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‘What is the cause of thunder?’: The Storm’s Three Ambiguities

Having spent the night out in the open, lashed by the storm, Lear asks Poor Tom: ‘What is the cause of thunder?’ (3.4.151). Lear has already asked several questions of Poor Tom and received quite baffling replies. At this point in the play Lear is either partly disrobed or naked, as is Tom. Meanwhile the Fool, Gloucester and Kent are trying to encourage Lear to take shelter. The most readily available interpretation of the question is that the ‘causes’ of the storm are entirely irrelevant and that Lear’s asking is merely proof of his madness. Gwilym Jones disagrees. He argues that it is one of the most important lines in the play. First, he claims that the question is not about causality but partiality: ‘whose’ is the cause of thunder? (2015b: 77) or which political side is the storm on? Second, Jones insists that because the question remains unanswered it effectively called upon early Globe audiences to ‘react to, understand through, the event of the storm’ (78). In other words, because it is unanswered in the dialogue the question functions rhetorically in performance and invites the audience to determine the implied answer. The trouble is that the implied answer remains ambiguous. Building on Jones’s analysis, this chapter reads through the event of the storm and identifies three ambiguities that complicate the quest for an answer.

Although the storm’s meaning is ambiguous, it is so in specific ways. The storm is situated within a very particular story about family, sovereignty and death, reflecting an ancient philosophical quandary about the role of the weather in relation to the human condition. The storm is not pure timeless atmospheric chaos, but tumult held within a particular frame. Thus, in order to better understand how one is actually pulled to ‘understand’ the play ‘through the event of the storm’ and to explore how one might arrive at a

deeper or different understanding of something after an encounter with the storm, the ambivalences of the storm are considered in quite specific terms. They are marked herein as ‘dramatic,’ ‘historical and philosophical’ and ‘theatrical’ ambiguities.

Section One considers the storm’s role in the minutia of the dramatic plot. Of particular interest here is the significance of Lear’s exposure to and eventual sheltering from the storm in relation to his desire to relinquish the responsibilities of rule. I show on how the old king’s desire for comfortable final years meaningfully intersects with his repeated refusal to take shelter from the storm. The literal intersection between his stated objective and the weather produces a paradox relating to the cultural and moral significance of human shelter and exposure and yields the question of what counts as an unburdened death. Section Two specifically interrogates the historical and philosophical ambiguity regarding Lear’s question, ‘What is the cause of thunder?’ and explores its resonances with Aristotelian meteorological natural philosophy specifically and the history of meteorological thought more broadly. This section situates *King Lear* as both a criticism of and exemplary text from within that tradition of materialist thought. In particular I am interested in the question’s referencing the meteorological problem of final causes or telos in the world. When viewed from this perspective, Shakespeare not only represents but also ironically plays with this enduringly open-ended question. In contrast to other texts from around that time, I will show how Shakespeare breaks with and arguably critiques the tradition of ascribing a purpose to the weather by way of Lear’s quest to understand the storm. The third section explores the storm’s ‘theatrical ambiguity,’ or its potential to be spectacularized in a range of ways in performance. In this chapter I explore spectacle as it is written in the text by investigating Shakespeare’s digest of various elements from Samuel Harsnett’s critique of the theatricality of exorcism in the storm. When read this way, the storm is simultaneously critical of spectacle and a cardinal example of the blinding power of the spectacular to influence interpretation.

The point of this chapter from an ecocritical perspective is to complicate moralizing interpretations of the weather for particular political ends. As I noted in the introduction, the aim of this study is not to deduce one idea or ecological message from the play, or even a particular theory of the weather.

Instead, I explore the variety of ways in which the weather is co-opted by anthropocentric reading practices and how the significance of the weather in this regard changes over time. The striking variation in interpretation of the play over history (*King Lear* as tragedy, history, tragicomedy; Lear as hero, villain, madman, magician) hinges on plausibly being able to read the storm for all these particular ends. Using close reading techniques, the goal of this chapter is to explore how the storm is structured to support this tradition of equivocal hermeneutic practices.

Dramatic ambiguity

Lear's desire for an 'Unburdened crawl toward death' (1.1.40) orients Shakespeare's tragic retelling of the historical fable. Lear cannot just retire on his life savings, downsize to a nice apartment in Florida and take up golf, because kings do not officially die. They represent the immortal body politic: the chant 'the king is dead, long live the king!' represents the way in which the king's death is expediently mourned and glossed. The concept of the 'king's two bodies' will be taken up in more detail in Chapter 3. For now it shall suffice to say that there is no precedent for Lear's 'unburdened crawl'. So for Lear's ideal death to become or to be accommodated by the world, aspects of the world, if not the entire world itself, needs to be configured differently. 'In the division of the kingdom' (1.1.3–4) Lear attempts to 'shake all cares and business from our age' (1.1.38) and restructure his world in order to graduate the idea of unburdened death from desired possibility to actuality. At this point for Lear, being unburdened means shedding himself of the responsibilities of rule. Although at the end of the play his ideal death is proven actually impossible in the kingdom, the play gives rise to the question: under what circumstances could Lear's ideal death be possible? If Cordelia had never been banished everything would have been fine? If Goneril and Regan had accepted the knights in their castles and submitted to Lear's demands would his death have been unburdened? Or could a hovel be enough in certain circumstances? Or is it properly impossible within the world of the play?

Derrida's notion of the 'im-possible' is a useful concept to think with here because it describes the relation between the impossible and possible. For

Derrida, 'im-possible' signifies the paradoxical relationship between possibility and impossibility; the concepts are not opposites but rather 'say the same thing' (2007: 445). He goes on to argue that the 'event' reveals this relation:

The history of philosophy is the history of reflections on the meaning of the possible, on the meaning of *being* or *being possible*. This great tradition of the *dynamis*, of potentiality, from Aristotle to Bergson, these reflections in transcendental philosophy on the conditions of possibility, are affected by the experience of the event insofar as it upsets the distinction between the possible and the impossible. (454)

Thus, he surmises, 'We should speak of the im-possible event ... [as] the condition or chance of the possible' (454). For Derrida an 'event ... must never be predicted or planned, or even really decided upon' (2007: 441). Jones also turns to Derrida in order to think about the storm as an event that just happens, that lies 'beyond anticipation' and that opens out onto what is 'to come' (2015b: 60). I offer up *King Lear* as a representation *par excellence* of the relation between the possible and the impossible with regard to the question of a king's 'unburdened death', and posit the two unanticipated events that give rise to the chance of the possible as Cordelia's 'nothing' and the storm.

Considering the trajectories of possibility in a tragedy, and one explicitly about the protagonist's desire to die, is a fraught practice. Any tragedy ends before it begins because the genre betrays the ending. Tragedies end in death or disaster for some of the important characters, particularly the protagonists named in the play's title: Macbeth, Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet. There is no need for a 'spoiler alert'; we already know which direction these plays are headed. But *Lear* is different because he is not struck down prematurely on a pathway to power, revenge or love. *Lear* is afflicted with the wrong kind of death. How, then, is dramatic tension or audience interest sustained in this play where the protagonist's quest is always already oriented towards death? The event of *Lear's* dividing the kingdom and divesting himself of responsibility sets the action in motion and produces the idea of an unburdened death. Our interest in *Lear's* inevitable death is thus buoyed throughout by the possibility that at some point it might actually be unburdened, unencumbered, untaxed by responsibility and, presumably, peaceful.

Thus, the tragedy of *King Lear* is not that *Lear* dies, but that his death is so thoroughly burdensome. *Lear* has one of the most crushing deaths imaginable,

both literally and metaphorically suffocating from grief under the weight of Cordelia's dead body. The injustice of her death is the burden of his. In other words, the tragedy of *King Lear* is that an 'unburdened death' is rendered in impossible, but the play gives rise to the simultaneous hope that it might be otherwise, that it might be possible. As Stephen Greenblatt suggests, 'the close of *King Lear* in effect acknowledges that it can never satisfy this dream, but the acknowledgement must not obscure the play's having generated the craving for such satisfaction' (1988: 125). So I turn now to the text in order to explore the two ways in which the play lures us to believe Lear's death might become possible, one is symbolized by the castle, the other by the hovel. Both possibilities are theorized as such in and through Lear's exposure to the storm. The former is very conservative in the true definition of the term attempting to conserve or preserve the traditional laws of the kingdom, the latter proposes a potentially radical and revolutionary change and would imply a thorough reworking of the dramatic world. Lear's exposure serves to reveal these possibilities.

