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Introduction: The Case for *King Lear*

The most obvious question to ask about this book is this: how is it possible to focus exclusively on a single theatrical storm? What makes possible such a seemingly narrow subject is the extraordinary scope of both historicist and presentist attentions (O'Dair 2011: 71) that have been paid to this canonical play, and the relatively limited investigations into the storm. Regarding the historicist questions, Shakespeare's is the first known iteration of the ancient Lear story that contains an extended meteorological event. Lear's impassioned cries are registered in Geoffrey of Monmouth's version (c. 1136) and a few flashes of thunder and lightning punctuate the anonymous *King Leir* (1605), but they are no match for the several spectacular scenes played out in the rain in the Bard's adaptation. It is only after Shakespeare that Lear has to contend with the fretful elements for any significant length of time. This version of the story has now been performed, read, criticized and adapted innumerable times since the first known production in 1606. Each production and interpretation attributes meaning to the storm. Which is to say, the storm is represented on stage to highlight certain themes or ideas, while in an essay it might be expediently glossed to justify a specific interpretation. One way of writing a book about a few storm scenes, then, is to explore the *longue durée* of their representation on stage and critical reception and to assess how the meaning of these scenes has changed over time. This task occupies Part Two of the book.

In terms of presentist concerns, *Lear* is also an important canonical text for the ecological turn in literary and performance studies for a range of reasons, from its references to non-human creatures such as wolves and bears (Shannon 2013), an array of plants from official corn to weedy hemlock (Archer, Turley and Thomas 2012) and multiple and contradictory deployments of the word 'nature' (Estok 2011; Egan 2006) to, of course, its climactic storm scenes (Jones 2015; Palfrey 2014; Mentz

2010).¹ Another way of writing a book about one theatrical storm is to develop an interpretation of how this event, at the centre of a story about mortality, family and sovereignty, might be understood in our ecologically vexed present. Part One uses theory and close reading to contribute to this growing body of Shakespearean ecocriticism focused on the storm.

That said, the troubles with writing a book focused exclusively on the storm are manifold. In the first instance the scenes are a blur of maddening dialogue, strange antics and wild weather. An audience will often find it hard to hear the details of the dialogue over the tumult of the staged effects. Moreover, Alexander Leggatt confesses, in his own performance history of the play, that he was 'astonished by how often [his] memory is at odds with the evidence' (15). In other words, all accounts of theatre productions are compromised by either an incomplete archival account, by their complexity, or by an individual's memory of the play. The storm's tumult makes a detailed account of the scenes ever more tricky.

On top of the contingencies of performance, the transhistorical cultural phenomenon that exists under the sign of *King Lear* has two significantly different textual versions, Quarto (1608) and Folio (1623), and it only gets more complex from there. Although the authorship of the revisions is the subject of some debate, Shakespeare is generally credited as author of, or at least some way involved in, these changes (Madelaine 2002: 2). The conflated editions, or versions that contain most of the lines from both early texts, are the work of editors, the first of which was Alexander Pope in 1714. It is not until the late 1970s that scholars started to look at the Quarto and Folio independently again. By the time of the first conflated print edition, Shakespeare's version of *King Lear* had been superseded on stage by Nahum Tate's romantic comedy adaptation in which Lear survives and Edgar and Cordelia get married, *The History of King Lear* (1681). The many different versions of the conflation generally contain all or most of the lines from the

¹ For animals see Shannon; for plants see Elizabeth Jayne Archer, Richard Marggraf Turley and Howard Thomas, 'The Autumn King: Remembering the Land in *King Lear*' *Shakespeare Quarterly* 63 (2012): 518–43. For the multiple uses of the term 'nature' see Simon C. Estok 'Dramatizing Environmental Fear: *King Lear*'s Unpredictable Natural Places and Domestic Spaces' from *Shakespeare and Ecocriticism: Reading Ecophobia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 19–32 and Gabriel Egan 'Supernature and the Weather: *King Lear* and *The Tempest*' from *Green Shakespeare: From Ecopolitics to Ecocriticism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 132–71; for the storm see Steve Mentz's 'Strange Weather in *King Lear*' *Shakespeare* 6 (2010): 139–52, Gwilym Jones' *Shakespeare's Storms* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015) and Simon Palfrey, *Poor Tom: Living King Lear* (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 2014).

