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Matthew Smith, University of Alabama, USA

# ‘Crack Nature’s Molds’: Reasoned Madness and Evolution in King Lear

## Abstract

King Lear as a product of evolutionary progressions is logical because the play is framed around two ideas of society and generation in direct confrontation. The sociopolitical ramifications of King Lear are clarified when viewed as an evolutionary progression because societal causality is mirrored in nature. The connection between Lear’s madness and nature’s role in determining societal evolution is demonstrated in the evolutionary notion that “everybody is what he typically is because his progenitors were what they were . . . [i]n the molecular structure of the minute germ of him,” (Maudsley 4) and that and social events are connected with the mechanistic march of nature. When Lear bellows “Crack nature’s molds, all germens spill at once,” (3.2.8) he is requesting the impossible, that the laws of causation be terminated and evolution be put on hold.

Keywords: Evolutionary Criticism, reason, philosophy, Shakespeare, King Lear, consilience, evolution, mechanism, madness, nature

Crack critical molds, all germens spill at once that make an ungrateful reading! Reason, and its counterpart madness, is the manifestation of a larger sociopolitical crisis. The heath scenes in King Lear serve as a juncture between madness and reason and highlight the crucial cultural consequences. Jan Kott’s grotesque and absurd contrasts A.C. Bradley’s redemptive readings, and Paul Delany’s Marxist readings are used alongside John Danby’s notion of two natures. These disparate critical approaches are unified under evolutionary critical theory in an attempt to account for each component of the play and its function in dramatic and social evolution. Reading the play as a product of evolutionary progressions is logical because the play is framed around “two ideas

of society in direct confrontation . . . the old generation and the new generation are set face to face, each assured of its own right to power" (Muir 21). When Lear bellows, "Crack nature's molds, all germens spill at once" he is requesting the impossible, that the laws of causation be terminated and evolution be put on hold (3.2.8). This confusion is the locus of Lear's madness: that he is of highest value in an already blind mechanistic universe![1] Reasoned madness challenges normative social behavior and is a necessary component in Lear's evolution from a royal with absolute claim to knowledge and power to an 'expression of unwelcome individuality.'

This paper seeks to demonstrate the complexity of madness in light of its components, namely societal pressure, age, and not least of all – genuine insanity. The degree to which Lear is capable of divesting himself of hubris and the trappings of kingship is examined. This examination highlights that Lear's miscalculation concerning the value of human life is mutually inclusive with social evolution![2] Madness, and by extension reason, is illustrated in crucial elements within the play: its relation to power, social structure, generational conflict and filial bond; all of which are framed within a society enduring the ravages of social evolution. Brian Boyd points out that "a reading informed by evolution will be more primed than others today to attend to the complexities and ambivalences of our readiness for hierarchy . . . and the interplay of our sense of autonomy and reciprocity and fairness," which underlines the centrality of social hierarchy and man's sense of fairness or justice in an evolving world (132).

Danby asserts that King Lear rests in a liminal stage between two competing forms of nature and reason, which implies a sociocultural evolution where "pelican" youth feed on the elderly. Therefore, reason is an instrument that charts each character's navigation of this bleak landscape and his or her attempt to endure the maelstrom of social transformation. Paul Delany continues this thread by arguing that "what are symptoms of decline for one class may be portents of liberation and fresh opportunity for another" (429). Jan Kott asserts that the play is a grotesque form of tragedy wherein, "Nature was the absolute, man was unnatural . . . in the world of the grotesque, downfall cannot be justified by, or blamed on, the absolute. The absolute is not endowed with any ultimate reasons; it is stronger, and that is all" (108). Joseph Carroll offers an alternative that connects these disparate positions together by asserting that,

*[T]he culturally specific religious and sociopolitical conditions in King Lear limit the forms of value and belief possible . . . they can envision more equitable distributions of material goods . . . but they cannot envision a teleological historical progression concluding in the triumph of the proletariat. ("An Evolutionary Paradigm for Literary Study" 87)*

What Carroll suggests is a synthesis of the intriguing elements of Danby, Kott, and Delany without falling into Presentist fallacy by assuming the play conforms to modern discourses. Carroll posits that "within the framework of evolutionary theory, life is a mechanical and blindly developing process" and that "this simple causal sequence entails no cosmic purpose . . . if people wish to justify ethical values, they can look for justification only within a purely human context" ("An Evolutionary Paradigm for Literary Study" 84). Humanist ideology is crucial to the play and it also serves to correct the incongruity prevalent in studies on King Lear.

