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Lear's Head: The Rise of the Psychological Metaphor, 1908–1955

I pause here and rewind this hitherto chronological genealogy to go back to eighteenth-century paintings and drawings of Lear's windswept head. (This is an analogue history; can you feel the duration of time turning back?) King Lear's horizontal hair and impassioned visage was a popular motif in eighteenth-century drawing and painting. In studies of the old king from the 1770s and 1780s by Joshua Reynolds, George Romney, John Mortimer and William Blake, Lear's face and his long white hair occupy the frame. Meanwhile, James Barry incorporated this visual trope into a series of full-scale neoclassical paintings of the play's final scene, the most famous of which is the c. 1777 version 'King Lear Weeping Over the Death of Cordelia' (Figure 7.1). The painting is ostensibly set in prehistoric England, the apocryphal time from which the Lear story emerges, as denoted by lively activities around Stonehenge in the background. The painting also mimics the composition of an image of Christ mourned by followers after being taken down from the cross (Sillars 2006: 91). In the top left-hand corner of the image, clear skies, with clouds haloed by the sun, provide evidence that a storm has passed. Nonetheless, Lear's hair is blown by a wind that does not affect anyone else in the painting. Lear holds his hand to his head and by way of his white hair, wind becomes a visual metaphor for his internal weather. In the context of the Lear story, the painting invokes the meaningful links between the storm and Lear's passions. At the same time, it privileges the interpretation that the storm is in Lear's mind.

The painting is neither an ahistorical representation of the play's final scene nor a misreading of the storm, but a historically situated meditation on

Figure 7.1 James Barry, *King Lear weeping over the dead body of Cordelia* (London, 1786–8). Tate, Purchased 1962; Photograph © Tate, London 2017.

human suffering, using Lear as an archetype. Stuart Sillars breaks down the ‘system of references’ that merge in this image. It offers:

a powerful critical statement about the play, elevating Lear’s grief to that of the classical ideal of the suffering father and intensifying Cordelia’s death by the parallel with the crucifixion while simultaneously denying the power of the resurrection, and forcing us to experience immediately the unnaturalness of the death of the child before the parent in a human, not divine frame. (2006: 91)

In order to represent human suffering Barry separates the storm from its placement in the play to embellish his expression of Lear’s heartbreak.¹ In doing so, Barry produces a metaphor precisely because it is not ‘literally applicable’ (*OED*) or contiguous with Lear’s bodily situation. The symbolism

¹ While this image captures emergence of a tradition of equating the storm with Lear’s individual condition, this image remains in wide circulation today, as one of the images on the *King Lear* Wikipedia page, as the cover image of the booklet for a 2012 conference on ‘Shakespeare and Emotions’ at the University of Western Australia and as a graphic on a smartphone case.

is produced by way of a creative act of magical transference based on likeness and separation.

There is a break between these romantic renderings of Lear's head and the attempt to spectacularize the storm as psychological metaphor on the modern stage. We saw in the last chapter that, throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the storm was constructed on stage as a spectacular meteorological event, and when taken up in interpretations or reviews of the play it was discussed in predominantly literal terms. On stage during this period, there was little need to worry about the complexities and paradoxes of the storm because Tate had heavily edited the cosmological drama that enclosed Shakespeare's version and removed the spectacular contradictions inherent in Lear's quest for shelter. Under Tate, the storm became an event over which legitimate forces triumphed. From the time when Shakespeare's *King Lear* was restored to the stage in 1838, theatre artists genuinely struggled to make sense of a cosmo-meteorological event that was couched in such thoroughly anachronistic terms, which I will explain in more detail below. But at the same time the industrialized Victorian spectacular theatre facilitated the representation of a literalized storm event that had only been imagined in previous centuries. Thus, artists seemingly prioritized spectacle over significance, with the noise of the theatrical mechanisms reportedly drowning out much of the dialogue anyway.