two texts, and some even contain elements inherited from Tate. Tate, for instance, situates the storm scenes on a 'heath', which was first transposed into Shakespeare's play in 1709 by Nicholas Rowe (Ogden 1997: 135).² The more authoritative contemporary versions, such as the Arden complete works that I use here, indicate which lines and stage directions are unique to the variant texts, but some less reliable editions fail to note their textual pedigree. All these versions are now in wide circulation in print and online. Moreover, each theatrical production will utilize a slightly different edition of the text, which is then edited in the rehearsal room by the director and actors to suit their own dramatic ends. The scholarly debate about *King Lear* is built upon this textual quagmire. More to the point, the brief sketch of the play's editorial history illustrates how texts, too, are entangled in intergenerational historical processes to such an extent that they almost take on a life of their own. With specific regard to the concerns of this book then, there is not a singular textual source from which to undertake a close reading of the storm.

Another issue regarding the present study's focus on the storm is that *King Lear* is also one of the canon's great humanist texts, representing the tragedy of a sovereign character and, at the same time, exploring cardinal human themes such as kingship, sovereignty, inheritance, territory, obligation, legitimacy, power, mortality and love. Jonathan Dollimore famously argues that, in contrast to criticism that casts it as a Christian or Pagan tale, Shakespeare so deeply rejected a religious tradition in *Lear* that we should consider it a work of 'essentialist humanism' (2004 [1984]: 189). The question of the human, if not the representation of the exceptionalism of the human condition, is a central theme in the play and its extensive scholarly history.³ As such, turning away from focusing on the human drama in order to explore the material dimensions of the storm scenes could be seen to leave the extensive scholarly history of *King Lear*, if not the 'essence' of the play, in its wake. In recognition of this challenge, this book practises an ecocriticism that is suspended between humanist and posthumanist thought, exploring how its canonical representation of the human condition is

² After Ogden, Gwilym Jones's *Shakespeare's Storms* further unfolds the argument against locating the storm in a single setting, because the focus on location distracts from the storm event.

³ Jonathan Dollimore's 'King Lear (c. 1605–1606) and Essentialist Humanism' from *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) is the definitive essay exploring the play's humanist dimensions.

troubled and transformed by the storm.⁴ Although I aim to contribute to the anti-human exceptionalist epistemology currently being developed by ecocritics and environmental humanities scholars, the critique of the human does not push us as fully into the realm of the ‘ecology of self’ in the manner of Robert N. Watson’s essay on *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, for example (2011: 33–56). I am largely looking at the dialogue between Lear and the storm, and the quality of the storm’s eruption or interruption in the story, rather than trying to read into the text intra-active or transcorporeal molecular exchange between weather and bodies.⁵

Given Shakespeare’s version is both the first with a storm and the first with the properly tragic ending, one of the ways I could approach this task is to focus on how the storm shapes the play as tragedy. This path could also be seen to pose problems for ecological thought. As Joseph Meeker famously argues, tragedy is inimical to environmentalism *per se*. He contends that the destructive tendencies of Western civilization are reflected back to us in the tragic mode of storytelling, thereby reifying human alienation from non-human nature. By contrast, for Meeker, comedy is a generic mode in which survival and entanglement is represented. Subtly countering Meeker, Steve Mentz uses *Lear* to suggest that generic differences between comedy and tragedy are neither better nor worse objects for ecocritical reading, but rather ‘resources’ that show a ‘continuum’ of differing attitudes to nature (2011: 168). Even as a tragedy, however, *King Lear* can be a decidedly comic play, if darkly so. The most recent version of *King Lear* in my home city, Sydney, had Lecoq-trained Geoffrey Rush in the title role. It was laugh-out-loud hilarious, until the blinding of Gloucester – at which point the audience were silenced, shamefully caught out laughing in the face of certain

⁴ Posthumanism is a large field of contemporary philosophy and literary theory that extends well beyond its brief invocation here. Suffice to say, it is a philosophical mode that challenges myths of human exceptionalism and opens up ways of non-anthropocentric thinking. For overviews see Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013) and Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). Donna Haraway is also often considered a leading figure of posthumanist thought, although she does not like the term herself, arguing ‘I never wanted to be posthumanist ... because urgent work still needs to be done with reference to those who must inhabit the troubled categories of woman and human’, *When Species Meet*, 16–17.

