Hamilton, Jennifer Mae. "Meteorological Reading." *This Contentious Storm: An Ecocritical and Performance History of King Lear*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. 11–30. Environmental Cultures. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474289078.ch-001>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 14:33 UTC.

Copyright © Jennifer Hamilton 2017. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Meteorological Reading

It is by touching, however lightly, on man's relation to the signifier – in this case, by changing the procedures of exegesis – that one changes the course of his history by modifying the moorings of his being.

Jacques Lacan, 'The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious: or Reason Since Freud' in *Ecrits* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2004), 165

The epigraph quote does not foreshadow a psychoanalytic exegesis of *King Lear*. Rather, this chapter undertakes a meditation on the 'procedures of exegesis' with the hope that we can unmoor the habit of interpreting the storm exclusively as a symbol for a transcendental humanist theme, but without forsaking the complexity of human drama of these scenes. The metaphoric dimensions of the storm have been debated for a long time. Quintessentially, G. Wilson Knight's 'The Lear Universe' (1930) declares the play to be about the entire universe, life and all the ages of man, and claims that the entirety of the dramatic action is enclosed in nature's 'earthly womb'. On the one hand, the philosophy of *King Lear* is 'firmly planted in the soil of the earth' (2001: 203), but on the other:

The violent and extravagant effects of the storm-scene kindle the imagination till it cannot watch, but rather lives within, the passionate event. Then follows the extravaganza of Lear, Edgar, and the Fool, with their variegated play of the fantastic to the sound of thunder, lit by the nimble strokes of lightning. This is purely a phantasma of the mind: Lear's mind capering on the page with antic gesture. (229–30)

That very same soil that would literally be turned to mud by a storm is 'purely' Lear's neurological phantasm. In the earthly cosmology mapped by Knight, 'storm' is a metaphoric substitute that is not literally applicable to the situation. Knight's reading is obviously coming from a very particular moment in the

Shakespearean critical tradition, but it is exemplary of how ‘storm’ is treated throughout the play’s modern scholarly history.

Other early heavyweights of early Shakespearean criticism such as Harley Granville-Barker and E. M. Tillyard understand the storm more or less symbolically too. In 1927 Granville-Barker claimed that the only meaningful aspect of the storm was its affective impact upon Lear and that we are best to highlight the connection with his mind (1964: 266), while in 1943, Tillyard argued that although the storm manifests concretely on stage, ‘the basic elemental conflict is as much a part of his thought as is the actual violence of the weather’ (2001: 64). In summarizing the many ways in which meaning has been attributed to the storm in the intervening years, R. A. Foakes concluded that the metaphoric mode dominates:

[t]he storm dramatised in *King Lear* functions in much greater depth at the centre of the action, as an extension of the turmoil in Lear’s mind, as a symbolic embodiment of the confusion and discord in the Kingdom, and potentially as an expression of the anger of the gods. (2003: 184)

In other words, the weight of critical tradition suggests that ‘storm’ is not primarily significant in itself, but more meaningful as a reified symbol of something else. The value-laden idea of ‘greater depth’ coming in the metaphoric register betrays the anthropocentrism of the critical tradition. The storm is not really poetry unless it is serving to signify something else.

In contrast, many recent readings of the storm scenes have tacitly pushed back against the standard symbolic interpretations and emphasized the cataclysm’s literal presence. Steve Mentz argued that the ‘storm scenes literalise the play’s crisis of authority’ because the storm does not respond to the king (2010: 143). Gwilym Jones argues that ‘the storm is consistent ... and consistently *just a storm*’ (2015b: 74, emphasis in original). Laurie Shannon describes the storm scenes as a representation of the ‘literal problem of weather on skin’ (2013: 141). These interpretations respond to a scholarly tradition that diminishes the significance of weather’s material importance in the play, both in text and performance, and complement the growing field of Shakespearean ecocriticism interested in rethinking representations of ‘nature’ or the ‘more-than-human’ world in a time of ecological crisis.

The storm is not the only dimension of the scenes that has been rethought in literal terms, but also Lear's responses to the storm. Simon Palfrey argues that 'Lear ... always speaks with absolute simplicity and literalness, and as a primitive king expects his words to come true. Nothing is abstract for the old king ... just as he is genuinely submerged in the watery element, Lear hardly speaks in metaphor at all' (Palfrey 2014: 46–7). In other words, he is not speaking in veiled terms about some other themes, but directly addressing the cataclysm. More literally yet, in 3.1 Kent's exclamation, 'Fie on this storm!' (3.1.45) seems like nothing other than a doggedly base exclamation about the material meteorological event that intervened at precisely the wrong time in the dramatic conflict, making an unstable situation even worse.

