

Abstracts – After *King Lear*

"For I live before his time": *Lear* Now and Then

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The ability of *Lear* to speak to our own time depends upon assumed analogies between "now" (the early twenty-first century) and "then" (the early seventeenth). These two temporal moments, however, are not stable—and neither is the "time" of *Lear*. Despite sophisticated historicist attempts to anchor it in its Jacobean context (see John Kerrigan's *Archipelagic English* [2008], for instance), the play works to dislocate its own temporality, simultaneously projecting itself in a primordial "British" past, adumbrating a non-self-identical present, and predicting a catastrophic future. Reading it requires an historicism of a kind, not a "new" historicism, but instead an historicism that can accommodate a layered and multidirectional temporality. This essay offers some notes towards it.

Men of Stones: *King Lear* and the Politics of Disregard

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Though an artifact from 2017, the viral quotation—"I don't know how to explain to you that you should care for other people"—resurfaced and recirculated in the early months of 2020. This quotation crystallized a frustration with an emerging politics of disregard – the position that one need not care for or take into account the well-being of other people. At the same time, the faux humility of "I don't know how" only barely masks the self-righteous insinuation, "I shouldn't have to." The cruel withholding of care that characterizes the politics of disregard is met by the hypocritical refusal of explanation. Thus, even as this viral quotation articulates our current cultural schisms, it exposes a mutual refusal to act masked insincerely by the language of inability. In those same months, a growing chorus of scholars and critics publicly pondered and promoted the renewed relevance of Shakespeare's plays but of one play above all. This essay is an attempt to come to terms with the pertinence of *King Lear* as a work grappling with the political and aesthetic problems of disregard.

While *Lear*'s revelation ("I have ta'en / Too little care of this.") and Gloucester's exclamation ("Heaven's deal so still!") are bound both by similarities of plot and language and by a critical tradition that understands these moments to represent twinned "social justice awakening[s]," this essay considers these speeches not as variations on a theme but as capsule arguments about the potential of tragedy to override a politics of disregard. Shakespeare, I argue, imagines and manifests a theory of tragedy in which our capacity to feel pity—and to care for other people—is not contingent upon our being manipulated by dramatic form or wrung out by spectacles of pathos. Rather, Shakespeare seems to say, we may simply choose to care.

The Bare Owner: Usufruct, the Body Politic, and Property Law in *King Lear*

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Shakespeare critics have been unable to explain adequately two problems in *King Lear*: (1) the

property transaction by which Lear divides and gives away his kingdom; and (2) who the “real” monarch is as a result of this transaction. This essay resolves both these problems by arguing that the ancient Roman concept of usufruct—which was in circulation in Shakespeare’s England as well as the neighbouring civil law jurisdictions of Scotland and France—maps onto the relationship between the body politic and body natural. Scholars have been thwarted in resolving these issues because they have studied the property transaction through the lens of English common law, when, in fact, ancient Roman civil law not only adheres most closely to the contract Lear makes with his daughters but also resolves problems posed by the phenomenon of the king’s two bodies. As we see literalized in the storm scene when he rips off his clothes and describes man as a “poor, bare, forked animal” (3.4.105-6), Lear is a “bare owner,” the status attributed to a property owner who grants usufruct of his estate to someone else, a usufructuary. As the embodiment of the body politic, Lear retains the “name and all th’addition to a king”, that is, the “title” to the kingdom. However, his body natural gives away the “sway”, “revenue”, and “execution” of the kingdom to his heirs in a transaction that adheres to theories of usufruct as articulated in ancient Roman civil law. Lear’s body politic retains the “abusus” because the body politic cannot give away the kingdom, but his body natural transmits the “usus” and “fructus” to his heirs. Because usufruct creates the appearance of ownership, critics and audiences have mistakenly seen Goneril and Regan as queens rather than usufructuaries, whereas in reality King Lear is a bare owner whose body politic retains the “abusus” of the kingdom throughout the play. Although this paper is rooted in ancient Roman legal concepts, savvy estate planning is essential in our current moment as Boomers are dying off, Gen Xers are taking care of aging parents struck with dementia, and Millennials deplore being less wealthy than their parents and a housing crisis that prevents them from becoming property owners.