⁵ I’m quite interested in feminist new materialist theories such as the idea of ‘intra-action’ developed by Karen Barad in *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007) and ‘transcorporeality’ as conceptualized by Stacy Alaimo in *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment and the Material Self* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2010). These ideas complement, contradict and, potentially, build on early modern humoral theory in interesting ways. This book does not take this complex path into rethinking embodiment, although there is scope for such a study.

disaster.⁶ Theorizing how the storm shapes the play as tragedy would also involve arbitrating on whether the tragic or comic dimensions of the play are better for 'the environment', and such conclusions are beside the point of the present study.

The task of the present study is not to discover within the play the most sufficiently moralizing ecological messages to help us combat climate change. Rather, *This Contentious Storm* takes up *how* questions. How are affects and ideas in the play mobilized in relation to the weather? How is the weather used as part of an interpretation, what parts of the play does it emphasize or overlook? How is the weather historical and political and how does that influence interpretation? How do these meanings change over time? In calling the storm 'contentious', as Lear does in 3.4, he recognizes his own predicament and ours: the weather does not have singular or constant meaning, but rather becomes caught up and complicates the geopolitical circumstances, wheresoever the rain doth fall. Echoing Feste's song from *Twelfth Night*, the Fool implores that one 'Must make content with his fortunes fit, / For the rain it raineth every day' (3.2.75–6). If our fortunes are shaped by the rain, we make new meanings based on the particularities of the fortunes we are trying to fit in, around and in response to the rain. How does Lear do this and what does it mean in the context of the story?

One need not dig very deep to find pleas for the accurate communication of meteorological and climatological data for the purposes of bringing 'climate skeptics' over to the other side of the debate. Without even dipping our toes into the extensive body of scholarship that explores the social dimensions of scientific truths,⁷ this book aims to show how, regardless of the state of technological progress, accurate or precise communication about the weather is almost impossible. The weather is a good conversation starter for precisely this reason; even if you and I have both experienced the same hot day in the same city in similar kinds of clothes, there is room for variation about what that meant for us, for our work days, our bodies. We might talk about it for hours because the experiences are not the same. In *Lear*, the storm is both embedded in the particularities of the story and then interpreted for particular social, artistic or political ends. There is no one ultimate meaning

⁶ My own review of this production is published in *Shakespeare Bulletin* 34 (3) (2016): 528–33.

⁷ See, for example, Donna Haraway 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective' *Feminist Studies* 14.3 (Autumn 1988): 575–99 and Bruno Latour 'Why has critique run out of steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern' *Critical Inquiry* 30.2 (Winter 2004): 225–48.

to this storm. The same is arguably true for all storms. Storms always signify multiple things; storms are necessarily overdetermined. So although I do not directly address the discourses around climate science communication in this book, it is in part a look at how the intensity and duration of weather takes up or absorbs meaning based on the kind of human narrative framing the event.

Through a descriptive analysis of historical interpretations and performances of the play, another aim of the book is to cultivate a rich and nuanced understanding of how it is not only now in a changing climate that the weather has held complex sociopolitical meaning, but also to explore how the weather has always been political and that these meanings have changed over time. There are particular elements of the Lear story that interest me in this regard. On the one hand, *King Lear* is a striking example of the ways in which we project fantasies of our selves onto non-human nature. Gloucester is the case in point here; he is constantly trying to fit the sky to his own ideological frame. On the other hand, as well as being about the weather, *King Lear* is also preoccupied with questions of our animal frailty, the finitude of an individual life, the tragedy of our earthly condition and the politics of exposure and shelter. In this regard the storm serves to materially complicate and literally represent, rather than merely symbolize, these themes. More than being a story about ungrateful daughters or a mad king, it is a meditation on the way the sky and the body delimit power. Although all Shakespeare's tragedies end in multiple deaths, *King Lear* is the only tragedy that is specifically about a king so capable he has to grapple with dying itself. The protagonist is not seeking revenge like Hamlet, power like Macbeth, or trying to alleviate the pangs of jealousy like Othello, but rather designing a way to 'Unburdened crawl toward death' (1.1.40). In representing Lear's pursuit of this unlikely and – as I will show in Chapter 3 – illicit objective, the play thus also represents the strange ceremonies, hierarchies, institutions and social conventions we construct in order to feign human transcendence. Come the storm, the weather moderates the relationship between mortal and immortal, between sovereign and outsider, between the sheltered and the exposed, and between established social hierarchies fighting to endure and an altogether different way of being in the world. Despite veering into loftier and more philosophical zones of the play, the overall study is animated by three fairly straightforward key questions. How to undertake a reading of the play that animates the storm as a literal presence in the text and material construct

