it at the same time explicitly shuns abstract systems that might stand for the human or stand over it. Another remark from “Of experience” specifically attacks modes of ascetic abstraction that take us away from life in the body: “There is nothing so beautiful and legitimate as to play the man well and properly, no knowledge so hard to acquire as the knowledge of how to live this life well and naturally; and the most barbarous of our maladies is to despise our being.”

This primitively combines obvious humanism with clear resistance to essentializing rhetoric. Montaigne, indeed, points the way to a humanism that is anti-essentialist, and if we see Montaigne’s humanist analysis of cruel systems in King Lear, then we will be taking a somewhat different, though related, line from the many strong readings in recent years that have derived from or resembled Jonathan Dollimore’s “King Lear and Essentialist Humanism” in Radical Tragedy – approaches that see in the play a refutation of humanism in favor of a Brechtian historicizing radicalism of one sort or another. It is Dollimore’s claim that “In Lear, as in Troilus, man is decentred not through misanthropy but in order to make visible social process and its forms of ideological misrecognition.” Montaigne, with his immense illustration of the variety and resourcefulness of individual subjectivity, can be mobilized (as he has been recently by Hugh Grady) as a kind of counter to the view that we need to subordinate subjectivity to social process in ways exemplified in Renaissance thought by Machiavelli; Grady proposes Montaigne as a sort of Renaissance Habermas to set against Machiavelli as a Renaissance Althusser or Foucault -
someone who exemplifies the possibility of the resistance of a subjective realm to ideological determination.

Machiavelli defines for Renaissance political culture forms of instrumentality which are central to modernity and crucial to understanding many of the social and political dislocations of the era. As if in answer to this new situation, the essays of Michel de Montaigne propose a strategy of resistance to the instrumentalization of politics defined by Machiavelli.22

By suggesting, as I have, that Montaigne’s thinking about cruelty both emphasizes the importance of temperament and, in “putting cruelty first,” opens up an evergreen path to resistance, this essay follows Grady’s suggestions. It also attempts to take up a challenge offered by Stanley Cavell with respect to Montaigne and the tragic. Cavell does not consider Montaigne extensively in his discussion of King Lear, but he brings him up at the end of his chapter on Othello in Disowning Knowledge in the following way. As often in quoting Cavell, I have to quote at some length to capture the complete thought, even though I omit some characteristic moments of recursion:

what you might call the philosophy or the moral of [Othello] seems all but contained in the essay Montaigne entitles “On Some Verses of Virgil,” in such a remark as “What a monstrous animal to be a horror to himself, to be burdened by his pleasures, to regard himself as a misfortune!” The essay concerns the compatibility of sex with marriage, or sex with age; it remarks upon, and upon the relations among, jealousy, chastity, imagination, doubts about virginity; upon the strength of language and the honesty of language; and includes mention of a Turk and of certain instances of necrophilia. The moral would be what might have been contained is Othello’s “one that lov’d not wisely but too well,” that all these topics should be food for thought and moderation, not for torture and murder; as fit for rue and laughter as for pity and terror; that they are not tragic unless one makes them so, takes them so; that we are tragic in what we take to be tragic; that one must take one’s imperfections with a “gay and sociable wisdom” (in “Of Experience,” Montaigne’s final essay), not with a somber and isolating eloquence. It is advice to accept one’s humanity. But to whom is the advice usable? And how do we understand why it cannot be taken by those in direst need of it? The urging moderation is valuable only to the extent that it results from a knowledge of the human possibilities beyond its urging. Is Montaigne’s attitude fully earned, itself without a tiniest of the wish for exemption from the human? Or is Shakespeare’s topic of the sheets and the handkerchief understandable as a rebuke to Montaigne, for refusing a further nod of honesty?23

