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“THE WATERS THAT YOU LOOSE”: WILD WATER AND THE DECENTERED HUMAN IN KING LEAR

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Shakespearean bodies are frequently marked by their vulnerability to the earth's elements and their susceptibility to changes in the environments of the plays in which we find them. Whether these characters are rejuvenated by green worlds, separated from their loved ones by blue worlds, or violently confronted by their surroundings in Shakespeare's dark forests, the material spaces in the Bard's corpus are agentic forces in and of themselves, and they shape, define, and drive human behavior.[1]

Carolyn Merchant foundationally argues that the ecology movement of the 1970s and 80s "emphasized the need to live within the cycles of nature as opposed to the exploitative, linear mentality of forward progress,"[2] and she constructs an image that shapes contemporary Shakespearean ecocriticism in its impulse to characterize the human as (in moderate cases) embedded and enmeshed in the natural world or (in more radical cases) as swallowed or drowned by it. To be sure, Shakespeare offers characters throughout his corpus who are swept into brutal, violent natural landscapes, but more and more, the impulse to extricate those instances through critical inquiry signals an implicit, spatial paradigm that wants to challenge and debunk human exceptionalism by asserting that the landscape, in its vastness, can merely absorb the powerless humans who believe themselves capable of dominating the natural world. The ecological center that once signaled human exceptionalism comes to signify violent absorption. The embeddedness that ecocritics observe suggests not a harmonious, equal balance between human and nonhuman

[1] For more on Shakespeare's blue studies, see Steve Mentz's At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean (2009) or, later, Mentz's "Shakespeare and the Blue Humanities" (2019). The concept of Shakespeare's "green worlds" can be traced back to Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) in which he explores the idyllic worlds outside of the city walls in Shakespeare's comedies. Critical history of Shakespeare's violent forests is long and varied—for a useful contemporary reading, consider Charlotte Scott's "Dark Matter: Shakespeare's Foul Dens and Forests" (2011).

[2] Merchant, Carolyn. "Introduction." *The Death of Nature*. xxxi.

nature but a threatening imbalance in which humans can be punished (through the very process of being embedded into the landscape) for their presumed superiority over nonhuman nature.

While I have a critical curiosity about the "enmeshed" human that appears so often in ecocritical approaches to Shakespeare's plays, I notice that many (arguably, most) ecocritical readings of *King Lear* enter the play through its human characters—studying the characters through the context of the elements instead of accessing the characters by means of the elements that shape their actions. Instead of considering the human as a spot on an ecological backdrop, I propose that examining *King Lear* through an elemental lens instead of a humanist one helps us see that the two are inseparable. This bonded lens helps us uncover some of the play's less-examined ecological connections. Perhaps the most ecologically-embedded character in Shakespeare's corpus, King Lear, often takes center stage in critical readings that want to examine the relationship between the playwright's characters and their environments. Indeed, the turbulent rainstorm that sits—quite literally—in the center of the play serves as fruitful ground for such examinations, and, in large part, this essay will consider the storm with those same goals.

Falling water is a critical element in *King Lear*—both in the environment and the human body. Cordelia spends much of the play wet with tears; Lear obsessively fixates on restricting his own tears; and the play centers on a storm that threatens to drench and drown its main characters. "Court holy water in a dry house is better than this rainwater out o' door," cries the fool in response to the fearsome storm, and he puts forth a central question: to what extent do the elements act as characters themselves in Shakespeare's wettest tragedy? Uncontained, wild water, the fool reminds us, is a formidable threat to those who are accustomed to safe, dry, indoor spaces, and that threat applies to his once-powerful King. From the fool's perspective (and we might recall here that he often emerges as the play's most reasonable, observant character), raindrops are as dangerous as

the self-serving courtiers who clamor for power in the King's court. Wild water, in its most menacing form, is dangerous not only because it threatens Lear's mortality, but also because it threatens the efficacy of his power—therefore making the future of the kingdom and its inhabitants precarious. The King often recognizes a correspondence between flowing water and the evacuation of his sovereign authority, and his anxiety about his slipping power often manifests in fits of rage against tears and rain.

Shakespeare presents falling water, in the form of rain and tears, as a reflection of Lear's dwindling power. Since the element challenges the King's views of hierarchy and control, falling water—a constant obsession for the King and scholars who have studied him for centuries—provides an entry point to the play that opens possibilities for a fuller understanding of the reciprocal relationship between humans and the elements that surround them. Reading water as capable of persuasion and action gets us closer to a fuller understanding of how Shakespeare and his early modern audiences would have perceived the elements in the world and in their own material bodies. In tracing Lear's attempts to control the flow of water both within his body and within the environment more generally, this essay aims to uncover the deep resemblance of humans and the elements who populate the play's kingdom. In entering the play first through its centering of flowing water then through the counterpoints to Lear's obsession with the element—namely, Cordelia's unrestrained tears and the storm's violent display of falling water—I point to the holism of King Lear's natural kingdom.

