In this essay, I argue that early modern audience members thought about “place” in ways different from present day audiences and that these differing spatialized habits of thought have led to problematically differing interpretations of Shakespeare’s plays. Specifically, I argue that early modern audiences would have understood *King Lear* based on an ideological geography concerning the place of the sovereign, known at the time as the verge.1 Most important to my argument here is the verge’s ability to subsume all other places as the person of the sovereign progressed across the kingdom. This sovereign subsuming of place had three aspects: it involved the personnel and provisions that made up the king’s household and were overseen by the Lord Steward; it included a military force charged to keep the “king’s peace” under the command of the Knight Marshal; and it created a jurisdiction extending to a radius of twelve miles from the king’s person. The governing body of this jurisdiction was known as the Court of the Marshalsea and was presided over by both the Lord Steward and the Knight Marshal. Evidence suggests that for the ordinary Londoner of Shakespeare’s day, the king’s verge was making itself felt in sometimes overbearing ways, becoming a contested site in the battle over the nature of sovereign authority.

In *King Lear*, the verge stands as the object of desire motivating the characters of Lear and Edmund, each of whom feels that he should command the royal place in order for justice to be done. Lear wishes to regain the verge so that he might put his daughters on trial. Edmund wishes to turn the world upside down, gaining retributive justice in going from “base” bastard to the “top” of the monarchy. Far from seeming just, at the time of the play’s first performances, the verge was commonly regarded as corrupt, especially due to the activities of the Knight Marshal’s Men, who may seem be in light of Lear’s hundred knights, who even the corrupt Goneril could complain “infected” her court. I argue here that Lear and Edmund are doubled through their mutual desire to rule the verge and mete out a personal justice. Moreover, I argue that this doubling is reflected not simply in early modern contrariety — here, the play’s hero and its villain, its most legitimate character (the king) and its least (a bastard). Most important for *King Lear*, these characters are doubled chiastically both in language and in their movements on the stage. With a significant exception, Lear and Edmund do not occupy the stage at the same time, but their paths cross once at the play’s beginning and once at its end — times when Lear alternatively loses the verge and then, briefly, regains it.

The word “verge” comes from the Latin *virga* (staff, reed, magician’s wand, or, predictably, penis) and etymologically refers to the staff of office held by the Lord Steward of the king’s household who, along with the Knight Marshal, sat as justices in the verge’s mobile jurisdiction. The king did not sit as a justice in this court, although theoretically he was there by proxy. As the historian and lawyer William Lambarde noted in 1591, the Steward and the Marshal “have the place of the king to hear and determine pleas of the crown within the verge”.2 It is, of course, the king’s authority and place — symbolically, his *virga*, or sceptre — that allow the steward and the marshal to act for him. More broadly, “verge” refers to the limits of the king’s place, and as such registers the concern over who is especially close to him and, more importantly, who is and is not under his personal jurisdiction. To be “on the verge” in Shakespeare’s day did not typically mean that a person or thing was on the cusp of a change in personal status.3 Rather, the concern was typically about one’s po-

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3. OED, “verge” 17a.
sition inside or outside the king’s local compass of authority. This compass could be figured in a variety of ways, the two most common being the twelve-mile “place” of the sovereign and the geographical limits of the kingdom. Shakespeare’s use of the term in plays other than King Lear suggests that the playwright was keen to these valences. In Richard II Gaunt denounces the king, saying, “A thousand flatterers sit within thy crown, / Whose compass is no bigger than thy head, / And yet, engagéd in so small a verge, / The waste is no whit lesser than thy land” (II.1.102). Gaunt’s criticism is that Richard is not big enough for the kingship, that he cannot see the complex nature of the territory enclosed by the “sceptred isle” (II.1.40), nor can he see the limits of the jurisdictional compass of the verge. In Richard III, Lady Anne, on hearing that she will soon be crowned queen, despairs, “O would to God that the inclusive verge / Of golden metal that must round my brow / Were red-hot steel, to sear me to the brains” (IV.1.58). Again, the verge is not the edge of something to get passed but the limits of royal authority. For Lady Anne, in fact, the verge cannot be overcome; instead, it owns a destructive force that, like most uses of the word “verge” registers the way in which the limits of royal authority create the place, who sets its limits, is seen to be threatened by an insurgent force that comes between that authority’s potential power and its application. Lear is likewise attuned to these formations when he warns Kent not to come between “our sentence and our power, / Which nor our nature nor our place can bear” (I.1.157-58). Gloucester makes the irony of Lear’s words clear, noting that the king has “subscribed his [own] power” and “Confined [himself] to exhibition” (I.2.23-24). It is not that Lear has placed himself or some other authority between his sentence and power, but that he has limited the range of his power. In other words, Lear trades a military unit capable of physical force for one capable of symbolic force—his “reservation of an hundred knights” (I.1.122).