Since Montaigne has an essay entitled “Of the affection of fathers for their children” that offers a conspectus of topics of King Lear in much the way, and much the tone, that “Upon some verses of Virgil,” summarizes the topics of Othello – so much so that, as Salingar demonstrates, it is very hard to believe Shakespeare did not to some degree have the essay in mind in composing King Lear – Cavell’s suggestion about Othello and Montaigne can easily be trans-
ferred. Is it the case that Shakespeare, by giving us access to tragic excess, in a way shows us what Montaigne almost leaves out of the essays, or treats too lightheartedly there? Montaigne is, however, not lighthearted about cruelty, and in what follows I will attempt to show that Shakespeare's handling of arguably the most excessive moment in *King Lear* follows the line of reasoning about cruelty I have identified in Montaigne.

My title, "Sovereign Cruelty," proposes that we connect Montaigne's thinking about cruelty and creedsal absolutism to Shakespeare's interest in sovereignty as qualified by, or asserted in, love-tests. Thus the allusion in the title to *Twelfth Night*, where the sovereign duke Orsino calls Olivia "yon ... sovereign cruelty" (2.4.78), and treats her combination of power over him and refusal to gratify his desires as an outrageous paradox that justifies violence: Orsino announces near the play's end that he will sacrifice Cesario to his love for that "marble-breasted tyrant" Olivia (5.1.120). Though the killing of Cesario is averted in *Twelfth Night* by the revelation that she is really Viola, and the frustrated Petrarchan relation between Orsino and Olivia is thus not thoroughly pursued in that play as a paradigm of sovereignty and cruelty, the dangers of frustrating a sovereign's love are thoroughly explored in *King Lear*. Lear sacrifices Cordelia to his thwarted love for Cordelia, and to his conflicted love, or his ambivalent love-hate, of his own sovereignty. Moreover, Cordelia, in standing out for the essential rectitude of her life-path in a way that destroys the order of the state and frustrates the will of the sovereign, behaves like a saint: her death at the end of the play – so at odds with the seeming logic of the drama at that point – is entirely appropriate to her self-presentation as a principle of solitary righteousness in opposition to a sovereign's will in the opening scene. In the choric scene 17 that appears only in the *History of King Lear*, Kent remarks to a nameless Gentleman that Lear refuses to see Cordelia because "a sovereign shame so elbows him" (17:43), and Kent's phrase – where "elbows him" may mean either "prods him" or "stands always at his elbow" – reminds us not only that Lear is governed by shame, but that his shame derives from his own exercise of cruel sovereignty.

Of all Shakespeare's tragedies, *King Lear* is the most preoccupied with individual cruelty of two kinds. The play treats cruel actions performed by people whose natures are not, or not entirely, cruel, people like Lear and Cordelia in Act 1 scene 1. In that scene, their formal conversation goes awry unleashes all the consequent horrors of the play. Father and favorite daughter are cruel to one another when their central life-plans prove incompatible and neither can find a way to express love alongside disagreement with the central desire of the other. Cordelia, who desires to marry, become an adult, and commit herself to a husband, cannot consent to the terms of the love-test, which require her to
swear a kind of perpetual central erotic commitment to her father along with a life-long contract to nurse him. In disrupting the love-test she is insistent on the rectitude of her desires and offers a cruel apparent denial of her father’s overall intentions and needs, one of which is clearly a continuance of erotic centrality as he lays aside sovereignty. Lear, who devises the love-test partly to allow Cordelia to pass into what he sees as adulthood for her – he is, after all, attempting a formal justification of the dowry agreed upon, as well as an erotic justification for his plan to live solely with Cordelia after his semi-abdication – naturally feels intense frustration at Cordelia’s refusal to go along with his plan. This explains (though it hardly justifies) Lear’s cruelty in his frustrated anger. He compares his daughter to a barbarous Scythian or a cannibal who eats members of her own family, and he puts off renouncing sovereign power just long enough to use it to banish Cordelia. The process neatly illustrates the steps by which, as Montaigne describes it, we conceive of people we disagree with as alien beings – Scythians, heretics, and so on – in order to be cruel to them while feeling good about ourselves. Lear takes this rhetorical path with each of his daughters in turn in the first half of the play.24