Although Lear is, undeniably, brought to his knees by the storm, the play does not insist (at least not exclusively) on such subordination. Robin Headlam Wells, in her discussion of Renaissance humanism, observes that "the same principles of order, degree, balance, and equilibrium were repeated on every plane of existence," and, in emphasizing the balance that I will

argue appears poignantly in *King Lear*, she shares a crucial early modern conception of the inseparability of human and nonhuman nature in the early modern period (27). Wells notices that "just as the proportions of the ideal human body reflected the mathematical structure of the universe, so too the balance of humours in a well tempered mind reflected the balance of elements in nature" (29). In this way, the world of *King Lear* becomes dangerous and violent because it is thrown out of balance by a sovereign who does not realize that he is materially connected to the earth and is therefore an integral part of the cycles of the earth and environment.

In reading the function of human tears in the text then reconsidering the storm as a natural reflection of that human process, I offer a reading in which the human and nonhuman worlds are indistinguishable in their ability to replicate the behaviors of one another. My reading alters current "enmeshed" readings of the play by examining instances in which the conflict between human and nonhuman nature that appears so often in Shakespeare's tragedies is truly reciprocal—the balance of power is ever-shifting. Falling water is a clear example of that continual fluctuation, and it functions identically in the human world and the nonhuman one. I will therefore seek to avoid the impulse that pervades recent Shakespearean ecocriticism: that is, applying a lens that, as LaRoche and Munroe see it, forces us to read Lear as undergoing a shift in which he " moves away from a focus on self and instead towards (human and nonhuman) Other" (81). I find that impulse flawed in its very separation of the human and nonhuman realms—a separation that ecofeminists tend to perpetuate by further dividing the text when, in confronting the human-nonhuman binary, they offer a (no less fragmented) triad consisting of nonhuman, human, and human "Other."

I observe that the text deliberately and outwardly rejects the initial act of separation by condemning its King for that very impulse. Despite their hopes to illustrate transcorporeality, in focusing primarily on Lear's absorption into the storm, ecocritics and ecofeminists often construct

a spectrum on which humans and nonhumans rest on opposite sides. Analyses that operate on this spectrum want to argue that Shakespeare's plays lean toward one side, and, recently, many point toward the agency of nonhuman nature—therefore overemphasizing the power and scope of the landscape above that of human bodies. We cannot envision the swimmers and sailors that pervade blue Shakespeare studies, as we cannot envision the ecofeminists' version of Lear, as anything but small and subservient to the awesome, fearsome nonhuman world—a world that modern scholars see as striking back at the humans who dominated it during the humanist movement.[3] In recent critical inquiries, Shakespeare's characters are positioned as mere blips on a vast, all-powerful landscape. The result in these cases is less a study of a monistic natural world but of one in which humans are dwarfed and powerless. The pendulum swings from the dominating human to the dominating landscape—an attractive binary in modern times perhaps, but one that *King Lear* opposes.

Admittedly, my hands are tied in the same way as the ecofeminists and ecocritics who work within frustratingly modern discourses. While I take issue with language that implicitly divides the natural world or renders one part smaller than another, I find myself limited by the contemporaneity of language that provides access to "natural" discourse since that language springs from deeply embedded dichotomies that separated humans from nonhumans after the early modern period. In some cases, the modern impulse to divide the human from the nonhuman means that I am beholden to language that is rooted in the very tenets I reject. In a central example, I rely often on Stacy Alaimo's useful, but no less binary, term "transcorporeality" which she defines as:

[3] An example emerges when LaRoche and Munroe argue that the pelting rain "reorients Lear to his inherent vulnerability rather than his presumed dominance and creates conditions for a different perspective"—a perspective that displays their own self-professed anxiety that they might "betray [their] own proclivity toward human exceptionalism" (81).

> the time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from "nature" or "environment." Trans-corporeality, as a theoretical site, is a place where corporeal theories and environmental theories meet and mingle in productive way. (238)

Indeed, the prefix of Alaimo's term suggests a moving from one pole to another, and I rely on the term despite my insistence that the two parts are already and always connected. Transcorporeality, then, applies to my examination since I observe crucial instances of "meeting" and "mingling" in the natural world of *King Lear*. Throughout the play, Shakespeare depicts the human body as indistinguishable from the nonhuman, natural landscape, and in so doing, he constructs a world in which humans are not only subjected to the unfeeling whims of the weather but where humans also reflect, embody, and enact the tendencies of the natural world. When applying the theory of transcorporeality to *King Lear*, I find it to be most useful when inverted—instead of using it to enter the text through the "material fleshiness" of the human body, it allows us to transverse the play by way of natural elements first and human corporeality second.

In *King Lear*, Shakespeare does not offer a wide, swallowing waterscape that supports readings of imbalance and discord; rather, he offers a world in which the characters are both subject and object in terms of falling water. In arguing that the storm holds power that Lear does not, we find ourselves in a corner where water is only efficacious when it falls from one body (the landscape) and not the other (the human body). When critics seek to position humans as violently acted upon by natural landscapes (as they often do when they frame humans as humbled then enmeshed or swallowed by the natural world), we lose the very balance that Shakespeare prioritizes. Such readings disregard the connectedness and resemblance of human and nonhuman bodies that early modern humans would have accepted. In this way, Lear's folly is the same as the

scholarship that wants to swing the pendulum of power in one way or the other: he insists on division where the world of the play insists on holism.

