

'Rude Wind': King Lear – canonicity versus physicality *

The titular quotation, 'rude wind', comes from the meeting of Albany and Goneril in Act IV of King Lear. She remarks that she has 'been worth the whistling' (4.2.30).

Registering her iniquity, he adopts her suffluent adage and both inflates and poisons it:

'Oh Goneril, / You are not worth the dust which the rude wind blows in your face.' Wind is associated with rudeness; rudeness in the sense of 'harsh', 'stormy', 'destructive' but also in the sense of 'unmannerly' or, as OED has it, 'offensively or deliberately discourteous' (OED, 4). King Lear's wind, here and elsewhere, is rude in the sense that traditions of low comedy are rude, Bakhtinian billingsgate terms are rude, schoolboy humour, sea-side postcards and fart jokes are rude.

In what follows I propose that we should confront the canonical centrality of Shakespeare's putatively greatest play with an awareness of its physicality, somatology and even scatology. Such an approach seems, at first sight, to be both perverse and iconoclastic but it will reveal a way of exposing the play's insistent materiality and, in so doing, demonstrate the fallacy of readings which champion its metaphysical, philosophical or even theological status. Moreover, a reading that turns its attentions to the waste-fulness of the text may helpfully lead us away from the abstractions of theoretical approaches which, too frequently, sanitise, airbrush or euphemise the

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deprivations which feature so prominently at the heart of this devastating and devastated play.

It would be risking turning King Lear into Carry On Shakespeare to point out that it contains one of the most elemental fart jokes in the whole of Eng. Lit. – ‘Blow winds and crack your cheeks!’ (3.2.1) – but it may well be that such flatulent readings serve, plosively and positively, to complicate what are by now almost jaded assumptions about the play’s transcendent greatness. One small instance: note that in Albany’s contemptuous salutation he speaks of ‘dust’. Chaucer the pilgrim’s tale is as dry as dust and Harry Bailey interrupts him, ‘Thy drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord!’ (7. 930). Drast, meaning ‘shit’, and dust are frequently mixed right up until the nineteenth century and the invention of domestic sewerage systems. As late as 1865, Mr Boffin in Dickens’s Our Mutual Friend is euphemistically collecting dust, that is, the mixture of ashes from fireplaces and horse dung which was used in the manufacture of bricks and road surfaces.¹ Bruce Thomas Boehrer insists that Ben Jonson, as an apprentice bricklayer, ‘would have come into close contact with manure on a regular basis’ and Kent’s violent outburst in King Lear associates plastering with the lavatorial as he threatens to ‘tread this unbolted villain [Oswald] into mortar and daub the wall of a jakes [that is, a toilet] with him’ (2.2.64).² Later in the same scene the Ajax / a jakes pun reappears: ‘None of these rogues and cowards / But Ajax is their fool’ (lines 122-3). Thus not only is Albany’s

¹ Lee Jackson, Dirty Old London (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 11.

² Bruce Thomas Boehrer, The Fury of Men’s Gullets: Ben Jonson and the Digestive Tract (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), p. 154.

‘dust’ probably fecal, but its destination is Goneril’s face. Could it be that behind this throwaway detail lurks the notorious flatulence of The Miller’s Tale – the ‘thunder-dent’ [i.e., thunder clap] fart of Nicholas who lets one fly full into the face of the squeamish Absolon? Shakespeare’s Troilus and Cressida draws its plot and character from Chaucer’s narrative poem, while the prologue of Two Noble Kinsmen pays tribute to ‘Chaucer, of all admired’ (line 13). The source of Shakespeare and Fletcher’s play was The Knight’s Tale; is it such a stretch to imagine Shakespeare reading that of the Miller which immediately follows?

But before ruining King Lear by irreparably associating its magisterial substance with whoopee-cushion puerility, we must first acknowledge its supreme canonical reputation. In Dr Johnson’s opinion, ‘The Tragedy of Lear is deservedly celebrated among the dramas of Shakespeare. There is perhaps no play which keeps the attention so strongly fixed; which so much agitates our passions and interests our curiosity. [...] So powerful is the current of the poet’s imagination that the mind which once ventures within it is hurried irresistibly along.’³ Nearer our own time, for A. C. Bradley, the greatness of King Lear is indisputable:

King Lear has again and again been described as Shakespeare’s greatest work, the best of his plays, the tragedy in which he exhibits most fully his multitudinous powers; and if we