Unprejudiced critics can increase objective rigor by distancing themselves from a single ideological, societal, theoretical or religious preconception This bracketing is achieved by assuming that the elements of King Lear are centered, not on Bradley's divine harmony, Kott's grotesque existentialism or Danby's capitalist coup, but that those elements compete in a play that cannot be delimited by monolithic hermeneutic strategies. On the contrary, it is clear that the cold humanism of Danby's Edmund is necessary in evolving past Lear's feudal structure, and from the rubble of Kott's assertion that "social order, from the kingdom to the family, will crumble to dust" will emerge a newly evolved society able to survive the grotesque by "hold[ing] up to ridicule what seems obvious common sense, and discover truth in the absurd" (Kott 121, 132). Delany shows that "Shakespeare apprehends the crisis of the aristocracy in his time and the decline of feudal-heroic values" and because the author is "unable to reconcile himself with the emerging bourgeois forces, he either associates their pre-dominance with the tragic decay of the old order or else opposes to them a mystical countervailing force" (439). Delany's tone of derision is important because it contrasts the all-too-common "sense of the helplessness of humanity pitted against higher powers" (Granville-Barker 80).

## The Reader's Response to Tragedy

The incandescent critic ought to shine through "shadows cast by the readings of Bradley and Knight, under whose gaze King Lear's complexities resolved themselves into a reassuring fable of providential suffering and sublime redemption" (Armstrong and Hans-Werner 29). The difficulty of King Lear is twofold: it is "Shakespeare's greatest achievement, but . . . not his greatest play" (Bradley 201) and it "gives one the impression of a high mountain that everyone admires but not one particularly wishes to climb," (Kott 100) which can be atomized to Charles Lamb's frustration that "it is too hard and stony; it must have love-scenes and a happy ending" (5). These nuisances revolve around the audience's preoccupation with justice: the notion that "Shakespeare has deliberately made us feel that justice has not been done, that the sufferings inflicted have been too great for human beings to bear" (Donner 510) or Johnson's unequivocal complaint that "Shakespeare has suffered the virtue of Cordelia to perish in a just cause, contrary to the natural ideas of justice, to the hope of the reader" (425). Schlegel, however, suggests that "after so many sufferings, Lear can only die" and that "even the virtue of the honest Kent bears the stamp of an iron age, in which the good and bad display the same uncontrollable energy" (36).

Schlegel connects two crucial elements: 1) a reader's criticism of the play's theodicy is wholly erroneous and misses the point of the tragedy which is that, 2) the play demonstrates the elements needed to evolve from fallow to fecund on both a sociopolitical level – to which Delany gestures – and a psychosocial level – which Danby and Kott propose. Lear's universe has no cosmic purpose – therefore no theodicy that disappoints Bradleyians – rather, it is mechanical evolution necessitated by purely naturalistic means. Because the play depicts "not ancient Britons, but humanity, not England, but the world," its scope is meant to be tremendous; it seeks to question the possibility of sociopolitical evolution not merely an isolated instance of filial discord (Knight 202). Kott makes this point when he states that "in Lear there is no young and resolute Fortinbras to ascend the throne . . . no cool-headed Octavius" and "those that survived are, as Lear has been, just 'ruin'd pieces of nature'" (126). So Johnson's notion that the play lacks true justice, and Bradley's notion that the "business of 'the gods' with [Lear] was neither to torment him, nor to teach him a 'noble anger,' but to lead him to attain through apparently hopeless failure the very end and