Although reading literally might seem simplistic, seeing the storm as a discrete weather event opens up new readings of the play's poetic dialogue. Take for instance the following section of 3.4 where Lear is explaining why he does not want to take shelter in the hovel:

Thou think'st 'tis much that this contentious storm,
Invades us to the skin: so 'tis to thee,
But where the greater malady is fixed,
The lesser is scarce felt. Thou'dst shun a bear,
But if thy flight lay toward the roaring sea,
Thou'dst meet the bear i'the mouth. When the mind's free,
The body's delicate: this tempest in my mind
Doth from my senses take all feeling else,
Save what beats there, filial ingratitude. (3.4.6–14)

Lear's deployment of the pronoun 'this' – 'this contentious storm' and 'this tempest in my mind' – seems to correlate the two types of cataclysm by virtue of the pronoun's lack of specificity; Lear's mental weather is poetically enhanced by association with a storm metaphor. But if one tempest is a bear, then the other is a roaring sea, so to speak. He does not read the meteorological storm as inside his mind, nor is he projecting his mad mind onto the skies. He is making a shaky distinction between literal and psychological cataclysms he is experiencing and, at this point in the play, he only barely has the language to do so. Any incidental conflation of the two cataclysms is less about the storm and more about Lear. More to the point, the reason he does not want to take shelter is that one storm is preventing him from feeling the

full effects of the other storm. The inference is that to take shelter would lead to an emotional collapse – so being caught between a rock and a hard place, so to speak, is his best option.

But Lear soon references ‘this tempest’ again: ‘This tempest will not give me leave to ponder / On things would hurt me more’ (3.4.24–5). What tempest is the referent here? Although it seems he is talking about the meteorological storm, the text is ambiguous. Lear initially says that ‘this tempest’—the one in his mind—prevents him from feeling the full material effects of ‘this contentious storm’—a meteorological event that is contentious presumably because it is not serving Lear’s purpose. But would the material or emotional storm hurt him more? Here Lear’s emotions are precariously balanced between himself, his daughters and the storm. Crucially, in all three instances, the non-specificity of the pronoun ‘this’ neither indicates that the storm is a reflection of Lear’s mad mind, nor does it represent the ontological instability of the meteorological storm. Rather it reveals the extent to which Lear is held in torsion between the physical storm and his emotional state.

A metaphoric interpretation implies that Lear could arrive at this point if the night was not literally stormy; that the matter and duration of the storm is not also involved in his process. But the material storm changes the stakes of the situation. Take, by way of contrast, Monmouth’s history (c. 1136). Lear’s emotional state during his period of exile is narrated but without a stormy intervention. In a notably theatrical flourish in a text largely written in the third person, Lear is given voice to tell his own tale:

(W)ith deep Sighs and Tears, (Lear) burst(s) forth into the following complaint. / ‘O irreversible Decrees of the Fates, that never swerve from your stated Course! Why did you ever advance me to an unstable Felicity, since the Punishment of lost Happiness is greater than the Sense of present Misery? The Remembrance of the Time when vast Numbers of Men obsequiously attended me at the taking of Cities and wasting the Enemies Countries, more deeply pierces my Heart, than the View of my present Calamity, which has exposed me to the Derision of those who formerly laid at my Feet. O Rage of Fortune! Shall I ever again see the Day, when I may be able to reward those according to their Deserts who have forsaken me in my Distress. (Monmouth, in Bullough 1973: 314)

Due to the absence of the storm Lear experience is different. In Monmouth, his primary realization is that he will not be able to seek adequate revenge on

his daughters because he has lost power. In contrast, by virtue of the storm's lack of response, the storm shapes Lear's dialogue. Initially he tries to conjure the storm, and when it does not respond he questions whose side it is on, the details of which will be explored in depth in chapter three. When the storm is interpreted as a metaphor alone, as 'Lear's mind capering on the page with antic gesture', there is nothing about the night itself that has a bearing on his situation; he's figuring it out on his own and the rest is merely decoration. In contrast, rather than being a set of individual feelings that Lear arrives at by his own mad volition or a clear-cut case of filial ingratitude, a literal reading of the scenes infers that Lear's psychological, bodily, sociopolitical and earthly situation is articulated by way of his attempted dialogue with and the ongoing physical exposure to a meteorological storm.

There are, however, limitations to literal reading. It can quickly move from simple to simplistic and can diminish the complex implications of the dramatic poetry. How to move from a literal reading of Lear's individual and delicately balanced emotions to, say, a discussion of the play's representation of sovereign power and death? Indeed, the first time I submitted an argument involving literal reading to a journal, the essay was unequivocally rejected with the anonymous reviewer commenting 'It is evidently more than just a storm'. Although I find Mentz's, Jones's, Shannon's and Palfrey's appeals to the literal convincing in the first instance, there seems to be another step in the path towards incorporating this storm in an ecocritical reading of the play.