Is Man No More than ‘This’?: *King Lear*, Language, Indexicality, and Suffering

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King Lear has long been ennobled as Shakespeare’s quintessential depiction of suffering. Yet the tragedy’s resolutely theatrical and embodied explorations of agony—encapsulated most resonantly by the concluding pietà of Lear holding the dead Cordelia in his arms—have tended to distract scholarship from its distinctly linguistic representations of suffering. Central to those representations are deictics, words like *here*, *now*, and above all *this*. In no other Shakespearean tragedy, in fact, does the word *this* appear with greater frequency. Though they might at first glance appear hopelessly trivial and ordinary, the many *thises* that punctuate *King Lear* give vent to an urgent desire for language to do something other than denote or make truth claims about the world. Pointing in lieu of (or as a means of) denoting, these words are uttered in order to establish a relation between speech and context, between language and environment, when such relations cannot otherwise be established. Against the isolations entailed by the inescapable privacy of suffering, the index functions in *King Lear* as a plea for intersubjectivity. The word’s essentially ostensive action is to establish a frame of coherence—of joint attention—between a speaker, his suffering and his interlocutors. And yet, because the index is devoid of any semantic content of its own, it depends entirely on the uptake of others to have this effect. To attend to the indexicality of suffering in *King Lear*, then, is to come to terms with the essentially tragic nature

of suffering itself, which demands a language that demands others in order to be effective, proper, and right.

Cordelia's Balm

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This essay revisits an important moment in the anonymous 1605 chronicle version of the play, *King Leir*, where Leir dreams that his daughter “Cordella” brings a “boxe of Balsome” to pour into his external knife wounds. Shakespeare transforms the chronicle’s medicinal resin into an actual tree-daughter, who serves as the “balm of [his] age” (1.1.247). This essay uses information about tree varieties known as “balsam” (*Commiphora opobalsamum*) and “balm” in John Gerard’s 1597 *Herball*, John Parkinson’s *Paradisus Terrestris* (1629) and *Theatrum Botanicum* (1640), and other herbal texts to explore the latent tension between Cordelia’s double identity as Lear’s dutiful healer and as the tree that suffers wounding in order to heal others. Drawing on premodern critical race theory, I argue that balm, while appropriated from Africa and New Spain, functions as an imaginary white elixir that solves a host of material conflicts, from poverty and sickness to political conflict. Balm symbolized the selfless, idealized service of white women who produce the white genealogies required of them. The mechanics of harvesting medicinal balsam tree resin, for which the herbs and salves known as “balm” derive their name, were unequivocally circular and Ovidian: specific trees are wounded to attain their resin, which then heals green wounds in human flesh. Cordelia’s greatest limitation to her selfhood is that she must be Lear’s tree, as she willingly accepts this self-sacrificial identity. Her own name proleptically indicates this role: Cordelia (*Lear*) and Cordella (*Leir*) are homologies of “cordial,” which refers to that which is both “pleasant medicine” and “gracious.” Serving as her father’s tree parallels her prescriptive racial responsibilities in both plays, since each play seeks to avoid what would have been considered an interracial union (the Irish King, a Persian sultan, and the “mingled” Burgundy). Denied an identity beyond producing balm for Lear’s r/age and the pressure of white endogamy, Cordelia’s is a gift derived from her pain.

King Lear and The Irony of Play

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In my paper I explore two scenes of Lear’s mad play: in 3.6, when he hallucinates daughters that he then puts on trial while those around him do not play along; and in 4.6, when he often seems to forget his sentences as soon as they are said, claims to be almost omnipotent, and ridicules a blind man loyal to him. Both scenes sound, and are, full of frustrations. But amid the frustration, I argue, therapeutic play takes place. Reading these scenes alongside both play theory and work in dementia care, I consider what Shakespeare suggests about qualities of experience that play can offer and the capacities that it can encourage. From Erasmus onward, theorists of play often assume that play does or at least should exist not only for its inherent enjoyment or intensity, but also, and principally, for the help it gives with recognizing and negotiating ordinary reality, encouraging people to develop abilities that are useful beyond play’s domain. But Shakespeare’s portrayal of Lear finds value elsewhere, in forms of play that entertain, rather than dismiss or diminish, misrecognition, even when delusion and hallucination are involved. Key to my