The second kind of cruelty in Lear is that of characters who have in them no dispositional resistance to cruelty, but rather an appetite for it: the sort of person of whom Montaigne remarks in “Of cruelty” that it is truly to their credit if they are virtuous (as it is not for someone like himself who has no strong inclinations toward vice). Montaigne discusses this in terms of the desire to exact a cruel vengeance on one’s enemies: if it is easy to master, as it is for Montaigne himself, there is little virtue in it. If one passionately desires to hurt them, then it is virtue not to do so. The passage as translated by Florio appears in transmuted form in The Tempest:

He that through a natural facility, and genuine mildness, should neglect or contempt injuries received, should no doubt performe a rare action, and worthy commendation:
But he who being toucht and stung to the quicke, with any wrong or offence received, should armre himselfe with reason against this furiously-blind desire of revenge, and in the end after a great conflict, yeeld himselfe master over-it, should doubtlesse doe much more. The first should doe well, the other vertuously. 25

King Lear contains at least one passage in which a naturally cruel-natured person plays this passage in reverse, sweeping aside an ethical inhibition against cruel revenge by offering to himself and possibly others the justification of his own “furiously-blind desire of revenge.” The Duke of Cornwall, preparing to blind Gloucester, comments that Gloucester cannot be killed without due process (possibly because Gloucester is a nobleman):

Though well we may not pass upon his life
Without the form of justice, yet our power
Goneril, Regan, Cornwall, and to some degree Edmund, filled with "this furiously-blind desire of revenge" but striving to satisfy rather than to mastering it, arouse in readers, as A.C. Bradley puts it, "that appalled dismay at the extremity of human cruelty which it is of the essence of [King Lear] to excite." Edmund's cruelty, though surely dismaying enough, is rational, Machiavellian, at times oddly cheerful; he takes revenge for his own social displacement (and offers this as an explanation for his actions in soliloquies) but he is neither furious nor blind. He does not seem full of the desire to hurt others, but rather of the desire to sweep aside obstacles to his acquisition of power. His motives are summed up in his exhortation to the Captain he sends to kill the captured Lear and Cordelia at the end of the play: "Know thou this: that men / Are as the time is. To be tender-minded / Does not become a sword"(5.3.30–32). Goneril, Regan, and Cornwall, however, are passionately cruel, and often rather stupid or irrational, so that their cruelty is in a way more shocking. I shall attempt to show in what follows that their cruelty, however deeply rooted in their natures, is unleashed by problems about sovereignty and citizenship which amount to reference to a system of political morality; and that, moreover, a new phase in the play's treatment of sovereignty is itself unleashed by their physical cruelty.

For although I just said that the cruelty of these characters is set going by the father–daughter train wreck in Act I scene 1—a train wreck not only in familial terms, but in the Hegelian tragic sense of a collision of opposed principled good intentions—a more precise answer to the question "what unleashes the cruelty of Goneril, Regan, and Cornwall?" would have everything to do with a particular issue about sovereignty and citizenship. It is, indeed, a question about nationality, and it marks the moment in King Lear when the issues about nationhood implicit in the play from the mention of the division of the kingdom in the opening lines rise closest to the surface. To whom should an English subject be loyal when a French army under an English princess invades the Kentish coast to restore or perhaps simply rescue a self-deposed and possibly deranged English king or ex-king?

Before looking further at Act 3 scene 7, the blinding of Gloucester, in these terms, let us examine the run-up to it. Goneril and Regan have a stake in the idea that Lear is no longer king, and they try to make this idea rhetorically real by referring to Lear in other ways. Thus Regan to Gloucester, commiserating on the news of Edgar's alleged intended patricide:
REGAN What, did my father’s godson seek your life?
He whom my father named, your Edgar?
GLOUCESTER O lady, lady, shame would have it hid!
REGAN: Was he not companion with the riotous knights
That tended upon my father?