Considering the storm metonymically stands out as a way of pressing 'lightly' on our 'relation to the signifier' in order to change 'the procedures of exegesis' (Lacan: 165). So, building on the work of Jones, Mentz, Palfrey and Shannon that call for literal readings of the storm, I argue that while the storm is always more than a psychological metaphor, more than a heavenly index of political strife, it is also always more than just a storm. Lear's dialogue with the weather is never exclusively with the cataclysm, but infused with the suite of concerns that occupy him at that point in the story. Kent's 'Fie on this storm' is, obviously a reference to his physical circumstances, but it also alludes to the more general political situation. 'Storm' is not a discrete symbol here, but a part that represents a whole. I thus propose 'meteorological reading' as a way to theorize the storm as metonymy for ecocritical purposes and to open up a way of understanding why the storm is so frequently understood as a metaphor.

Considering the literal, ecocritical interpretation as metonymic opens up a way of exploring *how* the storm functions as the representative part, rather than this being the conclusion. If, as Mentz suggests, the 'storm scenes literalise the play's crisis of authority' because the storm does not respond to the king (2010: 143), then at the level of the letter we are being told to understand the storm as part of the wider whole; the storm meaningfully and expediently stands in for the whole as an integral part. How is this working?

The metaphoric and metonymic are different poles of signification. Paul Ricoeur observes that 'association by contiguity and association by resemblance ... define metonymy and metaphor' respectively (2003 [1977]: 136). Metonymy, then, is a rhetorical term for meaningful relations that are proximate or nearby, while the similarity that makes a metaphor viable is also based on a separation. Roman Jakobson defined metaphoric and metonymic language as rhetorical continuum along which all meaning takes shape:

The development of a discourse may take place along two different semantic lines: one topic may lead to another either through their similarity or through their contiguity. The metaphoric way would be the most appropriate term for the first case and the metonymic way for the second, since they find their most condensed expression in metaphor and metonymy respectively. In normal verbal behaviour both processes are continually operative, but careful observation will reveal that under the influence of a cultural pattern, personality, and verbal style, preference is given to one of the two processes over the other. (1971: 67)

While I do ultimately conclude that the storm in *King Lear* operates on a variety of different metaphoric and metonymic registers, both rhetorically and theatrically, I am interested in historicizing the metonymic here because it advances the ecocritical argument for literal reading. Ecocritics preference the metonymic end of this spectrum when emphasizing the literal connections between things, even though such reading is usually not framed in rhetorical terms. The return to the focus on the literal is in itself under the influence of a particular cultural pattern, an increase in extreme weather events, a changing climate and rising cultural and political anxiety about the literal movements in the earth's atmosphere.

In this regard, meteorological reading has three main dimensions. First, it is a theorization of the poetics of the literal and mundane by way of

metonymy, and also a method for understanding how the literal and mundane are historically circumscribed. At the same time, meteorological reading aims to view strictly metaphoric interpretations as products of a particular historical context. By strictly metaphoric I mean instances when the meaning of 'storm' emerges only insofar as it is not 'literally applicable' (*OED*) to Lear's situation; where the storm is brought into decorate our reading of the human condition or the political chaos, but is not considered part. The particularities of such interpretations will be explored in chapter six. Line by line, however, the play text moves between metaphoric and metonymic uses of storm and tempest. But because drama affords the opportunity for ironic distance between what a character says and what it means in the overall story, when individual characters refer to the storm in a metaphoric mode it does not necessarily overlap with what the storm ultimately means.

With regard to the literary arts generally, Jakobsen defines metaphor and metonymy as most akin to modern styles of poetry and prose respectively:

It is generally realised that romanticism is closely linked with metaphor, whereas the equally intimate ties of realism with metonymy usually remain unnoticed ... The principle of similarity underlies poetry; the metrical parallelism of lines, or the phonic equivalence of rhyming words prompts the question of semantic similarity and contrast ... Prose, on the contrary, is forwarded essentially by contiguity. Thus for poetry, metaphor, and for prose, metonymy is the line of least resistance and, consequently the study of poetical tropes is directed chiefly toward metaphor.

While maintaining awareness of the anachronism in applying formalist analysis of modern literature to early modern dramatic poetry, it is worth noting that upon Poor Tom's arrival in 3.4, Shakespeare shifts the mode of Lear's dialogue from iambic pentameter to blank verse. We shift from a poetic mode to almost prose-like dialogue; all the while Gloucester's passages remain in a rhythmic pattern. As Lear's exposure to the storm endures, his language changes registers and starts to respond more directly to the environment around him, but Gloucester persists in trying to get Lear to take shelter and restore the order that existed before the storm. Building on Jakobsen, this move suggests that the storm occupies a strange and complex zone in the dramatic tale, between what is real and what is imagined, between

ideas and ideologies and the literal world or between the metaphysical and the physical.