Still, what is conceptually striking is how the word “verge” registers the way in which the limits of the sovereign place emanate from a central point of authority. Within the place of the king itself, the verge, this point of authority was embodied by a single person, the sovereign—the most local and most sacred point in the kingdom, the map. Given the important scholarship that continues to be produced, Lear’s map will remain invaluable to our study of the play, despite my relative neglect of it.


5. On what “place” meant to the men and women of Shakespeare’s time, and how it was conceptually different from modern notions, see Edward Casey, The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 103-93. I depart from most scholarship on place and space in early modern literature in that I do not in this essay rely on Michel de Certeau’s The Practice of Everyday Life, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), and Henri Lefebvre’s The Production of Space, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), however indispensable they have been. See Patricia Fumerton, Unsettled: The Culture of Mobility and the Working Poor in Early Modern England (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2006), 53-59, for instance, who uses Certeau and Lefebvre for a wonderful discussion of “low” spatiality. My other (seemingly) provocative choice in this essay on place and King Lear is that I choose not to discuss Lear’s map—a topos that may indeed seem indispensable for what I attempt here. Part-and-parcel of my argument is that this play has much more to offer us in terms of geography than those aspects that surround the king’s the interrelated and mutually constituting realms of the symbolic and the material, the rhetorical and the physical use of power. As such, place is, to the fullest extent, political, however much it may obtain secondary characteristics, such as the topographical features and ecological resources Lear enumerates in his descriptions of the divided kingdom: Goneril’s “shady forests and wide-skirted meads” (I.1.56), for example. To be sure, these features are not separate from the concept of place, and their importance has been recently noted in a number of important essays. Nevertheless, my concerns are more closely related to those of Gloucester in the play’s second scene, where he sees a series of politically delimited places in jeopardy because authorities are no longer able to wield uninterrupted power. Gloucester sees “cities” threatened by “mutinies”, “countries” threatened by “discords”, he sees “palaces” threatened by “treason” and homes threatened by “the bond cracked between son and father” (I.2.99-101). In each of these examples the central authority who creates the place, who sets its limits, is seen to be threatened by an insurgent force that comes between that authority’s potential power and its application. Lear is likewise attuned to these formations when he warns Kent not to come between “our sentence and our power, / Which nor our nature nor our place can bear” (I.1.157-58). Gloucester makes the irony of Lear’s words clear, noting that the king has “subscribed his [own] power” and “Confined [himself] to exhibition” (I.2.23-24). It is not that Lear has placed himself or some other authority between his sentence and power, but that he has limited the range of his power. In other words, Lear trades a military unit capable of physical force for one capable of symbolic force—his “reservation of an hundred knights” (I.1.122).

ground-zero of ideological geography. Especially in James I’s absolutist terms, not only was the king a father and the head of his household, he was also the pater patriae. Not only was the king charged with keeping his household safe, he was also the defensor pacis of his kingdom. And not only was the king responsible for finding justice for his family, he was also the fons justitiae for his subjects. Francis Bacon was working within this ideological geography when, in defense of the king’s jurisdiction, he noted that the verge should be “exemplary unto other places”. The verge, from this perspective, was “exemplary” in that it served as an especially illustrative example of family, peace, and justice as well as the power and the authority by which these qualities were circulated throughout the rest of the kingdom. According to Bacon, the verge was “as a half-page or carpet spread about the King’s chair of estate, which therefore ought to be cleared and voided [of disorder and injustice] more than other places of the kingdom”. The verge was also “exempt”, Bacon claimed, in that the “plot of twelve miles round (which we call the verge) [is] subject to a special and exempted jurisdiction”.

It is this state of exemptionality that escapes most of us when we read or analyze King Lear. Consider Lear’s hundred knights. Recall that he has “invest[ed]” (I.1.119) the dukes with the “Preeminence” (I.1.120) of sovereignty, retaining for himself a small military force which delimits a sort of miniature verge. Goneril and Regan come to see this as incompatible with the verge extending out from their own places of sovereignty. By claiming that Lear’s retainers “enguard his dotage with their powers and hold our very lives in mercy” (I.4.289-90), Goneril does more than indict her father of outlandish and senile ways; she suggests that even though she, her sister, and their husbands supposedly have gained “preeminence” of place, Lear’s kingly place (he still retains the title of king) continues to subsume theirs. Goneril confronts Lear saying that his “hundred knights and squires” are