(2.1.90-94)

Oswald, instructed by Goneril in Act 1 scene 3 (“Did my father strike my gentleman / For chiding of his fool?” (1.3.1–2)), has tried this out on Lear himself in Act 1 scene 4:

LEAR: Who am I, sir?
OSWALD: My lady’s father.
LEAR: My lady’s father? My lord’s knave! You whoremonger dog, you slave, you cur!
OSWALD: I am none of these, my lord, I beseech your pardon.
LEAR: Do you bandy looks with me, you rascal?
[LEAR strikes him]
OSWALD: I’ll not be stricken, my lord.
KENT: [tripping him] Nor tripped neither, you base football player.
LEAR: [to KENT] I thank thee, fellow. Thou serv’st me, and I’ll love thee.

(1.4.68–76)

So very soon after Lear’s abdication, physical violence and the formation of new bonds of service and love are occasioned by different answers to the question of how Lear should be addressed, whether he is still king or not. And while the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Oswald may have few members, the play records a good deal of cruel treatment of him: he is beaten and abused once by Lear, twice by Kent, and finally beaten to death with a staff by Edgar, all for being a loyal servant to Goneril and for sticking to her answer to the question of who Lear is.

While Goneril and Regan may try to delete references to Lear as King from their discourse, this effort breaks down in the presence of Lear or even of his servants. Lear starts being “the king” again as soon as the disguised Kent arrives at Gloucester’s castle, perhaps because they are not sure that Gloucester has taken Regan’s hint that he should stop thinking of Lear as King, but partly also because the habits of a lifetime are hard to break and because, as the disguised Kent says, Lear retains very substantial personal charisma:

LEAR: Dost thou know me, fellow?
KENT: No, sir, but you have that in your countenance which I would fain call master.
LEAR: What’s that?
KENT: Authority.

(1.4.23–7)

Clearly, when Lear retains to himself “the name and all th’addition to a king” (1.1.134), he intends to keep, and partly succeeds in keeping, the centrality as
an object of loyal emotional commitments that he enjoyed before his quasi-abdication.

Gloucester, a key figure in this shadowy political process as a quasi-subject of Cornwall and Regan, tries out rhetorically the idea that he owes primary allegiance to Cornwall. Gloucester reassures Edmund, bleeding from the self-inflicted wound he allegedly got in thwarting Edgar’s plan to kill Gloucester:

Not in this land shalt he [Edgar] remain uncaught,  
And found, dispatch. The noble Duke my master,  
My worthy arch and patron, comes tonight.  
By his authority I will proclaim it.  

(2.1.56-9)

But the allegiance to Cornwall gives way to Gloucester’s accostumed reverence for Lear when Lear arrives and is mistreated: Gloucester tells Edmund, “we must incline to the King” at 3.3.12 and, in a telling revision of the phrase “the noble Duke my master,” asks Kent on the heath, “Where is the King my master?” at 3.6.39.

All this is preparation for Act 3 scene 7, in which Cornwall feels justified in pulling out Gloucester’s eyes and stamping on them because Gloucester is in Cornwall’s view a traitor. Cornwall’s cruelty stems from an abstract categorization having to do with a failure in national loyalty or, in terms that might be called either residually feudal or emergently absolutist, loyalty to an individual sovereign. But by being loyal to the interests of the old king, rather than to those of the newly sovereign or quasi-sovereign duke, is Gloucester in fact a traitor?