Thus, what ultimately separates a meteorological reading from a literal reading is the task of bringing together historically situated aspects of the storm's signification alongside attention to its own presence as a potential or actualized theatrical event. This consideration is not only for the early modern scholar interested in how weather was represented in Shakespeare's time, nor is it just for esoteric field of Shakespearean ecocriticism interested in how new responses to the Bard might help to fight the environmental crisis. Rather, this method of reading weather is applicable across the vast array of discursive and historical approaches to Shakespeare and literary texts more generally, and is arguably helpful for scholars trying to come to terms with how these once-banal, 'backgrounded' (Plumwood, 1993) signs are caught up in the ideological fight about climate change.

To illustrate meteorological reading by way of a seemingly contrary example, in 1983 Michael Elliott, director of the Granada Television production of *King Lear*, opted not to film the storm scenes on location because it would emphasize its 'literal naturalism'. This Elliot saw as a problem because, in his reading of the play, he concluded: 'Shakespeare is not primarily concerned with the surface of things. The storm is in Lear's mind' (Elliot, in Lusardi 1991: 195). A straightforward appeal to literalism, interested only in the notion of the storm as storm, necessarily contradicts Elliot's interpretation. But a meteorological reading takes a slightly different perspective and posits Elliot's commentary as more revealing of his worldview and his own perception of the cultural significance of the weather in 1983, than Shakespeare's specific concerns as a dramatic poet. Elliot, we might say echoing Jakobsen, was under the 'influence of a cultural pattern' and, as such, gave 'preference' to metaphor. In this regard, it is also worth pointing out that anachronistic cultural assumptions about how Shakespeare may have used the weather inform Elliot's opinion too.

Just as the symbolic significance of the weather changes, the 'literal' or 'naturalistic' significance of the weather has also not remained constant over time. Thus, the ways in which the storm might be understood as metonymically linked to the action, as a contiguous part that represents the whole, also changes over time. At Shakespeare's time of writing, the weather's literal cultural significance in England and continental Europe was far from

superficial. In Marlowe's *Dido*, Jupiter's threat to hang Juno 'meteor like twixt heaven and earth' (1973: 7) neatly captures how different meteorological phenomena such as hurricanes, whirlwinds, thunder and lightning, rain, hail, snow and even earthquakes were imagined until at least the early eighteenth century. In this context, the word 'meteors' denoted much more than just shooting stars. The word, stemming from the Greek *meteoros* – meaning 'lofty' – invoked the perceived heavenly origins of all kinds of weather. From Aristotle's *Meteorologica* in the third century BCE until well into the eighteenth century, meteorological events were generally imagined to moderate the relationship between the heavens and the earth. To put it in S. K. Heninger's words, 'rain falls on the New Atlantis for reasons quite different from those which explained why divine grace showered the City of God' (1960: 3). In this respect, interpreting the weather literally or naturalistically in the early modern period was not the superficial pursuit it seemed for Elliott when he directed a television version of the play in the early 1980s. On the contrary, attempting to interpret or read the weather was once linked to questions about the nature of the human condition, our contiguous relationships with God or the gods and our place within the cosmos. The weather was at once material *and* deeply political and philosophical, or, to put it another way, the seemingly self-evident boundary between the literal and the figurative has not always been drawn in the same place.

Thus, if grace was thought to rain down upon the world, it was not a metaphor; the significance was immanent in the meteor itself. Thus weather literally was the part that represented the whole of God's grace or wrath, and other things in between. I take up the complex ways in which this manifested politically, philosophically and theologically in and through the Aristotelian notion of 'final causes' in Chapter two, but for now it shall suffice to simply outline the system in order to illustrate this claim. Figure 1.1 illustrates how the geocentric earth was imagined as enclosed by a series of spheres, which were believed to operate in mutually influential and fundamentally physical relation to each other. Within this classical geocentric paradigm, meteorological activity was causally linked to the heat of the sun, a confluence of terrestrial elemental forces and the rotations of the crystalline spheres around the earth. The outermost sphere of the Prime Mover generated all cosmological activity, but the weather occupied the sublunary spheres, between

Figure 1.1 Oronce Finé. 'De mundi sphæra' from *Le sphere de monde: proprement dicte Cosmographie*. (Paris, 1549). MS Typ 57, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

earth and sky. In occupying the space between earth and sky, the weather literally moderated the relation between the material and the metaphysical, and was thus variously positioned as messenger (the bearer of both good news and bad) in the complex and mysterious relationship between the heavenly and terrestrial realms of the system. The weather was literally the point where humans, to paraphrase Karen Barad, met the cosmos half way.