Directors and set designers were faced with a multivalenced problem when staging the storm in the modern theatre. On the one hand, we shall see how they wanted to produce Shakespeare for a range of reasons from quality and difficulty to prestige. On the other, with *King Lear* they had to contend with the dilemma of how to make sense of the anachronism of the storm event. Maynard Mack cautioned us against 'exaggerating the losses' suffered in the translation of Shakespeare to the stages of different periods, but at the same time he points to the storm as something of an exception (2005: 23). In contrast to characterizations of the play as timeless and universal, I showed in chapter one that the storm's timeliness and singularity with regard to Shakespeare's representation of the particular philosophical and political question of the weather's 'final causes' begat the central hermeneutic quandary presented by the storm. The challenge of characterizing the storm's aesthetic and poetic purpose was especially pronounced in the time frame covered in this chapter

wherein the meteors have fallen from grace and, at least for the first half of the twentieth century, seemingly have no cultural significance. So when the weather's decline from omen to atmospheric mechanism is combined with the completely counter-intuitive actions of Lear and Edgar during the storm, the seeming 'loss' of that wider cosmo-meteorological predicament makes these scenes especially difficult to read, dramatize and meaningfully interpret *as such*. That said, rather than viewing the shift to a new context as a loss of former knowledge of ecological entanglements, this chapter presents twentieth-century interpretations of the storm as psychological or political metaphor as historically situated readings of the play, which allow directors, actors and scholars to manage the suite of anachronisms presented by the cosmological drama in the text generally, and enable the play to adapt to the stylistic concerns of the modern theatre.

The same argument sounds slightly different in ecocritical terms. By way of this study of the storm, I argue that the characterization of the storm's meaning in adjunct or discrete and metaphoric relation to the human evidences the broader philosophical and political 'backgrounding' (Plumwood 1993) of the weather itself for much of this period. For Plumwood, backgrounding 'results from the irresolvable conflicts the relationship of domination creates for the master, for he attempts both to make use of the other, organizing, relying on and benefiting from the other's services, and to deny the dependency which this creates' (48). I will argue here that artists in the first half of the twentieth century insisted that the storm service a purely anthropocentric story, thus producing the kind of stormy metaphor we saw in Barry's painting. Even when the storm breaks out of Lear's mind, it does not return to the 'foreground' in literal terms. As such, a straightforward appeal to literalism fails to account for the complexity of the storm in the latter half of the twentieth and early into the twenty-first centuries. In the second half of the chapter, then, I turn to teasing out the return of the non-human presence in the play, concomitant to, but not necessarily in direct dialogue with, a growing awareness of the environment's material role in human affairs. The new meteorological spectacle is neither an attempt to replicate the cosmology of the Globe, nor the technophilic literalism of the Victorians. Instead, the weather starts to become meaningful *as weather* when understood as deeply entangled in the socio-political-affective drama of *King Lear*.

‘Symbolical gestures’ (Max Reinhardt 1908)

The theorist and theatre designer E. Gordon Craig never officially worked on a production of *King Lear*, but his ideas and sketches influenced Max Reinhardt's 1908 production at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin (Styan 1982: 53). Craig outlined his philosophy in ‘The Art of the Theatre: The First Dialogue: an expert and a playgoer conversing’ (1905). The dialogic form enabled him to contrast his new ideas with audience expectations based on old conventions. He used the voice of the ‘playgoer’ to set up the received perspective on the theatre arts and, in contrast, the voice of the ‘stage-director’ to ventriloquize his new philosophy. The director lets the playgoer know that the new:

Art of the Theatre is neither acting nor the place, it is not the scene nor the dance, but it consists of all the elements of which these things are composed: action, which is the very spirit of acting; words, which are the body of the play; line and colour, which are the very heart of a scene; rhythm, which is the very essence of dance. (Craig 2009 [1911]: 73)

Here Craig advocated stripping theatre back to its basic energetic elements in order to rethink and remake the whole dramatic world. His 1920 woodcut (Figure 7.2) of one of *King Lear*'s storm scenes shows human silhouettes in action mirroring a dynamic, abstract storm of lines and shapes; theirs is a dance of formal similarity.