Looking at the situation as a political scientist might, there seem to be three possible views. First, the view that sovereignty has passed definitively to Cornwall and Albany, and thus that there are no English subjects by Act 3 of King Lear. Those who had been English are now either Cornish or Albanian, and they commit treason if they plot against the sovereign Dukes of those two realms. Second, the view that Lear is still in some sense king, though in a devolved and residual way, and that mistreating, degrading, or exposing Lear to danger is itself treason. This view perhaps justifies principled intervention on Lear’s side on traditional legal grounds of loyalty to one’s sovereign, not merely on the basis of shared humanity. Third, the view that the play has left these political issues in a deliberately confused state so that both the first and the second view are candidates for belief. The first, Cornish-Albanian/or traitor, view is presupposed in an important essay by Richard Strier on the idea of service in the play. As Strier puts it in a discussion of Gloucester’s resistance to Cornwall:
It is important to be clear on Gloucester’s political as well as his social situation. In sending Lear to Dover Gloucester is aiding an invading enemy (sad, perhaps, a popular rebellion). The letter that Edmund, in his major act of loyalty, passes on to Cornwall proves Gloucester “an intelligent party to the advantages of France” (3.5.10). Cornwall and company are not misusing language in speaking continually of “the traitor Gloucester”... Gloucester is indeed a traitor.27

Note that Stier says “Lear” rather than “King Lear.” His analysis forecloses the question of who is king—that is, who focuses loyalty—a question that the play makes every effort, as I see it, to keep open. References to Lear as “the king” abound in the very scene (in both the Folio and Quarto versions, in this respect identical) in which helping him (or at least setting him on the way to those whose declared purpose is to help him) is represented as treason: “Where hast thou sent the King?” (3.7.48) Cornwall asks Gloucester. The remark that most clearly defines Gloucester’s analysis of the political position vis-à-vis the insurgent force in Dover is uttered earlier to Edmund, as noted above: “We must incline to the King” (3.3.12). This does not sound like treason.

Yet, as Stier’s comment shows, there are strong reasons to see the charge of treason as plausible. There is an alien enemy on English soil. and Gloucester is aiding that enemy by sending Lear to Dover. Act 3 scene 7, in which Gloucester is blinded, begins with Cornwall urging Goneril to inform Albany that “the army of France is lawned” (3.7.2). The next line is “Seek out the traitor Gloucester.” It is clear that the presence of a foreign enemy brings in for Cornwall a clarifying system by which to make absolute judgments of loyalty, and that this system is essentially a national one: England vs. France. That absolute system immediately spurs suggestions of physical cruelty:

CONWALL: Seek out the traitor Gloucester. [Exit some]
REGAN: Hang his instantly.
GONERIL: Pluck out his eyes.

(3.7.3–4)

Gloucester, bound and helpless, first tries to deny the charges, then justifies himself by reference to his loyalty to Lear and his repudiation of the cruelty done and threatened to Lear by his daughters:

REGAN: Wherefore to Dover?
GLOUCESTER: Because I would not see thy cruel nails
Pluck out his poor old eyes, nor thy fierce sister
In his anointed flesh stick bearish fangs.

(3.7.53–6)

Cornwall then follows Goneril’s suggestion. From this physical abuse—in which Cornwall asks his servants to participate (“Fellows, hold the chair. / Upon these eyes of thine I’ll set my foot” (3.7.65–6))—arises the act of princi-
pled rebellion against service that Strier calls "the most radical possible socio-political act" (119). Cornwall's man, who has "served [him] since [he] was a child" (3.7.71) remonstrates, interferes, draws on his master, wounds him mortally, and is himself killed. Why?

As I have suggested above, I think that Montaigne's analysis of cruelty can help us understand this scene. Montaigne suggests that we interrogate political-religious abstractions when what they define as righteousness promotes acts of cruelty. Stanley Cavell comments in "The Avoidance of Love" that "a purpose of tragedy remains ... to make us practical, capable of action." 28 It is the physical cruelty of Cornwall (suggested by Goneril) that precipitates the servant's action, an action that attempts to disambiguate the contrary political loyalties of the situation by reference to the necessity of opposing particular acts of cruelty. If Cornwall can do this to Gloucester's body, he must not be acting for the good. The same sort of reasoning, as already described, motivates Gloucester. It also motivates Cornwall's other servants, who stood by, perhaps even held the chair, when Gloucester was blinded, to transfer loyalty in less dangerous ways, but in ways that reflect the idea that they may have to break an abstract principle of loyalty to their master because of the horrible thing he has done (this is a passage that appears only in the Quarto History of King Lear):