discussion is a concept first formulated by D.W. Winnicott: that of “potential space,” a “third space” that play creates and that mediates between inner and outer worlds. In Lear’s potential space, I show, opposites converge and seeming impossibilities take place. In 3.6, indulging in restless obsession yields much needed sleep, and in 4.6 Lear ranges through strangeness: forgetting clears the way for helpful memory, while bitter jokes about Gloucester’s brokenness give way to profound feelings of disability gain. Somehow, paranoia itself becomes a source of joy.

Disaster Politics: *King Lear*

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Repeated declarations of emergency and natural disaster make exceptional states all too familiar. But are disasters really “natural”? Are emergencies inevitable? These questions, which feel acute in the twenty-first century, have had a long reach. From the time of the word’s appearance in John Florio’s 1598 English dictionary, “disaster” has provoked a sense of fear, certainly. But it has also elicited a skeptical undercurrent, a sense that disasters are neither “ill starred,” as the word’s etymology suggests, nor “natural” as in our modern formulation. Instead, disasters are arguably the product of human action, as Shakespeare reveals with dramatic effect in *King Lear* (c.1606). The villainous son Edmund mocks his father, the earl of Gloucester, for worrying about recent events, claiming that the “disaster” he decries is his own fault: “This is the excellent foppery of the world, that, when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeit of our own behaviour, we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and stars.” Edmund answers the above questions clearly: disasters are self-made, the product of human folly.

Questions about disasters and emergency power were particularly pressing ones in the years surrounding *King Lear*’s composition and performance, as this SAA paper will seek to explore. Building on some of my earlier work on food anxiety in Shakespeare, and newer work on damaging storms, this paper brings together these concerns through focused attention on *King Lear*. Specifically, I aim to track the relationship of emergency and sovereignty through the storm itself. If the storm might expose problems of royal sovereignty in *King Lear*, it also offers opportunities for alternate forms of sovereign rule. Specifically, minor characters in the play make possible the restoration of community even in the time of emergency. Through dedicated action, characters such as Kent, Edgar and Gloucester help construct the resolution – whether heartbreaking or hopeful – that this play might offer.

Political animals

Maria Sequeira Mendes, *University of Lisbon*

This chapter reexamines *King Lear* by focusing on the theme of flattery, proposing that fawning serves as a strategic form of resistance to authority and presents a contrast to the ineffectiveness of plain, direct speech. This reevaluation offers a new perspective concerning the role of praisers in the play. Section (i) argues that Goneril and Regan interpret Lear’s words not simply as an opportunity for sycophancy, but as their King’s request for them to exhibit political expertise in front of an audience; a request they dutifully obey. The sisters’ critics fail to see that, in offering praise, meaning is significantly shaped by the recipient’s reaction, which is why Lear’s acceptance of their speeches, and the way they match his own, should not be

overlooked. Subsequently, section (ii) re-examines the role of plain speaking and contends that sincerity was not necessarily considered a virtue in the early modern period. Francis Bacon's "Cassandra, sive Parresia," in *De Sapientia Veterum, or The Wisdom of the Ancients* (1609), which argues that unrestrained truth-telling is not always advisable, will help to show that Cordelia's honest-spoken words are imprudent in a courtly setting. Section (iii) also revolves around the perils of truth-telling, questioning whether directness in addressing a King is the best way to proceed. Section (iv) examines the role of the audience in this first act. While flattery is, as critics have noticed, relational, I contend that praise with purpose requires not two, but three elements: the praiser, the praised, and an audience, who might be present or be imagined by those flattering or being flattered. Scenes of flattery are not stable, as the different reactions of those present help to shape and change what is taking place.