Although Craig actually turned down Reinhardt's offer to design the production and the woodcut of the storm came much later, he created sketches of the play and developed a concept of how the storm might be staged in the early twentieth century. In these sketches the transfer of the storm from a pictorial and literal to a conceptual plane begins to take place in the theatre. In a note on one of his sketches, he explained how his philosophies might inform a staging of the storm:

If we should have no snowstorm [*sic*] visualised, but only the man making his symbolical gestures which would suggest to us a man fighting against the elements ... this would be better ... Following that line of argument in its logical sequence, then, would it not be still more near to art if we had no man, but only movements of some intangible material which could suggest the movements of which the soul of man makes battling against the soul of nature. (Quoted in Innes 1983: 180)

Figure 7.2 Edward Gordon Craig. *The Storm, King Lear* (1920). Wood-engraving on Japon paper, copy 103 of 150. Photograph © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Publication is with the consent of the Edward Gordon Craig Estate.

Craig seeks to eschew not only pictorialism but materiality in order to move towards representing the conflict of immaterial essences of man and nature. As Christopher Innes has pointed out, the key word in Craig's note on the storm was 'intangible.' Innes focuses on the word to underline the fact that Craig never had to actually realize this seemingly impossible vision on stage. Nonetheless, it signals the beginning of a radical rethinking of the confrontation between the body of the actor and the tumult of elements in productions of *King Lear*.

Reinhardt used Craig's theories as a way to making Shakespeare modern, contributing to what Henry Kahane described as Reinhardt's method for reimagining the classics:

The new art of the stage picture did away with the scientifically designed historic restoration in favour of the artist's free vision of past periods, thus shifting the focus from accurate objectivity to a recreation of the spirit of the whole period in question. Reinhardt developed this ... approach with unique virtuosity; it became a hallmark of his style. (1975: 325)

His ambition to renew the theatre makes the German production a more striking object of inquiry than the first English production in the twentieth century (Norman McKinnell 1909). In Reinhardt's work we see a very clear break with the Victorian spectacle, whereas it took a little longer for the shock of the new theatre to have any significant impact on the aesthetics of mainstream British productions of Shakespeare. As J. L. Styan observes, Reinhardt was 'among the first directors to approach the great plays with eyes unclouded by the traditional staging of the Victorian age' (1982: 51). Furthermore, although he was best known as a prolific director of contemporary plays from continental Europe, by Maeterlink, Strindberg and Wedekind, Reinhardt regarded Shakespeare as the greatest playwright of all time, 'an incomparable piece of good luck that has befallen the theatre' (quoted in Styan). Reinhardt saw the revival and redesign of Shakespeare as an important task for the development of modern theatrical institutions (Kahane 1975: 327). Although all artists arguably use Shakespeare to showcase their capacity for creative innovation, this objective has particular potency and difficulty in *King Lear's* translation into the modern theatre. Unlike his British predecessors, rather than competing for the most spectacular meteorological event by combining technologies to mimic the weather in the world, Reinhardt was interested in a qualitatively different kind of stormy spectacle. The move away from meteorological mimicry and towards an abstract storm is not framed as a lack of interest in the weather itself, but rather as a way of making Shakespeare modern.

The main difficulty in working with Craig's philosophies is in actually translating his abstract ideas into a functional design for a conventional dramatic narrative. To take on this task, Reinhardt enlisted Carl Czeschka, a graphic designer most famous for his work at the *Weiner Werkstätte* (Vienna Workshops). Costumes and set dressings used boldly printed black and white textiles, drawing on Czeschka's work as a functional art object designer. For the storm, he used an almost bare stage with an austere unadorned

castle façade made to look like concrete. The production drew upon new technologies such as electric lighting in order to animate the playing space. By the early twentieth century British and European theatre makers had much greater control of light and so the audience were seated in a darkened auditorium with a well-illuminated stage. Despite producing a stage that made no clear reference to any specific historical place or time, *Donner und Blitz* (thunder and lightning) were still created. Lightning was made with flashes of electric light, and thunder may have been created acoustically with sheets of metal rattled, by a recorded sound effect played on a phonograph or by drums. So ultimately, although the design was underpinned by a radical theatrical philosophy that did not aim to reproduce a pictorial storm on stage, the always already abstract meteors undermined the task.²