³ Johnson on Shakespeare, edited by R. W. Desai (London: Sangam, 1997), p. 183.

were doomed to lose all his dramas except one, probably the majority of those who know and appreciate him best would pronounce for keeping King Lear.⁴

Published over a century ago, this opinion has enjoyed a long life and has hardened into something of a critical orthodoxy. Even the usually sceptical Jan Kott finds King Lear superior to other plays: ‘King Lear is still recognised as a masterpiece, beside which even Macbeth and Hamlet seem tame and pedestrian. King Lear is compared to Bach’s Mass in B Minor, to Beethoven’s Fifth and Ninth Symphonies, to Wagner’s Parsifal, Michelangelo’s Last Judgement, or Dante’s Purgatory and Inferno.’⁵ The same Dantesque comparison was made by Barbara Everett who insisted on the eminence of the play: King Lear is ‘our greatest tragedy, a Divine Comedy of the modern world.’⁶

Writing in 2004 Marjorie Garber registers this modernity in terms of the apocalypse of 9/11, proposing that the play addresses us from ‘ground-zero – as, in a sense, it has always done’.⁷ And in the same year Richard Wilson trounced the tradition of reading the apocalyptic ending in terms of a Christian deliverance. The deception practised on Gloucester and the king’s extreme suffering function, he argues, to disabuse its audience about ‘the concern of God, working of providence, influence of the planets, power of the Pope, decision of the king of France, or effect of the Armada over the

4 A. C. Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy (London: Penguin, 1991, first published 1904), p. 243.

5 Jan Kott, Shakespeare Our Contemporary (London: Routledge, 1967, first published 1965), p. 100.

6 Barbara Everett, Young Hamlet (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 59.

7 The Facts on File Companion to Shakespeare, edited by William Baker and Kenneth Womack (New York: Infobase, 2012), p. 1184.

cruelties suffered on stage’.⁸ Romantic readings hint at the play’s metaphysical aura while more recent historicist ones suggest the play’s omnipotence in its capacity to challenge systems of belief upon which Western Christendom has been predicated for over two millennia. However, in their albeit various ways, both approaches assume and reinforce the play’s canonical centrality.

What could be more iconoclastic than to attack this play? The mischievously controversial critic, Terence Hawkes, who once told The Guardian that he would rather ‘watch The Bill on TV than go out to see Shakespeare’, knew exactly what he was doing when he attacked the reputation of Shakespeare’s masterpiece.⁹ Almost quarter of a century ago in an interview in The Guardian, he and James Wood (the paper’s chief literary critic) had an argument about the greatness of Shakespeare. They took as their starting point Hawkes’s recently published book on King Lear in which we might have expected him to say something laudatory about Shakespeare – he doesn’t:

JAMES WOOD: Professor Hawkes, in your new book, King Lear (published by Northcote House), you say that there has been much dispute over the years about whether King Lear is a ‘masterpiece’ and the logical extension of your position is that it may very well not be. But wouldn’t you agree that even if we can’t know if Lear is a masterpiece, the fact that we go back to it again and again suggests in itself some value.

TERENCE HAWKES: But I want to know who goes back and in what circumstances ... most people don’t go home and take King Lear off the shelves; they watch TV. What

⁸ Baker and Womack, p. 1187.

directs people back to King Lear by and large is an education system which insists on having English at the core of its humanities programme, and Shakespeare at the core of English.

This exchange typifies Hawkes’s own version of the politics of literature and his scepticism towards the institutions which promote the circulation of High Culture. He insists on the necessity of literature’s political intervention in the status quo: ‘I don’t want to say these texts are great because I want to allow historicism its full play ... I believe in change in societies, and the idea that certain texts are the products of genius freezes change, because it appeals to a notion of transcendent values. I don’t believe in that.’ It is significant that Hawkes attempts to politicise King Lear because, while Hamlet’s reception dwelt on the political corruption of Elsinore and identified the Prince not merely as a revenger but as a political scourge, King Lear was often read as a retreat from politics.¹⁰

Hawkes’s trademark mock-truculence insists on the material conditions of the play’s consumption – in the theatre or the classroom. Underlined by its canonical centrality, King Lear is infused with a kind of cultural capital which precludes, argues Hawkes, any challenge to its continued circulation. In his review of Bruce Thomas Boehrer’s The Fury of Men’s Gullets: Ben Jonson and the Digestive Canal, published in 1998, Hawkes’s concern with the scatological appears to satisfy this demand for a more

⁹ The Guardian, 8 March 1995, p. 10.