Cordelia's 'nothing' represents the conservative possibility that Lear could die an unburdened death on his own terms in the opulent surrounds of a castle. Lear tells us that this is what he had envisaged: 'I loved her most, and thought to set my rest / On her kind nursery.' (1.1.123–4). His later regret at banishing Cordelia should be considered as part of an assumption that she would have actually been able to provide what Goneril and Regan do not. Precisely whether or not Cordelia would have been able to calm Lear is ultimately unknowable, but in an interpretation of Cordelia's 'nothing', Emily Sun unpacks the way 'nothing' is a reification of the promise symbolized by Cordelia. Sun argues that Cordelia's response to the love test in 1.1 reflects a pragmatic and complex understanding of her duty. She will love her father, with a love in excess of duty, but also take up the responsibility of being either Queen of Burgundy or France. By embodying all these roles at once, she will somehow manage to enable an unburdened death for Lear and symbolically unify the kingdom. As she says in the first scene, she cannot 'speak' this 'love' for her father in front of the court because, Sun argues, it is in excess of her immediate duty. Duty is pragmatic; the love she promises is not (Sun 2010: 17–24). The event of Cordelia's 'nothing' momentarily represents the possibility or chance of Lear's unburdened death. In that moment, she might ensure

the enduring coherence of the kingdom, despite the division, and the continuation of the legitimate order. By banishing her, Lear literally shuts down the possibility she represents.

Cordelia endures throughout the play as a symbol of that possibility nonetheless; a conservative one not necessarily because it is old-fashioned or 'right-wing' or any other pejorative term we might append to contemporary conservatism, but rather because it represents the desire to conserve something that has been and seems to be slipping away. During the storm, the drama is in part sustained by the spectacular absence of the alternative future represented by Cordelia. Lear's exposure to the storm is likely the opposite of how we might tacitly understand her 'kind nursery'.

It is in relation to what Cordelia *might have* done differently that the old man's literal exposure to the cold night functions as a metonymy for Lear's supporters' sympathies. After the storm, Gloucester, for instance, expresses his unequivocal sympathy for Lear and, for doing so, has his eyes gouged out. When pressed as to why he sent Lear to Dover, he argues he sent him there out of reach of the daughters. But also because:

The sea, with such a storm as his bare head
In hell black night endured, would have buoyed up
And quenched the stelled fires.
Yet, poor old heart, he help the heavens to rain.
If wolves had at thy gate howled that stern time,
Thou shouldst have said, 'Good porter, turn the key,
All cruels else subscribed.' (3.7.58–64)

Gloucester sends Lear to Dover because there 'the sea,' a metonymy for the French army, led by Cordelia, has the capacity to rise up and change the organization of power in the kingdom. In other words, he claims that vengeance delivered by armed force is the only thing capable of righting the injustice of Lear's literal exposure to the storm and that Cordelia is coming back to set things right again. The king's lack of shelter, the fact that he was old and out in the cold, wet, night, functions as the centrepiece of his sympathies, thereby implicitly suggesting that if Cordelia was already here this never would have happened.

With regard to the characterization of Lear's exposure as a horrible injustice, Cordelia symbolizes the possibility that Lear would not have actually

been exposed to the storm, that the world may be configured otherwise and that Lear's desired unburdened death might have been possible; under her care he could have kept the knights (or maybe would have had no need for the knights, given that he only claims the retinue *after* he banishes Cordelia) and remained sheltered from the storm. In this regard, Cordelia is the light and hope in the world and, indeed, she is often read from such a perspective. In sum, she represents the possibility of taking shelter in the opulence of the castle and an unburdened death where the mortal body is not merely sheltered but insulated from the stormy weather by fortified walls of wealth and power.

Concomitant with the conservative reification of Cordelia and the berating of Goneril and Regan for shutting Lear out, there is a radical possibility in the storm that is usually either overlooked or held up as a symptom of his madness: Lear is utterly uninterested in finding a dry house. He repeatedly rejects the opportunity to take shelter from the storm. Thus, despite the extravagant sympathy from Gloucester and Cordelia and all the blame that Lear heaps upon his elder daughters, Lear seems to want to be exposed. In reframing Lear's madness as, quite literally, an *avoidance of shelter*, his refusal to relinquish the knights in the first instance, or retreat to the hovel in the second, opens another pathway to an unburdened death. To conclude that Lear is mad given this contradictory mindset is precisely what Regan says: 'O, sir, you are old: / Nature in you stands on the very verge / Of her confine. You should be ruled and led / By some discretion that discerns your state / Better than yourself' (2.2.338–42). So what if instead we take Lear at his confounding word here, mad or not? Before the storm arrives, Lear had already said 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 to return to Goneril with half his train dismissed. Then, when in the storm, Lear either actively ignores or directly refuses to take shelter at least *nine* times. In taking seriously Lear's avoidance of shelter, the storm event promises him another possible way to reach his impossible goal, by means of a differently coded relationship between the weather and mortal bodies. More than just a vehicle to elicit Gloucester's, Cordelia's and, presumably, the audience's sympathies, the storm gives Lear another, different chance at an unburdened death. How does recognizing Lear's active avoidance of shelter change our reading of his exposure to the storm? More specifically, how does viewing his literal exposure from this perspective change a reading of the play?

In the storm, stubborn old Lear comes up against a meteorological force that finally has some kind of sway over him. Other than the Fool, the storm is the first ‘character’ in the play that is allowed to, in Lear’s own words, ‘come betwixt our sentences and our power’ (1.1.171). He cannot banish the storm; he must allow it to speak back and to figure some kind of response. Once he realizes he is not controlling the storm, it gives Lear pause for questioning. His first question is about who will come to the defence of people, like himself, exposed to storms: ‘Poor naked wretches ... / That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm’ whom or what will ‘defend you / From seasons such as these?’ (3.4.28–32). The question reflects an extraordinary change of mind and heart.

Simon Palfrey reads his prayer to the poor naked wretches as a reach toward a ‘possibility’. For Palfrey this is a ‘reach beyond jealous enclosures, [toward] a possibility to which Lear’s present exposure gives powerful credence ... And so as much as the suffering of which he speaks is actual enough ... the mood is more pertinently of the possible: and of possibilities that can as easily be cataclysmic as redeeming’ (2014: 50). But what is ‘the possible’ in this context? How might the suffering actually end? ‘Before names and stations – or after them,’ Palfrey continues:

this is what we are: a brittle enduring, liable to be severed, viable to be put back together, and either way not to be blithely assumed, safe and whole before the fire. What is more, part of the suffering is precisely continuance. These things are far from view and perhaps far from mind: but they are not extinct. Suffering survives; life, in Lear’s perfectly apt verb, *bides*. It endures, and in doing so waits for things to change. The change might be in the weather, in the times—or in our mindfulness. (50)

The trouble is that the possibility Palfrey lays requires a qualitatively different world order to that promised by Cordelia’s ‘kind nursery’. But the king is not really allowed to die in these circumstances. He is not allowed to bide. In this regard, Lear’s exposure is literally and figuratively transgressive. The fact of his exposure is thus fuel for moral outrage and conservative backlash, as well as being the seed for a revolutionary uprising. King Lear is a one-man *coup d’état* against himself. On the one hand his shelter represents the stability of the kingdom, his exposure, on the other, represents a radical alternative.

Given Lear's avoidance of shelter in relation to the desires to shake all cares, the situation also suggests that the sheltered confines of the castle promised by Cordelia, refused him by Goneril and Regan, might not actually have had the capacity to unburden Lear anyway. In understanding the play *through* the event of the storm – the pathway that Jones argues is opened up by Lear's question, 'What is the cause of thunder?' – we see that the weather does not change course, nor does it neatly align with Lear's desires; instead Lear changes his mind about his situation in response to the weather.

After a lifetime in the castle, however, stubborn old Lear is poorly equipped to think beyond its sheltered confines and so has to keep asking questions to discover an alternative path toward an unburdened death. In other words, he did not plan his one-man coup very well. Once Poor Tom appears, Lear takes the opportunity to ask these questions. Initially he circles back upon his own misfortunes – 'Didst thou give all to thy two daughters? And art thou come to this?' (3.4.48–9) – but soon after, Lear asks Poor Tom a series of questions: why is he not dead given his 'unaccommodated' status, what are the causes of thunder, and what has he studied to know what he knows? Lear then invites the outsider into the hovel and finally takes shelter.