Nonetheless, when considered in relation to the earlier theatre, this production represents a significant departure from the spectacular pictorial representation of prior performances. Reinhardt's storm expressed the relation between 'man' and 'nature' as one of abstract metaphysical energies, rather than complex conceptual-material entanglements. The desire for the theatrical creation of symbolical gestures placed bodies on stage struggling to make sense of their abstract surrounds, but, at the same time, the stage was only able to gesture toward the symbolic insofar as he never entirely transcended the literal spectacle of the thunder and lightning. Nonetheless, in morphing the spectacle out of the literal and into a realm of ideas, Reinhardt's production began the task of making Shakespeare new and adapting his works to fit the aesthetic and ideological demands of the modern stage.

² One of the only traces of the storm scenes that I have been able to locate is a heavily annotated and somewhat illegible page of Reinhardt's 1908 prompt copy. The dark annotation indicates that a *Donner* sound effect interrupted Lear's first speech in 3.2. The *Donner* is preceded by a *Blitz*, scrawled above it. Another word in that seems to be *Gewitter* (thunderstorm) precedes the start of Scene 2 as well. To its left in red is the word *Sturm* (storm). Unfortunately the archives provide no detailed information regarding the way in which the thunderstorm was generated.

‘Not in itself ... dramatically important’ (Harley Granville-Barker 1940 and George Devine 1955)

In 1940, Harley Granville-Barker came out of retirement to direct a production that played at London's Old Vic. Granville-Barker's direction and design of *King Lear* reflected his reading of the play as expressed over a decade earlier in his *Prefaces to Shakespeare* (1927). Rather than trying, like Reinhardt after Craig, to create a stage picture where the soul of man came into conflict with the soul of nature, Granville-Barker aimed to theatricalize the internal conflict of an individual man. So before looking at his stagecraft, it is worth revisiting his preface to *Lear* not only because it presents an interpretation of the meaning and purpose of the storm that he then translated onto the stage, but also because it is one of the more famous and influential criticisms of the play from the first half of the twentieth century.

Granville-Barker began his preface by debunking Lamb's and Bradley's famous claims that *King Lear* was unstageable. He argued instead that it was not the play, but the way in which it had been staged that gave rise to such claims in the first place (Granville-Barker 1964 [1927]: 260). In an earlier chapter, I explored Lamb's meditation on *King Lear*. The reason he thought it could not be staged was that the stormy spectacle emphasized Lear's physical weakness and distracted our attention from his psychological complexity.³ Granville-Barker argued that because Lamb was writing at a time when pictorial spectacle was the order of the day, it was perfectly understandable that he did not think the play could be staged. The trick, according to Granville-Barker was to stage the play and, in particular, design the storm scenes, to express precisely this magnificent inner turmoil, rather than detracting from it as Lamb complained.

To do this he insisted that the design needed take emphasis away from the storm itself and work instead to represent Lear's interior struggle. The symbolic design, he argued, was not only what he had in mind, but what Shakespeare had in mind too. He insisted that what went 'wrong' with *Lear*

³ Bradley's opinion was similar, but Granville-Barker was more sympathetic to Lamb's point of view. He argued that Bradley's belief that *King Lear* could not be staged was based upon his own academic prejudice, but that Lamb's judgement was simply clouded by his historical context (Granville-Barker 1964 [1927]: 261–4).

in the nineteenth century, and the reason why Lamb could not envisage it on stage, was that the relationship between the text and the stage for which it was originally intended had been forgotten:

In this hardest of tasks – the showing of Lear’s agony, his spiritual death and resurrection – we find Shakespeare relying very naturally upon his strongest weapon ... the weapon of dramatic poetry. He has, truly, few others of any account. In the storm-scenes the shaking of the thunder-sheet will not greatly stir us ... in impressive scenery, he has none. (Granville-Barker 1964 [1927]: 266)

In many ways, Granville-Barker is right. The Victorians did take the pictorial spectacle to a new limit, Shakespeare was quite good at writing dramatic poetry and, in the Globe, Lear was probably on a stage without props or scenery. But, as I argued in chapter five building on the work of Jones, the rich cosmo-meteorology of the early modern period, combined with the multiple tools used create thunder, lightning, wind and rain effects in both the public and private theatres contradicts these claims. Not only was the storm itself a spectacular and important feature in early productions of these scenes, its cultural framing was quite different to the modernist and existentialist sensibilities emerging in the early twentieth century.

