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The Spectacular Jacobean Theatre

The Quarto's title page and the Stationers' Register indicate that the first performance of *King Lear* was at Whitehall on St Stephen's night, 26 December 1606.¹ But it is widely accepted that *King Lear* was primarily written for the Globe, and was probably first performed there either just before or soon after the court performance, with Richard Burbage in the title role. Once in repertory, it would have been played at both the Globe and, after the company's acquisition of the second theatre in 1609, at Blackfriars. Without specific information about the staging of *King Lear*'s storm, we have to rely on conjecture about how such a complex spectacle might have looked, sounded and smelled in the company's two major theatres, and then to consider what it might have signified to early audiences within the context of Shakespeare's adaptation of an old and familiar story.

Due to the lack of scenic art and the concomitant descriptions of setting in the dialogue of plays from the period, Elizabethan and Jacobean stagecraft is often characterized as non-representational and contrasted with, for example, Victorian theatre with the proscenium stage, pictorial backdrops and moving set pieces. The received wisdom that Shakespeare's stagecraft was spare underscores a range of anachronistic assumptions about the stormy spectacle in the twentieth century that I will come to revise in the next chapter. Before that, however, I must alter the dominant assumption a little.

In the early seventeenth century, as today, meteorological effects were of a different order of theatre craft to set pieces and backgrounds; they were percussive, pyrotechnical and ephemeral, rather than structural and painterly.

¹ The only other recorded performance of *King Lear* during Shakespeare's lifetime was by a provincial company at Nidderdale in Yorkshire in 1610.

The King's Men likely invested a lot of time, money and labour into their creation. Gwilym Jones has already gone to some lengths to rethink the role of the storm in Shakespeare's theatre and I build on his line of thinking here. Jones argues that although 'little is made of the effect of the storm' by early modern theatre scholars, the 'thunder and lightning in an Elizabethan (and Jacobean) theatre would have been a hugely impressive and noisy affair' (2009: 5). So although the stage might not have been designed as a facsimile copy of the world, the weather was spectacularized for the audience.

There were many different kinds of meteors and multiple techniques for their creation. Effects were produced with a combination of chemicals, fire, wooden objects, mechanical devices and musical instruments.² The most widely used means of creating thunder was a device known as a 'thunder roll' or 'thunder run', which was a cannon ball rolled down a wooden trough. A drum was used to evoke distant rumbles of thunder. Lightning effects were produced with a variety of devices, combined with fireworks and other flammable substances. Sprinkling powdered starch or iron filings over a naked flame, for example, produced dazzling sparkles of light. In some productions calling for supernatural weather spectacles, chemical powders were combined with fire to produce differently coloured smoke. The 'thunderbolt', which was a different meteor altogether, had its own effect. According to Phillip Butterworth, 'thunderbolts were used as a signal or statement from God or heaven to an earthly recipient ... a fizzing, flaming streak of fire delivered at rapid speed'. Pragmatically, the *SWevels* [*sic*], otherwise known as rockets-, fireworks- or squibs-on-lines, was used in the creation of the effect. The 'rocket-on-line', the name of which gives a clear idea of the device itself, is a firework run along a flameproof rope that created a streak of light and sound as it moved. The sound of rain was created by the use of dried balls of starch in a wooden box; depending on how it was handled the device could also create the noise of a low thunder rumble (Butterworth 1998: 42–6, 230). Considering storms in the indoor private theatre, Sturges identifies two other devices specifically used in *The*

² On lighting the Elizabethan and Jacobean stages, see R. B. Graves, *Lighting the Shakespearean Stage, 1567–1642* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009) and P. Butterworth, *Theatre of Fire: Special Effects in Early English and Scottish Theatre* (London: Society for Theatre Research Press, 1998).

Tempest,³ but possibly also co-opted for a slightly different purpose in *Lear*: ‘a sea machine (small pebbles revolved in a drum) and a wind machine (a loose length of canvas turned on a wheel)’ (1987: 81). Whatever the combination, these technologies would have created a multi-sensorial – aural, visual and, to some degree, olfactory – event.