Men so disordered, so debauched and bold
That this our court, infected with their manners,
Shows like a riotous inn, epicurism
And lust make more like to a tavern, or brothel,
Than a great palace. (I.4.219-24)

Goneril suggests here not merely that Lear has disgraced her palace, but that he is degrading her “court” by use of his superior place. It is not the simple fact of the verge’s conceptual existence that would have informed original audiences. The verge underwent challenges both in the common law courts and in the parliament because its practices were termed onerous and corrupt. For instance, finding themselves within its twelve-mile compass, subjects were hassled and often arbitrarily selected to supply provisions, gratis, for the king’s household. More substantive complaints focus on the large fees charged by the Knight Marshal and the way in which these were collected. Although the parliamentary bills concerning the knights have been lost, a trace of one of them survives in the papers of the House of Lords, where it had been sent after its third reading in the Commons.

The draft, dated 1606, notes that the verge is a useful court in small matters not fit for the ordinary courts and for giving relief against persons that lurk in places of exemption or pretend to be privileged; but by the ill conduct of the officers, called marshals, the court is scandalized and the subjects oppressed.

The language of the draft is perhaps most striking in how much its representation of the Knight Marshal’s men’s “ill conduct” resembles Goneril’s accusation that Lear’s knights’ “debauched” behaviour has “infected” her court. An intriguing correspondence develops when we consider that Shakespeare’s play and these bills were both written and performed (or read in public). In both texts the king’s personal military force acts similarly and is figured as a sign of deep corruption.

Details of the Knight Marshal’s Men’s behaviour are provided by Bacon. These details surprisingly issue out of his work in order to preserve the Court of the Marshalsea, although to do so he was forced, in 1610, to admit to the court’s sins. He says that although the Court of the Marshalsea promised speedy justice as it marched its way across the kingdom, its very mobility in combination with “the fee commonly called the Knight Marshal’s fee, which is great and laid upon the defendants”, had created a culture of corruption. Bacon provides details that flesh out the concerns that prompted the Common’s bill: the king’s own military force, “the multitude of the Knight Marshal’s men”, would enter a territory and then, because a fee was to be gained with every arrest and because the court and its men would often move on without actually adjudicating the case, the men

8. Bacon, Works, 266.
9. Bacon, Works, 266.
were in a position to “make gain upon arrests by stirring of suits upon malice or frivolous causes”.  

In order to save it from its opponents in the superior courts and the House of Commons, King James, presumably following Bacon’s advice, came upon a plan to save his jurisdictional compass, but at a cost: as Bacon put it, under their plan the court would have “less state” in exchange for “more strength, legally”. 14 James established an entirely new court, “The Court of the Verge”, which had the jurisdictional competence to hear exceedingly limited types of pleas, especially as those might involved persons outside the king’s household. This court had “less state” in one very telling way: the Court of the Verge did not follow the king on progress, but was immobile, encompassing the twelve miles in any direction from Whitehall palace. The Court of the Verge was, then, no longer really part of the verge, or rather, was only part of the verge when the king resided in Whitehall. In a way, then, not only was the king’s powerful jurisdiction immobilized, but so too was his stateliness. When the king came calling after 1611, his authority over place was greatly diminished. Indeed, we see in these assumptions a decidedly modern notion of place and mobility, that the “sacred places” of the king, to use Bacon’s phrase, may be permanent, but they are permanently restricted to certain fixed places. 15

This immobilization of sovereign place occurs at a time in which place, as a concept, was undergoing transformation. Edward Casey describes the change as one from a sense of place that emphasized heterogeneity, of how different places were, to a sense of location that emphasized homogeneity, of how similar places are. This change was, furthermore, a change from an emphasis on a vertical hierarchy of interrelated and dependent places, to an emphasis on a nonhierarchical array of relative positions. 16 It was a change, as Casey describes it, from an Aristotelian sense of place to a Platonic one. Aristotle claimed that one place [topos] was always contained within another and that all places [topoi] were ultimately conjoined through shared substance [ousia]. 17 Plato claimed that the places of the world existed in relation to one another upon a backdrop of undifferentiated “space” [chora]. 18 Casey calls the modern conception a state of “Positional primacy” and notes that we see it across the cultural spectrum after 1600 — for instance, the “rise of neoclassicism in art and literature reflected a new concern with the precise position of objects in the scenes in which they were set”. 19 By 1700, place becomes “utterly relational, the sheer order of coexisting points”. These points “do not retain any of the inherent properties ascribed to them by ancient and early modern philosophers: properties of encompassing, holding, sustaining, gathering, situating”. 20 In King Lear we see these properties in the verge’s ability to subsume — to “hold”, “gather”, “sustain” — other places because of its superior status. 21