Granville-Barker’s claim to authenticity for his symbolic production lends extraordinary authority to his thoroughly modern interpretation of the storm and his conceptual ‘backgrounding’ of the setting. Granville-Barker argued that the scenes were originally designed solely for the purposes of Lear’s self-reflection:

The storm is not in itself ... dramatically important, only its effect upon Lear. How, then, to give it enough magnificence to impress him, yet keep it from rivalling him? Why, by identifying the storm with him, setting the actor to impersonate both Lear and – reflected in Lear – the storm. (1964 [1927]: 266)

Granville-Barker’s reading removes any independently meaningful or functional aspect in the storm, beyond its significance for Lear. Given the potentially contradictory logic of the storm’s own impressiveness but without rivalling Lear, presumably either Lear takes the storm as a sign of his own magnificence or at the very least the audience will. By couching his claims in an educated, but still anachronistic, assumption about spectacle in the early

modern theatre, Granville-Barker instantly gives credibility to his distinctively modern interpretation of the storm.

When Granville-Barker came to direct *King Lear*, the cosmic crisis catalysed by the storm, so central to Shakespeare's version, was no longer relevant. By 1940, meteorology was a militarized, industrialized and instrumentalized science. Meteorologists adopted the task of predicting the weather so that military operations, business activities or everyday lives might be better organized around the variability of the weather.⁴ Rains of bombs were a far more imminent threat than rain itself, with the qualitatively different *Blitz* ('lightning') of the Blitz only one year away from damaging the very theatre that housed this production (Dymkowski 1986: 129). Thus any metaphysical questions about the relationship between the actual meteors and the human were scarcely relevant. The human had totally colonized the stage.

Granville-Barker's staging shifted emphasis away from the external tumult of the storm itself and focussed on spectacularizing Lear's internal cataclysm.⁵ Lear, played by John Gielgud, and the Fool were placed on a virtually black stage, lit only with spotlights. Nothing else was visible on the stage. The storm was evoked quite simply by means of the recorded sound effects of thunder, wind and the occasional flash of light. Granville-Barker was criticized for this move, because the abstraction in staging did not otherwise blend with his use of traditional acting and realistic sound effects (Dymkowski 1986: 183). But, as Dymkowski underlined, the director's point was to create a focus on Lear (181). Those who liked the production saw it as an educated and intelligent version of the play: 'This production is one of the glories of the Shakespearean stage because of [Granville-Barker's] understanding of the text', claimed one reviewer (quoted in Speaight 1973: 136). Gielgud was also seen to have delivered an 'Olympian performance' (quoted in Babula 1981: 135).

The move to redesign the scenes along similarly anthropocentric and metaphoric lines continued in George Devine's second production of *King Lear* in 1955. Unlike Granville-Barker, Devine turned the whole setting into a kind of psychological cosmos to house an intra-human drama. Devine again

⁴ For a sociological study of the professional work of a meteorologist and the cultural application of the modern science of meteorology see G. Fine, *Authors of the Storm: Meteorologists and the Culture of Prediction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

⁵ This section is indebted to Christine Dymkowski, *Harley Granville-Barker: A Preface to Modern Shakespeare* (1986), 180–90, who describes the storm sequence at length.

cast Gielgud as Lear and hired the Japanese-American sculptor and architect Isamu Noguchi to design the set and costumes. In other words, he cast a traditional Shakespearean actor in the title role and employed an experimental designer to construct the stage picture. Devine had a deeply conceptual approach to the dramatic action that he wanted to be reflected in the design. His vision was for:

a permanent surround framing a series of fluid locations which, above all, would enable the play to expand beyond the confines of representational scenery ... costumes free of historical associations ... [and] a symphonic division of the play into three movements.