Then there is the question of how these effects related to the structure of the stage. While Andrew Gurr argues that the playhouses are merely ‘convenient accessories to the business of playing’ (1992: 115), the architectural differences between the two playing spaces would have had a significant impact on the appearance of the storm. Situated on the south bank of the Thames in London, the Globe was a large open-air public theatre built by the Lord Chamberlain’s Men. This same company would be selected as the King’s Men soon after James VI of Scotland assumed the throne of England as James I in 1603. The Globe was a public theatre able to accommodate between 1,500 and 3,000 seated in its three-tiered auditorium. The raised, apron stage thrust out into the central pit, where for a penny the ‘groundlings’ would stand to watch the performance.⁴ As with the replica establishment in London today, performances took place in the afternoon and were dependent on natural light and good weather. Although the daylight would have dimmed the pyrotechnics and dulled the thunder run, theatrical weather outdoors was, as Jones points out, open to ‘environmental irony’ (2015b: 9). In other words, when actual weather intervened poorly or well with the action, players likely capitalized on their literal circumstances either for humour or enhanced dramatic effect.

The Blackfriars was effectively the opposite of the Globe: a private, indoor, rectangular auditorium with an estimated capacity of about 700 people, all of them seated, some on stools on the stage itself. In contrast to the daylight of the Globe, the dim oil- and candle-lighting of the indoor theatre and the sensitive acoustics of its cathedral ceilings would have awarded a special intensity to the spectacle of the storm scenes, both enhancing the sounds of the thunder, wind and rain and brightening the effects of the lightning. Moreover, music was a more significant feature of performances in the private

³ On *The Tempest* at Blackfriars, see Sturges, 73–97 and A. Gurr, ‘*The Tempest’s Tempest* at Blackfriars, *Shakespeare Survey 41: Shakespearean Stages and Staging*, S. Wells (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 91–102.

⁴ On theatre-going in the early seventeenth century, see A. Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare’s London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

than the public theatre. In their designated room to the side of the Blackfriars' stage, the musicians, doubling here as sound-effects men, would doubtless have added to the sound of the thunder-roll or thunder-sheet their own music (likely that of strings, woodwind and drums) in order to create the tumult of the storm (Sturges 1987: 82–3).

As well as being a technically complex and durational event in both theatres, it is also probable that such a spectacle was popular with audiences. As Jones points out, 'the Globe and the Rose ... were less than fifty yards apart ... It is therefore quite possible that the audience and the players at the Rose would have been distracted, and intrigued, by the violent sounds coming from nearby' (2015a: 37). While this is a moot point with regard to *King Lear* because the competing venue was empty by the time of the first productions, the idea holds true: spectacular storms were probably used in a variety of ways as a 'marketing' strategy specifically designed to lure audiences away from rival companies. In the prologue to *Every Man in his Humour* (1598), Ben Jonson even expresses a hope that his audience will not demand such cheap and populist tactics:

[The playwright] rather prays you will be pleas'd to see / One such to-day as other plays should be; / Where neither ... / nimble squib is seen, to make afear'd / The gentlewomen, nor roll'd bullet heard / To say, it thunders, nor tempestuous drum / Rumbles, to tell you when the storm doth come; / But deeds, and language. (2000 [1601]: 2)

Like the storm, this prologue is also commercially strategic. In contrasting his own work to an unnamed multitude of 'other plays' that use spectacle in lieu of dialogue and action, he implies he is doing something different and more sophisticated. His use of the modal verb 'should' in the conditional mood of how things 'should be' signals his own position on the matter. Jonson implies that a staged storm detracts from the experience of theatre by anticipating one's emotions and directing an interpretation. Instead, the speaker of the prologue argues that the audience 'should be' satisfied with well-crafted dramatic stories over spectacle and he pleads with them to have better taste.⁵

Although Sturges argues that Shakespeare 'had greater faith in the power of theatrical illusion' than Jonson (1987: 114), I showed in the second chapter

⁵ In arguments with his scenic artist Inigo Jones, Jonson advocated simple staging. See, for example, D. J. Gordon, 'Poet and Architect: The Intellectual Setting of the Quarrel between Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 12 (12) (1949): 152–78.

that *King Lear*'s storm does not actually aim to foreshadow action or frighten 'gentle-women' in any hackneyed manner, but rather plays with conventions in a complex way for particular narrative ends. In the context of the very early productions, then, what kind of story was this noisy and fiery storm event in the service of telling? What politics did it convey? What emotions did it manipulate?