Walter Ong described these changes as one of an epistemology based on verbal dialogue to an epistemology based on a visualized space. For Ong, this movement begins with the increasing importance of the printed word (“the scholastic, scientific passion for fixity and exactitude, associated with dependence upon written documents”) 22 and comes to its most influential development in Ramus’ spatialized “method”. In dialectic, it is a change in which Aristotle’s word-based categories go from being “predicates or accusatives to classifications” and eventually become Ramus’ “topoi or places”. 23 Ong describes similar changes in theology, law and medicine, and argues for a more general change in Western epistemology, a “hypertro-

13. Bacon, Works, 264
14. Bacon, Works, 266.
16. Casey, The Fate of Place, 103-36.
19. Casey, The Fate of Place, 183.
23. Ong, Ramus, 314, 315.
Moreover, at the time of order, but to a place within it. Banishment not to some place outside the political prisonment. Imprisonment is, in a way, a form of—about the possibility, the verge’s ability to practice Knight Marshal’s Men, but they certainly knew what it was like to have been imprisoned by the finally, they may not have known, personally, the Knight Marshall’s Men could stir up unrest. In contrast, they also would have been aware of how the presence of the members of the king’s household as they went about purveying goods and services, and we can be sure that some in the audience respected the haughty ways of those who “pretend to be privileged”.25 They would have been aware of the presence of the Knight Marshal’s Men as they kept the peace in the “sacred” place of the king. By contrast, they also would have been aware of how the Knight Marshal’s Men could stir up unrest. Finally, they may not have known, personally, what it was like to have been imprisoned by the Knight Marshal’s Men, but they certainly knew about the possibility, the verge’s ability to practice in the most extreme form of control over place: imprisonment. Imprisonment is, in a way, a form of banishment not to some place outside the political order, but to a place within it.

Moreover, at the time of Lear’s first performances, performances themselves were entirely mobile. The scholarly community is well aware of the importance of touring for theatre companies of Shakespeare’s day.26 What we need to bear in mind is that King Lear was quite possibly first performed not at the Globe or at Blackfriars and not before the king at Whitehall but on tour.27 Leeds Barroll has argued that King Lear’s first London perform-

ance would have been “before the King’s majesty at Whitehall upon St. Stephen’s night”, as the title page of the first quarto has it. Barroll also reasons that because the public theaters had been closed for much of 1606, there is little chance it would have appeared in London at all that year.28 But Barroll does not consider the probability that the King’s Men were out on tour during the time of the closings and that they may have performed King Lear first while moving around the countryside in a way quite analogous to the king’s perambulations. If this were the case, the touring company’s resemblance to the mobile court – its ability to subsume places upon which it “settled” – may very well have struck the playwright if he were composing, or revising, the play on tour. We may very well, therefore, owe the prominence of the verge in the play to the mobility, during Shakespeare’s time, of the place of the stage.

For most readers of King Lear, the play begins in Lear’s palace. That is, after all, the place where centuries of editors have located the scene – where they have explicitly told us the play begins. Scholarly views about editorial interventions have changed in recent years, and the most progressive of editions no longer assign artificial scene designations.29 Nevertheless, it should not surprise anyone if, after years of seeing this editorial direction, a reader still imagines that the play begins in a palace of the king. It is as if this setting has been etched onto the consciousness of Lear readers much like our understanding of many scenes as located on the “heath” – a word and location


29. On the advent of editorial scene designation, see Gerald Eades Bentley, Shakespeare and His Theatre (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 53-63; Alan C. Dessen, Elizabethan Stage Conventions and Modern Interpreters (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 84-104; Paul Menzer, “Dislocating Shakespeare: Scene Locators and the Place of the Page”, Shakespeare Bulletin 24 (2006), 1-19; and Turner, The English Renaissance Stage, 165-66. Included among the “progressive” editions I mention here are the third-series Arden, the New Cambridge and the Oxford. Most that still provide a location for the scene are editions of the complete works, such as the Bevington, the Norton, the Pelican, and the Riverside. The Norton is unique among these in that it does not locate the scene in Lear’s “palace” but terms this place his “court”. The difference between these terms and how modern readers understand them, encapsulates much of my argument in this essay.