Noguchi's design consisted in 'the elemental shapes of the universe: egg-forms, triangular caverns, air born prisms, a multifaceted ramp, and other mobile abstract pieces'. During the storm scenes these elemental forms were made to move in time with the action of the play text: 'an ominous group of black shapes [that] dilated and contracted like the iris of an eye according to mood and rhythm' (Wardle 1978: 153). Furthermore, Noguchi's costumes lacked all traditional signifiers of monarchical hierarchy, such as crowns and ceremonial robes. Pictorialism was replaced by simple colour, line and shape geared towards a setting that wholly reflected the character's emotions (Figure 7.3).

The production was not well received, reviewers seeing the strange décor and costumes as distracting.⁶ Gielgud himself regarded the production as a complete failure, blaming Devine for his stranglehold over the artistic vision. According to some reviewers, he reverted to his classical style of acting as soon as the public came in (Wardle 1978: 153). The result, wrote Irving Wardle, was 'a universal poetic setting with orthodox English classical acting going on inside it' (154). Regardless, Granville-Barker and Devine's productions attempted to transfer the storm into a symbolic realm. In Devine the whole dramatic world was a reflection or extension of human emotions given abstract expression. In a different, but related manner, Granville-Barker's representation of the storm as within Lear was a grand spectacularization of his mind. Despite its deep entanglement in the story of *Lear*, in these

⁶ 'Stage is strewn with geometric or symbolic shapes. Fool's face is diamond-patterned. Décor very distracting', J. C. Trewin, *Shakespeare on the English Stage*, in Babula, 138; 'Confusing setting and distracting costumes', Anonymous, *London Times*, in Babula, 138.

Figure 7.3 Isamu Noguchi. Model of King Lear's set (1955) © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum/ARS. Licensed by Viscopy, 2017.

examples the storm is made to express the seemingly transcendental human condition. As such, the storm is not literally applicable to the situation and thus becomes merely metaphoric.⁷ These observations are not entirely new to our knowledge of Shakespeare in performance, but what is important to underline in an explicitly ecocritical performance history is that the concerted attempt to construct the storm as a metaphor for Lear's mind, or the human condition more generally, reflects the modernist backgrounding of nature. In the drive towards abstraction and minimalism, it is the storm, not the human drama, that recedes from view.

⁷ It is worth mentioning that, in a different but related sense, the human body itself was used in the staging of the storm scene in productions of *The Tempest* around that time as well. Robert Atkins's 1934 production, for instance, dramatized the storm by means of a 'large number of ladies [as] impermanent waves ... undulat[ing] with conviction' (quoted in C. Dymkowski, *The Tempest: Shakespeare in Production*, [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000], 75). Atkins again in 1938 and Michael Benthall in 1951 used women dancing to evoke the tumult of the storm. Both these suggest similar movement away from the meteors, towards abstract ideas of tumult and chaos, reflecting discretely human and political concerns. That the human body was also used to represent the storm in *The Tempest* shows how movement away from the pictorial representation of the meteors was not isolated to productions of *King Lear*, but that the particular strategies for turning more fully toward the human differ depending on the story being told.

Although the psychological metaphor is the most straightforward or obvious interpretation of the storm, what this chapter has served to show is that it is a product of a particular time in history and a particular set of aesthetic and philosophical concerns, rather than being the one, authentic and right way of interpreting this baffling moment in the text. In casting this historical light on the psychological metaphor, this chapter hoped to denaturalize it and position it as just one of many interpretations responding to more than just the text. This was a particularly powerful and formative time in Shakespearean stage production, however, and although in the next chapter developments that move the interpretation away from the purely psychological are highlighted, productions that physically constructed the storm as a psychological metaphor laid the interpretative groundwork for a modern Shakespearean performance tradition that endures today.