In its earliest performances, the storm was not just a simple meteorological event, but one that defied audience expectations shaped by older, tempest-less versions of the story. As such, I suspect that, despite its textual ambiguities, as a literal event and new addition to *this* particular story told at *this* historical juncture, the primary effect of the storm was to elicit sympathy for King Lear by way of literal exposure and to, however obliquely, stoke support for King James. Although Laurie Shannon has argued convincingly that the dramatization of 'weather on skin' gave rise to Shakespeare's unique meditation on the human-animal divide and presented an idea of 'human *negative* exceptionality' (2013: 132, emphasis in original), building on the argument from the end of chapter three, I assume that in the theatre the nuances of the text's social commentary were secondary to the spectacle of Lear's exposure. So rather than focusing on the nuances of the storm's text, we need to consider how its fiery spectacle might have given rise to sympathy for Lear.

King Lear was a paradoxical allegory of the British political landscape in 1605–6. James Shapiro writes that 1606 was a 'good year for Shakespeare' but an 'awful one for England' (2015: 7). King James was reeling from the foiled attempt to blow up parliament in late 1605 and struggling with the English parliament over the question of whether to unite England and Scotland. James advocated unity; the parliament resisted. Thus *King Lear*, a play about disloyalty and division, was written in a context where concepts of loyalty and unity were paramount. Although James and Lear are opposite figures, in their actions, ages and temperament – Lear divides while James wanted to unite; Lear had ruled for years while at this time James had only held the throne for three; Lear is erratic while James was not – the wrecked kingdom and the tragic ending might have an almost cathartic effect on a people who nearly found themselves kingless a year earlier. In such a context, the spectacle of the storm and of Lear's exposure garners sympathy for a once-sovereign figure plagued by systemic disloyalty and illegitimate claims to power. Throughout the history of the play this will

not always be the case – we will not always sympathize with Lear and his status as legitimate sovereign will be deeply questioned by the end of the twentieth century – but the early incarnations of the play were not radically critical of kingship. To explain this deeply conservative interpretation of the play – which, I might add, utterly contravenes my own personal interpretation of one of the most ambiguous and potentially anti-authoritarian dramatic works in the canon – I return again to look more carefully at Shakespeare's use of Harsnett.

Shakespeare's thorough metabolization of Harsnett, which is key to understanding the storm's capacity to move people to sympathize with Lear, should also be seen as central influence on Shakespeare's adaptation of an old tale to resonate with the political landscape of 1606 as well. In this, the spectacular storm remains the key. Where Harsnett critiqued the theatricality of Catholic exorcism by pointing to the thunderous theatrics as illusory, Shakespeare enacted the same political critique in terms of Catholic illegitimacy *and*, in an extraordinary sleight of hand, co-opted the authority of theatricality by maintaining the illusory storm. So, while Brownlow argued that Shakespeare's storm should be understood in an analogical relation with Harsnett's exorcism – 'Shakespeare ... presents his storm as an exorcism, with King Lear as its interpreter' (Brownlow 1993: 114) – in contrast I show how the relationship between the texts is far more complex. The storm was like an unreconstructed feature of the exorcism. For example, the purpose of Harsnett's critique of Catholic illegitimacy is to unmask the theatrical illusion of exorcism, thereby highlighting the illegitimate nature of the exorcist's dialogue with the heavens. In this regard, Lear might be thought of as the illegitimate exorcist. He attempts to conjure the storm, but his failure is spectacularized for the audience, just as Harsnett demystifies the exorcist's craft for the reader. But, in the context of the tragic story, the fact that the storm does not 'align' with Lear and that his attempted dialogue is unreciprocated does not exact an identical critique upon the old man. Thus Shakespeare is also the exorcist, whose art remains masked, thereby turning Lear into his unwitting victim. With regard to Harsnett, then, Shakespeare co-opts the authority of theatricality, or the power of the spectacle shape our sympathies, at the same time that Lear attempts to commune with a pitiless storm. Which is to say Lear is also in the position of the possessed victim, or the one suffering a cruel and unusual 'exorcism' at the hands of illegitimate powers.