Lear's acceptance of shelter, however rustic, is both literally and figuratively a turning point with regard to the possibility of an unburdened death. It is not an unequivocal change in Lear's attitude to his daughters – he goes on to call for them to be arraigned in a mock trial and specifically for Regan to be 'anatomized' (3.6.74), and claims that women are 'centaurs', not half horse from the 'Down from the waist...' but 'sulphurous pit' (4.6.121–4) – but it is a significant shift in how he understands his own particular desires and the possible pathways towards an unburdened death. In the act of taking shelter in the hovel, Lear represents the possibility that an unburdened death does not necessarily require the opulence of a castle with the unequivocal support of everyone, but a small shelter and a few friends. After trying to establish a new world order on his own terms in the hovel, he finally comes to rest. Coming through this experience, by Act 4, Scene 6, King Lear is celebrating a very different kind of mortality by wearing a weedy crown, realizing he is not 'ague-proof' and embracing his mortal stench.

In and through Lear's literal exposure to the storm, the play simultaneously offers up the radical simplicity offered by the hovel, a supposedly vile thing

made precious by necessity, and the conservative luxury of the kingdom and castle, which Cordelia sees as her 'aged father's right' (4.4.28), as different pathways to an unburdened death.

Upon reunion, Cordelia and Lear hold very different opinions regarding how to respond to the circumstances. While Cordelia represents the possibility of a fully opulent and royally accommodated yet ultimately unburdened death, fought for with the 'arms' of France (4.4.27), Lear has other ideas. Cordelia wants to confront her sisters ('Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?' [5.3.7]) that denied Lear his rights. While Lear wants to 'away to prison' (5.3.8) without seeking revenge and reclamation to the throne, just Cordelia's companionship. Crucially, he does not 'abjure all roofs' forever. Instead he comes to believe that, although some form of accommodation is necessary, the ostentatious architecture of the castle is not. Indeed, the castle, and the responsibilities and burdens that it represents, seems to be part of his problem. Following the distinct conclusions arrived at by Lear and Cordelia, one could read *King Lear* as a play about the politics of sheltering from a storm and the ethics of different types of dwellings. While Laurie Shannon explored what it meant philosophically to lack a roof over one's head or to be cosmically unaccommodated (2013: 141), the next stage in this revisitation of the literal dimensions of the storm is to reflect on the meaning of different kinds of roofs.

The play is thus not only about seeking shelter in a pragmatic sense, it also offers a rich and complex ethical and political enquiry into the tensions between privileged excess and base necessity in relation to exposure. In *Succeeding King Lear: King Lear and the Possibility of Politics*, Emily Sun explores the relationship between literature and politics in the play and in some modern adaptations. She argues the text itself:

opens up a history—that which gives rise to a succession of readers that keep returning to the play as to an originary locus for grappling with a problem. The question of the relations between literature and politics in modernity is not resolved by *King Lear* but rather articulated in a paradigmatic manner, such that later readers return to the play in their own attempts to deal with the question. (2010: 2)

For Sun, however, the storm is an adjunct to a fundamentally humanist drama about the political sphere, wherein exposure and shelter (or non-exposure, in

Sun’s terms) are metaphors for an individual outside or inside the bureaucratic space of the ‘polis’ (36–46). For Sun, thinking about the inside and outside of the polis is largely concerned with the question of how human subjectivity is produced by administrative constructs. But the politics of *King Lear* is manifest in the literal delineations between indoors and outdoors – from castles to hovels and across high-grown fields – and is felt in the bodies of the characters with and without clothing. In this regard, neither the storm nor Lear’s lack of shelter are only metaphoric; the thunder, lightning, wind and rain, combined with the aging king’s plight, produce the play’s philosophical and political dilemma and show up how it feels to be inside or outside the polis. The abiding dramatic ambiguity circles around the question of an unburdened death. What kind of shelter is acceptable in these circumstances? Could an extraterritorial hovel be a place for such a death, or is anything less than a castle morally outrageous

Historical and philosophical ambiguity

Lear’s question, ‘What is the cause of thunder?’ references an insoluble, yet enduring, material and philosophical conundrum. Lear is asking what remained in Shakespeare’s day an unanswerable but nonetheless abidingly meaningful question: ‘What are the four causes of thunder?’ The question is impossible to answer in full because of the problem of the weather’s ‘final causes’. In the Aristotelian natural philosophical model, all phenomena are determined by describing the material, efficient, formal and final causes, where explanatory priority is given to the ‘final cause’ or the purpose of something. In the *Physics*, Aristotle argues that ‘Nature belongs to the classes of causes which act for something’ (2009), but the weather is the exemplary exception to the rule because the ends are unpredictable and thus ultimately unknowable. What the weather is ‘acting for’ is unclear. So, despite the centrality of teleology to his overall method, the *Meteorologica* does not arbitrate on the weather’s final causes. The example he offers is the relationship between rain and corn. Sometimes the end result of rain is that corn grows, but he could not claim that the corn’s growth was the purpose of rain, because rain could result in the opposite end as well: ‘if a man’s crop is spoiled on the

threshing floor, the rain did not fall for the sake of this – in order that the crop might be spoiled – but that result just followed’ (Aristotle 2009). So although, in the words of Thomas Aquinas, ‘Rain results from the necessity of matter’ (Aquinas 1999: 125) – when it rains, it rains – the ultimate purpose of rain is unknowable. The Fool infers this understanding of the weather in his song to Lear and the idea that he must make his fortunes ‘fit’ the weather, rather than hoping the weather will deliver a particular outcome (3.2.74).

Within the Aristotelian paradigm, it is impossible to think about the weather without reference to geocentric cosmology, especially given the role of the weather as moderator between the heavens and the earth mentioned in Chapter 1. Although Shakespeare was writing on the cusp of massive changes to Western cosmology, Copernican theories were only trickling into Britain by the early seventeenth century; they had certainly not yet dislodged the dominant geocentric worldview (Gatti 1989). Thus when Shakespeare was writing *Lear*, the popular meteorological imaginary to which he appealed in his plays was undergirded by a geocentric cosmology, even though new ideas were starting to take hold. So while we often think of Shakespeare as presciently modern, meteorology was only beginning to transform.¹

Given the play was written at the beginning of this period of historical change, it pays to sketch an overview of the key conceptual problem lodged within the classical meteorological system: the problem of final causes. This will help explain the way in which pre-modern weather was directly implicated in complex cultural questions, how those political and theological

¹ The invention of Galileo’s air thermometer is dated at 1597. Francis Bacon’s major treatise on the scientific method, the *Novum Organum* or *New Organon*, was published in 1620. In this he called for a less superstitious understanding of the weather:

Natural philosophy has, in every age, met with a troublesome and difficult opponent, superstition, a blind and immoderate zeal for religion. For we see among the Greeks, those who first disclosed the natural causes of thunder and storms to the yet untrained ears of man were condemned as guilty of impiety towards the gods. (Bacon 1620)

Francis Bacon also imagined a modern meteorological science in *The New Atlantis*, wherein ‘great and spacious houses where we imitate and demonstrate meteors; as snow, hail, rain, some artificial rains of bodies and not of water, thunders, lightnings’ in 1627 (Bacon 1624). These methods begin concretely to transform social and political institutions around 1660, with the founding of organizations such as the Royal Society. Further, Hook’s description of ‘A METHOD For making a History of the WEATHER’ was published in 1667, in Thomas Spratt’s *The history of the Royal Society of London for the improving of natural knowledge*, and most instruments that would become integral to modern meteorology emerged in the late seventeenth and the early eighteenth centuries. In other words, with the exception of Galileo’s thermometer, all this happened after Shakespeare wrote *King Lear*. If anything, the play could be taken as another example that things were about to change, but not enough to be heretical to contemporary beliefs. *King Lear* was not, after all, censored in its day.

questions manifested around the time of *King Lear's* early performances, and in what ways they are mobilized in Shakespeare's construction of the storm sequence. But also, with regard to the presentist concerns of this book, this section begins to foreshadow the ways in which thinking about the weather as the climate changes resonates strongly with the vexed meteorological-political questions explored in *King Lear*.

Indeed, there is something untimely or seemingly classical about the ways in which contemporary meteorological events are being taken up and turned into political questions. Conversely, modern narratives of progress seem to be, in part, undone by the weather. In *Queer/Early/Modern* (2006) Carla Freccero theorized a temporal frame where time is understood to work 'counter to the imperative ... to respect the directional flow of temporality, [and] the notion that time is composed of contiguous and interrelated joined segments or sequences' (4), where contemporary questions can be seen in early modern texts and vice versa. I will argue that despite the changes to the cosmological system and a seeming paradigm shift from the closed world to the open universe, despite Shakespeare as sometimes being seen as presciently modern, despite the idea of progress having a singular direction away from errors of earlier thinking, the seemingly retrograde cultural question of Aristotelian meteorology – surfacing in *King Lear* as the query 'what is the cause of thunder?' – strangely endures in Western culture today.