SECOND SERVANT I'll never care what wickedness I do, If this man come to good. THIRD SERVANT If she live long, And in the end meet the old course of death, Women will all turn monsters. SECOND SERVANT Let's follow the old Earl, and get the bedlam To lead him where he would ... THIRD SERVANT Go thou. I'll fetch some flax and white of eggs To apply to his bleeding face. Now, heaven help him! (History of King Lear 1:96–104)

The simple, inadequate acts of compassion are themselves treason if Gloucester is a traitor, which is perhaps why the second Servant says he'll not care about wickedness in order to keep Cornwall from thriving. 29 Once again, an act of excessive cruelty prompts moral reordering.

Studies of Montaigne and Shakespeare — when they go beyond intimating the probability of influence — frequently end by proposing a contrast in sensibility that accompanies the obvious difference in genre between the essay and the play. Cavell's fine paragraph quoted above, in which the turbulence of the Othello world is seen as unsuccessfully contained by Montaigne's serene acceptance of human sexual nature in "Upon some verses of Virgil," thus
resembles Fred Parker's comment in "Shakespeare's Argument with Montaigne" (focusing also on "Upon some verses"). I quote Parker at some length:

Montaigne's own 'wanton and youthful conceits'... bring the realm of instincual nature within the play of mind, and it is this -- the strategy of this essay, and of the Montaignean essay more generally -- that gives force to his concluding affirmation of the integrity of flesh and spirit:

May we not say that there is nothing in us, during this earthly prison, simply corporal, or purely spiritual? And that injuriously we dismember a living man?...

This precious sense of integration finds no ready echo in Shakespeare's drama after 1600, in which, as I have tried to show, imaginative contact with Montaigne's 'great and puissant mother Nature' is destabilising rather than the reverse. How are we to make sense of this difference? One way would be to argue that Shakespeare is demonising forces of nature which he cannot, unlike Montaigne, see how to integrate into a properly human life; or alternatively, that he exposes the dangerous reductiveness of taking Nature as one's guide, if not one's goddess.30

Parker goes on to claim that the differences are, however, at their heart generic.

I agree with Parker and Cavell that, in general, Montaigne holds to a "precious sense of integration" which Shakespeare does not on the whole rely on or project, perhaps especially not in King Lear and Othello.31 This has partly to do with different attitudes toward death. Unlike Shakespeare, Montaigne never thinks of death as in itself cruel. It is pain that is cruel. Moreover, when the death of another causes us pain, it is and must be pain for something we ourselves have failed to do, as in the case of "the Lord of Montau," in "Of the affection of fathers for their children," who lost his son, "a worthy, forward, and gallant young gentleman, and trayly of good hope." Montau confided to Montaigne