¹⁰ R. A. Foakes, Hamlet versus Lear: Cultural Politics and Shakespeare’s Art (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 45.

material analysis although he rightly points out that scatological or carnivalesque readings of canonical drama ‘may be distasteful to a culture which still peers at the Early Modern period through Victorian spectacles.’

Nevertheless, it raises a central issue in respect of the public theatres and their dramatists in a community over which ordure held such sway. London not only stank to high heaven as a result of its enormous problems of waste disposal, but the popular entertainments with which the theatres competed almost made a feature of confronting, involving and to some extent splattering their audience with blood, guts and general filth.¹¹

Hawkes goes on to argue that the separation of theatre, on the one hand, and bear-baiting, on the other, ‘with its savagery, spittle, blood, guts and faeces’ ‘would certainly not have made sense to the average member of an Early Modern audience.’ Indeed, as he notes, such spaces as the Hope doubled as both arenas for bear-baiting and theatrical entertainments. Hawkes is concerned that sanitised, ‘Victorian’ readings of Jonson’s plays too readily gloss over their rude materiality: ‘Jonson’s interest in bodily functions, his unrelenting pursuit of the links between the alimentary and the literary, his preoccupation with eating, evacuation, vomiting and the all-too-human stench that these disseminate are less shortcomings in need of explanation than dimensions of an art whose true contours we still fail accurately to discern.’ Centrally here, Hawkes’s insistence on

¹¹ London Review of Books, 21 May 1998, p. 24. Recently this prevailing view of urban pollution has been taken to task. In Sanitation in Urban Britain, 1560-1700 (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), Leona J. Skelton challenges what she calls the ‘chamber pot in the window’ myth (p. 3). She asserts, contrary to stereotypes of the early modern city as knee-deep in feces, that its population was determined to suppress noxious practices in an effort to combat miasma. Unfortunately, most of the cases she cites illustrate the breach rather than the observance of decontamination and one wonders if her sense of the lived experience of early modern citizenry isn’t a little rose tinted. See my review of this book in the Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences, 72 (2017), 223-5.

scatological materiality outweighs Boehrer’s reliance upon anthropological theory:

‘Boehrer’s recourse to Deleuze and Guattari’s theories of bodily space seems needlessly complicating.’

From its beginnings scatological criticism has been characterised by a wide variety of analytical approaches. For instance, Norbert Elias and David Inglis addressed the development of the modern fecal habitus in sociological terms while Norman O. Brown discussed the excremental vision in terms of psychoanalysis and Mary Douglas dealt with the anthropology of dirt.¹² Rose George’s The Big Necessity: Adventures in the World of Human Waste explores sewage disposal and public hygiene from the point of view of sustainability and environmentalism, an endeavour anticipated during the Second World War by the Quaker and pacifist, Reginald Reynolds.¹³ John G. Bourke described various feculent rituals as long ago as 1891 in his encyclopaedic Scatologic Rites of all Nations (the title of which makes him sound like a shitty version of George Eliot’s Dr Casaubon).¹⁴ In literary studies, of course, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White’s The Politics and Poetics of Transgression read sexual and scatological taboos in

¹² Norbert Elias, The Civilizing Process (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969 and 1982, 2 vols, first published 1939), David Inglis, A Sociological History of Excretory Experience: Defecatory Manners and Toiletry Technologies (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 2000), Norman O. Brown, Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytic Meaning of History (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1959), Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concept of Pollution and Taboo (London: Routledge, 2002, first published 1966).

¹³ Rose George, The Big Necessity: Adventures in the World of Human Waste (London: Portobello, 2008), Reginald Reynolds, Cleanliness and Godliness (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1943).