Despite the rich cultural significance of the weather in the early modern period, when displaced from this context, we are left with a very different kind of vocabulary with which to interpret the storm. It is impossible to return to a time where the earth sat at the centre of the universe and the

meteors moderated heavenly messages to enjoy Shakespeare's provocative use of the weather in *Lear*, which Gwilym Jones argues was the perspective of early modern audiences encountering this storm (2015b: 78). In contrast, Michel Serres described the period between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries as the time of 'the erasure of the meteors' (1977: 229), implying that the weather effectively disappears from the Western cultural imaginary. Of course weather does not disappear, but where the meteors once delivered contentious messages from the gods, whose realm was made contiguous with earth by way of the meteorological passage, by the twentieth century Walter Benjamin argued that discussions of the weather indicated 'boredom' (1999: 101) and Roland Barthes noted that one speaks of the weather in order to say 'nothing' (1990: 81). In the New Atlantis the meteors fell from grace.

Meteorological reading is thus a historically situated interpretive practice and is also aware of other historically situated interpretations of the storm. While Lawrence Buell argued that reading setting as a meaningful 'presence ... begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history' (1995: 7), the practice of meteorologically reading *King Lear* involves a subtle modification to this relationship. The natural history of *King Lear's* stormy setting is not natural history as such, but rather the history of the representation of natural forces by Shakespeare and their interpretation and reinterpretation over time. The ways in which these representations influenced natural history is another question altogether.¹ The natural history of *King Lear's* storm thus includes G. Wilson Knight's interpretation of it as Lear's mind and Elliot's concerns with the banality of literal naturalism, among many others. Meteorological reading prompts the reader to consider how their interpretation of the weather is historically and ideologically inflected. But meteorological reading also aims to restore the rich philosophical and cultural significance of the literal weather without anachronistic appeal to the divine and geocentric logic of classical and early modern meteorology. In other

¹ There is a growing body of work in feminist and queer literary theory and science and technology studies exploring the material links between representation and reality. This line of argument I understand as stemming from the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, on the one hand, and Vicki Kirby, on the other. This work explores the way in which language is performative within the world, in other words it *does* rather than simply describes, in Sedgwick following J. L. Austin, and the way in which language or text is nature, in Kirby following Derrida. I see my study as a step in between, focusing on the complexity of the text or performance itself, but not taking the extra step to fully theorize the relationship between word and world.

words, although there is no geocentric cosmos, the weather is still contiguous with social and political questions, albeit differently so. Meteorological reading aims to describe those differences.

To this end, meteorological reading is 'against interpretation' in the sense famously characterized by Susan Sontag. She argued that 'interpretation is not (as most people assume) an absolute value, a gesture of mind situated in some timeless realm of capabilities. Interpretation must itself be evaluated within a historical view of human consciousness' (1966: 6). The objective of reading of this canonical meteorological event is neither to once and for all determine the universal significance of the storm as divinely intended by Shakespeare, nor is it to clearly articulate what it means now for a presentist Shakespearean ecocritical practice troubled by a changing climate, but instead to see how the event moves through human history and to query some of the more ostentatious humanist fantasies authorized in its name.

The metaphoric and metonymic poles aside, another way to approach the meteorological is to emphasize, historicize and attempt to wrestle with the question of the storm's *duration* and *idiosyncrasy*. Gwilym Jones argues that the storm 'aesthetically and structurally ... sustains the play' (Jones 2015: 67). He is right. A total of eight scenes are allocated to the representation of the stormy night, three of which are literally played out in the rain (3.1, 3.2 and 3.4) and another in which the king is sheltered in a hovel while the storm rages outside (3.6). While in the third and fifth scenes of the third act characters indoors discuss what actions they will take despite the terrible weather. The storm is foreshadowed by Lear when he claims he would 'Rather I abjure all roofs and choose / To wage against the enmity o'th'air' and to 'be a comrade with the wolf and owl' (2.2.400–2) than relinquish any knights. The actual storm is first directly brought into the action to at the end of 2.2 when Gloucester is cautioned to retreat indoors by Cornwall because there will 'be a storm' (2.2.479). As noted above, although *King Lear* is an ancient story, Shakespeare's is the first version of the old story to feature such a significant storm sequence and tragic ending.² As mentioned above, there is no bad weather in Monmouth's history (c. 1136), nor is there a storm in Holinshed's

² For a more extensive history of Shakespeare's intertexts see Geoffrey Bullough and Kenneth Muir.

version (1577), while in the anonymous *King Leir* (1605) there are only a few rumbles of thunder around a similar point in the plot. In sum, the storm – its duration, its significance in the action and the characters' reflections – is unique to Shakespeare's particular version, and a defining feature of the play.