Aside from a few attempts to characterize individual elements by thinkers like Empedocles and Hippocrates, Aristotle developed the first systematic method for describing the weather in his *Meteorologica* around 350 BCE. After its translation into Latin in the twelfth century, it remained the authoritative text on the earth's weather system in the West for over half a millennia. In some accounts, Aristotelian meteorology seems to be superseded overnight by the rise of the modern scientific method, but in *Renaissance Meteorology: Pomponazzi to Descartes*, Craig Martin shows how Aristotelian-derived methods of observation and classification were still being used widely throughout the seventeenth and arguably into the eighteenth century (2011: 38–59). Moreover, the work of Jan Golinski and Katharine Anderson on meteorology in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reveals the extraordinary difficulty of establishing the modern science of meteorology, largely because, to quote Golinski, 'atmospheric

phenomena occupy a domain of inherent uncertainty' (2007: 204). Grappling with such conspicuous unpredictability made it difficult for meteorologists to accrue the authority required of scientists (2007: 205). Emily O'Gorman argues that nineteenth century meteorologists were treated more like soothsayers than scientists (2014). Even now, in the highly technologized science of modern meteorology, the problem of unpredictability is the meteorologist's main occupational hazard. As Gary Fine argues, '[w]e believe that we can determine the relationship between the prediction and the subsequent event, allowing us to determine the accuracy of the claim'. But, he says, a key question remains unanswerable: 'did the weather occur as expected, and how can one judge if that is the case?' (2007: 175). For example, while rain might be predicted for a particular area, only certain parts of the area might actually receive rainfall, and even then it still might be in different quantities to what was predicted, or some areas might receive precisely the amount predicted, while others that were expecting rain remain dry. Even with sophisticated contemporary technologies, perfect weather prediction is like a mirage that is always just out of reach.

All of this is to highlight two things: first, the mainstream cultural understanding of meteorology at Shakespeare's time of writing was based on Aristotelian natural philosophy. Second, the onto-epistemological question at the heart of classical meteorology endures in modernity despite the paradigm shift, and the rise of new methods for measuring and predicting the weather.²

Unlike modern meteorology, however, the overarching goal of classical to late Renaissance meteorology was not weather prediction. It contrasted with the more esoteric field of 'astrometeorology', which was based on the superstitious interpretation of sunsets, animal behaviours and the like, and was

² In comments on a draft of this chapter, Greg Garrard suggested that my claim about the endurance of the meteorological dilemma was a bit problematic. I accept this criticism. He said that it 'represents a confusion between the lay conception of uncertainty ("we don't know what's going to happen") and the scientific conception, which is a statistical quantity that can be stated precisely. Quantifiable uncertainty (i.e. confidence interval) is, in many ways, the *opposite* of the lay sense of the term (hence many confusions about climate science)'. Since it is beyond the scope of this chapter to think through this in more detail, I wanted to add in a footnote that while I agree that there is a difference between the statistically quantifiable methods of prediction and the classical methods of observation, there remains a gap between the prediction and the reality – even though the gap might be smaller, science does not perfectly circumscribe its objects. The weather/meteorology remains exemplary in this regard. This does not mean I don't trust scientific consensus, it just means I simultaneously acknowledge its limits.

charged with the curious task of speculating on the future.³ In the classical model, the weather when it happened, what happened and the scale to which it happened was largely a surprise. The weather's formal properties were not understood as fixed, but rather mutable and changeable. Meteors were combinations of different elements, but their formation was taken as largely accidental. This incomplete or mutable materiality is a minor but conceptually important feature of classical meteorology. Martin identifies a long tradition of characterizing the meteors as nature's accidents and as formally incomplete. He shows how, in the thirteenth century, Albertus Magnus described the meteors as 'matter that is a state of becoming a simple substance' and how John Buridan, in the fourteenth century, used the term '*imperfect mixtures*' to categorize meteorological effects in contrast to perfect mixtures such as, flesh, blood, milk or metals' (Martin 2013: 27). According to Martin, the mid-sixteenth-century meteorologist Marcus Frytsche described a meteor as something 'that happens in the upper regions of the air' and as 'close to being an element' (2013: 10). As Martin points out, the word 'happens' translates from Latin '*accidere*', thereby forging a conceptual and etymological linkage between the meteors and the notion of the accident; which, incidentally, coincides with Derrida's notion of the event as something that just 'happens'. The main point, however, is that among natural philosophers from the thirteenth century onward there is some degree of agreement that meteors are accidental, incomplete, imperfect and always in a state of becoming. Instead, the overarching aim of classical meteorology was to describe how the weather emerged and for what purpose. In other words it was a generalized systems theory and then, potentially, retrospective analysis. Aristotle's meteorological system was conceptualized within a cosmological model that placed the earth as the fixed centre of a series of concentric 'spheres' known as the heavens. The meteors occupied the spheres between the moon and the earth. The spheres below the moon were the sublunary or terrestrial spheres. The meteors were understood as the imperfect combinations of the four elements: earth, fire, wind and water. In Oronce Finé's painting in the first

³ There is a branch of classical meteorology interested in weather signs and patterns but it is more or less distinct from the Aristotelian tradition. See L. Taub, 'Prediction and the Role of Tradition: Almanacs and Signs, *Paraepgmata* and Poems', *Ancient Meteorology* (London: Routledge, 2003), 15–40.

chapter (Fig. 1.1) – which I selected for its illustrative beauty more than its specificity to the historical space of this argument – the lunar sphere is marked with a crescent moon and the sublunary spheres with representations of their dominant elemental forces: there are many ways of conceptualising the arrangement of the four elements, but in Fine's case, in descending order from the moon we see fire and air labelled in the two spheres, and water and earth at the centre. The drawing also captures the link between the earth, meteors and the heavens, and their concentric spatial arrangement as parts of a whole cosmos. But also noteworthy is the perceived scale of the sublunary spheres with regard to the rest of the heavens; although today we think of the earth's atmosphere as dwarfed by the enormous and infinite universe, the sublunary spheres took up a significant portion of the whole geocentric cosmos, and thus played a significant role in the cultural imaginary. Within Aristotle's cosmological framework, meteorology was the study and description of the way in which the different meteors were produced. 'Meteor' literally means 'something raised up' (Heninger 1960: 3); although the study of atmospheric disturbances and weather patterns is still called 'meteorology', the word 'meteor' refers today to just one atmospheric phenomenon, which is no longer considered meteorological: a small extra-terrestrial rock that burns up upon entering the earth's atmosphere. However, until the eighteenth century the word 'meteor' denoted a range of different atmospheric phenomena stemming from Aristotle's original classifications: hurricanes, whirlwinds, thunder and lightning, rain, hail, snow, rainbows, clouds, mist and dew. The term also covered other phenomena that no longer fall into the study of modern meteorology: coastal erosion, silting, oceanic salinity, comets, earthquakes and shooting stars.⁴

Meteors were imagined as complex combinations of the different elements produced by such means as the interaction between the heat of the sun and the rotation of the heavens around the earth. There were four qualities to the elements: hot, dry, cold and moist. Each element had two essential qualities: earth was cold and dry; air was hot and wet; fire was hot and dry, and water

⁴ From our modern perspective, earthquakes are perhaps the most unlikely phenomenon to be classified as a 'meteor', given that they occur underground and that we now understand them as the movement of the tectonic plates. But for many centuries earthquakes were thought to be caused by powerful winds that found their way underground through openings in the earth's surface and, as such, they were classified as 'meteors'.

was cold and wet. Although any meteor could be produced anywhere given the right conditions, it was thought that, in the sublunary spheres, the airy and fiery meteors (lightning, thunder, comets and shooting stars) were produced higher up, whereas the earthy and watery ones (coastal erosion, salinity, wind, rain, snow, rainbows, clouds, mist, earthquakes and dew) occurred closer to the earth. Meteors fell into two main categories: vapours and exhalations: 'Vapour is naturally moist and cold', wrote Aristotle, 'and exhalation is hot and dry: and vapour is potentially like water, exhalation is potentially like fire' (1.3.27–9). Vaporous meteors were the various formations of water above the earth responding in complex ways to the heat of the sun.⁵ Exhalations were a more eclectic mix of hot and dry phenomena.⁶ We might summarise Aristotle's work and the practice of classical meteorology that followed as a way of categorising and classifying processes but in a way that shirked determinism. Nothing was understood as static or final.