¹⁴ John G. Bourke, Scatologic Rites of All Nations (Washington, DC: W. H. Lowdermilk, 1891). The title page of the first edition warns ‘Not For General Perusal’.

cultural materialist terms while Gail Kern Paster’s The Body Embarrassed typified the new historicist approach to somatic studies.¹⁵

Recent developments in waste studies are defiantly materialist as a brief survey of the field over the last decade or so will illustrate. Russ Ganim and Jeff Persels are scatology’s new wave pioneers. In 2004 their Fecal Matters in Early Modern Literature and Art argued that while sexuality ‘has long been the darling of academic readers [scatology] still retains the power to make us blush, to provoke shame and embarrassment.’ They go on, the contributors to this volume address ‘unflinchingly [...] the objective reality of the scatological as part and parcel of material culture.’¹⁶ Three years later Valerie Allen’s On Farting: Language and Laughter in the Middle Ages analysed the systems of belief surrounding the complicated exegetic traditions leading to the variety of explanations of involuntary farting as found in the commentaries of Augustine and the classical medicine of Hippocrates and Galen.¹⁷ Anal eruptions testify to post-lapsarian bodily disobedience (which, incidentally, is also the cause of involuntary erections). Sophie Gee’s Making Waste: Leftovers and the Eighteenth-century Imagination examined the underside (or backside) of a period more usually associated with the pioneering optics of Isaac Newton or the lucent architecture of Christopher Wren, both of whom illuminated the Enlightenment. By contrast, Gee dwells rather on

¹⁵ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, The Politics and Poetics of Transgression (London: Methuen, 1986), Gail Kern Paster, The Body Embarrassed: Drama and Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

¹⁶ Fecal Matters in Early Modern Literature and Art, edited by Jeff Persels and Russ Ganim, (Abingdon, Oxon: Ashgate, 2004), p. xiii, my emphasis.

¹⁷ Valerie Allen, On Farting: Language and Laughter in the Middle Ages (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2007).

the period’s ‘waste matter: excrement, snot, sweat, nail clippings, garbage, dead dogs’.¹⁸ Perhaps surprisingly she proposes a literary antecedent in Milton and especially the way he ‘pays scrupulous attention to God’s dregs and discards’.¹⁹ The influence on Pope and Swift is undeniable and the latter certainly serves to ground this excremental vision in the mire of ubiquitous filth: ‘Swift’s is a worldly, temporal vocation, not heavenly and philosophically dense as Milton’s is.’²⁰

Martha Bayliss in Sin and Filth in Medieval Culture: The Devil in the Latrine argued that what, in the modern world, is trivial, embarrassing, taboo or merely a topic of puerile humour was, in the pre- and early modern world, not simply the emblem for but ‘the actual embodiment of the sin that made [...] flesh impure and corrupt.’²¹ As she puts it, ‘Excrement did not just mean sin; in medieval thought, it was sin, the material embodiment of the corporeal corruptibility.’²² Notice the reappearance of that word ‘embodiment’: Bayliss’s criticism is refreshingly materialistic and shares with a lot of recent work on scatology a bracing suspicion of the abstractions and obfuscations of more rarefied literary theories. In this, she follows perhaps the most staunchly materialist of recent writers on scatology, Susan Signe Morrison.

18 Sophie Gee, Making Waste: Leftovers and the Eighteenth-Century Imagination (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 91.

19 Gee, p. 41.

20 Gee, p. 103.

21 Martha Bayliss, Sin and Filth in Medieval Culture: The Devil in the Latrine (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), p. 7.

22 Bayliss, p. 23.

Morrison’s brilliant Excrement in the Late Middle Ages: Sacred Filth and Chaucer’s Fecopoetics exemplifies the ethical dimensions of such an approach. There, she argues that literary theory too frequently dematerialises the body and abstracts the somatogenic inspiration of so much artistic endeavour. Corporeal experience is deodorised and its representation euphemised: ‘material dirt itself demands investigation’.²³ She attacks post-structuralist linguistics, feminism, and especially psychoanalysis all of which have tended to theorise physical processes out of sight (and we might add, smell): ‘The recent critical debate about the history of the body has tended to avoid the topic of excrement. The stench of material flesh can be hidden by theoretical musings.’²⁴ Morrison’s intensely somatic focus allows her to insist on the contiguity of the Middle Ages and the contemporary period. Rather than flush away what modernity condemns as disgusting, we must ‘see ourselves in that threatening, filthy alterity’.²⁵ In this way we ought, metaphorically anyway, to emulate the communal dumping of the medieval citizenry and so engage collectively in popular solid-ification, as it were, of biological democracy. The alternative is selfish individuation and the etiolating fragmentation of the body politic. As Morrison insightfully cautions us, the ‘privatisation of excrement can [only] limit us and harm our planet.’²⁶

23 Susan Signe Morrison, Excrement in the Late Middle Ages: Sacred Filth and Chaucer’s Fecopoetics (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 1.

