

# From Sacred Mater to Profane Matter

Day 11

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King Lear

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Clarifications?

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A few preliminary thoughts...

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Harold Bloom on what makes a great piece of literature canonical—

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...A strong poem, which alone can become canonical for more than a single generation, can be defined as a text that must engender strong misreadings, both as other poems and as literary criticism. Texts that have single, reductive, simplistic meanings are themselves already necessarily weak misreadings of anterior texts. When a strong misreading has demonstrated its fecundity by producing other strong misreadings across several generations, we can and must accept its canonical status.

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By 'misreading' he really means 'creative interpretation'.

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Relates to what I've been saying about Mythos—  
and brings to mind Keats's concept of 'Negative Capability'

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...at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason...

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and then just let's a solution emerge or reveal itself

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Midrash as creative misreading—

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In Judaism, the **midrash** is the genre of rabbinic literature which contains early interpretations and commentaries on the Written Torah and Oral Torah (spoken law and sermons), as well as non-legalistic rabbinic literature (aggadah) and occasionally the Jewish religious laws (halakha), which usually form a running commentary on specific passages in the Hebrew Scripture (Tanakh).<sup>[2]</sup>

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This is how a tradition stays alive—

Certain practices, customs, texts, stories,  
artworks are treasured as part of the 'canon'—

And the Forces of Life demand that it be  
continuously creatively reinterpreted

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But any kind of reductionism—ideological,  
fundamentalist, dogmatic, moralistic—are  
rejected as agents of the Forces of Death.

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Clearly Lear has invited innumerable  
"misreadings".

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For example—

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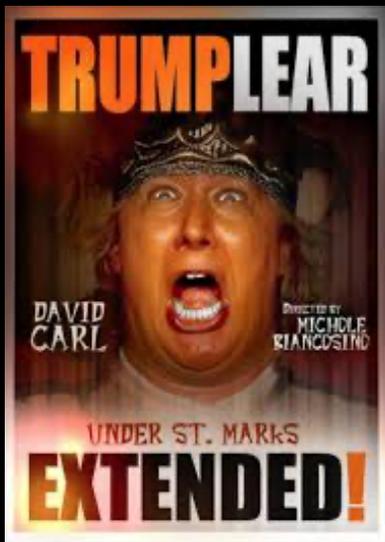
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Available on Amazon Prime—



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Shakespeare himself 'misread' Geoffrey of Monmouth's 11th century version of the Lear story

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In Monmouth's account Cordelia is victorious in the battle, restores Lear to his throne, and then succeeds him as ruler when he dies.

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So why does Shakespeare change—i.e., misread or creatively interpret—the ending in a way that so shocked people?

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There are two major schools of Lear interpretation—

polar opposites with lots of variations between

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On one end of the spectrum, *King Lear* is a Christian statement

On the other that it is a Nihilistic statement

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Both are legitimate, and they depend on so many factors.

But it's also important to try to understand what the author was intending to say—

even if that does not exhaust the possibilities for interpretation.

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And that's been my goal in presenting Shakespeare—

To understand him as best we can on his own terms

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And I'm hoping you'll do a little of that in your group discussion.

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King Lear is moving us forward now, rather than looking backward—

Goodbye Medievals & Renaissance, and Hello Modernity

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Some other preliminary considerations—

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Does Terence's Five-Act Structural Rhythm help us understand the play better?

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Act 1: Establishes the Issue; good guys & bad guys  
Act 2: Forces of Life skirmish with forces of death  
Act 3: Forces of Death make gains  
Act 4: Forces of Life counterattack  
Act 5: Resolution

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Act 1 : Establishes the Issue

What is the issue?

Forces of Life: Kent, Cordelia, King of France

Forces of Death: Regan, Goneril

(We meet Edmund in Act 1, but don't learn he's a bad guy until Act 2. We don't meet Edgar till Act 2.)

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Act 2: Preliminary skirmishing: Forces of Death make their move

Edmund's plot against Edgar—we learn Edmund is a bad guy and that Edgar is weak & naive

The daughters' plot against Lear

Edgar and Lear both cast out onto the stormy heath

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Act 3: Forces of Death make gains

Characters on team Life getting drenched in the wilderness

Edmund's plot against Gloucester results in Gloucester's joining Edgar & Lear on the heath.

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But is there anything positive occurring on the heath?

Is there some change for the better in Lear?

How do you account for it?