Storms were understood on a spectrum of related but different meteors. For example, Aristotle characterizes thunder and lightning, rain and hurricanes as related but different:

The windy exhalation causes thunder and lightning when it is produced in small quantities, widely dispersed, and at frequent intervals, and when it spreads quickly and is of extreme rarity. But when it is produced in a compact mass and is denser, the result is a hurricane, which owes its violence to the force which the speed of its separation gives it. When there is an abundant and constant flow of exhalation the process is similar to the opposite process which produces rain and large quantities of water. Both possibilities are latent in the material and when an impulse is given which may lead to the development of either, the one of which there is the greater quantity latent in the material, is forthwith formed from it, and either rain, or, if it is the other exhalation that predominates, a hurricane is produced. (3.1.11–18)

Although there is nothing especially surprising about the distinction as such – then, as now, a hurricane is qualitatively different from a light showering

⁵ Rain, for example, was produced 'when the heat which caused (water) to rise leaves it ... the vapour cools and condenses again as a result of the loss of heat and the height and turns from air into water: and having become water again, falls again onto the earth' (1.9.26–31). The vapours were the evaporation and condensation of water in relation to the sun.

⁶ Aristotle described the two kinds of exhalations as follows: 'Exhalations that arise from the earth when it is heated by the sun ... (are) of two kinds; one is more vaporous in character, the other more windy, the vapour rising from the water within and upon the earth, while the exhalations from the earth itself, which is dry, are more like smoke' (1.4.8–11).

of rain – I quote here in order to underline this point simply because in the limited scholarship hitherto devoted to the bad weather in Shakespeare, storms are rarely separated from isolated flashes of thunder and lightning in any significant way (Thomson 1999; Jones 2015). But of course a hurricane or storm is quite different in scale and duration from isolated instances of thunder and lightning and thus in representation can serve a similarly different functions or purposes within dramatic storytelling.

The Aristotelian method for observing and describing the weather is troubled by one rogue element: the perceived material link between the weather and a non-specific transcendent force located in the celestial spheres of the heavens. Meteorological movement, Aristotle argued, was generated by the rotations of the heavens around the earth: ‘The (terrestrial) region must be continuous with the motions of the heavens, which therefore regulate its whole capacity for movement: the celestial element as source of all motion must be regarded as first cause’ (9). The spheres above the moon were known as the celestial spheres; bodies in the celestial sphere were made up of one element only, ether. In a geocentric cosmos, the weather was the medium between the heavens and the earth. Although, as Aristotle says, the material causes of the meteors are the sublunary elemental forces and relations, ‘the driving power of the eternally moving bodies must be their cause in the ultimate sense of their motion’ (9). Which is to say, although there are sublunary laws that determine the movement and variations in the weather, the original source of motion is transcendent or heavenly. The imagined outside to the earthly sphere produces a transcendent logic within meteorological thought that historically has been used to explain the earthy material disruptions of the weather.

Given that the original cause of meteorological activity was heavenly or extra-terrestrial, then the final causes or purposes of the weather often had a heavenly origin too. Thus, providentialism was not a metaphor: the weather was generally understood as divinely ordained or part of some heavenly plan. Thus, when orthodox philosophers, poets, pamphleteers, artists, priests and dramatists drew a link between the meteors, the heavens and the human world, it was a description that referenced the way the material world was popularly imagined, at least in Europe, until the late seventeenth century. For example, the image of the Sabbath (Fig. 2.1) published in *The Nuremberg Chronicle* in 1493 (again selected more for its illustrative power than historical

Figure 2.1 Hartmann Schedel. 'The Universe' from *The Nuremberg Chronicle* (Nuremberg, 1493). Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

specificity) represents the geocentric cosmos similar to the one pictured in Figure 1.1, but in this instance God and the angels inhabit the heavens. In other words, whosoever or whatever was imagined to occupy that outermost sphere of transcendent force was in some way seen as responsible for the weather; be it the Catholic or Protestant God, Greek or Pagan gods, this

transcendent imaginary formed the details of providentialist thought, which often materially hinged on worldly weather events.

As mentioned above, for Aristotle, deliberating on the final causes of the weather was impossible because no singular cause could ever be determined: abundance or dearth of rain could result in the life or death of the same plant – which is very different, according to his system, from trying to understand the purpose of human hair and other more stable material phenomena. Aristotle ascribed to hair the purpose of insulating the human head, the function of fat on kidneys was to protect them and the purpose of bird talons was ‘rapine’ (Aristotle: 2015). That said, he suspected others would be troubled by not knowing the weather’s purpose and would attempt to describe the final causes of the weather.

He was right. There developed a long philosophical and theological tradition that took up the difficulty. The purposes ascribed to meteors were not nearly as earthy and pragmatic as those of hair, kidneys or claws; instead they were lofty, moralizing and largely anthropocentric. Given the weather’s heavenly origins, the difficulty for natural philosophers was tied to questions of theodicy. How could one possibly imagine a moral order in nature and humans if the meteors are apparently both benevolent *and* destructive, and unpredictably so? More than just causing corn to grow or be spoiled, how could one actually fit the meteors into a neat moral or theological paradigm if both the good *and* the wicked were harmed in a flood, or if both priests *and* murderers could be struck by lightning?

There were no simple answers to these questions. As Martin demonstrates, the meteorological conundrum was not just taken up by a few esoteric scholars, but has a long and complex history. Philosophers from the Stoics and the Epicureans, through the Scholastic tradition, tackled the question. It was part of the Catholic eschatological imaginary and formed a key aspect of the theological debates across Europe after the Reformation, taken up in various ways by Lutherans, Calvinists and Catholics, as well as Pagans, Atheists and Sceptics (Martin 2011: 38–59). In order to explain the extraordinary variety of positions on the final causes of the meteors, Martin activates the concept of ‘multiple Aristotelianisms’:⁷ ‘Aristotelian meteorology differed among courtly

⁷ The original concept is outlined by Charles B. Schmitt in *Aristotle and the Renaissance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

elites, Italian university professors, members of Catholic religious orders, and Lutherans' (Martin 2011: 16). The multiple interpretations of Aristotle's work are especially interesting on the issue of meteors because it reveals the extent to which the weather has long been involved in polarized ideological debates.

A scholar to whom Martin makes special reference on this point is the sixteenth-century Catholic philosopher Pietro Pomponazzi, who drew an analogy between the timeless meteorological conundrum and the mysteries of religious faith. He embraced the ambiguity of Aristotelian meteorology and marvelled at the idea of not knowing. According to Pomponazzi, 'There are many things that seem bad to us, which are optimal, because we are ignorant of their purpose' (in Martin 2013: 46). Pomponazzi was dismissive of philosophers looking for answers to everything and argued that this 'unknowability' was essential for the practice of faith. For him, the fact that the final causes remain unknown gave rise to the problem of doubt, which, for a religious thinker, opened up the possibility of faith. While Pomponazzi did search for answers, his analysis revealed the basic relationship between the meteors and theological questions. What was a natural philosophical 'difficulty' according to Aristotle was, for Pomponazzi, the very problem of existence that necessitates faith.

But not all thinkers were as content with ambiguity as Pomponazzi, and the more politically motivated or evangelical writers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries harnessed the fear of the unknown in order to make an unequivocal statement of faith. As such, the final causes of the meteors are frequently written about by religious thinkers of all denominations to manage their fears in relation to the unknown and unpredictable whims of God. Providentialist writings after the Reformation often exploit the enduring cultural investment in natural teleology in order to persuade individuals to subscribe to their particular religious denomination. Moreover, the Reformation added another layer of complexity to the problem of final causes for meteorology. Alexandra Walsham argues that 'the cross-fertilization of an eclectic body of opinions and beliefs ... to interactions between different layers of culture and to processes of adaptation and assimilation' in varying interpretations of natural disasters goes 'some way to explaining how Protestantism was implanted in England' (70). In other words, the ways in which responses to disasters were theologically inflected was fundamentally

linked to shifts in political power. Reflecting on the weather's purposes was not only a way of exploring one's own faith, but was a way of differentiating an allegiance to one sect or another.