24 Morrison, Excrement, p. 4.

25 Morrison, Excrement, p. 158.

26 Morrison, Excrement, p. 157.

In 2015 Morrison’s The Literature of Waste was published, the logic of which is accumulative rather than analytic. It is in this amassing of material that the book demonstrates a salient feature that all the above studies share, that is, albeit articulated to differing degrees, a concern with the ubiquitous, indeed ineluctable, materiality of lived experience. For instance, the ninth chapter is deftly entitled, ‘The Secret Life of Objects: The Audacity of Thingness and the Poignancy of Materiality’.²⁷ Here she writes, ‘Dung leaves an ontological deposit, preventing us from seeing ourselves as wholly different.’²⁸

An instance of this material focus can be seen in the work of Holly Dugan for whom Hawkes’s cocktail of the discharges of the Hope Theatre looms large. Dugan’s approach is invigorated by what Morrison terms ‘Thingness’. Of Jonson’s Bartholomew Fair Dugan writes:

the play’s many references to the scent of livestock, pork, leather, tobacco, stale gingerbread, ale, farts, belches, sweat and urine conjure both the material realm of the fair and the stage. Like Smithfield market, the Hope, located to the south on Bankside, had its own uniquely foul stench, connected to that of the surrounding area: the aroma of the pike stews, soap-boiling yards, rose gardens, mud and the flooded polluted ditches of the surrounding area, were combined with the smells of the theatre – its structure [...] and its occupants (the sweat, urine, belches, perfume of the actors, animals and crowd, along

²⁷ Susan Signe Morrison, The Literature of Waste: Material Ecopoetics and Ethical Matter (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 121.

²⁸ Morrison, Literature of Waste, p. 131.

with the apples, oysters, ale and tobacco that they undoubtedly consumed inside). These scents, to name just a few of them, defined the smellscape of the Hope. ²⁹

These features often figure conspicuously in anti-theatrical accounts and descriptions of London and are, Dugan concludes, an important part of the understanding of ‘the material conditions of London’s theatrical entertainments.’ ³⁰ For Bruce Boehrer it is Middleton as well as Jonson who captures vividly ‘early modern London’s rapid urbanization and environmental degradation.’ ³¹ Civic immorality, in Middleton’s work, is symbolised by ordure: ‘Middleton is able to depict the city so successfully as a site of moral turpitude because he also views it as a place of excrement.’ ³² Jonson’s fecal imagination is, in contrast, burdened with urban detritus in shockingly material terms: ‘From a jaundiced perspective [The Devil is an Ass] is the story of London itself, in little: the arrival of new goods, the growth of markets, the increase of desire and frenetic activity, all in the end reduced to sewage: the contents of a close-stool, a shithouse, a prison.’ ³³ While Jonson and Middleton are readily construed in these scatological ways, Shakespeare’s canonical centrality tends to discourage such an approach.

²⁹ Holly Dugan, “‘As Dirty as Smithfield and as stinking every whit’”: The Smell of the Hope Theatre’, in Shakespeare’s Theatres and the Effects of Performance, edited by Farah Karim-Cooper and Tiffany Stern (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 195-213, p. 204, my emphasis.

³⁰ Dugan, p. 213.

³¹ Bruce Boehrer, Environmental Degradation in Jacobean Drama (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 39.

³² Boehrer, Degradation, p. 39.

³³ Boehrer, Degradation, p. 61.

As Prince Hamlet remembers the nobility of his dead father, he notes how the King protected Gertrude from the buffeting air (quite the opposite of Albany and Goneril): ‘so loving to my mother / That he might not betem the winds of heaven / Visit her face too roughly’ (1.2.140-2). Shakespeare’s transcendental canonicity shields his reader, like Gertrude, too frequently from the buffeting of the playwright’s flatulent materiality.³⁴ However King Lear typifies Shakespeare’s contempt for the abstract. Shakespeare is bluntly, most of the time rudely, concrete and it is this concreteness or materiality, especially in terms of physicality (what Bayliss called ‘embodiment’), to which we must now turn.