aim of life" (235) is contrasted directly against Kott's view that "history becomes a protagonist, tragic in its meaninglessness" and that "there is no moral order" (31) but only the conclusion that "fate is represented by the class struggle" (147). While these works highlight indisputable elements within the play, both critics mistake a part for the whole. They assume a theodicy where there is none, so that moralizing King Lear is as imprecise as deeming it absurd. Therefore, one can blend Kott's absurd, Delany's decline of feudalism and Danby's new Hobbesian man into one cogent harmonious whole. The evolutionary approach seeks to combine these sundry components into a congruous system wherein Danby's 'new man' and Delany's decline are not absurd, grotesque, or moralistic events, but spontaneous natural events that are a part of a social, political and intellectual evolution. These elements are causes – they are necessary but not sufficient conditions – by which the effect, evolution, must take place. A new man and new social structure would not have been possible without tragedy. Cordelia's death is understood as necessary when one takes into account that "the cost of evolution is very high: to generate the few survivors with advantageous traits, many organisms must die . . . to make this method viable" (Holliday 104). According to a rough Hegelian dialectic, Lear (the 'good party') is the thesis, Edmund (the 'evil party') the antithesis, and the new society and new man are the syntheses. This model has been used to question which party would rise from the rubble of the tragedy, with critics claiming Edmund, Kent, Cordelia or Oswald as the emblem of such an age. This dilemma, like the previously discussed dilemmas, stems from an unnecessary bifurcation. It does not have to be either good versus evil, Baconian versus Hobbesian, or Edmund versus Edgar, but the evolutionary approach will demonstrate that it is, rather, a synthesis of all components.

The discerning critic can avoid restrictive '–isms' with an awareness that "during the 1980s all four approaches, political/nihilistic, deconstructive, revisionary and feminist, whatever their differences, have contributed to a redefining of the nature and status of King Lear" (Ioppolo 60). The notion of a nascent social order in Lear is clear, but the argument concerning which character serves as an emblem for the new order is much contested. Kott argues that "only the Fool stands outside . . . and does not follow any ideology. He rejects all appearances, of law, justice, moral order," which infers that the Fool's acceptance of irrationality testifies to his heightened sense of reality (132). Bradley argues that Lear's "purgatorial experiences culminat[ing] in reconciliation," make the play

'The Redemption of King Lear' (249). John Danby maintains that through "a combination of gentleness and toughness . . . Cordelia expresses the utopian intention of Shakespeare's art," which implies that Lear represents the disintegrating feudal state, Edmund the nascent Machiavellian state, and Cordelia represents the norm by which the "wrongness of both states are judged" (125). Paul Delany offers a more precise reading, saying "Edmund embodies no hope of the future, but only the most destructive aspects of the new era of bourgeois transformation . . . though Lear has let the garden of England go to seed, it is clear that [Edmund] has no interest in restoring it to its proper condition" (437). Richard Halpern, on the other hand, says that the "play collapses back into feudalism" and because of this, "the strongest challenge to feudal values does not come from Edmund, who hates the current order; it comes from Oswald, who loves it in such a way to debase it terminally" (243-44). Joseph Carroll shows that 'ripeness is all' by claiming that no single character prevails, but that enduring a "world gone mad" is possible through "sanity, decency and charity" ("An Evolutionary Paradigm for Literary Study" 100). Some critics posit that Edgar represents what Shakespeare would deem 'the new man,' but Edgar is merely the catalyst by which the young and old are synthesized. Edgar dispenses nature's justice, saying "the gods are just," (5.3.171) and he serves as "noble philosopher" (3.4.143) to Lear and advisor to Gloucester, saying "Men must endure / Their going hence even as their coming hither" (5.2.9-10). Edgar is a guide and a proponent of solidarity and cooperation but his anodyne demeanor lacks the charisma necessary to spark revolution. Edmund works from the other end of the spectrum; he yields the vigor but lacks the indispensable understanding of cooperation. Knight recognizes that Edmund "repudiates and rejects custom, civilization," and similar to Danby's Edmund, "he obeys nature's law of selfishness, he does not understand that it is in the nature of man to be unselfish, to love and serve his community . . . he thinks he has the power to carve for himself, as a solitary unity" (Knight 211). These characters are emblems of an inchoate dialogue concerning the true role of man in this world, a discourse drifting away from the body politic under absolute monarchy and towards a more humanist proto-republicanism, a political crisis highlighted by Lear's internal agon. King Lear's purpose was not to tackle such issues but to enter the dialogue; it was – in keeping with the utopian tradition – a thought-experiment with theoretical implications.