27. See Gurr, Shakespearian Playing Companies, 91-92.
that was added to texts of the play a century after it first appeared.30

My point here is that Shakespeare’s earliest audiences would not have imagined that the play begins in the king’s palace, even if they may have understood that the king is in this scene thoroughly “at home”, surrounded by his daughters and his household, deciding grave matters of both family and state. Shakespeare’s earliest audiences, especially those in London, had every opportunity to experience the various manifestations of the “place” of the king. What we see, then, in modern editions of King Lear, with their immobilizing assumptions that locate the beginning of the play in a royal palace is a sign of a post-1611 mindset, this idea that the king leaves behind much of his stately character when he leaves his own palace. We see these changes in ideological geography in how modern audiences no longer conceive of a doubling of place in the opening scene. And furthermore we see this change in the relational and ordering properties of scene designations in modern editions of Shakespeare that began in the eighteenth century. During that century Shakespeare’s editors began locating the scenes of his plays with increasing specificity. In 1709 Nicholas Rowe was the first editor to label each Shakespearean scene with a setting. His setting for the opening scene of King Lear, for instance, locates the scene in “A Palace”. In 1733 Lewis Theobald made the article definite and specified the owner: “The King’s Palace”. A few decades later, Edward Capell specified the room: “A State-room in King Lear’s Palace”. Turner argues that by virtue of locating each and every scene, these editors created structural relations among them that follow what Casey, Foucault, Ong and others find as a general cultural trend. Turner’s claims follow neatly those of Ong and his dichotomy of an earlier verbal culture corrupted by a modern textual one. Turner describes the abstract space of modern Shakespearean text as a “readily” one, which he contrasts with the earlier verbal / performative space of the theatre.31

Indeed, Shakespeare’s earliest audiences may well have been attuned to character dialogue which suggests that the location of the first two scenes is Gloucester’s castle. At the start of Act I Scene 2, Gloucester’s observes that Lear has just then gone “Upon the gad” (I.2.25), words which, according to W. W. Greg’s astute observation, “do not, to say the least, hint at any change of locality”.32 Gloucester seems to tell the audience that Lear has just left and that he and his two sons remain there at his home, not Lear’s. This is not to say that there is no change of place between the scenes, for the king’s exit has the effect of uncovering Gloucester’s subsumed place.

Just as Shakespeare’s earliest audiences would have been in an ideological position to understand the play as beginning in Lear’s verge, they would have been in a position to understand that the play ends there. Recall that a mere twenty-five lines before the play ends, Albany abdicates his sovereign authority much as Lear had at the start of the play. Albany confers on Lear, for the remaining “life of this old majesty”, “our absolute power” (V.3.293, 294) — a gesture with short-lived effect, since Lear is in the quick process of dying. Fainting, Lear calls out “Break heart, I prithee break” (V.3.305). Kent tells those around not to interfere with this process, saying “Vex not his ghost. O, let him pass. He hates him / That would upon the rack of this tough world / Stretch him out longer” (V.3.307-09). Immediately, Edgar reports, “O, he is gone indeed” (V.3.09). Albany responds by having Lear’s and the others’ bodies (quite unconventionally) taken from the stage. Albany also, of course, announces his own abdication and his own idea of a power-sharing arrangement. The play ends, therefore, with a question about the disposition of the sovereign verge, a scenario that mirrors the play’s opening scene. Instead of Kent and Gloucester worrying over the subject of inheritance of the kingdom, as they had at the beginning of the play, Kent and (the most recent) Gloucester have become the subject of such a worry. Most important, an early modern audience member may very well have been aware that the scene’s place had changed when Lear briefly regained sovereign authority.

These beginning and ending changes in the verge occur at moments when Lear’s and Edmund’s paths cross onstage. As a consequence, Shakespeare’s earliest audiences would have also been in a position to understand not only a doubling of place that modern audiences tend to miss, but a doubling of character (Lear and Edmund) that for the most part has gone unnoticed. As we know, Lear, for most of the play, desires to regain the place of the sovereign. Less well known, how-


ever, is that Edmund struggles not only to gain a foothold in the “legitimate” social order of the kingdom but in fact also struggles to gain the very place of the verge. While Edmund may seem motivated, toward the end of the play, by a deep desire to be “beloved” (V.3.235), what matters to him throughout, as he tells us twice in his revealing soliloquies in Act I Scene 2, is “land” — that which confers social, moral, and legal status — in other words, place. Edmund’s trajectory throughout the play, moreover, reveals this ultimate object of his desire. As he tells us in Act V Scene 1, he will marry the sister who will get rid of Albany for him (“Let her who would be rid of him devise / His speedy taking off”, V.1.55-56) and thereby make him by marriage the sovereign, male ruler of Britain. Bearing this goal in mind, we can read his early profession to “top the legitimate” (I.2.20) not just as a reference to topping his brother, whom he has just referred to as “th’ legitimate” and “my legitimate” (I.2.17, 18), but in a larger sense as a reference to legitimacy itself. The desire to “top” legitimacy itself certainly matches both his larger goal of gaining the greatest amount of power in the land and his other goal, to reverse the injustice of his condition of bastardy and turn the world upside down.