Shakespeare’s characters are continually validating what they say with what they organically are, habitually equating their speech with their bodies. At the beginning of Richard II, for example, Bolingbroke accuses Mowbray of lying. He threatens literally to make him eat his words: ‘With a foul traitor’s name stuff I thy throat’ (1.1.44) and asserts that ‘what I speak / My body shall make good’ (lines 36-7). At the opening of Macbeth, Duncan seizes upon the body’s genuineness; physicality validates speech. Addressing the Bloody Sergeant, he remarks: ‘So well thy words become thee as thy wounds; / They smack of honour both’ (1.2.44-5). The Bloody Sergeant himself is unable to speak further but his very body calls out for assistance: ‘I cannot tell – / But I am faint; my gashes cry for help’ (lines 42-3). Similarly in his supremely understated incitement to

³⁴ The motif of wind blowing in the face was one Shakespeare also used in Richard II. The King asks Aumerle about Hereford’s departure: ‘what store of parting tears were shed?’ Aumerle responds: ‘Faith, none for me, except the north-east wind, / Which then grew bitterly against our faces, / Awaked the sleeping rheum, and so by chance / Did grace our hollow parting with a tear’ (1.4.5-9).

riot, Mark Antony disclaims his oratorical skills and relocates them in the gaping cuts of the body in front of him:

Show you sweet Caesar’s wounds, poor poor dumb mouths,
And I bid them speak for me. But were I Brutus,
And Brutus Antony, there were an Antony
Would ruffle up your spirits, and put a tongue
In every wound of Caesar, that should move
The stones of Rome to rise and mutiny.

(3.2.225-30, my emphasis)

Previously in the same play, Casca has quite literally vocalised his political aspirations through his destructive dexterity: ‘Speak, hands, for me!’ (3.1.76). Even the lowly Third Citizen in Coriolanus recognises the irresistible rhetorical force of wounds. He asserts that they are unable to deny Coriolanus their voices, ‘for if he show us his wounds and tell us his deeds, we are to put our tongues into those wounds and speak for them’ (2.3.6). Edmund realises the rhetorical importance of the wound. It is as if his false reports may be substantiated by corporeal evidence: ‘Some blood drawn on me would beget opinion / Of my more fierce endeavour’ (2.1.33-4). These wounds testify to dignity and even majesty, publicly displayed and heroic in stature (but note that Edmund’s are fraudulent). In contrast to such ennobling damage, the body in King Lear is tested almost to destruction: gross, stinking, frail and, as it is forced towards ruin, beshitten.

Meeting Lear on the heath, Gloucester requests that he may kiss his sovereign’s hand. Lear responds, ‘Let me wipe it first; it smells of mortality’ (4.6.132). Although in Titus Andronicus we see the aftermath of Lavinia’s rape with her hands lopped off, her tongue cut out and her mouth issuing a fountain of blood, nowhere do we actually witness the procedures of physical torture in progress. Nowhere, that is, with the obscene exception of the blinding of Gloucester. The attention the playwright pays to the physical devastation of Gloucester’s eyes is unique: ‘Out, vile jelly! / Where is thy lustre now?’ (3.7.81-2). With chilling irony Shakespeare has Gloucester foresee his own punishment. As Regan interrogates him as to the reason he has sent the King to Dover, Gloucester replies, ‘Because I would not see / Thy cruel nails pluck out his poor old eyes’ (lines 54-5). It is at this point that the audience starts to flinch as we realise the torturous potential behind Goneril’s earlier ‘Pluck out his eyes!’ (line 5). What William Ian Miller has called the ‘blind world of Lear’ leads directly to a prurient fascination with stink and the reek of corruption: ‘There’s hell, there’s darkness, there is the sulphurous pit, burning, scalding, stench, consumption’ (4.5.125).³⁵ In King Lear’s opening lines the play’s most perfidious character has successfully (but only temporarily) deodorised: of Edmund, Gloucester asks Kent, ‘Do you smell a fault?’ (1.1.15). The incipient stench is there, albeit not yet manifest. As Miller puts it, ‘The blind world of Lear is a world of hopelessness, randomness, moral chaos and despair. Only smell thrives, and that is why the atmosphere is so poisoned and depressingly frightening and filled with utter disgust

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William Ian Miller, The Anatomy of Disgust (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 76.

with life.’³⁶ Like that of Poor Tom, the body in King Lear is ‘grime[d] with filth’ (2.2.172), foetid and fecal.