In *King Lear's* kingdom, falling water opposes the divisions that Lear enacts. Both literally and figuratively, water erodes the boundaries—those based in gender, class, family, and anthropocentrism—that Lear wants to construct and uphold and that unleash chaos on the realm. Falling water, in the form of rain and tears, helps us see that boundaries between humans and their ecological surroundings are fundamentally imaginary and tenuous. In offering falling water in both human and nonhuman forms, Shakespeare blurs the lines of distinction between the two. Falling water, then, serves as a lens of transcorporeality which illuminates an inseparable balance between human and nonhuman nature; it helps us see that the play does not insist on the same binaries as its eponymous king.

I

Fervently and frequently, King Lear obsesses over his tears. In numerous instances, he threatens self-mutilation if his tears fall without his permission—a fascinating dynamic in its demonstration of Lear's impulse to sever and separate in response to his weakening power. In a particularly graphic example, the King, enraged by his eldest daughter's attempt to reduce his number of followers, admonishes his "old fond eyes," threatening to "pluck" them out for weeping (1.4.319). The violence with which Lear would disfigure his own body by "plucking" it apart carries through the play—he tears the kingdom in two, forcibly removes Cordelia from the family, and impetuously ejects Kent, his most loyal advisor, from his court. As we see when he threatens to remove his eyes, Lear's compulsion to sever illustrates his belief that natural orders—of families, kingdoms, and even human bodies—can be separated and reconfigured to suit his purposes. His continual dismemberment of nature's established hierarchies unleashes a flood—

both metaphorically and literally—that seeks to reset and reestablish the order he subverts. First in his choice to abdicate his throne then in his bifurcation of the land and bastardization of Cordelia, Lear rejects his duties as husband of the land and patriarch of his family—insisting on his own, unnatural elemental alignment which incites and perpetuates division. The play features the perverse, violent order that Lear attempts to instate—one that is built on tenets of deep separation—as destabilizing and dangerous, and the moments of the play that feature falling water clearly demonstrate the flaws in Lear's divisive ideology.

Lear's power as monarch would have been absolute; therefore to divide anything inside of his kingdom would have been his prerogative, but he does not understand that the natural order (the very one he is compelled to divide) is a necessary pillar of his authority. Therefore, the division of his kingdom disrupts the foundation of his power. Shakespeare considers the nature of power and the irony of the fact that a monarch who rules from atop systems designed to uphold him is the only one capable of destabilizing those systems. We cannot view Lear as a mere human when the play begins—he is a divinely-sanctioned monarch to whom the entire realm would bow, but when he acts on his impulse to divide his kingdom, he unknowingly catalyzes his fall from that elevated position.

When Franco Moretti discusses the tenets of sovereignty in the early modern period, he observes that "power is founded in a transcendent design, in an intentional and significant order;" therefore, "political relations have the right to exist only insofar as they *reproduce that order symbolically*" (9). From the play's opening lines, Lear fails to reproduce the order that would reinforce his power. Kent delivers the play's first lines: "I thought the King had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall" to which Gloucester responds:

> It did always seem so to us, but now in the division of the kingdom, it appears not which of the dukes he values most, for equalities are so weighed that curiosity in neither can make choice of either's moiety. (1.1.1-7)

Shakespeare opens the play with confusion in the court, and he emphasizes the "equality" or balance from which that disorder has emerged. The division of a balanced court begins a series of similar divisions which include the land and Lear's family, and the seemingly arbitrary nature of Lear's reallocation of power carries through each of those subsequent events. Lear surprises Kent, his closest advisor, in the way he distributes power between Albany and Cornwall—a moment that foreshadows Kent's shock when Lear disinherits Cordelia and gives her share of land to her sisters. Moretti's discussion of sovereignty becomes useful again here. He notices that in the Elizabethan court (both literal and dramatized), we often see a conflict between will and reason—the former belonging solely to the monarch and the latter to his counselors. Moretti characterizes this conflict inside of the body politic metaphor in which the sovereign acts as the "heart" and his counselors as the "eyes" or the "organs of sense and intellection" (12). This fine balance, Moretti argues, upholds the Elizabethan "world picture," and Renaissance tragedy, as its first order of business, tends to "*sever* the connections that sustained the dominant culture" (11-12). We might place Moretti's observation directly onto *King Lear* to understand the initial catalyst of Lear's downfall. In an act that manifests literally later in the play, Lear's first act of self-dismemberment consists of plucking the eyes from the body politic.[4] In becoming unpredictable to his advisors (more specifically, the trustworthy Kent), Lear figuratively blinds himself, therefore making it impossible to, as Kent famously begs later in the scene, "see better" (1.1.180). Lear fails to realize that in

[4] Gloucester's blinding in 3.7 marks the violent and final dissolution of the band of loyal advisors who surround Lear in the play's opening scene.

dividing the kingdom, he has mutilated the body politic and disrupted the kingdom's pillars of sovereignty.