As a digest of the range of sources, Shakespeare's *King Lear* is also historically and generically complex, and as such is peculiarly open to reinterpretation. On the one hand, Lear is a quintessential Shakespearean tragic character insofar as he is brought down by his own personal failings, but on the other, he is often read as a victim of history, fate or social forces beyond his control; as such he can be viewed both as a classical tragic icon and becoming-modern hero. The ambiguities of Lear's character also correspond with instabilities in the text's cosmic architecture, which is to say, as Lear does not comfortably sit within his character, the play as a whole does not coherently fit within any established cosmological framework or 'world'. Lear has one foot in the classical closed world and another in the modern open universe. While character's affective ambiguities will be explored in Chapter three, for now it shall suffice to say that the play is preoccupied with debates between differing worldviews: Gloucester believes in heavenly signs, Edmund is sceptical and Lear sits somewhere in between; all of these characters 'read' meteorological signs differently within the world of the play. Both John Danby (1945) and William Elton (1966) argue that the play seems to reach both forwards and backwards in history, referencing ancient pagan ideas, newer Christian ones and then, in some ways, hinting at modern scepticism. To widen the angle from story to genre, the two early versions of the play even categorize it differently: in 1608 it was printed as a history, in 1623 a tragedy. Thus, the play straddles history, tragedy, fable and fairy tale uneasily, if often productively. As Maynard Mack said, '*King Lear* is a problem' (2003 [1966]: 7). Although it is not conventionally understood as one of Shakespeare's 'problem plays', along with Leggatt, I submit 'the storm [as] the obvious problem of the play' (8).

Conventional historical inquiry reveals that this storm was unconventional in its day. So although *Lear's* storm is now so familiar it seems clichéd, it is worth taking a moment to look at it in context and see why it is unique.³

³ Leslie Thomson's 'The Meaning of 'Thunder and Lightning': Stage Directions and Audience Expectations', *Early Theatre* 2 (1999): 11–24 and the introduction to Jones's *Shakespeare's Storms* provide far more extensive overviews of the conventions.

Shakespeare took advantage of the capaciousness enabled by the storm's duration to play with conventional early modern uses of turbulent weather in a range of ways. There are meteorological events that have a pragmatic structural function, such as the sea storms that deliver Pericles from port to port, those that establish the conditions for plays, such as *The Tempest*, and those that act as the premise to both *The Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night*. In contrast, the storm in *King Lear* is in the middle. It significantly muddies the established plot; during the storm the political conflict reaches its climax and the so-called 'parallel plots' begin to merge together. During the stormy night, which I take to span the whole of Act 3, Lear reaches an emotional limit in dialogue with the weather, Edgar as Poor Tom presents a spectacular performance of madness, the Fool disappears, a message is sent to Cordelia to bring her back from France, Edmund betrays his father, Gloucester's eyes are gouged out and Cornwall is stabbed; but precisely how the storm is materially involved in all these actions, beyond the implication made by Kent at the start of Act 3 that the storm makes it physically difficult to see, is decidedly unclear. At the very least, the storm does not merely 'blow over' and come to function as a sign of the human tumult. Instead, the storm becomes central to the political turmoil.

Aside from the pragmatic function of revealing who has shelter and who does not, the storm becomes more deeply entangled in the story by way of Lear's failed attempt to bring the storm into neat alignment with his desires. This is in contrast to the storm that rolls through the early scenes of *Julius Caesar*, for example. Cassius easily grabs hold of the thunder and involves it in his plot against Caesar. A frightened Caska [sic] asks, 'Cassius, what night is this?' (JC 1.3.42); Cassius replies 'A very pleasing night to honest men' (JC 1.3.43) and goes on to successfully argue that the thunder is 'instruments of fear and warning / Unto some monstrous state' (JC 1.3.70–1), thereby involving Caska in his plot. The device was ubiquitous enough to be parodied by Thomas Middleton in *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1606). The revenger, Vindice, suggests that the heavens have missed their cue: 'Is there no thunder left, or is't kept up / in stock for heavier vengeance? (*Thunder*) There it goes!' (4.2.196–7) (Middleton 1995). In both examples the characters have no trouble using the thunder for their own ends.

King Lear is not so fortunate. Just before the first stage direction, Lear is represented as desperately trying to maintain control:

No, you unnatural hags,
 I will have such revenges on you both
 That all the world shall – I will do such things –
 What they are yet I know not, but they shall be
 The terrors of the earth! You think I'll weep,
 No, I'll not weep [*Storm and Tempest*]
 I have full cause for weeping, but this heart
 Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws
 Or e'er I'll weep. O fool, I shall go mad. (2.2.470–8)

Lear is already faltering *before* the storm, the storm serves to emphasize his failure. It is imprudent to make too much of the stage direction, because it was only added in the Folio version and no director is beholden to the position of the direction. In other words, in performance the thunder can begin rumbling whenever a director seems most dramatically useful for the particular interpretation. Nevertheless when reading the Folio or common conflation, the direction is always in the same place and there is something significant about the timing here. Lear is trying to build to a crescendo, claiming that 'all the world shall ...', but he falters. No storm is there to buoy his plot. He has no idea how he will seek vengeance. The storm comes in at a later point, out of time with Lear's desires. Despite this, in a tragic attempt to keep up appearances, two scenes later he spends his time exposed to the storm trying to bring it into line with his aim. The storm never responds.