As Caroline Spurgeon notes, the body is the central image in King Lear, yet it is an agonised body ‘in anguished movement, tugged, wrenched, beaten, pierced, stung, scourged, dislocated, flayed, gashed, scalded, tortured, and finally broken on the rack.’³⁷ Even the usually level-headed Albany threatens to dismember his wife, justifying his violence towards her in terms of his own sanguinary determinism: ‘Were’t my fitness / To let these hands obey my blood, / They are apt enough to dislocate and tear / Thy flesh and bones’ (4.2.64-7). These moments illustrate the centrality of King Lear’s tortured body, the revelation of which the playwright stages most profoundly in Lear’s tearing at his clothes in order to join Poor Tom in his nakedness: ‘thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more than a poor, bare, forked animal’ (3.4.105). David Hillman pronounces King Lear to be ‘the most painfully corporealised play among Shakespeare’s works’ and during the play’s most profound moments in the final scene, Lear attempts again to expose that corporeality: ‘Pray you, undo this button’ (5.3.308).³⁸

There is no need for theoretical abstractions because Shakespeare cites his drama in the physicality of his scripts and the actors speaking them. The drama is concretised in front of us, in the flesh. Alexandra Harris insists on this physical certainty: ‘Through all

³⁶ Miller, p. 76.

³⁷ Caroline Spurgeon, Shakespeare’s Imagery and What it Tells Us (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), p. 339.

the spouting, cracking, spilling, washing in Shakespeare’s plays, the human body proves stubbornly solid.’³⁹ Kent’s role as a messenger intersects with that of Oswald, whom Kent tripped and humiliated only a few days earlier in the presence of the king and his challenge is phrased in suitably carnal terms, ‘Come, I’ll flesh ye’ (2.2.45). Oswald reiterates this reference to human tissue when he describes the situation to Cornwall as ‘the fleshment of this dread exploit’ (line 121). It is as though the challenge has become incarnate.

King Lear illustrates the idea of corporeal verity. Edmund’s realisation of his political aspirations is intimately related to his physical attractiveness to the warring princesses. By choosing to sleep with one or other sister, he is able to fashion his own political advancement:

To both these sisters have I sworn my love;
Each jealous of the other, as the stung
Are of the adder. Which one of them shall I take?
Both? one? or neither?

(5.1. 55-8)

While Edmund’s physical assertiveness and Edgar’s physical privation offer two extremes of somatic politics (one with and one without authority), Lear’s movement from

³⁸ David Hillman, Shakespeare’s Entrails: Belief, Scepticism and the Interior of the Body (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 120.

³⁹ Alexandra Harris, Weatherland: Writers and Artists Under English Skies (London: Thames and Hudson, 2015), p. 112.

the former to the latter demonstrates the play’s prurient obsession with histolysis. Unlike in Hamlet where the flesh is ‘too, too solid’ (1.2.129), locking the Prince’s transcendent spirit within the nutshell prison of Denmark, in King Lear, the flesh is mortified, decaying, rotting.⁴⁰ For Charles Lamb this fleshly disintegration is intensified by the cussed buffeting of Nature, particularly a wind which is both careless and promiscuous:

On the stage we see nothing but corporal infirmities and weakness, the impotence of rage; while we read it, we see not Lear, but we are Lear, – we are in his mind, we are sustained by a grandeur which baffles the malice of daughters and storms; in the aberrations of his reason, we discover a mighty irregular power of reasoning, immethodized from the ordinary purposes of life, but exerting its powers, as the wind blows where it listeth, at will upon the corruptions and abuses of mankind.⁴¹

Stephen Greenblatt talks about the way in which the play, in spite of its several mentions of Jove or Apollo as well as the gods, is actually supremely naturalistic. There are no ghosts or witches as there are in Richard III, Julius Caesar, Hamlet or Macbeth. Cordelia is not a spirit and Lear’s mistaking her for one is a symptom of his insanity. In the words of Greenblatt:

King Lear is haunted by a sense of rituals and beliefs that are no longer efficacious, that have been emptied out. The characters appeal again and again to the pagan gods, but the gods remain utterly silent. Nothing answers to human questions but human voices;

⁴⁰ For a fascinating consideration of Hamlet and claustrophobia, see Ian McEwan’s comic novel, Nutshell (London: Jonathan Cape: 2016).