That said, investing the meteors with broader theological or political significance or purpose required a convincing story. Walsham describes how a given story could telescope the 'timeframe between wicked act and heavenly revenge ... to enhance the teleological link between cause and effect' (76). For example, there is the famous story of Martin Luther whose religious epiphany, in 1505, was prompted by a violent thunderstorm; caught out in the storm, he exclaimed: 'Help me, Saint Anne, and I shall become a monk!' (Mullet 2004: 37). Luther survived and less than two weeks later he entered the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt. If there is more to this story than mythic appeal, then, as Jones has asserted, 'without one notable thunderstorm in 1505 ... it is conceivable that the entire modern era of the west would have been radically different' (Jones 2015: 178). The storm can be retrospectively ascribed this purpose for Luther and, at least symbolically, serve as a plausible catalyst for the Reformation. Furthermore, myth or not, it has particular resonances with what will come to be the definitive features of Protestantism, in particular the notion of an unmediated relationship between God and the individual.⁸

Myth-making about the meteors' final causes remained an aspect of popular writing on weather events when Shakespeare was composing *King Lear*. The most widely available sixteenth-century English book on the meteors was William Fulke's *A Goodly Gallery with a Most Pleasaunt Prospect, into the Garden of Naturall Contemplation, to Beholde the Naturall Causes of All Kind of Meteors* (1563). This was an enduringly popular treatise based on geocentric cosmological principles and Aristotelian meteorology, and infused with Fulke's own Puritanical beliefs. The book had a wide enough readership to be repeatedly reissued and reprinted, in 1571, followed by another in 1602 with a slightly different title and title page and a second edition in 1634. A third edition was printed in 1639, reissued in 1640. The work was then reprinted again in 1654 with an entirely new title: *Meteors: OR, A plain Description of all kind of Meteors as well Fiery and Ayrie, as Watry and Earthy:*

⁸ The storm features in more explicitly religious accounts of Luther's life. See, for example, D. Wilson, *Out of the Storm: The Life and Legacy of Martin Luther* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008).

BRIEFLY Manifesting the Causes of all Blazing-stars, Shooting-Stars, Flames in the Aire, Thunder, Lightning, Earthquakes, Rain, Dew, Snow, Clouds, Springs, Stones and Metalls, which was also reissued in 1655 and 1670.⁹

Working within the Aristotelian tradition, Fulke explores the full range of meteors, including earthquakes and metals, but unlike Aristotle, he actually makes comment on the final causes:

Concerning the formall and finall cause, we have little to saye because the one is so secret, that it is knowne of no ma(n) ... The essentiall forme of all substaunces, Gods wisdome comprehendeth, the universall chiefe and last End of all thinges, is the glory of God. Myddle ends (if they may be so called) of these impressions are manifold profites, to Gods creatures, to make the earth fruitfull, to purge the ayre, to sett forth his power, to threaten his vengeance, to punyshe the worlde, to move to repentaunce: all the which are referde to one end of Gods eternall glory, ever to be praysed. Amen. (Fulke 1571)

There are similarities between Fulke and Pomponazzi; both claimed the elusiveness of the weather's end purpose is a matter of faith. But while Pomponazzi embraced the ambiguity itself as evidence of God's greatness, the Puritan Fulke interpreted the variability of the meteors as a form of direct instruction from God: when the meteors were benign, the faithful should be grateful; when violent, they should be afraid and repent.

Whereas Fulke's commentary was a religious analysis of the broad natural philosophy of meteorology, pamphleteers responded to specific violent meteorological events within a particular geopolitical context. After a violent storm in 1613, opportunistic pamphleteers were quick to explain it in contemporary theological terms. Their aim was to capitalize on the trauma of the event: to encourage those with faith to remain strong and to convert the unfaithful. Despite what looked like random damage, the pamphleteers laboured to frame the disaster in terms of God's plan. Such publications were rife with the 'telescoping' of cause and effect that Walsham identified (76). There are three surviving pamphlets written in response to the wild weather experienced in England during the winter of 1613, less than a decade after *Lear* reached the stage.

⁹ Publication data retrieved from English Short Title Catalogue, <http://estc.bl.uk> (accessed 26 February 2013).

Figure 2.2 Anonymous. *The last terrible Tempestiuous windes and weather* (London, 1613). Woodcut. Pamphlet title-page.

Take, for example, *The last terrible Tempestious windes and weather. Truly Relating many Lamentable Ship-wracks, with drowning of many people, on the Coasts of England, Scotland, France and Ireland: with the Iles of Wight, Garsey & Iarsey. Shewing also, many great mis-fortunes, that have lately hapned on Land, by reason of the windes and rayne, in divers places of this Kingdome* (Fig. 2.2). By claiming to be 'truly relating' his events, the anonymous author implies that he is giving an objective description rather than making persuasive rhetorical argument; however, the pamphleteer's main goal is actually to reason out the destruction caused by the weather for theological ends, to promote his cause by encouraging repentance in his readers and, ultimately, to shut down lingering ambiguities. Like Fulke, he works to account for such destruction and suggests ways to respond to it:

For as God is infinite in his mercie, So is hee infinite in his Justice; and as our transgressions are numberless, so are the severall rods and punishments uncountable that God uses to inflict upon us, sometimes by weake meanse to accompalish great things, and confound the mighty; and sometimes by elementall causes, as fire, aire, water, and earth, hee shewes his universal power. (A2)

This author's remedy for displays of wholesale destruction is abject repentance in order to encourage God to show mercy on the population in future:

Then let us consider with ourselves in What dangerous estates wee are in When the Almighty is offended with us, and let us turn to the Lord though harty repentance ... and then no doubt but God in his mercy will turne his favourable countenance towards us. (D)

This is an act of interpretation. It turns the mystery of meteorological violence into a clear moral story that corresponds with the author's own theological principles and moral agenda.

Turning back to Shakespeare now, the method of telescoping or linking cause and effect is often deployed by a particular character for specific actions with desired ends, to manipulate or moralize. Although he might be similarly selective, Shakespeare is never as earnest as the pamphleteers. He was not, after all, writing morality plays. Whether or not the dramatic ends are actually met in the play or not is not important. What is key is that in most cases the weather is taken up by a character and awarded a clear dramatic or narrative

function. Shakespeare takes a sceptical, often humorous, approach to such meteorologically related myth-making in *Julius Caesar* (1599). In 1.3 Cassius, anxious to have Caska [*sic*] join with him in his plot against Caesar, draws on the thunder to justify his argument. ‘If you would consider the true cause’ of thunder, he says:

why, you shall find
That heaven hath infused them with these spirits
To make them instruments of fear and warning
Unto some monstrous state. (*JC* 1.3.63–71)

Here Cassius strategically involves the thunder in the plot against Caesar; for Cassius, the thunder is a sign that the state is rotten. Does Cassius really believe this is what the thunder signifies, or is it a manipulative strategy to strengthen his argument against Caesar? That depends on how we read Cassius’s motives. But, whatever they may be, Cassius exploits the storm for his own ends; he ascribes a final cause to the thunder in order to try and convince another person of his point of view. I do not assert that these representations reflect Shakespeare’s tacit knowledge of the central problem of natural philosophy of meteorology, but rather to emphasize that the character’s interpretation of the meteors draws on common practices from the day and can be understood within the rubric of Aristotelian meteorology as offering a particular position on their final cause. The purpose of the rain is to encourage the wicked to repent or to illustrate the rottenness of the state. In the example of *Caesar*, Shakespeare is clearly referencing the way the weather was used strategically for particular political ends, and incidentally co-opting that strategy for his own theatrical purposes.

In *The Tempest* (1611), the representation of the ‘final cause’ of the tempest rests entirely in the hands of Prospero, who creates the initial dramatic situation by conjuring up the sea storm. After the storm-tossed opening scene, which ends with everyone on board abandoning ship to what they anticipate will be their certain deaths, we meet Prospero and his daughter. Her father comforts Miranda, who laments the fate of those who have drowned (‘Tell your piteous heart / There’s no harm done’ [*TT* 1.2.14–15]), and explains at considerable length to her (and the audience) how they came to be on the island. Miranda remains unclear about the purpose of the storm: ‘And

now I pray you, sir, / For still 'tis beating in my mind – your reason / For raising this sea-storm?' (*TT* 1.2.175–7). At this point Prospero puts her to sleep by magical means. If Prospero were to tell Miranda she would perhaps be terrified of her father, and the story would not have any intrigue for the audience. During the course of the play, his objectives for conjuring the storm begin to appear: Prospero ordered Ariel to 'perform' the tempest in order to deliver his brother Antonio, and split the characters up so that, over the course of the next few hours, Prospero's revenge can unfold. By putting the 'author' of the storm 'inside' the play¹⁰ and keeping all the other characters ignorant of Prospero's plot, Shakespeare reveals to us his own point of view on the dramatic purposes of storms. Here, that purpose is to bring about Prospero's revenge; but metatheatrically the purpose of the storm is to create the conditions for the drama itself. The play's title leads us to expect a story that is all about a tempest. Instead, what we get is a relatively brief, but very noisy, opening to a three-hour-long entertainment. Yet the storm remains the *sine qua non* of the entire play, rendering the action, up to a point, plausible.