At the beginning of King Lear, therefore, we have, first, Lear’s subsuming of Gloucester’s place (“topping” it, as it were) and in the next scene, Edmund’s articulation of his desire to “top” his brother, as well as at least a hint that he will try to become the king, to top the source of legitimacy itself. This connection between Lear and Edmund is, however, much more involved than the simple dialectics we might expect between the play’s hero and its villain; it is also a contrast between the most legitimate and the least legitimate characters, and between one who cannot leave his place behind and one who has no place to call his own. Moreover, as Lear incrementally loses control of the verge, Edmund gains closer access to it, taking over, first, a noble place, and then aiming at a sovereign one. These correspondences between Lear and Edmund are made explicit at the beginning of the play and at its end in the form of a pair of chiasmata: with a significant exception, Lear and Edmund do not occupy the stage at the same time but, instead, cross each other’s paths, Lear entering the scene as Edmund leaves it, once at the start of the play, but only for the remaining “life of this old majesty”, conferring on him “our absolute power” (V.3.293, 294). Edmund is thus sent away; Lear is thus restored.34

33. At least two critics have previously noticed this doubling; see Y. B. Olsson, “Edmund and Lear (a Study in the Structure of King Lear)”, Durham University Journal 78 (1985-86), 251-58, and Annie Whiteside, “A Director’s Note on Edmund: ‘When Night is Falling, He is Rising’”, Shakespeare Bulletin 4 (1986), 16.

34. For a different perspective, see Jay L. Halio, who argues that Edmund should stay onstage so that as an outsider he might “[take] it all in”: “Staging King Lear 1.1 and 5.3”, Shakespearean Illuminations, ed. Jay L. Halio and Hugh Richmond (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1998), 104.

35. Gillies notes that the ins and outs of the play are between the place of the household and the placelessness of the so-called heath. “[T]he ‘geography’ of Lear’s ordeal”, he says, “is far less important than its ‘placial’ quality; a quality that has no meaning independently of the phenomenological fact that it is ‘outside’ the ‘household’ setting”, “The Scene of Cartography in King Lear”, 125.

movements that alert us to their relationship, but the play’s language as well. Here Gloucester promises Kent that he will soon send Edmund away but then suddenly notes that the king will soon arrive:

He hath been out nine years, and away he shall again. The King is coming. (29-31)

In a breath the earl speaks of his son’s leaving and the king’s entering. We may even imagine that this going and coming would be mirrored on the stage: Edmund leaves with his father in one direction as Lear enters the scene from the other, commanding Gloucester to “Attend my lords of France and Burgundy”. Given that Edmund may very well have no place in the presence of the king and his court other than as an adjunct to his father, early modern acting companies may have felt it only natural that Edmund would leave at this point.34

In the final scene, “hence” and “enter” replace “away” and “coming.” This moment occurs precisely as Gloucester’s promise that Edmund will go “away” comes to pass:

ALBANY. […] Bear him [EDMUND] hence a while.
Enter LEAR with CORDELLIA in his arms. (V.3.251)

Again, Edmund is commanded to leave, and again Lear arrives, taking over the scene. In the first scene Gloucester said he would send Edmund away to some unknown place “out there”. Here, in the final scene, that promise is made good, not by Gloucester, who is now dead, and not of Edmund’s own volition, but by Albany, who remains the kingdom’s sovereign authority. As the first scene provided the terms and the action for going and coming, so too does the final scene. Once Lear has established himself in this final scene, and once Albany has dismissed the very report of Edmund’s death — “that is but a trifle here” (V.3.289) — Albany abdicates, as Lear did at the start of the play, but only for the remaining “life of this old majesty”, conferring on him “our absolute power” (V.3.293, 294). Edmund is thus sent away; Lear is thus restored.35
The following figures from the first quarto further point out the chiasmatic relationships between the prepositions and pronouns associated with Edmund and the verbs and nouns associated with Lear.

While I do not mean to suggest that Shakespeare intended for these chiasmata to work out this meticulously, the ordering of the words does rather neatly illustrate the relationships I have been at pains to describe. That Edmund receives prepositions and pronouns is, again, not so much a matter of dramatic craft as it is a function of the bastard being moved about by more powerful figures and highlights his lack of agency. Lear’s agency is, by contrast, highlighted by ownership of active verbs. Even at his lowest moment when he carries in the dead Cordelia, he enters and speaks by force of will.