⁴¹ The Romantics on Shakespeare, edited by Jonathan Bate (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p. 123.

nothing breeds about the heart but human desires; nothing inspires awe or terror but human suffering and human depravity. For all the invocation of the gods in King Lear it is clear that there are no devils.⁴²

Greenblatt is talking about the competing religious positions surrounding the Jacobean cult of exorcism and while important, this is a tangential concern here. However, Greenblatt does insist on the play’s secularism and his term ‘emptied out’ is key for this discussion, because it is clear that in the very first scene of this play, Lear is (intentionally or not) voiding his self, emptying himself out, evacuating himself. The division of the kingdom, together with its parcelling out, is a kind of self-division or fragmentation which drives a wedge between the King’s two bodies. The Fool will later draw attention to this act of splitting by referring to the eggshell and the peascod, both fissured and emptied (1.4.151, 182) and the clefting and voiding of Lear’s reason is similarly figured: ‘Thou hast pared thy wit o’both sides and left nothing i’th’middle’ (line 168).

Lear’s abdication is a kind of political enema, evacuating all monarchical power and it happens so quickly we almost miss it. Lear’s opening line is a command, ‘Attend the lords of France and Burgundy, Gloucester’ (1.1.33). Gloucester’s response is immediate and submissive: ‘I shall, my lord.’ Fewer than one hundred lines later a similar command is issued, ‘Call France. Who stirs? Call Burgundy’ (line 127). The impatient and anxious question, which itself splits Lear’s decree in two, demonstrates the evacuation of his regal self. Within the space of just seven lines, Kent refers to his king

⁴² Stephen Greenblatt, Shakespearian Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England (Berkeley: footnote continued

as ‘Royal Lear’ (line 140) and ‘old man’ (line 147). It is a metamorphosis of alacrity and degradation and it will lead, on the heath, to the violent confrontation of human and elemental.

Lear’s linguistic impotence takes place in public: ‘fie, fie, fie! Pah, pah!’ (4.5.128), ‘kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!’ (line 183), ‘Howl, howl, howl!’ (5.3.256) or ‘Never, never, never, never, never’ (line 307). Paradoxically his moments of greatest eloquence are saved for the wind – rude, persistent and indifferent:

You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks!
You sulph’rous and thought-executing fires,
Vaunt-couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
Singe my white head; and thou all-shaking thunder,
Strike flat the thick rotundity o’th’world!

(3.2.2-7)

The ‘oak-cleaving thunderbolts’ in King Lear are the natural heir / air to Nicholas’s ‘thonder-dent’ fart, the lightning bolt the flash of flame as the fart is combusted by Absolon’s flaming coulter, a flare so bright that it nearly strikes the viewer blind: ‘with the strook he was almoost yblent’.⁴³ Much virtue in that ‘almoost’. In the comic universe of The Miller’s Tale the agony is temporary, unlike Gloucester’s the blindness is

University of California Press, 1988), p. 119.

43

The Riverside Chaucer, edited by Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 76.

short-lived. In the anguished world of Shakespeare’s play, by contrast, there is never relief. Nature, goddess of the wicked Edmund, protracts the agony well beyond breaking point: ‘He hates him / That would upon the rack of this tough world / Stretch him out longer’ (5.3.289-91). Harris underlines the symbiosis between violence in the natural world and that undergone by the protagonist himself: Shakespeare ‘had dared to make no distinction between the storm and the man who experiences it. Lear, as we hear before we see him on the heath, is “minded like the weather”.’⁴⁴ As Ewan Fernie has recently argued of King Lear, ‘Human self and physical world are interpenetrating in Shakespeare’s play.’⁴⁵

The language of the heath is the momentous rhetoric that qualifies King Lear as Shakespeare’s most canonical tragedy – the most significant epic since the Divine Comedy – but this is a momentousness unabashed by cosmic flatulence: ‘Rumble they bellyful’ (3.2.14). Lear’s tempestuous outburst draws attention to the superfluity, the redundancy, the wastefulness of Nature’s destruction. Opposed to the ‘thought-executing fires’ and the ‘oak-cleaving thunderbolts’ is the ‘white head’ of ‘a man / More sinned against than sinning’ (lines 59-60). It is an image of the impotence of humanity against the force not of the supernatural but of the natural – what Lear himself calls ‘the enmity o’th’air’ (2.2.398) – all the more cataclysmic for its ordinariness.

44 Harris, Weatherland, p. 233.

45 Ewan Fernie, Shakespeare for Freedom: Why the Plays Matter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 240.

In its examination of the sufferings of the ‘Poor naked wretches’ (3.4.28) against the ‘pitiless’ (line 29) and rude wind, Shakespeare’s play collapses the distinctions between canonicity and physicality, folding each into the other. In its pervasive exploration of palpable weakness, hunger, waste and shit, the excruciating agony of King Lear demands that its very canonicity be registered in terms of embodiment.