In contextualizing how Lear begins the process of unseating himself, Moretti notices a metaphor that Shakespeare makes quite literal throughout the play. Eyes, in their many renderings, serve as a symbol of wisdom, empathy, and—significantly—the deep resemblance of all living things. We may return to Lear's threat to pluck his eyes from his head to consider this point. In the context of his disintegrating power, Lear responds to the reduction of his train by shouting:

> Life and death! I am ashamed
> That thou hast power to shake my manhood thus,
> That these hot tears, which break from me perforce,
> Should make thee worth them…
> …Old fond eyes,
> Beweep this cause again, I'll pluck you out
> And cast you, with the waters that you loose,
> To temper clay. (1.4.311-321)

Again, Lear reacts violently to water's uncontrollability. He equates his loss of emotional control to the loss of his masculinity, and he attempts to stabilize the situation with force. He threatens to "pluck" out his eyes and use their moisture to "temper clay." While clay inarguably assumes its most common definition here—as the earthy substance that can transform into a moldable paste—the word holds numerous meanings in this case. We might recall Prince Hamlet's famous speech in which he ponders the afterlife of the material human body and muses, "Imperious Caesar, / dead and turned to clay, / Might stop a hole to keep the wind away" (5.1.213-215). Hamlet's line is significant in the context of *Lear* because the word "clay" wears two meanings at once: clay is the

inanimate, elemental substance of earth, and it is the material that comprises the human body. The Oxford English Dictionary becomes useful here. It defines "clay" as, "a stiff viscous earth found, in many varieties, in beds or other deposits near the surface of the ground and at various depths below it: it forms with water a tenacious paste capable of being moulded into any shape;" alternately, it offers the definition we see in *Hamlet*: "earth as the material of the human body (cf. Genesis ii. 7); hence, the human body (living or dead) as distinguished from the soul; the earthly or material part of man" ("clay" 1. a, 4. a). The word, as Lear uses it, holds both meanings. The ferocity with which the King admonishes his own body likely results from his immense anxiety over losing control of both the land (in which case the word "clay" assumes the former meaning) and its inhabitants (which invokes the former definition). Lear wishes to mold—to "temper"—the earth and its occupants, and he believes that part of regaining that ability requires controlling his own body; that is, controlling its moisture. Another potential implication of Lear's use of the word "clay" appears in his outburst. The word "clay," the OED tells us, can also describe "earth, moist earth, mire, mud; esp. the earth covering or enclosing a dead body when buried" ("clay" 3). In this sense, Lear's fears about losing control of his body, kingdom, and subjects are entangled with his fears about his own mortality. He needs to "temper" the material that wants to thwart his authority and cover his grave.

The malleability of the word "clay" as Shakespeare uses it encapsulates the holism of the natural world in the early modern period, and the word's various meanings encompass the circular relationship of power inside of that world. Shakespeare chooses a word that belongs, in its immediate rendering, to the nonhuman realm. It signals raw, inhuman material, but it also describes the human body in a natural transition where it becomes raw, inhuman material itself. Like the word meant to describe it, clay acts as an agent both of human and nonhuman nature, and

it represents changeability—not just within one side of the nonhuman/human binary (clay, as an inanimate tenacious paste can be transformed from one inanimate object to another) but also the transition from animate to inanimate forms of being. The word "clay," as Lear uses it, holds all meanings at once, and those meanings spread throughout the entire natural world. While modern lenses allow us to read clay in this way—that is, as deconstructing or erasing a human/nonhuman nature binary inside of the play—Shakespeare uses it as a shifting, vastly applicable concept within the natural world that rejects the construction of such binaries in the first place. The fluidity of the word prevents prioritization of one meaning over the other—it cannot simply designate inanimate matter (the "tenacious paste") because it also, and at the same time, designates animate matter (the human body).

Lear's anxieties spring from his perception of water's dynamism and its ability to catalyze change. He recognizes the element both in its uncontrollable form, in his own free-flowing tears, and in its controllable one—as the element that can "temper clay." Lear's preoccupation with tears is reminiscent of Gail Kern Paster's foundational text on bodily humors and women's bodies as "leaky vessels." Paster's observation that early modern "constructions of woman" were built upon the assumption that "women's bodies were moister than men's and cyclically controlled by the watery planet, the moon" affirms Lear's belief about the fundamental differences between women's and men's bodies (Paster makes clear why Lear equates crying to diminished masculinity) while opening interpretations for Lear's anxieties ("Leaky Vessels" 39). Accordingly, Lear emphasizes the connection between the female body and the earth—he sees the humors as humans' "most rudimentary form of self-presence;" that is, they act as a sign that women are inherently, materially tied to the earth and therefore more easily controlled (5). Paster's inquiry further expands our perception of Lear when she examines the early modern notion of "virginity

as a sieve that does not leak," and she discusses three portraits of Queen Elizabeth I in which the artists feature a sieve beside the monarch which is meant to "symbolize not only her physical virginity but also the connection between that virginity and her ability to rule ("Leaky Vessels" 50). Indeed, when viewed through this context, Lear's own leaking—his unrestrained tears—signifies his own (to borrow a pivotal phrase from Paster) "embarrassed body" in the form of his impotence as a patriarchal monarch. In this sense, Lear's visceral reaction to his tears is a response not only to his diminished masculinity but also his diminished influence as a patriarch and monarch—a thread that carries through the entire play and recurs, most powerfully, when he rails against the storm in act three.