Turning back to *King Lear*, we find a storm that functions very differently. In the next chapter I come to closely address the emotional details of Lear's dialogue with the weather; for now it shall suffice to observe that in the first storm speeches of 3.2 Lear tries to duplicate the putative success of the anonymous pamphleteer, Cassius and Prospero, and harness the storm for his own purposes, but without success. Lear calls upon the storm to become part of his own personal narrative and aid him in exacting revenge upon his daughters for their ingratitude. But he fails catastrophically. Ultimately, he cannot use the storm to convince anyone of anything because the storm is indifferent to his plight: try as he might, he cannot get the storm to respond to his cries. Instead, he has to respond to the storm.

One of the key reasons Lear gets into trouble is his proximity to the storm. *Contra* Lear, orthodox theologians and pamphleteers published their tracts calling for repentance in the wake of particular disasters; their opinions were forged from the safety of retrospection. In *The Tempest*, Prospero's trick relies

¹⁰ For an exploration of the notion of Prospero as Shakespeare, with a focus on the actor's performance, see G. McMullan, 'The Tempest and the Uses of Late Shakespeare in the Theatre: Gielgud, Rylance, Prospero' in *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing: Authorship and the Proximity of Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 318–53.

on the other characters being frightened by the storm but ultimately surviving to reflect on their new island home. Indeed, the scholarly perspective on the storm in *King Lear* is usually retrospective too; after the event, we reflect upon its effects and determine its overall significance once it has congealed into a thing rather than a process. But the characters in *Lear* do not enjoy the benefits of retrospection; they are caught up in the middle of the storm. Like them, in meteorologically reading the play, we are forced to contend *with* and proceed *through* the storm. As Steve Mentz argues, these scenes are ‘Shakespeare’s most direct interrogation of how a providential storm feels against your skin’ (2010: 141). In narratives that ascribe a clear purpose to the weather, the material encounter and its providential significance do not usually overlap. However, in *Lear*, the storm’s significance begins to take shape while the king is still feeling the rain against his skin; so its ultimate purpose is ambiguous. The question, ‘What is the cause of thunder?’ is thus never clearly resolved in the text but kept open and ambiguous. The play does not offer a conclusion on the question of the storm’s purpose or final causes, but rather opens up space for a few possibilities. The first is for presenting it in performance in a way that emphasizes a particular interpretation, the storm’s purpose as a cosmic enhancement of Lear’s mental state or a natural symbol for political chaos, for instance. Second, in meteorologically reading this text, one is able sit at little longer with the uncertainty and consider what it means not to know.

Theatrical ambiguity

By the time Shakespeare wrote *The Tempest*, he had transmuted into metatheatre the most spectacularly theatrical feature of *King Lear*. In the second scene of *The Tempest*, after putting Miranda to sleep, Prospero reveals his reasons for ‘raising this sea-storm’ (*TT* 1.2.177). Although the audience comes to know the reasons, the characters other than Prospero and Ariel misrecognize the fundamental structure of their situation on account of the stormy spectacle, and act upon that misrecognition until the very end of the play. They think the storm is natural, but actually Prospero strategically plots it for a particular narrative end. The play would not be possible without the dramatic irony created by the split between the theatre of the shipwreck

narrative and metatheatre of the revenge narrative produced by the opening storm, 'Performed to point' (*TT* 1.1.194) by Ariel. In other words, the drama occurs in the space between the puppet mastery or metatheatre of Prospero and Ariel and the theatre of the shipwrecked royalty; without the chasm between the two realities enabled by the storm there would be no play.

The audience does not have the same acute awareness of the artifice of the storm in *King Lear*. Although there is metatheatre and dramatic irony in *King Lear*, to be sure, the storm is not the result of overt trickery. We take the storm more seriously because it seems a more realistic aspect of Lear's world and less like a deliberate theatrical construct or device. Nevertheless, the fact that Shakespeare reveals the theatrical purpose of the storm in *The Tempest*, provokes us to consider the effect of its masking in *King Lear*. The theatrical ambiguity here can be found in the space between the received reality of the dramatic world and the way Shakespeare draws attention to artifice via Poor Tom.

To understand the theatrical aspects of the storm and how they are entangled with the metatheatrical aspects of the scenes, I turn now to one of Shakespeare's key source texts, Samuel Harsnett's *A declaration of egregious popish impostures to with-draw the harts of her majesties subjects from their allegiance, and from the truth of Christian religion professed in England, under the pretence of casting out devils. Practiced by Edmunds, alias Weston a Jesuit, and divers Romish priestes and wicked associates. Where-unto are annexed the copies of the confessions, and examinations of the parties themselves, which were pretended to be possessed, and dispossessed, taken upon oath before her Majesties commissioners for causes ecclesiasticall* (1603), henceforth known as the *Declaration*. For over a hundred years, scholars have recognized this as an important inter-text for Shakespeare in the writing of *King Lear*. Frank Walsh Brownlow (1993: 107), Geoffrey Bullough (1973: 314) and Kenneth Muir (1977: 203) all agree that the *Declaration* is the most significant influence on Shakespeare's adaptation of the ancient tale. In the tract, Harsnett's work demystifies the strategies of fear and terror used by the Catholic Church in the practice of exorcism.

Shakespeare's engagement with Harsnett is superficially apparent in the similarities between Edgar's mad babbling in 3.4 and 3.6 and the strange names given to devils in exorcisms recounted in the *Declaration*. Harsnett's exorcists use the words 'Modo', 'Mahu', 'Fratteretto' and 'Fliberdigibett' (Harsnett in Brownlow: 191–336) and Edgar draws on the same weird names: 'The prince

of darkness is a gentleman. Modo / He's called, and Mahu' (3.4.139–40), 'This is the foul fiend Flibbertigibbet' (3.4.113) and 'Frateretto calls me, and tells me Nero is an angler in the lake of darkness' (3.6.6–7). Edgar's brother Edmund has the same name as the chief exorcist in Harsnett's text. According to Bullough, the *Declaration* 'contributed greatly to [*King Lear*'] atmosphere of trickery, deceit and the sense of a wickedness inexplicable by reason' (Bullough 1973: 301). For Muir the verbal borrowings prove that Shakespeare read Harsnett's tract many times (1977: 207–8). But Shakespeare's use of the text went much further, as Robert Stevenson observed many years ago: '[h]ad his purpose been the gathering of such fiendish names and phrases as he actually did cull from it, then any number of other immediately contemporary books on demonology would have much better served his purpose' (1952: 900–1). What is more likely, then, is that a larger set of ideas expressed in the work appealed to him and he wanted to explore it dramatically and in greater detail.

The *Declaration* is a scathing critique of the Catholic Church's practice of exorcism as a strategy to frighten and indoctrinate a population. It explicitly questions the way the Catholic Church used the theatricality of exorcism to invoke a relation with the heavens and cultivate power and authority. Harsnett pens the tract as an appeal addressed 'To the seduced *Catholiques* of England' to see through the theatrics of the exorcism (Harsnett in Brownlow: 195). Just as pamphleteers deployed narrative techniques to attribute particular theological purpose to storms, exorcists, according to Harsnett, exploited the theatrics of the exorcism for similar ends. In order to trivialize the practice and undermine its authenticity, Harsnett compares an exorcism to a theatrical performance: 'the Pope, and his spirits he sendeth in here amongst you, do play Almighty God, his sonne, and Saints upon a stage; do make a pageant of the Church, the blessed Sacraments, the rites and ceremonies of religion' (196). In reality, he argues, exorcists are just actors, who have no capacity to actually dialogue with the divine.