The infinite displeasure and hearts-discontent that he felt, inasmuch as he had never communicated and opened himself unto [his son]; for, with his austere humour and continually endeavoring to hold a grimme-stern-fatherly gravity over him, he had lost the means, perfectly to find and thoroughly to know his son, and so to manifest unto him the extreme affection he bare him, and the worthy judgement he made of his vertue. Alas (was he wont to say) the poore lad saw never any thing in me, but a severe-surly-counten-ance, full of disdain, and haply was possessed with this conceit, that I could neither love nor esteeme him according to his merits. Ay-me, to whom did I reserve, to discover that singular and loving affection, which in my soule I bare unto him. Was it not he that should have had all the pleasure and acknowledged thereof? ... I [i.e. Montaigne] am of opinion his complaint was reasonable and well grounded. For, as I know by certain experience, there is no comfort so sweet in the losse of friends, as that our owne knowledge or conscience tells us, we never omitted to tell them everything, and expostulate all matters unto them.32
As Montaigne's example shows, he is fully capable of observing the tragic regret that follows failure to express love properly. Nonetheless, Montaigne's own chief experience of loss, that of de la Boëtie, is sweetened by his memories of candor and, in general, his experiment in selfhood is predicated on the full expression and clarification of himself, especially to those close to him. As he goes on to say almost immediately in the essay: "I doe unfold and open my self as much as I can to mine owne people, and willingly declare the state of my will and judgment toward them, as commonly I doe towards all men: I make haste to produce and present my selfe, for I would have no man mistake me, in what part soever." Montaigne's commitment to integration, to acceptance of human nature in its full spectrum, is also a commitment to a zone of personal frankness that forestalls tragic misunderstanding. Thus for Montaigne, the tragedy at the end of King Lear might lie in what Lear and Cordelia have not yet managed to make clear to one another rather than in what they or others deserve or do not deserve in the way of early death.

In this essay, however, I have emphasized an area of Montaigne's reflection on human nature in which he is unable or unwilling to be serene or to see human nature as integrated. Some men have cruel natures; some do not. Some human moral systems—intended to make the world more bearable—appear to promote cruelty. These are facts Montaigne cannot integrate into acceptability: rather he exclaims against them. Thus, while Montaigne is, as I have demonstrated, rational and analytic about human cruelty, he is not reconciled to it, and he looks on its systematic aspects with anger and horror. He is also rich in suggestions about how to make the social order less cruel—by, for instance, eliminating judicial torture; or (as in the passage above) making father-child relations truer and warmer. But Montaigne's essays do not contain and integrate human cruelty in the ways that they appear to contain or remove all hysterical pressure from issues of sexuality.

In this the Essays are like King Lear. I have argued that there is a substantial affinity between Montaigne's analysis of cruelty and Shakespeare's treatment of cruelty in King Lear. In sum, the key moment in Shakespeare's tragedy in which not only onstage but audience loyalties are precipitated toward one side and against another exactly fits Montaigne's analysis of cruel systems: an abstract principle unleashes cruelty in those predisposed to it, and an outrageous act of physical cruelty becomes the text against which abstract principles are to be judged. Sovereign cruelty in this play gives way to sovereign shame.
Notes


4. Quotations are from The Norton Shakespeare, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: Norton, 1997). Citations from the parallel-text King Lear refer to the Folio text, The Tragedy of King Lear, except when otherwise noted (as here). For most of the purposes I pursue in this essay, the History and the Tragedy do not differ substantively, and I retain familiar character names from the Quarto version ("Edmund" rather than "Edmond") because they tend to be what I and readers are used to from the conflated texts.


7. Michel de Montaigne, "Of cruelty," in Donald Frame, trans. and ed., The Complete Essays of Montaigne (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1958), 313. In what follows I quote Frame’s translation when I am pursuing what Montaigne means, and quote Florio’s translation, from The Essays of Montaigne: The John Florio Translation (New York: Modern Library, 1933) when there may be a question of direct influence on King Lear; as seems likely in quotations from the "Apology for Raymond Sebond" and "Of the afflictions of fathers for their children." The Shklar title ‘‘Ordinary Vices’’ is taken from Frame, 156.

8. Frame, 313. Florio has ‘‘Amongst all other vices, there is none I hate more, than cruelty’’ (379).

9. Ibid., 814.

10. Ibid., 78–9.

11. Ibid., 523–5.

12. Ibid., 530. For something near a contradiction of this, see ‘‘Of physiognomy,’’ Frame, 797, where Montaigne admires the discipline of the Turkish armies and attributes it to the savage punishments meted out for looting of any kind.