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Act 4: Forces of Life Counterattack

Cordelia arrives with French army to restore Lear to the throne

Gloucester fooled into failed suicide

Cordelia and Lear are reconciled

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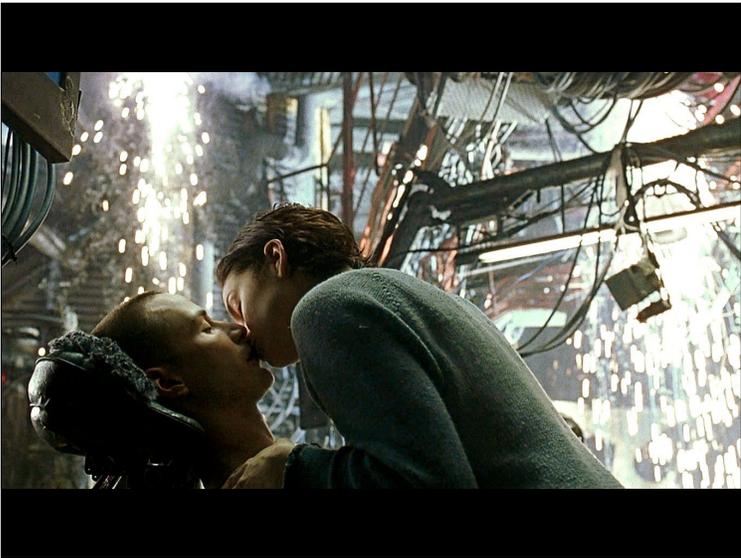
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Things are looking up, right?

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Act 5: Resolution  
Albany and Edmund prepare to fight the French  
They beat the French  
Cordelia and Lear are defeated and brought in as prisoners

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Uh, oh... things are looking bad again.

But—

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Edgar kills Edmund in duel  
Goneril poisons Regan and then herself.  
All the bad guys are dead—Hooray!

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So it's looking good again for the Forces of  
Life

And then—

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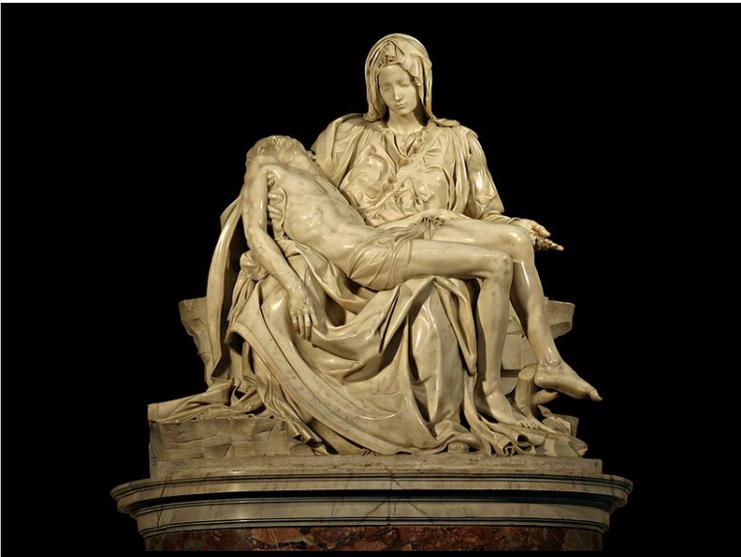
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Ok—Let's break into discussion groups and work with the questions on the handout.

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Fideism vs. Enlightenment Rationality

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Protestant Fideism—  
an epistemological theory which maintains that faith is independent of reason—  
that reason and faith are hostile to each other and faith is superior at arriving at truth.

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Enlightenment Rationality—

Truth is only what's reasonable, and so whatever is in scriptures or in one's subjective experience that is unbelievable or rationally unsupportable is rejected as mysticism or ignorance.

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But important takeaway here—

This separation is justified by a radical, post-axial theological thinking:

Emphasizing the radical transcendence of God by stressing his disconnection from the world he created.

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God created it, but he is perceived as increasingly distant from it.

Humans come to see themselves as more independent, more on their own.

Humans have their God-given Reason, and with it are tasked to understand Nature's laws.

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So while God is autonomous up there beyond the firmament, so are humans autonomous down here under the firmament.

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What starts as an axial project—stressing God's radical transcendence—  
morphs into a radical pre-axial project—all that matters is prospering within the immanent frame.

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(ironic)

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And so a whole new idea about moral order develops

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If before it was ascent and descent, now there's nothing to ascend to.

The idea of the human as divine is rejected as spiritual pride.

All that's necessary is to follow God's commandments as revealed in the scriptures.

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The new ideal is the sanctification of ordinary life—

Sacred eventually collapses into profane

Because nothing is special anymore—no festivals, no liturgies, no sacred art, no sacred places

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The enchantment of the heath and the enchantment of eternity are both gone—at least among educated elites.