Stephen Greenblatt suggests that Harsnett offers a critique of the theatricality of authority and that, in turn, Shakespeare is interested in his use of the theatre as an 'explanatory model' (1988: 106) for demystifying the institutional ruse that was exorcism. On Greenblatt's reading, Harsnett characterizes exorcisms as 'stage plays, most often tragi-comedies, that cunningly conceal their theatrical inauthenticity and hence deprive the spectators of the rational

disenchantment that frames the experience of the play' (106). The 'quality of the ritual or the marks of possession' hardly matters; the most important aspect of the exorcism is its effect upon the spectator (100). By pointing out the theatrics of the exorcism, by demystifying its spectacle for the spectator, Harsnett's work utterly 'demolishes' (112) its authority. But, in an ironic twist, Shakespeare also borrows from Harsnett the idea of the inherent authority of theatricality, by which I mean the power both to move, to affect *and* to get the audience to believe in something: an idea, a person or a hope. In a 'drastic swerve from the sacred to the secular' (Greenblatt 1988: 126), the illusion *as illusion* cannot be further demystified and is therefore enduringly powerful. In other words, while it is possible to disarm the efficacy of a religious ritual that constructs a dialogue with the divine by pointing it out as artifice, the theatre is not pretending to do anything else and thus cannot be undone by demystification on those grounds. As such, Shakespeare appropriates the theatrical authority held by the Catholic Church for the secular theatre, giving the spectacle a quasi-religious authority.¹¹

In many ways, there is no pretence in *King Lear* that the illusion is anything other than that: in 'the play, Edgar's possession is clearly designated a fiction, and the play itself is bound by the institutional signs of fictionality: the wooden walls of the play space, payment for admission, known actors playing the parts, applause, the dances that followed the performance' (Greenblatt, 120). And yet, the story has an extraordinary affective power upon the spectator. For some reason *King Lear* holds the authority to say a lot about the human condition. As I quoted above, the play generates a 'craving for ... satisfaction' of Lear's unburdened death and has been interpreted as saying a lot of serious things about love, ingratitude, death, loyalty, legitimacy, sovereignty, shame and animality – the human condition, in many of its facets. This capacity to *affect* or *move* comes from somewhere. I suggest that the capacity to move is, in part, generated by the authority of the spectacle and the concomitant

¹¹ Obviously Shakespeare's theatre was not entirely secular; I'm also convinced that secularism operates like a theological position anyway. But, more to the point, I make a qualification here via footnote because Shakespeare was writing *King Lear* at the same time the Catholic sympathizers were plotting to blow up the Protestant king, no less. Religion was incredibly important and powerful at that time and the theatre had a role to play in the architecture of a society shaped by religion. So by 'secular theatre' I mean that Shakespeare's plays, *Lear* in particular, are not like morality plays promoting a particular theological position. And certainly beyond their early performances, they have been able to be taken up in a variety of different ways to explore different affective and ideological positions.

egregiousness (in both common 'outstandingly bad' and archaic 'remarkably good' valence) of having Lear run around in a storm aimlessly for two scenes.

Shakespeare's engagement with Harsnett on the question of the authority of theatricality comes to the fore in relation to the use of the storm as a spectacular device. In the *Declaration*, Harsnett makes extensive reference to stormy theatrical effects, likening the theatricality of the exorcism to the task of creating violent weather on stage:

It served wonderous aptly *ad terrorem et stuporem incutiendum populo* [to stir up the people with astonishment and terror]: in steede of thunder and lightning to bring *Jupiter* upon the stage, by these dreadful frightful Exorcismes, thundring, clapping and flashing out the astonishing of Gods names, *Jehovah*, *Tetragrammaton*, *Adonai*, and the rest, to amaze and terrifie the poore people, and to possesse them with an expectation of some huge monster-devil to appeare. Who standing at gaze with trembling and feare, hearing the huge thunder-cracke of adjuration flie abroad, and no devils roare; and then seeing the Exorcist in a rage to throw away his thunder booke behind him, and hunt the devil with his owne holy hands. (287).

There are unmistakable parallels here between Harsnett's critique of exorcism and Shakespeare's construction of the storm in *King Lear*. As the exorcist accrues authority through performing the storm, so too does King Lear or the theatre makers responsible for the spectacle. The storm at the centre of the play serves to 'possesse [*sic.*]' the audience 'with an expectation of some huge monster-devil to appeare'; when it does not the expectation turns back upon Lear and the earthly antics of him and his followers. The key difference between Harsnett and Shakespeare, as Greenblatt is careful to point out, is that there is no explicit critique of the institution of the theatre itself in Harsnett; Harsnett only critiques the Catholic Church. But 'mere' illusion is the purpose of *Lear's* storm; in this regard, the answer to Lear's question, 'What is the cause of thunder?' is arguably: to give the audience a chance to just absorb the spectacle and accept its significance.

Although the storm is not metatheatrical as it is in *The Tempest*, there is metatheatre in the storm: Edgar is in disguise. In a neat definition, Peter Hyland suggests that '[a]ll disguise devices [...] are essentially metadramatic, since they reveal the artifice of performance by putting the disguiser, a conscious performer, into the fictional real world of the play'. But, he adds the

important caveat: 'in any specific play the playwright might have no particular or conscious interest in such metadramatic possibilities' (2013: 93). In some contexts, disguise has a particular purpose. In *Twelfth Night*, for example, Viola disguises herself as Cesario in order to travel. In *King Lear*, the purpose of Edgar's disguise is not straightforward. While ostensibly Edgar is hiding from his father, he does not actually have to hide from Lear. Edgar's fooling Lear as the poor naked wretch is, perhaps, another 'event' in the play, to call back Jones' idea that I referred to in the first section of this chapter; it is something that just happens by virtue of the fact that Edgar was in disguise. Moreover, in Edgar's famous aside to the audience – 'My tears begin to take his part so much / They mar my counterfeiting' (3.6.58–9) – suggests that the intensity of the situation is coming to infect the integrity of his disguise. And, like Edgar, the audience, reader and director are caught in torsion between knowing the 'artifice' of the situation on account of the disguise and grappling with feelings about the reality of Lear's exposure to the storm and of his stripping on account of Poor Tom's nakedness. Although it is a tragic or potentially comic case of mistaken identity, we are nonetheless invited to feel strongly towards it, with Edgar's aside functioning as a licence to invest in and to feel something towards the situation despite the illusion. Theatrically, then, the spectacle of the storm is extraordinarily powerful because we are both invited to see it as a construct by way of Edgar *and* we are brought to feel its full force nonetheless.

It is in this space between authenticity and disguise, the real and the ironic, that this theatrical spectacle is inherently ambiguous. On the one hand, it is possible to try, like Edgar, not to be moved and to maintain ironic distance from Lear's dialogue with Poor Tom because he is speaking to a character in disguise. Lear fundamentally misrecognizes his reality. On the other, there is something about Lear's situation that draws one in: the spectacle of an old man stripping naked in a storm, his impassioned and confounding cries to the heavens and his curiosity about the thunder and Poor Tom's history are compelling. It is hard not to be moved in some way; it is difficult to remain distant. Here is where the question of the authority of the spectacle itself is paramount. The authority of the *sturm und drang* in many cases eclipses the irony of the moment. This spectacle draws its authority not only from being flashy and bright and from confusing thought and activating feeling, but also by implying literal exposure. The implications of Lear's exposure as

a result of the stormy spectacle could trump any critique. It is on this point that Shakespeare seems to have played most cleverly with Harsnett by both harnessing the critique and co-opting the tricks at the same time. It is both a successful exorcism or purgation of affect in the audience (catharsis) and, like *Harsnett's Declaration*, a critique of the ruses of such wanton theatricality.

Conclusion

The ambiguities around the storm exist primarily in the text. In performance, the space of uncertainty can be somewhat closed down by concrete interpretive tools such as costume, light, sound, gesture, set design and vocal intonation. So in the first instance, this chapter's tracing three ambiguities in the storm serves to open up a space to think about the variety of interpretations of the event on the stage across the long history of this play in performance, which occupies the second part of this book.

What is interesting from an ecocritical perspective here is the weather's involvement in both plot and interpretation. On the one hand, the analysis has revealed the extent to which the weather event is embedded within the sociopolitical and psychological crafting of this canonical work. It becomes entangled in the play of human sympathies so central to the drama, it draws on a long historical tradition of philosophizing in the face of meteorological violence and it is using the spectacle in a non-didactic and complex manner to give rise to emotion and complicate interpretation.

The other dimension of the present study that this chapter opens up is one of ideological bias. I am especially curious as to how, despite these three fundamental ambiguities, the weight of the critical uptake of *King Lear* tends to fall on one side of the fence. Regarding shelter, Lear's exposure eclipses all considerations of the violent threats levelled at his daughters. Regarding the storm's significance, there is an overwhelming tendency to make meaning out of the storm, rather than working with and through its uncertainty as a process or event. In the next chapter I explore the moral dynamics of shame and posit some tentative suggestions as to why, despite these wild ambiguities, the bulk of *Lear's* critical tradition displays strong sympathy towards Lear and offers concrete interpretations of the storm.