Naughty Nights: Anthropocene Storms in *King Lear*

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Literary representations of hostile environments are becoming increasingly topical in the Anthropocene. As survivors of flooding from Nepal to North Carolina to Florida have been painfully learning in recent years, one particularly threatening feature of our new climactic regime comes with an excess of water. The flooded hovel at the center of *King Lear* clarifies the environmental stakes of hostile watery spaces. This paper returns to these familiar scenes, and updates my own earlier writing about them (in "Strange Weather in *King Lear*" *Shakespeare* 6:2 [2010]: 139-52), in order to move from textual analysis to environmental prognosis. These scenes, I propose, do not only present a visceral image of human vulnerability inside unstable Nature. They also begin to articulate a poetics of rough water swimming that may become especially urgent during our own storm-tossed era. The keystone line, as my title suggests, is the Fool's caution to King Lear: "Prithee, nuncle, be contented; 'tis a naughty night to swim in" (3.4.108-09). By treating the "naught" in the Fool's warning as a call-back to Cordelia's destructive nothing in act 1, as well as a call-forward to the overwhelming emptiness of Lear's repeated "never" after Cordelia dies in act 5, I suggest that this warning about the flooded kingdom underlines the play's evacuation of the relationship between humans and the non-human environment. But I also will argue that the practice the Fool suggests Lear should avoid, swimming, becomes, via a few glancing references in other plays (*The Tempest*, *Henry VIII*, *Julius Caesar*) and recent histories of swimming by Karen Eva Carr and Kevin Dawson, a provisional method for survival and locomotion in a hostile environment. By connecting this moment in *King Lear* with the figure Josiah Blackmore calls the "shipwreck swimmer," this paper aims to begin a larger project on the eco-poetics of swimming in the Anthropocene.

Care, Pity, and Justice in *King Lear*

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Readers of *King Lear* have long experienced a tension in the play between pity and justice. As A.C. Bradley remarked of the old king at the play's end, "His sufferings too have been so cruel, and our indignation against those who inflicted them has been so intense, that recollection of the wrong he did to Cordelia, to Kent, and to his realm, has been well-nigh effaced" (231). This

tension resonates with a similar dynamic explored by feminist care ethics. Virginia Held writes that, "Whereas an ethic of justice seeks a fair solution between competing individual interests and rights, an ethic of care sees the interests of carers and cared-for as importantly intertwined rather than as simply competing" (loc. 15). Cordelia's pity in *Lear* derives from her rejection of this ethic of justice. Instead of treating her father like a competing party in a legal suit, asking what treatment her father has earned from her or what cause she might have against him, Cordelia espouses an ethic of care that prioritizes her relationship with her father. In doing so, I argue, Cordelia—and with her the play—resists an ethics predicated on the nascent liberal self, one that privileges autonomy and self-sufficiency, and instead encourages both her father and the audience to confront and embrace human vulnerability and neediness as opportunities to develop community through bonds of care.

Lear's Hidden Curriculum: Leadership, Love, and Service

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"'Tis best to give him way; he leads himself." Cornwall, *Lear* 2.4.293

"The servant-leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead." Robert K. Greenleaf, *The Servant as Leader*, 1970

For over fifty years, education scholars have discussed the notion of the "hidden curriculum" and its adverse effects on students at the K-12 and post-secondary levels. These implicit and often unstated expectations and practices impact both individual access to and success in the classroom and beyond. Further, they convey particular institutional and cultural values characterizing those who "belong" and deserve support (or not) in the educational community. Historically, underserved and low-income students—while bringing many strengths to their college experiences—have struggled to persist and graduate at the same rates in institutional structures not built for their success. However, more recent attention and attendance to these inequities, as well as a focus on fostering more inclusive classrooms and campuses, have spurred important conversations about what it means to serve our students well and what the role of higher ed leaders is in that mission.

This essay poses the question: How does *Lear's* "hidden curriculum" speak to how we may successfully teach and serve our students? My exploration will include a close examination of the play's cultural discourse of service and analysis of scenes illustrating social dissonance around disrupted expectations and misconstrued values. I will discuss *Lear's* instructive potential to define the emotional and institutional contours of "good service," whether to one's subjects or to one's students, both bodies upon which power is leveraged and enacted. What are the obligations and potential benefits of good service? To what extent does serving allow for reciprocity and shared power? And in what ways might servant leadership models in higher education connect with early modern concepts of service?