Continuing the celebration of the cataclysm's exceptionalism, Leslie Thomson and Gwilym Jones have noted that, unlike Shakespeare's *Macbeth* or Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, *King Lear* courts but ultimately *resists* the widespread convention of associating bad weather with either divine or demonic supernatural forces (Thomson 1999; Jones 2015). On the one hand, Lear believes the gods are controlling the storm, but he soon realizes they are not. On the other, Gloucester thinks that the heavens provide clear political messages, but he is ultimately proved wrong. The antagonist Edmund, who believes in neither divine origins nor providence, nevertheless exploits others' beliefs in heavenly signs to serve his own political advantage, but he ends up dead too. I return to this conflict of worldview, and in particular Edmund's famous scepticism, in my discussion of the storm's theatricality in Chapter 2; for now it shall suffice to say that the absence of implied divine or supernatural forces have made the play especially appealing to scholars

reading the text in line with humanist and human exceptionalist philosophies. Indeed, the text has come to function as a touchstone for the representation of the human condition in a Godless modern universe (Dollimore 1984: 189–90).

The characters' conflict about worldview is an aspect of the play's representation of the difficulty of generational change. At the point where Edmund believes his plot is working, he exclaims: 'The younger rises when the old doth fall' (3.3.25). But the play as a whole suggests that questions of inheritance are not at all straightforward. If anything, the play dramatizes the problems with crafting a clear legacy, from Lear's perspective, and accepting inheritance, from his daughters'. In the first scene Lear divests himself of power in order to 'Unburdened crawl toward death' (1.1.40) and the play represents the catastrophic failure of his attempt to hand over power to the next generation. The question of who is at fault in this tragedy is directly or tacitly an aspect of almost all the scholarship on the play.

While it is possible to focus on the intergenerational drama in terms of its representation of personal traits, family dynamics or gender roles, this thematic also reflects the broader historical changes that Shakespeare was writing in and through. Scholars have argued in various ways that the decline of the classical and geocentric closed world and the rise of the modern and open universe is legible within *King Lear* (Markels 1991: 11–26); that the ideological shift from a religious to secular paradigm is evident in the various and incommensurable worldviews of the individual characters (Danby 1948; Elton 1966); that the political shift from the decline of feudal aristocracy and the rise of the capitalist nation state is represented in the conflict over Lear's entourage of knights and the unclear social status of characters that are left with a ruined and divided kingdom at the end (Delany 1977: 429–70). In sum, *King Lear's* conflict centres around altering modes of inhabiting personal, political and, as this book will argue, environmental worlds, all of which are entangled with one another.⁴ The story was first told in a time when the ideological architecture of those worlds was changing.

With regard to the historical context in which I make this argument, then, another shift is taking place. On an unprecedented scale we – in the Western,

⁴ This configuration of different ways of framing interpretation echoes Félix Guattari's three different ecological scales from *The Three Ecologies* (London: Continuum, 2007).

hegemonic and quasi-royal sense of the term – are attempting to coming to terms with the entanglement of nature and culture, and the extent to which human activities are part of nature. It is thus a productive text to use to think through some of the broader social and political questions that are tied to the changing cultural significance of meteors within the Western hegemony, both in scholarship specifically focused on this text and in the broader scholarly community trying to get a handle on the rapidly transforming significance of weather in relation to climate change. *King Lear* is especially useful to think with because it represents some of the strange conflicts that can emerge during periods of great upheaval and change.

The most pressing problem with the weather is that it is temporally restricted and climate change spans across time; as such, the weather signifies our dilemma poorly. In mid-2010, British comedy duo Armstrong and Miller issued a dire warning on their TV show: ‘You have until September the thirtieth to learn the difference between climate, a long-term trend averaged over many years, and weather, which is what’s going on outside the window right now’, or else you may end up in prison.⁵ The skit imagines a world where it is illegal to link an isolated weather event to climate change; all citizens are issued with a fact book and asked to familiarize themselves with the science before the end of the month. The policy is designed to stop people falsely offering an unseasonably cool and rainy day as ‘evidence’ of the great global warming swindle, and threatens punitive punishment if they do. I appreciate the sentiments expressed in this sketch, which satirizes both the attempt to teleologically link an isolated weather event to an idea of how the climate might be in the future and anxieties about government intervention and political action on environmental issues. Still, bad sign reading, a common trope of contemporary climate scepticism, and the human habit of attempting to read the skies for some teleological purpose is not at all new. This habit of meteorological sign reading, rife with superstition, anxiety, false consciousness, misrecognition and bad prophesy has been a feature of the Western cultural imagination

⁵ The sketch is in Series 2, Episode 6. It was first broadcast on the BBC in September 2010. At the time of writing details of the episode are available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00p27k7> (accessed 28 February 2017) and a poor quality clip is on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQlHaGhYoF0> (accessed 28 February 2017).

since the Greeks. Given the widespread resurgence of bad sign reading with regard to climate and weather, we need a way to readily understand such practices. Given that *King Lear*'s motley cast of characters practise bad sign reading throughout, the storm can function as a blueprint for the various ways in which weather becomes entangled with the particularities of an extant political conflict, the geography of a specific place and the ideological predispositions of the characters. I will explore the specifics of the history of bad interpretation regarding the weather in much greater detail in the next chapter.

