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Epilogue: The Art of Necessity

R.A. Foakes claimed that '*King Lear* is released from history, and can therefore be seen as an essentially a contemporary play' (1993: 181). Moreover, Maynard Mack asserted that, 'each exploration (of *King Lear*) is an exploration of ourselves' (2005 [1966]: 83). As a Yale Professor, Mack's 'our' presumably refers to the universal class: the dominant, masculine Western humanoid. In other words, *King Lear* is remade in every age in response to *prevailing* cultural concerns of the time. Indeed, Shakespeare remade the ancient Lear story in the early seventeenth century, responding in oblique ways to contemporary political challenges faced by King James I and IV, but he also set square in its centre a storm that invoked both classical debates about the weather's meaning and nascent modern anxieties about its meaninglessness. The play emerged during a period of substantial change in human history; it was always already historically in-between, and nowhere is this more evident than in the storm. The play seems released from history or able to be remade because it has an ambiguous meteorological centrepiece that allows for the projection of both ancient and contemporary concerns. But now our contemporary concern is the ancient question of the storm. As Bill McKibben said '[o]n a stable planet, nature provided a background against which the human drama took place; on the unstable planet we're creating, *the background becomes the highest drama*' (in Martin 2011: 4).

At the time of writing this epilogue, the upper-middle to upper classes living in the cities of developed nations of the global north, the privileged selves that are reflexively explored in main stage productions of *King Lear* in London, New York, Sydney, Berlin and so on, are, in many ways, insulated from the effects of climate change. Coastal or riverfront metropolises, with the immediate exception of Miami,¹ are designing, building and updating

¹ Miami is understood widely as the first major western metropolis to be severely affected by rising sea levels. For media coverage of the issue see Robin McKie 'Miami, the Great World City, is Drowning While the Powers That Be Look Away', with the 'looking away' having interesting or, perhaps, tragic resonances with the shame response outlined in chapter three. Retrieved at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/11/miami-drowning-climate-change-deniers-sea-levels-rising> (accessed 12 May 2016).

seawalls, and levies to make these places resilient in the face of storm surges and sea level rise. New storm water drains are being built in an effort to manage increases in nuisance flooding and keep roads open. Air-conditioned offices cut through the heatwaves, enabling productivity to continue whatever the weather; houses or apartments with central heating systems or decent clothing help insulate from the cold snaps; private cars ferry many people to and from work; it is shelter all the way down – add supplies of Vitamin D available to order online, a rich person never need go outside, feel outside. Within the world of those well accommodated by the system there remains a degree of anxiety about what is yet to come, manifest, as Jarius Grove so eloquently put it, in the ‘apocalyptic tone recently adopted by everything’ (2015). But what is also now clear is that it is people abandoned by or, indeed, banished from the current system, those suffering poverty and the violence of resource and commodity wars that push back against colonialism, those excluded from legal process and detained indefinitely in island prisons, those living in low-lying island nations without the resources or geographical scope to migrate within one’s borders, indeed, those in less well-paid jobs working amid the wealthy as support staff to the middle and upper classes, who are the ones that will suffer the most. After abandoning the masses, ‘we’ are left concerned not really about the gradual rising temperatures, the melting permafrost, the species extinctions and the acidifying oceans but about how all that might incidentally interrupt a morning commute to work, delay a flight, make a holiday to the Great Barrier Reef less picture-perfect, and, in particular, how a storm made extra-strong and unwieldy by virtue of the extra carbon in the atmosphere might be able to cut through the layers of insulation, tear back the seawall, brick wall and raincoat, and invade us all the way to the skin.

The storm, not as proxy for some other theme but as the primary material concern, gives rise to the question and challenge of the earth-bound human response. Thus, the question of Lear for today is not ‘What is the cause of thunder?’ or what is the storm’s meaning and purpose in the world, but Regan’s shocking and seemingly cruel question: ‘What need one?’ (2.2.455). The question seems spectacularly cruel when asked of Lear, especially given the all he gave and the speed with which the rest of it is stripped away, but it needs to be able to be asked of people surrounded by an excess of stuff defending the right to it with strange and unwieldy

arguments moving between denial, indifference, anger, shame: 'O, reason not the need' (2.2.456). Inheritance can be problematic and such is the world we inherit. So, really, what need one knight, one car, one international flight, one holiday home, one solar-powered pool pump, one leaf-blower, one wide-screen television, one more iPad, one electronic pepper grinder, one investment in a fossil fuel company. 'What need one?'