While the chiasmata do not reveal the whole story, for there is the matter of the single moment, at the beginning of the final scene, when Lear and Edmund occupy the stage together. This moment does not involve two authorities standing in the same place at the same time, nor does it involve one authority subsuming the place of another. Recall that for much of the play, Lear has been out wandering the indefinite expanse of what is commonly termed the “heath”. At the same time, Edmund has been making a kind of progress between the sovereign places of Albany and Cornwall, Goneril and Regan, the exact coordinates of Lear’s proposed “monthly course” (I.1.121). Edmund has been establishing relationships with the sisters, finding his way into their “forfended place[s]” (V.111). All the play’s action has been pointed “toward Dover,” the point on the actual extremest verge, the boundary of royal control, where all of the play’s forces violently meet. Amid the tumult of the battle there, Edmund takes captive both Lear and Cordelia. The final scene begins with this stage direction: “Enter Edmund with Lear and Cordelia, prisoners”. The opening line of this scene comes from Edmund: “Some officers take them away” (5.3.1). In terms of authority over place, we are close to witnessing a complete reversal of the situation in the opening scene, where Lear was in command and Edmund was on the verge of being sent away. Of course, Edmund is still operating here within Albany’s verge, not on his own authority, but he is nevertheless anticipating his sovereign status when he declares Lear and Cordelia “within our power” (V.1.71). Edmund’s power is not yet the sovereign’s ability to subsume another’s place, but it is still the ability to place others against their will, and as such it is an especially violent act. It is, in fact, quite similar to the power of imprisonment the Knight Marshal’s men had been abusing at the time Lear was first performed.

With Lear and Cordelia “away”, Albany enters the scene and is told by Edmund that he has had the prisoners taken out of sight for fear that Lear might “pluck the common bosom on his side” (V.3.47). Most disturbing to Albany is Edmund’s power over place, for Edmund wishes to withhold the King and Cordelia until “Tomorrow, or at further space, t’appear / Where you shall hold your [Albany’s] session,” because, he says, “The question of Cordelia and her father / Requires a fitter place” (52-53; 57-58). Edmund, that is, controls the place of justice to the extent that he suggests to Albany, his sovereign, that his presence is not a “fit” place for justice. When Albany objects that Edmund is “a subject of this war, / Not […] a brother” (59-60), Regan’s defense of him is also rendered in terms of place. Edmund “led our pow- ers,” she tells Albany; he “Bore the commission of my place and person, / The which immediate may well stand up / And call itself your brother” (62-65). Regan goes on to develop the idea that Edmund’s relationship to her is one of occupying place. For one thing, in making him her “lord and master”, she tells him to “take” her “soldiers, prisoners, patrimony” (V.3.74). Each of these terms suggests a sovereign power over place. Regan’s “patrimony” gives Edmund inherited land and title in excess of that which his earldom had given him. “Prisoners” gives him the power violently to place (or displace) another person, which is of course the power to which Albany objects, and which exceeds that of an earl. Finally, “soldiers” settles his relationship to the verge, for as Lear had lost his soldiers, the violent, ordering edge of the sovereign place, Regan now gives Edmund the men she had denied her father. The only thing standing between Edmund and the kingship, it seems, is Albany.

We tend to think that what follows this moment is the combat between Edmund and Edgar, but however much violence does ultimately settle the issue, it all takes place within the structure of the law. Two things are at stake. First, Albany announces that he is imprisoning Edmund, which is, of course, a way to defeat Edmund’s new-found,
although illegitimate, power over place. Second, in order to arrest Edmund, he must “contradict the banns” (V.3.85) of marriage, by which he means Regan’s declaration, “Witness the world that I create thee [Edmund] here / My lord and master” (V.3.75-76). It is an interesting legal manoeuvre, for Albany claims that he is doing so “in the interest” (V.3.83) of his own wife, who, he says, is also “subcontracted to this lord” (V.3.84). Furthermore, because Goneril’s contract with Edmund essentially dissolves her marriage to the duke, Albany tells Regan, “If you will marry, make your loves to me” (V.3.86).36 Only seconds prior, after Regan’s self-pronounced marriage banns, Edmund had, in essence, become sovereign of half the kingdom. The only thing standing between him and becoming sovereign over the entire kingdom is Albany. The question of what, exactly, Edmund has done to deserve Albany’s charge of “capital treason” (V.3.81) is not entirely clear, but we can be rather sure that it comes from his being “subcontracted” to Goneril. Edmund’s response, “Let the drum strike and prove my title good” (V.3.79), positions him here within “the law of arms” (V.3.147) not only to settle the issue but to kill Albany. The law of arms seems like the perfect venue for a man of Edmund’s purported skills. The paradoxical quality of the law of arms seems particularly appropriate for Edmund’s trajectory in that “arms” are the primary mode of violent nature and “law” is the primary mode of politics and sovereignty. The law of arms is, in fact, a threshold structure and as such makes for an appropriate bridge for the lawless villain to enter into the seat of law itself. And that seat, the sovereign throne, is a structure the illegitimate Edmund at once opposes and wishes to occupy.