Lear obsession with restricting his tears corresponds to his belief that they signify weakness, but he fails to recognize that they mirror the ability of the earth—a connection that Shakespeare makes explicit through Cordelia. Shakespeare intimately connects Cordelia to the earth when he ties her wetness—her tears and her wet, material body—to the earth's own water. This theme first appears when Kent and an unnamed gentleman discuss Cordelia's love for her father. The gentleman says:

> her smiles and tears
> Were like a better way. Those happy smilets
> That played upon her ripe lip seemed not to know
> What guests were in her eyes, which parted thence
> As pearls from diamonds dropped. (4.3.21-25)

The gentleman's blazon marks his engagement with a trope that Nancy Vickers has compellingly argued "informs the Renaissance norm" of the presence of a beautiful, ideal women through use

of "scattered rhyme."[5] The gentleman likens Cordelia to the earth itself when he compares her tears to its most precious buried treasures. Shakespeare affirms Cordelia's deep attachment to the earth when she learns of Lear's diminished mental state. She calls upon the earth to heal him: "All blest secrets / All you unpublished virtues of the earth, / Spring with my tears" (4.5.17-19). Cordelia enlists her tears or, in her father's words, her "women's weapons," for healing purposes (2.4.304). Cordelia's tears have generative properties—they stimulate growth and healing, and they demonstrate a reciprocal water cycle in which she supplies a nourishing, penetrative element that allows the earth to nourish her in return. Unlike her father who would "temper clay" by manipulating the earth with his hands, Cordelia understands the natural processes of her body—the shedding of her tears—as integral to a cycle of regeneration. Her tears are implicitly tied to the earth's cycle of generation and growth, and her respect for her place in that process allows her to power to unlock the healing properties of the earth. Although Lear might argue that Cordelia's tears—her "women's weapons"—signify her weakness, Shakespeare positions them as a source of power since they allow her to access the "virtues" of the earth.

To be sure, in releasing her tears, Cordelia positions herself as equal to the play's primary combatants for power. Cordelia's command is no less than that—she does not simply appeal to the earth, she commands it, but instead of positioning herself outside of the natural water as her father does, she works within the cycle of creation (a cycle in which water is a crucial component). Cordelia's power is born from her understanding that her body is an integral part of natural cycles, and while Lear, through his impulse to sever, separate, and divide, loses power at a rapid rate, Cordelia acquires power by invoking the connection between her body and the earth. Unlike her

[5] Nancy J. Vickers. "Diana Described: Scattered Woman and Scattered Rhyme." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 8, no. 2, Dec. 1981, pp. 265–279.

father, she realizes that her tears are not a sign of weakness; rather, they align her to the natural world and unlock its vast potential.

Shakespeare balances Cordelia's embodiment of natural elements with her devout piety, and he carefully crafts Cordelia as an ideal woman through his portrayal of her tears. Cordelia's tears serve as a locus of ideals that contradict in the face of anthropocentric and patriarchal boundaries. Her ability to be a dutiful wife, for instance, stands at odds with her duty to her father. "Why have my sisters husbands if they say / They love you all?" she quips in response to Lear's impossible ultimatum—emphasizing the impossibility of his request that she announce her unparalleled love for him (1.1.109-110). Perhaps most importantly, Cordelia's tears demonstrate her deep connection to the nonhuman, natural world, and she therefore bridges the divide between the human and nonhuman worlds that her father perpetuates when he tries to weaponize it to enhance his authority.

Shakespeare supports the ideology that Cordelia represents (a singular natural world) when he depicts her connection to the earth as holy. Sylvia Bowerbank examines the intersection of piety and ecology within the early modern imagination. Practicing piety and responsible ecology, Bowerbank contends, are "inseparable" both "in theory and practice" when considering how early modern women tried to "shape themselves into harmonious subjects" and "live justly on the earth" (85). Indeed, Cordelia attempts to live both harmoniously and justly, but the fissure between the human and nonhuman world (enforced by her father and replicated through the fissure between genders) complicates her ability to do so. Cordelia's tears, the gentleman explains, can be viewed as "sunshine" and "rain"—affirming their earthly qualities and further rendering Cordelia as a replication of the earth itself (4.3.21). Cordelia's tears, the gentleman explains, are also "holy water" that fall from her "heavenly eyes," and Shakespeare thereby orchestrates the harmony

Bowerbank ascribes to the ideal early modern woman. By weeping, Cordelia simultaneously enacts her piety and her ecological mindfulness. She is a foil to her father in that she embodies the similitude of the realms he tries to separate, and she embodies the elemental sameness of the earth and the material human body.

Cordelia's allies herself with the earth—a stance that casts her as her father's opposite. While we might define Lear's need to control Cordelia and the land in more general terms—he is a willful monarch who believes his power should extend to every human and nonhuman facet of his kingdom—we might also consider that he attacks the intimate connection between women and the earth that is most evident by their shared ability to "leak" unabashedly. Lear's obsession with leaking intensifies when he grapples with the evacuation of his monarchical power. When Regan and Goneril have—officially and finally—stripped Lear of his train of followers, he fixates on restricting his tears—presumably as a way to stop the "leaking" of his power. He exclaims: "Touch me with noble anger, / And let not women's weapons, water drops, / Stain my man's cheeks" (2.4.318-320). He continues his rant by fixating, again, on the flow of water from his eyes. He cries:

> …You think I'll weep
> No, I'll not weep
> I have full cause of weeping, but this heart
> Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws
> Or ere I'll weep. (2.4.324-328)

Lear's outburst demonstrates his desire to uphold the boundaries he has constructed inside of his kingdom and his psyche. His anxiety about unrestrained leaking comes from his divisive ideologies about gender and control. Of course, referring to tears as "women's weapons" helps us

see that Lear draws a clear line between genders—believing women to be more prone to uncontrolled weeping, but we also see that he believes his mind to be separate from his body as he coaxes himself out of what he believes to be a corporeal reflex.