The flipside of Regan's question is, of course, what does one need? While it is easy to moralize about excess, to appeal to one's 'reason', the brute asceticism of the hovel is not exactly the ideal alternative. Once Lear realizes that the storm is neither on his side nor his daughters', his 'wits begin to turn' and he feels cold. Although he will come to ignore Kent and refuse to enter the hovel later in the play, at this point Lear accepts by way of a moment of self-reflection: 'The art of our necessities is strange, / And can make vile things precious. Come; your hovel' (3.2.70–1). Whether he means 'our' in the royal sense of the kingdom or 'our' in the sense of all human beings, that Lear comes to view the hovel as a viable option for shelter is indeed strange. Earlier on the same night, Lear had responded to Regan's question by defending extravagance by arguing that he *needed* an entourage of one hundred knights to embellish his wretched and cheap existence and that he will seek vengeance upon those who try to separate him from what he so deeply needs.

The question of human necessity is at the centre of *King Lear* and the play offers two paths or two dwellings that metonymically represent this dilemma: one path leads to a castle and the other towards a hovel. The castle cannot be the ideal shelter. The question of who has the right to be in the castle is a key dimension of the tragedy, it is excessive, it was exclusionary of all without the divine right, and it is now the proxy of the private suburban mansion, urban penthouse, lifestyle property. The castle is always the symbol for the dwelling that some people can access and that a multitude of others cannot. But, if the play critiques the castle, in either its historical or contemporary form, the hovel does not come to stand in as an ideal alternative mode of dwelling either. The play does not come to glorify the hovel and see within it a great path to an austere and trouble-free future for Lear either. The scene sheltering in the hovel is wretched and sad, Lear's mock-trial a spectacle more shameful and ashamed than his body itself. Thus, the question 'what need one?' and its obverse 'what does one need?' is the question that remains.

There is a long tradition of thinking beyond necessity and arguing for something more than we ostensibly need as a matter of great importance to humans. Lear does it. So does Audre Lorde. In an essay entitled 'Uses of the Erotic,' Lorde argues something akin to Lear before the storm, but with a different political implication, Lear asks his daughters to 'allow not nature more than nature needs' (2.2.448) and permit him to have the entourage of knights. 'Not nature' for Lear is a human exceptionalist claim. Lear seeks to mask his base animality and for his exceptionalism to be on display by way of the knights. For Lorde, 'not nature' is a critical and radical political project. Lorde, argues,

The principle horror of any system ... which defines human need to the exclusion of the psychic and emotional components of that need ... reduces work to a travesty of necessities, a duty by which we earn bread or oblivion for ourselves and those we love. This is tantamount to blinding a painter and then telling her to improve her work, and to enjoy the act of painting. It is not only next to impossible, it is also profoundly cruel. (55)

Desire, an extravagant erotic want beyond that of reproduction, an excessive impulse to claim a life beyond that which is immediately provided, also needs to be understood and valued as necessity.

To take *King Lear* as a fable for our time, then, is not as simple as arguing that those in the West have to reduce themselves to the bare necessities and that those in developing nations cannot desire more than they have. Thus, the line from Lear that seems most resonant in and for the contemporary context is provoked by the storm's failure to respond to his cries and the associated sensation of feeling cold in the storm: 'the art of our necessities is strange' (3.2.70). As an artform, necessity is not a universal and timeless or innate and measurable dimension of the human condition but something contextual, pliable and experimental that can potentially be unfamiliar, foreign or seemingly other. Necessity can be the stranger we might turn away from in shame, or it can invite a mode of being that we open up to due to an enduring interest or change of circumstance. *King Lear* is contemporary again in this time of environment crisis as an authoritative and affective invitation into the ethical question of human necessity, due to the king's contentious exposure to the meteorological storm.