As well as having duration in the play, being idiosyncratic in relation to contemporaneous works and providing a vector through which to process strange interpretations of the weather, the storm gives us a unique vehicle through which to read the weather longitudinally. Real-world meteorological storms – disastrous or not – are singular events in history; *King Lear*'s storm is reiterated and reinterpreted in each production, analysis, review, reprint and adaptation of the play across time. In other words, it makes little sense to ask what would have happened if Hurricane Katrina had struck New Orleans in the 1920s, or, indeed, if Cyclone Tracy had destroyed a city other than Darwin at Christmas-time in 1974, for example. But we can explore what the storm in *King Lear* meant for audiences in the Globe theatre in the early seventeenth century, for a scholar in 1810 as King George III is going mad, for a director in 1927 between the wars, and for an actor playing the role in the early part of the twenty-first century when the weather is starting to change.

Although *King Lear*'s storm is uniquely portable across history and geography, the storm is embedded within a very particular story. It is the most spectacular more-than-human feature in a play about an old king who attempts to entirely divest himself of power and responsibility in order to die. Thus tracing the long history of *King Lear*'s storm within the context of its particular story provides a unique perspective, not only on the significance of the weather, but how human–weather relations are complicated by moral, political and social ecologies. Thus, due to the centrality of this story in the Western cultural imaginary, the meaning of what Laurie Shannon describes as the play's representation of 'weather on skin' (2013: 141), is also at the same time deeply ideological and historical.

This short chapter has presented five key ideas that together constitute 'meteorological reading' as a method for 'touching lightly' on our relationship to the signifier in order to incorporate the weather literally into our understanding of the play without simultaneously forsaking its canonical study of the human. At the same time, however, I do hope that over the course of this book, by focusing so intently on the storm, our understanding of the significance of the humans represented in the play will also begin to shift.

First I argued that the primary rhetorical mode of the storm is metonymic. To consider it thus privileges the storm's literal presence in the dramatic world, but also invites questions as to how it is the part that represents the whole. Focusing on the storm's metonymic figurations reveals how its significance is overdetermined, but also offers a way of grappling with its ominous physical presence at the same time (a fact easily forgotten in reading, not so in performance). Although it was not a central part of this argument, considerations of the different dimensions of more-than-human metonymies has great potential for ecocritical, ecopolitical, ecopsychological readings of weather in other kinds of texts too. Despite privileging metonymy, however, I also explored how both the metonymic and metaphoric modes of signification are at work during the storm and how both are historically circumscribed.

The second dimension of meteorological reading is to explore and critique the historical and cultural context within which the weather comes to signify. This is perhaps both obvious and nonetheless easy to forget when grappling with the seemingly timeless materiality of the weather. I showed how during the early modern period the weather was providence, but by the twentieth century it was an indicator of nothing. As Brian Fagan's *The Little Ice Age: How Climate Made History* (2000) argues so well, different periods in history also have different climatic conditions and this has a material influence on history too. The primary consideration of the performance history chapters will be to attend to the ways in which the weather's symbolism, whether as God or as nothing, is operating under the 'influence of a cultural pattern', to echo Jakobsen. In the basic practice of meteorological reading the main point in this regard is that the chain in which 'storm' is the representative part of 'something else' – a kingdom, a social value, an affect – is linked differently depending on context; and so to with metaphor, where the meaning of discrete substitutions that are effective and affecting shift across history.

The third and fourth dimensions of meteorological reading are duration and idiosyncrasy, respectively. In other words, not all storms are created equal, some are long and distinctive and others are short and derivative. All dimensions have a bearing on the overall significance of the event. With regard to *King Lear* I showed how it was both the longest and most particular storm in Shakespeare's oeuvre. In the next two chapters these seemingly rudimentary observations will have a significant bearing on my argument regarding how the play forges a path through and in response to the storm. Finally, meteorological reading is presented here as a method for ecocritically reading the weather in our contemporary moment of climate change, and also is set up as something that has always occurred. Western humans have never been particularly good at reading the weather and yet we have always tried; the weather is a perennial site of bad sign reading, anxious prophesizing and, now, unstable scientific data. So while we might consider the struggle to accurately communicate climate change via weather events today as being an especially contemporary problem, meteorological reading posits the practice as another iteration of a long-standing tradition of vexed interpretations of the weather. This tradition will be explored in more detail in the next chapter.