Lear's sense of control is built on binary ideologies—a belief system that is gradually challenged when examined through Lear's tears since they delegitimate the boundaries between mind and body and human and nonhuman nature that Lear wants to construct. This outburst showcases Lear's urge to maintain binary thinking while also showing that those binaries are fundamentally non-existent. In trying to restrain his tears, Lear asserts his dominance because to cry would be to soften the lines that legitimate and affirm his power. His insistence that he will not weep is born from his dualistic view of his own body—he perceives his mind and body as separate, conflicting parts, and that perception extends to his kingdom and its inhabitants. Instead of cultivating a monistic kingdom, he insists on dividing his court, his family, and the land itself, and yet, his language demonstrates the inherent instability of the boundaries he attempts to instate.

Given Lear's fixation on how others perceive him, he presumably deploys the word "flaws" in this speech in its corporeal rendering. Tracing the word back to the early modern period clarifies how Lear uses the word both literally and figuratively. Immediately, and most obviously, Lear suggests that his heart will burst into a hundred thousand fragments or "detached pieces" before he will allow himself to cry ("flaw" n.1.1). Given Lear's tense emotion in this speech, we might also interpret his claim that his heart will burst into "flaws" as a manifestation of his anxiety and frustration since another early modern rendering of the word figures it as "a sudden uproar or tumult" of excessive emotion or passion ("flaw," n2.2). In both cases, Lear's claim signifies his heightened emotions and his anxiety about the physical manifestation of his inner turmoil. In a related sense, Lear likely intends the word to signify his disdain for such outward shows of passion.

If we consider another meaning of the word, a "defect, imperfection, fault, or blemish," we see that the word functions in this way—it signifies a passionate bursting and the shame that would accompany such a display ("flaw" n.1.5.a). Indeed, he has already verbalized his belief that outward displays of grief or anger (through tears) would mark him as highly feminine; therefore we can read his use of the word "flaw" in the literal, visible sense in two corresponding senses: the term marks both the fragmenting of his body and the shame that would accompany the act of fracturing in the form of emotional release.

While Lear expresses his emotional turmoil and the corporeal consequences of that turmoil in this moment, the word "flaw" also has significant ecological valences. In addition to its physical, corporeal definitions, early moderns would have understood the word "flaw" to mean "a sudden burst or squall of wind," or, similarly, as a "short spell of rough weather" ("flaw," n2a, n2b). In this way, Lear's rant illustrates his resemblance of the weather and environment. If he were to release his tears, he would simultaneously unleash his own "women's weapons" and environmental ones. When we consider this possibility with the fact that Lear is obsessed with controlling his tears, we clearly see his rejection of natural processes both in terms of the weather and outbursts of human emotion. The speech functions as an extension of Lear's threat to cast his eyes, with the "water that [they] loose," to "temper clay"—he fervently rejects the outpouring of water—both in terms of rain and his own tears—if he does not control the circumstances of release and purpose. When Lear wants to temper clay with his tears, he wants to mold the earth to his specifications; similarly, his refusal to cry marks his fervent need for control. Lear obsesses over water cycles—seemingly viewing them as indicative of his influence and power.

Lear's desperation to maintain his power in the play's first two acts manifests in his obsession with controlling his tears. Both through Lear's gradual undoing and through offering

Cordelia as an admirable counterpoint to her father's unwillingness to submit to catharsis, Shakespeare commends the unrestrained flow of tears, and he positions catharsis as a deeply natural act. When Lear finally accepts that he is "a natural fool of fortune," he notices that his fall from grace would compel "a man of salt" to "use his eyes for garden waterpots" (4.6.210-216). Lear sees the human body and the elements of the earth as indistinct in this moment, and he realizes something that his daughter has already demonstrated in working *with* the elements in a healing ritual: the cycle of water passes equally and identically through humans and the environment, and it resists constraint. Where Shakespeare positions Lear's kingdom as a single, holistic entity, the King perceives the possibility for separation—a belief that manifests powerfully through his attempts to restrain falling water. It follows that Lear's reckoning would appear in the form of uncontrolled water—and it does in one of the play's most famous and pivotal moments: the confrontation between Lear and the ferocious rainstorm in act three.