on stage without forsaking the play's representation of inter-human conflict? Then, if this climactic storm is at all meaningful as a literal event, how then can we account for and respond to the centuries of Shakespearean performance and scholarship in which the storm is valued largely as a vehicle for the play's expression of seemingly immaterial aspects of the human condition? Finally, to what extent does an interpretation of *King Lear*'s human drama change when the storm is considered primarily in material and meteorological terms?

My answers to these questions draw on methods from ecocriticism, environmental humanities and more traditional literary and performance historiography. On the one hand, concepts and questions taken from classical meteorological philosophy, posthuman philosophy, feminist science and technology studies, material ecocriticism and affect theory help to both animate the storm's literal presence in the dramatic world and to conceptualize the characters' material and emotional relation to it. On the other, practices such as close reading and analysis of primary documents like pamphlets, prompt copies and production photographs in concert with contextual knowledge from extant theatre and cultural histories, alongside snippets from the extensive tradition of *Lear* scholarship itself, situate this storm within context of this particular story. Although I maintain an interest in the human conflict represented in the play, the interdisciplinary approach aims to open up ways of moving *Lear* scholarship into the more-than-human critical paradigm, where attentions to the complex and lively field of earthbound agencies and energies are being considered and valued *beside* or *with*, rather than beneath, the human. At the same time, the method of meteorological reading I develop in the first chapter aims to retrospectively involve the storm in extant critical debates born of its role as an iconic work of humanist dramatic literature.

Given so little is stable in the world of the play – the weather, Lear's emotions, the political situation in the kingdom are all a right mess – the structure of the book foregrounds the instability of the text. Instead of launching straight into the performance history, where we see more or less clear interpretations of the storm, I have opted to approach the subject by looking at the particular ways in which the storm is ambiguous. The three chapters of Part One focus on unsettling habits when reading the play. The ecocritical specificity of this section is not to deduce the play's particular ecological message or pin-point the meaning of the storm, but rather to observe the various ways in which the storm complicates the

story. While the storm is chaotic, it is chaos within a particular frame, relating to a particular set of sociopolitical concerns. Working hard to counter a critical tradition that opts to congeal the storm's spatio-temporal becoming into a reified thing with solid meaning – a metaphor for madness, for example – 'Part One: Ecocriticism' explores the storm's ambiguity. Chapter 1, 'Meteorological Reading', builds on the ecocritical manoeuvre to interpret the storm literally, by returning to the rhetorical or poetical dimensions of the storm but by characterizing and historicizing it as metonymy. Chapter 2, 'What is the cause of thunder?', historicizes the ambiguous relationship between the storm and the rest of the action, by probing the metaphysical question of 'final causes' in meteorological natural philosophy and then theorizing the power held in the spectacle of the storm by way of an analysis of Shakespeare's intertextual dialogue with Samuel Harsnett. In Chapter 3, 'Cataclysmic Shame', the specific instability of Lear's emotions is reconsidered in relation to the storm. I specifically address the way in which Lear's kingly obligation to perform immortality gives rise to shame around the body, and how that particular thread of the story climaxes when he disrobes in the storm. These first three chapters aim to show the plasticity of the storm, while at the same time trace the storm's specific role in the overall architecture of the play and the character development of the protagonist.

The final four chapters that constitute 'Part Two: Performance History' offer a chronological romp through the centuries in which Shakespeare's versions of the play have been performed, with a specific focus on how the storm was created and to what end. Although in the critical history of *King Lear* there is some degree of nuance as to what the storm symbolizes, my main focus in these chapters is to track the long emergence of the storm as metaphor for mind that comes to dominate Shakespeare criticism and also explore how that is changing today. I have approached this history through the British performance tradition, stemming from the Globe. Most of my examples are English, with a few exceptions.

There are evidently other ways of telling this story and many productions left out. I offer up this as one way of mapping the big history of *Lear's* storm and, with the conceptual space opened up in the first three chapters, there is great scope for future work teasing out the specificity of Lear's relationship with the storm as it has been represented around the world both in productions of Shakespeare's play and in the various adaptations.