Illegitimate power, which is centralized in and as the Catholic Church in Harsnett, is distributed through *King Lear* in his daughters and Cornwall, but, in particular, embodied in and articulated directly by Edmund, the bastard antagonist. 'Edmunds' is the name of Harsnett's exorcist and Edmund occupies that illegitimate political position in the play. Both 'Edmunds', the antagonist in *Lear* and the exorcist in Harsnett, were characters charged with exploiting others' beliefs in the heavens for their own material gains. In the *Declaration*, Harsnett explores how Edmunds cynically preys upon the beliefs of others to maintain the church's authority. In *Lear*, Edmund directly plays with his father's beliefs in heavenly signs in 1.2. But it is not until the storm that Edmund makes his main power play. Where Edmunds the exorcist uses storms as theatrical tricks, Edmund the bastard's trick during the storm is subterfuge. He takes the opportunity of his father's articulated sympathy with Lear's exposure to the storm to pragmatically move to claim his land. Upon gleaning information about Lear from Gloucester in 3.3, based on trust established during their earlier exchange about the heavens, he reports Lear's plans and his father's sympathies to Cornwall in 3.5. Thus, the storm is treated as a theatrical spectacle akin to exorcism by magnificently co-opting the authority of the exorcism's theatricality in and for the theatre. At the same time, Shakespeare reflects a similar political position to Harsnett criticizing illegitimate figures exploiting the beliefs of others.

The key difference is that Shakespeare has distributed the contemporary politics of the *Declaration* throughout the story, in the setting, protagonist and antagonist, while at the same time using the power of stormy illusion to garner the utmost sympathy for Lear: in terms of the play's resonance with audiences in 1606, the dazzling loud and bright spectacle and the concomitant meditation on loyalty and unity emerging from the Sovereign's literal exposure to a meteorological cataclysm was all that really mattered in the end. In this regard, the sympathy Lear probably garnered from the audience – due to the spectacle of his exposure to the cold night and the pitiless meteorological storm – was central to the way in which the play would have resonated with the contemporary political landscape. My sense is that *although* Lear is appallingly behaved, during the storm an audience would come to realize that he is still worthy of basic human kindness, and a dry and warm house. The spectacle produces bipartisan sympathy: no matter what side of politics you

are on, most would agree that Lear should be sheltered. The message: support the beleaguered king.

A few other contextual details lend support to this interpretation. First, we know that the Master of Revels did not censor the play so, at least in the early productions, any lingering ambiguities did not cause serious offence. Lear was evidently not mistaken for James, and the play was not taken as critical of his rule. Moreover, despite its textual ambiguity, as a theatrical event *King Lear* is not very subtle. Indeed, this genealogy will come to show how productions are *either* spectacularly supportive of authority *or* radically critical of the establishment, just as we might understand *King Lear* as *either* old and requiring support and loyalty; extravagant, hot-tempered and deserving of nothing; *or*, even, appallingly behaved *and yet* still deserving of basic human sympathy. As I mentioned above, the gunpowder plot was just over twelve months before the first known performance of *Lear* for the king at court and so questions of religious affiliation and political loyalty remained paramount. In this regard, it was not a time for Shakespeare and the Company to risk ambiguous messaging with regard to the legitimacy of the king's authority. Also, given that James's two young sons were also the Dukes of Albany and Cornwall, Andrew Gurr argues the play was not only a broad argument for loyalty and supportive of the king's agenda, but also 'a token of support for James's desire to unify his kingdoms' (2002: 51), given the utter chaos that results from their division in the play. After the death of Richard Burbage in 1619, an elegaic poem was written about all his great protagonists, including 'Kind Lear.' According to Jeffrey Kahan, that Lear was perceived as 'Kind' suggests that he successfully played the role in 'the key of victim' (2008: 2).

In other words, in its first fiery and spectacular incarnations at Whitehall, The Globe and Blackfriars, the storm's predominant function was to emphasize Lear's exposure and produce sympathy for the old man. Lear's so-called madness, which is now more frequently considered the primary purpose of the storm, was likely an adjunct dimension of this character that can be viewed variously as a humoural condition, psychological affliction or an affective response to his regret at having banished Cordelia, but it was secondary to the dramatization of the spectacle of his exposure to the elements. Thus, the meteorological storm itself, situated across a landscape that is neither court

nor battlefield, provided a theatrical space that allowed those remaining loyal to Lear to try to recover what was lost in the division and others to act upon the systemic instability to establish new authority. So despite the suite of ambiguities that I identified in the second chapter, there were no radically modern or ambivalent messages delivered to audiences in early productions. The openness of the play text on account of Lear's exposure to the storm, the storm's unclear dramatic function and its spectacular authority to move audiences to feel something are critical to its capacity for future reinterpretations, but these result from subsequent changes to the play's political, social and cosmological context.