II

King Lear's storm is well-trodden and fertile ground for ecocritical readings of the play. Those who want to render a human-versus-weather discussion of the play—or the Shakespearean dramatic corpus in general—need look no further than the storm in which a rapidly declining king grasps at the last bits of his authority as he faces off with a raging, violent rainstorm, and, for centuries, critics have ruminated on the fissure that erupts between Lear and the environment in the storm scenes. I agree with Steve Mentz when he observes that "the storm scenes present a world that is not legible," and therefore, the storm "underlines the play's larger crisis of authority" ("Ecological Crisis" 165). To be sure, the storm is a massive component in Lear's fall from power, but it becomes difficult to articulate how—precisely—the storm contributes to Lear's decline because the two are simply too entangled to say with any certainty which is the aggressor and

which is the victim in the storm on the heath. In the storm, Shakespeare displays Lear's divisive impulses in their most potent form, and they ring as deeply false since the King cannot separate his material body from the environment. The storm is disorienting for Lear not only because—as many have argued—he is engulfed and immersed in the natural world, but because he begins to lose his identity since he and the storm are inseparable extensions of one another.

Lear's belief that he can divide and redistribute his kingdom is challenged by the inseparability of the human body and the natural world. *King Lear's* transcorporeal themes resonate throughout Lear's experience in the rainstorm as the play critiques his impulse to divide. The King's desire to split objects that should, naturally, remain intact (his kingdom, his family, indeed, even his own body when he threatens to "pluck" his eyes from his head) reads as a rejection of the deep inseparability of all living things.

In a famous scene that demands consideration when examining *King Lear's* storm, an unnamed gentleman reports that he has seen his King railing against the oncoming rainstorm. He says that Lear "Bids the wind blow the earth into the sea / Or swell the curled waters 'bove the main" and that he "Strives in his little world of man to outscorn / the to-and-fro conflicting wind and rain" (3.1.11-12). The gentleman's account of events illustrates Lear's perception of the natural world: he believes himself immune to its fury, and in his "bidding" and "striving" to control the storm, he believes that it will bend to his command. When he leaves Regan's home at the end of act two, insulted by her insolence, he flees to the natural world—believing that nature will bend to his will where his daughters did not; instead, he meets furious resistance and an even more visceral, fundamental evacuation of power when he faces the storm. Before he ventures into the storm, he promises to unleash "the terrors of the earth" on his daughters and he vows that his "heart / Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws / Or ere [he'll] weep" (2.4.324-328). His belief that he

can control the elements appears vividly in these lines. He boasts control of the elements of his kingdom when he threatens to use them as weapons, and he boasts control over the elements of his body when he, again, furiously resists their release. In refusing to weep, Lear, quite literally, refuses to resemble his daughters and the weather.

Lear's frequent attempts to control his tears demonstrate his rejection of transcorporeality. Lowell Duckert, in his discussion of early modern waterscapes, follows a "vital materialist track" which "configures coexistences with rain in relation, preferring a material monism in which rain is substantially shared instead of a dualistic approach that takes on the 'darker' parts of irreducible difference to envision rain as essentially not-us" (167). The transcorporeal relationship between rain and humans that Duckert outlines here takes priority in *King Lear*. When Kent tries to usher Lear toward shelter from the storm, Lear says, "Thou think'st 'tis much that this contentious storm / Invades us to the skin" (3.4.8-9). Lear does not perceive a harmonious coexistence with the storm, nor does he view his material body as an inextricable part of the waterscape; rather, he characterizes water as an insidious antagonist that wants to "invade" his body.

Lear's experience in the storm dismantles his view of the world and his sovereign position above it. Lear opens himself to the natural world when he exposes his naked body to the rainstorm. LaRoche and Munroe put it best when they notice that the moments of the play that seem "most clearly to identify Lear as mad occur at the same time as he experiences (and acknowledges) his transcorporeal connection with the rain," an observation they argue demonstrates Lear's belonging to (and acceptance of his incorporation into) "an integrated, organic whole where human and nonhuman (and categories of class and gender) dissolve into one another" (87). The material integration into the land that Lear experiences when he makes himself vulnerable marks a

significant change in his character—not just because we might begin to read him as a "mad" thereafter, but also because he releases the fervent need to control his daughters and the elements.

There is little doubt that Shakespeare portrays nature and humans as intimately tied, and the storm serves as an important locus of that reading. The gentleman who reports Lear's interaction with the storm notes that he primarily attacks the idea of uncontained, wild water (as he does when he and admonishes his own tears) but when Lear berates the storm in front of the audience, he demonstrates the extent not only of his arrogance, but also his ignorance of transcorporeality. In response to the Fool's plea that Lear "Ask thy daughters' blessing" to escape the storm, Lear cries: "Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! Spout, rain! / Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire are my daughters. / I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness" (3.2.14-18). Lear's folly appears clearly in these lines. His attempts to align himself with the elements—promising them no "unkindness" which marks his failure to observe the interconnectedness of the elements and the material body (indeed, Alaimo's theory of transcorporeality paired with the frequency with which Cordelia herself "rains" helps us see that the elements *are*, in fact, his daughters), and he continues to employ imperative language despite the momentary disparity between his dwindling power and the colossal force of the storm. Furthermore, Lear acts as an insufficient steward of the land and the elements that comprise his kingdom. He distinguishes between human and nonhuman agents when, by categorically separating the elements of the storm from those inside of the human body, he rejects them as his "daughters." He ignores the fact that those elements are, in fact, part of his daughters' material bodies, and he therefore distinguishes and separates the human body from nonhuman nature. Lear further illustrates his binary ideology when he continues to shout at the storm:

> I never gave you kingdom, called you children:

You owe me no subscription. Then let fall
Your horrible pleasure. Here I stand your slave,
A poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man.
But yet I call you servile ministers,
That will with two pernicious daughters join
Your high-engendered battles 'gainst a head
So old and white as this. (3.2.14-26)

In this moment, Lear finds himself in a battle in which he and the storm that take turns making and taking commands. Lear begins by commanding the storm; then, when he remembers that he is now "poor, infirm, and weak," he admits that the storm "owes him no subscription" and need not bend to his will. He notices a cyclical, shifting exchange of power between himself and the storm. Lowell Duckert offers a useful perspective of early modern conceptions of water which illuminates Lear's response to the storm. Duckert notices that rain "captures and connects bodies at their most open and porous, and its piercing quality stresses the real violence of bodily penetrability" (167). Applying this lens to Lear's exposure to the storm illuminates a root of his distress. He realizes that he has become a "slave" to the storm, a "poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man" because his openness—his very porousness—highlights his powerlessness, but his powerlessness is balanced by the storm's own slavishness. Where the storm turns Lear into a slave at the top of the speech, by the end, its elements have become "servile ministers" themselves. Similarly, Lear opens his rant with commands, and in so doing, he seeks to reclaim the power he has abjured; however, his imperative tone quickly shifts to one of subservience when he submits to the storm as its slave.

Again, Duckert provides useful context for Lear's raging speech. He explains that "rain, like everything else, never falls straight down," because "the nature of matter is to be on the go—

no stop—in spinning plurality" (169). Certainly, Lear's slipping modes of speech—from commanding to docile—might be read as reflective of his precarious mental state, but this speech also signals his own corporeal connection to the landscape. Duckert's assertion that the "exposure" that rain signifies is our "greatest risk and greatest potential at once," since humans "are always-already environmentally enmeshed—always in our element of water—and that there is both distress and delight to be had with a showering world" (169). Gail Kern Paster reads Lear's impassioned speech as a vivid representation of "Lear's self-destructive narcissism," and she notices that his speech swings from one "contradictory self-image" to the next—a trajectory that she observes puts the King, at times, in league with the elements and, in others, at odds with them ("Minded Like the Weather" 204). Such is the case for Lear, as his exposure to the rain opens pluralistic possibilities for him in respect to nature. Like the rain itself, Lear's language reflects the "nature of matter" in its unstoppable spinning plurality. Through the storm, Shakespeare configures human power dynamics and language as directly resembling rainfall, and Lear comes to see power as a flipping, circular concept.

Lear experiences immense anxiety about the fluctuating cycle of authority he finds himself trapped within. His very resistance to the circular trajectory of power makes him vulnerable. The flipping, disorienting speech that Lear hurls at the storm does more than signal his precarious, rapidly slipping sanity, it also resembles his confusion in discovering something that early modern audiences likely would have accepted as true: the storm does not appear suddenly as an unprovoked adversary but instead as an extension of the disorder Lear has imposed on his kingdom.[6] The conflict between Lear and the storm seems, at first, born from an adversarial

[6] Of the storm in *King Lear*, Gail Kern Paster claims that "the early moderns would have understood [its] contentiousness…as a trait shared literally between meteorological events and their own embodied passions" ("Minded like the Weather" 205). Paster notices that choler functions as a prevailing passion in the play—a possibility that she rightly observes would contribute to the "hard-heartedness" of the play's evil characters.

diametric between humans and the elements, but Lear's constantly churning speech, in its ever-flipping, "spinning plurality," directly reflects the pattern of the rain that drenches him. Indeed, Lear is not only embedded in the weather—he enacts his own rainstorm.

III

Shakespeare challenges Lear's view of the land when he portrays an intimate connection between human and the nonhuman worlds, and he emphasizes the interconnectedness of the material human body and the nonhuman world when he reminds audiences that they are comprised of the same elements. The play features water as a response to Lear's fracturing of the natural world, and in depicting water as an element that functions similarly within human and nonhuman bodies, Shakespeare confronts Lear's error. Before the storm, Lear sees weakness in falling water; he considers it a weapon used by the lesser sex, and he views it as a force that he can tame and wield against his enemies. Through the storm, we clearly see that the elements of the natural world blur, flip, and blend into one another. Indeed, the earth unleashes the same "weapons" as Lear's favorite daughter, and eventually, he, too, resembles the earth in his ecological mimicry.

The stubbornness with which Lear opposes and attempts to manipulate the water cycle underscores his own elemental composition. When he howls over Cordelia's dead body in the play's final scene, he accuses the onlookers of being "men of stones!" and holds a looking glass to her mouth hoping that her "breath will mist or stain the stone" as a sign of life (5.3.308-310). In the play's final moments, Lear compares hard, emotionless people to stones, and he considers water—here, in the form of water vapors in Cordelia's breath—as a force that can "stain" stone. Indeed, Lear calls back to his own folly at the play's beginning in these lines. He enters the play with a stony disposition; he is hard, callous, and immovable, but his stony surface is eroded over the course of the play—both literally and figuratively—by the flowing water in his kingdom.

Lear's prior contempt for (and fundamental underestimation of) the natural world is dismantled by ferocious displays of falling water, and the play thereby portrays the elements as powerful forces—even, at times, powerful enough to dissolve the stone of a willful monarch.

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