By this point in the play, Lear’s understanding of sovereignty has become just as radical and just as paradoxical as Edmund’s. Indeed, Edmund, just like Lear, understands justice in this world as involving a dialectics of place, of legitimacy and illegitimacy’s striving. In Act IV, Scene 5, Gloucester has just undergone Edgar’s apocalyptic “cure” when Lear enters, as the stage direction terms it, “mad”. Lear raves about his daughters’ treatment of him and, ignoring the content of his speech, the blind Gloucester notes “the trick of that voice” (IV.5.103) and realizes he is in the presence of the king. Lear responds, perhaps because he has not witnessed someone react to his kingly presence for some time and perhaps because he feels something of his old powers of sovereignty once again, “When I do stare, see how the subject quakes!” (IV.5.105). After this brief hint of his former power, Lear seems to recall its juridical nature, and rewards Gloucester by mockingly pardoning him of adultery. He eventually ends by noting the basic problem with justice in a world shot through with paradox:

A man may see how the world goes with no eyes; look with thy ears. See how yon justice rails upon yon simple thief. Hark in thy ear: handy-dandy, which is the thief, which is the justice? Thou hast seen a farmer’s dog bark at a beggar? GLOUCESTER. Ay, sir.

LEAR. An the creature run from the cur, there thou mightst behold the great image of authority. A dog’s obeyed in office. Thou rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand. Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thine own back.

Thy blood as hotly lusts to use her in that kind For which thou whip’st her. The usurer hangs Thy blood as hotly lusts to use her in that kind For which thou whip’st her. The usurer hangs

through tattered rags small vices do appear; Robes and furred gowns hides all. (IV.5.143-56)

In this moment of reason-in-madness, Lear sees “justice” as something other than the “rightness” of the legitimate order. Instead, like Edmund, he understands that he who holds power is the authority who is “obeyed”.37 They both acknowledge that those who have power only seem to be above base flaws because they have “accommodations” to hide behind, while the naked wretches cannot hide their flawed natures and are exposed to the punishment of the law. Furthermore, Lear employs rhetorical chiasmus in his figuration “yon justice rails upon yon simple thief,” which in the next line are — “handy-dandy” — switched, “which is the thief, which is the justice?” George Puttenham called this type of figure “counterchange”, noting its inherent qualities with reference to place. It is, he said, “a figure which takes a couple of words to play with in a verse, and by making them to change and shift one into other’s place, they do very prettily exchange and shift the sense” (3.19). Shakespeare not only performs a counterchange, he even comments on it with the metalinguistic phrase, “handy-dandy”,38 applying it to justice

36. See B. J. and Mary Sokol, who note that as “preposterous” as Albany is being here and as much as his words are “mock legal analysis”, his charge is legitimate: Shakespeare, Law, and Marriage (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 156.


38. If there were any question about whether Lear is thinking about place in his musing here, the folio includes the explanatory phrase “change places” for the phrase “handy-dandy” — a phrase which the OED
and modelling the chiastic movements of Lear and Edmund who cross each other’s path on the stage.

In the end these character movements I have described are barely visible in the absence of a common reference point — and that common reference point is the verge. That is to say, if a reader or audience member does not think in terms of the verge (if there’s no “there” there), then Lear and Edmund seem to have nothing in common.

states means precisely that, to change places (3b). See also Weimann, who reads the phrases “handy-dandy” and “change places” as referring to the movements between the authority-delimited places of locus and platea (“Bifold Authority in Shakespeare’s Theater”, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 39 (1988), 416-17.

We moderns are, thus, ideologically blinkered to the doubling that not only makes sense as an interpretation but is clearly manifested in the play’s language, stage business, character motives. Without the ideological common ground of the verge, Lear and Edmund are denizens of separate plots, the main and the sub. With this common ground, the plots don’t just correspond; they interact. Even if we do not instinctively own these early modern habits of thought, once we have seen these relationships through the lens of an early modern ideological geography, it may be difficult not to notice them ever again.

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