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Ecocritical Big History

Hans Christian Andersen and Charles Dickens attended the opening night of Charles Kean's 1857 production of *The Tempest* together. Andersen described the spectacle of the opening storm scene in his diary:

During the overture, a storm was heard muttering, the thunder rolled, cries and screams were heard from behind the stage; the entire prelude was thus given while the curtain was still down; and when it was rolled up great waves seemed to be rolling towards the footlights, the whole stage was on a furious sea, a great ship was tossed back and forth ... seamen and passengers tumbled about, there was a death shriek, the masts fell, and then the ship was swallowed up by the sea. (1871: 283)

Dickens later demystified elements of the fantastical experience by describing the craft behind it. Apparently, Andersen recounted, 'the whole ship was made of air-tight linen, which had been puffed out, and from which they ... all at once let out the air' (1871: 283). On one hand, the story of their outing provides evidence of some of the particularities of Victorian theatre, but on the other it is an example of the complex relationship between technology and spectacle implicit in the staging of storms.

In the first instance, then, the discussion of theatrical weather in Part 2 calls for a measured consideration of the relationship between the visual effect, the artifice of which is sometimes but not always hidden, and the particular technologies behind it. Ideally for the purposes of the next four chapters I would have access to similar conversations between equally odd couples for every production of *King Lear* between 1606 and 2016, to provide a good sense of how the storm scenes were created and to what ends in each instance. History was not so kind. Instead, in order to describe the transmutification of the storm scenes across the period, the next four chapters draw on a range

of primary and secondary sources to reconstruct the storms in selected stage productions.

I am not alone in the task of writing grand narrative histories. Indeed, in *The History Manifesto* (2014) Jo Guildi and David Armitage argue for a return to bigger historical narratives for the purposes of knowing the past differently in order to create a more equitable public future in a changing climate. What I aim for in the next four chapters, then, is their ideal of a 'a fusion between the big and the small, the 'micro' and the 'macro', that harnesses the best of archival work on the one hand and big-picture work about issues of common concern on the other' (121). The issue of common concern is that in the global north today we need to find a different way of living with weather extremes in a changing climate. We are becoming aware of how weather events can be used to justify particular political positions. How can the sustained grappling with the relationship between humans and the weather help us to understand that broader project? What does it mean to understand the weather as always having been involved in political debates rather than just a feature of the current environmental crisis?

Weather is a rogue earthly force, which is difficult to predict and impossible to control. Weather materially exceeds the grasp of humans. The same can be said, in a sense, of the weather in *King Lear*: the storm exceeds the grasp of any one character and also disavows Lear's loudly expressed fantasies of control. At the same time, the theatre makers and scholars across the work's history have been able to exert a degree of control over the form and meaning of the storm. Theatre makers can literally practise the fantasy of controlling the weather by building it on the stage; scholars can control interpretations of the relationships between humans and the weather. By way of adaptation, stagecraft and performance style, some of the more muddy, material and mortal dimensions of *King Lear* can, and have been, largely avoided. Thus, to begin this journey across the heath of history, I situate the seeming contradictions of Shakespeare's complex meteorological spectacle in the social and political milieu of London in 1606 and explore the significance of Lear's exposure to the storm in early productions.

That said, the meteorological spectacle on stage only accrues meaning when considered in relation to the story. As Gwilym Jones observed, 'Shakespeare's employment of storm effects [conflates] the poetic and the practical: the

language builds on, complicates and varies the effects' (2015a: 50). I take Jones' point as axiomatic throughout Part 2, with one key caveat: while Jones explores bad weather staged in Shakespeare's lifetime, this section of the book moves well beyond the playwright's death and thus must also acknowledge the textual instability of *King Lear*. As we already know, there are two distinct versions of Shakespeare's *King Lear* – the Quarto (1608) and Folio (1623) – which were traditionally conflated in popular and scholarly editions. Critical to any understanding of the gradually shifting significance of the storm, though, is the knowledge that between 1681 and 1820 Nahum Tate's adaptation, *The History of King Lear*, largely held the stage, and by 1838 Shakespeare's play had been mostly restored. Moreover, all versions and productions of the play were banned between 1810 and 1820 due to the madness of King George III. Given these variables, throughout Part 2 I explore the intersection of the technologies used and the overall aesthetic effect, alongside the particularities of the story being told, in order to characterize how the weather came to signify in a given context.

Although the form and significance of the storm changes, the constant feature of the storm scenes during chapters five and six is that it was always represented on stage as a literal meteorological event and taken by Lear as such. It was neither conceptualized and theatricalized as a psychological or political metaphor, nor was it constructed as a figment of Lear's imagination; it was always a storm. In this regard, the two theatrical questions presented by the play were, first, how to actually construct the spectacle on stage and, second, how to assign Shakespeare's rogue storm a purpose and meaning as such. In other words, any production of the play might be thought as offering a slightly different answer to Lear's question 'what is the cause of thunder?' – specifically, as we have seen in the discussion of Aristotle from chapter two, the 'final cause' or purpose of the literal storm. The question arises even in Tate's version, in which Lear's mad query is cut. We will see, therefore, how the literal or meteorological is given meaning through design, adaptation and interpretation. By the twentieth century, however, interest in literal spectacle dwindled for reasons that will be described below. At the same time, new interest in human interiority converged with experimental design strategies and the storm began to morph into a spectacular psychological metaphor and concomitantly interpreted as such in scholarship. Since the 1960s, however, an

interest in what the storm might signify beyond the individual human comes to the fore again, the details of which will be explored in the final chapter, 'Towards the Flood'.

Part 2 of the book has a dual function. On the surface it practices 'meteorological reading', the method theorised in chapter one. To recap, what distinguishes a meteorological reading from a literal reading is the task of taking into account the historically situated aspect of the storm's symbolism for the characters and audience alongside its implied material presence in the text. In performance there is another dimension to account for as well, which is the way in which the storm is actually constructed on stage. When taken as a whole, however, part two also tracks the changing cultural significance of the weather alongside *King Lear*'s metamorphoses across time. Thus, the ecocritical big history told here both tells a different history of a canonical tale by exploring its climactic more-than-human event and also reveals the ways in which the weather has always had an ideologically or politically charged cultural dimension, albeit in different and ever-changing ways.

The period covered in Part 2 is long: four hundred and ten years. While it is common for Shakespearean performance histories to cover this time span to give an impression of the changing interpretation of the human story and the characters, the focus on the storm alters the conventional 'performance history' agenda somewhat. Here I am interested in how weather is brought into the service of a dramatic tale recognized widely as one of the great meditations on the human condition. What is the storm's role in the production of that fantasy? The various meanings projected onto *Lear*'s storm are, therefore, indices of broader mainstream sentiments about the desired relationship between humans and the weather; which is oftentimes a fantasy of how we would like things to be rather than how they actually are. Rather than constructing a long chapter to theorise precisely what it means to practice 'ecocritical big history' in Shakespearean performance studies, beyond these introductory notes, this section of the book illustrates the genre by practicing it.