That said, given the aim of this section is to chase the storm across history, it is also worth scaling up our thinking about the significance of the spectacle of the storm in the Globe and how that relates to broader historical changes underway at the time. As I showed in chapter one, the play has been read as foreshadowing a number of large-scale historical processes, only nascent in England in 1606: the decline of feudalism, the rise of capitalism, the decline of the religious and the development of the secular worldview. The *King Lear* cosmos is not closed or complete, but rather open and ambiguous. Lear's invocation of ancient gods references the past, to be sure, but the storm's indifference to him can also point to a modern godless universe. Given the play's provisional representation of processes of historical change, in the guise of a story about abdication, inheritance and generational change, the storm's lack of supernatural import invites an interpretation of the play as a radical story about what it *feels* like physically and emotionally to experience a paradigm shift, one of the primary blows to human narcissism, what Derrida after Freud calls the 'cosmological trauma' (2006 [1993]: 121). Lear's changing personal feelings about 'this contentious storm' can be understood symbolically as markers of process of historical change. In 1606 audiences may have also felt they were on the edge of big changes too, especially given the widespread political instability in Britain at the time. Although this argument is only really plausible from the vantage of retrospection, there is a crack in 'nature's moulds' (3.2.8) occurring culturally at the very time Shakespeare's storm refuses to align with any known cosmic order.

Crucially, the crack that occurs to nature's moulds is radically different to the one Lear called for. By refusing to be an obedient entity, the storm

creates a fissure in the architecture of the heavens down to the walls of the Globe theatre itself. In other words, if the stage was a microcosm of the early modern world, then the Globe was the example *par excellence* because, taken as a whole, in name and architecture, it resembled the geocentric cosmos: the heavens were objectified in the roof above the stage and the stage itself represented the earth at the centre. In *Playhouse and Cosmos* Kent van den Berg claims that 'the architecture of the playhouse objectifies in its basic spatial relationships the metaphoric relations of play and reality that Shakespeare establishes in dramatic fiction' (1985: 23). Staged storms literally originated in the 'heavens' of the theatre, with thunder and lightning resonating from the attic room above the actors' heads. Hamlet famously describes how the roof, walls and pillars not only structurally resembled the cosmos, but were also decorated as such: 'This goodly frame the earth / ... / this brave o'erhanging firmament, / this majestic roof fretted with golden fire' (*Ham.* 2.2.300–3). In *King Lear*, Lear does not simply describe the heavens, but rather calls upon them to physically correspond with his power or take pity on his plight. In his famous storm speeches in 3.2 Lear calls upon the theatre itself to become a 'frame' for his actions too: 'Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks' (3.2.1) calls upon the heavens to do his work, to restore his sovereign authority. But tragically, the frame does not shift to align clearly with his new situation, nor does it align with any character's particular belief system. It is as if the story of *King Lear* begins in one world and ends up in a new and unfamiliar cosmos.

At the same time, however, the weather is not entirely evasive and the relation between the actual weather's unpredictability and Lear's non-responsive storm is deeply ironic when considered in relation to performances of the play. On one hand, the fantasy of humans controlling the weather is explicitly dramatized by way of Lear's desperate attempt to commune with the meteors and, at the same time, realized in theatre artists' god-like manipulation and control of the stage environment. In Bacon's utopia, *The New Atlantis* (1627), the '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' are supposedly new modern scientific institutions (2011 [1621]). Although some scientific practice during the period that follows becomes a spectator sport, such as the gory operating 'theatres' of the nineteenth century, meteorologists never managed such a feat. Instead, in the centuries to come, the great houses

for the imitation of the meteors become the live theatres of London where, with chemicals, fire, instruments, flying machines and eventually technologies of gas and electricity, spectacular storms were imitated and demonstrated for audiences.

Conclusion

Contrary to the received idea that the Jacobean theatre was largely symbolic and unspectacular, building on Jones's work, this chapter has shown how the storm would have been a spectacular moment in the performance and theorized what the dazzlingly staged storm might have signified to an early audience. In the next chapter, rather than the Restoration coming to be a period whereby theatre becomes spectacular, the big historical narrative I chart here identifies changing technology, new artistic techniques and evolving architectural styles as a source of innovation on the stage and thus a different kind of meteorological spectacle begins to develop.