15. Frame, 506.
16. Frame, 856. Florio has "super-terrestrial opinions, and under-terrestrial manners, are things, that amongst us, I have ever seeme to bee of singular accord" (1012). See also "Of presumption," Frame, 480–81: "It seems to me that the nursing mother of the falsest opinions, public and private, is the over-good opinion man has of himself;"
17. Frame, 798.
18. Florio, 390–91; italics Florio's.
19. Frame 789–90. Hellebore was prescribed for insanity.
20. Ibid., 852.
21. Jonathan Dollimore. Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology, and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries (Brighton: Harvester, 1984), 191. Dollimore be it noted, sees Montaigne as exemplary of the sort of radicalism he imputes to Lear and Troilus; indeed, Montaigne is one of his key examples of Renaissance radicalism.
24. This account of 1.1, though in some ways indebted to Cavell's in "The Avoidance of Love," differs from Cavell's in seeing Lear himself as more loving, and Cordelia as less loving. Cavell, in my view, in emphasizing Cordelia's total and (from Lear's viewpoint) intolerable love for her father, underestimates the importance of Cordelia's impending betrothal in her resistance to Lear's plan. My account is closer to Janet Adelman's; see Sufocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, "Hamlet" to "The Tempest" (New York: Routledge, 1992), 117–22.
27. Richard Strier, "Faithful Servants: Shakespeare's Praise of Disobedience," in Heather Dubrow and Richard Strier, eds, The Historical Renaissance: New Essays on Tudor and Stuart Literature and Culture (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 158–19. Judy Kronenberg, disputing Strier's claims about the radical nature of disobedience in King Lear, nonetheless follows him in her view of the political allegiances at this point. "Cornwall, along with Albany, is the reigning power, and he is punishing Gloucester as a traitor to the state." Her subsequent comments do not suggest that Cornwall is incorrect in believing himself to have this authority, though she feels that others are entitled in Renaissance resistance theory to attempt to thwart his excesses. See King Lear and the Naked Truth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 161–6. Richard Halpern remarks that "When the king gives away his land, he seems to expect some residue of the royal office to adhere to him: 'the name and addition of king' (1.1.125). What he discovers, however, is that in giving away his land he has given away all." I am arguing that he has not quite given away all; that "the name of king" continues to have considerable power. See Halpern, The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation: English Renaissance Culture and the Genealogy of Capital (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 222.
28. Stanley Cavell, Disowning Knowledge, 118. See 47, on the blinding: "What this particular act of cruelty means is that cruelty cannot bear to be seen."
29. The moment is similar to Huck's decision to incur damnation by not turning Jim in as a runaway slave in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.
30. Fred Parker, "Shakespeare's Argument with Montaigne," *Cambridge Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (1999), 17. Parker does not cite Cavell, and appears not to know that he and several other critics, including Arthur Kinosh and Janet Adelman, have argued that "Upon some verses of Virgil" was a preoccupation of Shakespeare's when he wrote *Othello* and *All's Well*; see Parker, 5: "[Upon some verses'] has never, so far as I know, been proposed as a candidate for direct influence on the play I have in mind, *Othello*.”

31. As I have suggested elsewhere, there are outbursts of this sentiment, tellingly contextualized as shameful, in *All's Well that Ends Well*, notably in Haroles' comment that "Simply the thing I am / Shall make me live ... / ... / There's place and means for every man alive" (4.3.310–16). See Engle, "Shakespearean Normativity in *All's Well*,” 278–9.

32. Florio, 349–50.

33. Ibid., 350.

34. See, for example, "Of conscience," Frame, 266.

35. This essay began life as a short paper at the GEMCS conference in Newport Beach at the invitation of Julia Reinhard Lupton, and was expanded into a lecture at the Ohio Shakespeare Conference at the invitation of Jon Kamholtz. I am indebted to audiences at both events, and to the members of the SAA seminar on Shakespeare and Montaigne directed by Tom Bishop and Peter Holbrook. Will Hamlin and Peter Holbrook gave extremely helpful specific suggestions as I revised the essay for publication.