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(Puritans banned Christmas celebrations because they thought they were too papist and pagan.)

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God might be great, but he keeps to himself.  
Everything is foreordained—the clock just unwinds.  
There is nothing sacred or mysterious about the machine.

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It's not about developing the intrinsic potential in a thing, it's about manipulating nature—and the polity—to be whatever humans want it to be.

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If human mind can imagine it (*theoria*), all that's needed is the craft or knowledge (*techne*) to make it (*poiesis*).

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So live long and prosper!

That's what God wants us to do—otherwise he wouldn't have given us reason and the desire to prosper.

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But to prosper is thought of almost exclusively as material rather than spiritual.

Material prosperity becomes a sign of being blessed by God.

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So now the task becomes to reverse engineer creation so that humans can make changes in the world that will enable humans to prosper.

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But what's the map to create a new society?

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Well, early on Calvin had a very clear map for what he wanted to do—  
re-engineer society into a Biblical theocracy like ancient Jerusalem

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Calvin's Geneva in the 1550s the most radical social engineering project since Lycurgus's Sparta

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The Massachusetts Bay Colony is inspired by the same ideals—  
But it was thought to be easier to create something new in the "wilderness"

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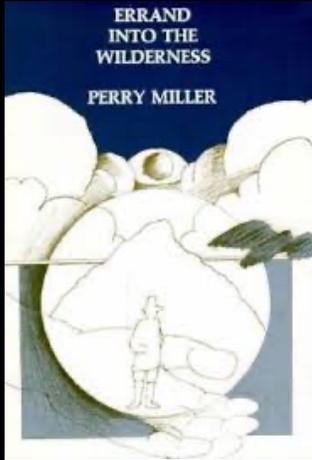
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Without Geneva in the 1550s, there's no Paris in the 1790s.

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Without Paris in in the 1790s—  
There's not Marx.

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Without Marx—

There's no Russian Revolution in 1917—

And probably something very different happens in  
China after WWII.

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Ok, I'm probably overstating things here—  
but there's a case to be made.

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Why would anybody find this attractive?

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Reinforces a disconnect between one's personal beliefs and the way the world really works.

Faith increasingly, at least among elites, becomes a personal, private affair.

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Public life—business and politics—are domains for the pursuit of material interests.

Spiritual concerns/values become increasingly irrelevant in the public sphere.

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There's a lot of freedom here in the public sphere—

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Science & technology develop largely uninfluenced and thus unimpeded by spiritual or "metaphysical" concerns—

All that matters is material improvements.

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Result?

The biggest expansion in material prosperity, technological innovation, and improvements in health and longevity in the history of the world.

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Lots of people were uncomfortable with the changes, but you just can't argue with that kind of success.

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The social imaginary doesn't change that much in Catholic southern Europe or Orthodox eastern Europe—

These areas remain relatively economically undeveloped.

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So, the new Protestant social imaginary is very receptive to technological development and capitalism.

God wants us to prosper and to use the Reason he gave us.

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MAX WEBER

The Protestant Ethic  
and the  
Spirit of Capitalism



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Material prosperity becomes a sign of being blessed by God.

Being poor becomes a sign that you are among the reprobates who are predestined for hell.

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In the medieval period the poor were considered blessed by God—

Monks took vows of poverty—

Mendicant religious orders would wander begging for alms, and it would be a blessing for you to give your money to them.

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This is a dramatic example about how changes in the social imaginary start changing actual reality—

Some new practices and attitudes get legitimated that were considered awful in the medieval period.

Where this new social imaginary is resisted, the societies remain economically less developed.

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So before going further, it's important to emphasize the genealogy here—

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Separation of Nature from God starts with the Nominalists, moves through Luther and Calvin, then onto Francis Bacon and the other founders of the scientific revolution.

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There's a profound shift in the social imaginary regarding how humans see themselves in relationship to the cosmos—

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But there's also a social-political impact, which is the point of the Taylor reading I gave you this week.

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When The Great Chain of Being and its cosmic hierarchy gets deconstructed—  
the idea of social hierarchy loses its cosmic or ontological grounding and legitimacy.

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Remember the Machiavelli quote about how the republic has a form that could be corrupted—  
and that revolution was about getting things back to the way it is imagined in the Divine Mind?

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Well, now that the divine mind has nothing to do with supporting or sustaining things in the sublunar world, form or essence as entelechy unfolding gives way to form that can as imposed *ab extra*— by the molding power of the human imagination.

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Questions?

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