## King Lear and the Utopian Rehearsal

If Shakespeare means for these characters to be read as archetypes, the play overcomes the tragically grotesque – the absurd – and it underscores the view that King Lear is a microcosm of humanity to the point that what rises from the rubble at the end does not really matter. James Robinson connects the old king with the Everyman morality plays, saying "Everyman is stripped of all those features of a temporal life that he turned to for help when Death beckoned, but gaining new knowledge and perceptions during the course of the play . . . Lear, like Everyman, is to be saved" (34). This shows that Lear is an emblem of the universal and that he is "caught in a dichotomy between temporality and unresolved destiny" (Auerbach 327). His is an Everyman "for whom a mortal completion is unsatisfactory, but for whom an immortal conclusion remains illusory" (Auerbach 327). The notion that King Lear confronts metaphysical conundrums on a conceptual level is furthered by its resemblance to Early Modern utopian narratives.

The play demonstrates society's transformation from fallow to fecund, and Shakespeare is able to dramatize social philosophy abstractly by using utopian topoi. More's Utopia, meaning 'no-place' in Latin, is a fictional account from Raphael Hythloday, whose last name means 'expert in nonsense' (Brotton 89). Anthony Pagden argues that "More is pointing out that, although the Utopian system may look absurd at first sight, it provides a means of overturning those very values" that hegemony is "standing in the way of enabling the best state of the commonwealth to be realized" (154). More, like Shakespeare, is attempting to illuminate deleterious sociopolitical elements in a manner that is politically safe. This tradition includes More, Bacon's New Atlantis, Neville's The Isle of Pines, and Margaret Cavendish's The Blazing World. Stephen Greenblatt views Utopia as a rehearsal in political praxis saying, "The invocation of the New World allowed More to articulate . . . that these texts be understood not as isolated philosophical ideas but as expressions of a whole way of life lived in particular physical, historical, cultural, and social circumstances" (The Swerve: How the World Became Modern 230). This reading corresponds with the evolutionary schematic because it offers an inclusive "detailed blueprint for this application, from public housing to universal healthcare" (The Swerve 230). Much like More's theoretical blueprint, reading King Lear as series of natural causes and effects produces an interpretation that recognizes social change as entirely relative to the natural conditions which generate it. Hermeneutic incongruity derives from bifurcating elements of a gestalt system, where harmonizing those elements would yield a more

comprehensive interpretation. King Lear, like Utopia, serves as that blueprint; it "is not a society towards which More wishes to strive. It is a canvas upon which he can debate a range of issues relevant to his own particular world" (Brotton 90).

Evolutionary criticism is similar to the purpose of the utopian tradition, namely that they are both discursive matrices where it is recognized that "the arts help organize the humans' aesthetically modulated models of reality" (Dutton 94). Both the utopian tradition and evolutionary criticism seek to offer a blueprint of possibilities. They suggest "consilience, or the principle that evidence from independent, unrelated sources can 'converge' to strong conclusions," which occurs when "multiple sources of evidence are in agreement[.] [T]he conclusion can be very strong even when none of the individual sources of evidence are very strong on their own" (Wilson 8). In practice, this blends Delany and Danby's theories and lends purpose to the play that challenges Kott's notion of the absurd. Carroll notes that "the most important biological concept is the relationship between the organism and its environment, which presupposes principles of personal psychology, sexual and family relations, social organization, and cognition," so the evolutionary perspective reaches its climax at the most natural of scenes, the heath ("An Evolutionary Paradigm for Literary Study" 1). Lear's division and Gloucester's unfairness generate the generational conflict, which is compounded by the fact that the play deals with "an assumption that nature is a reflection of the status quo" and Renaissance thought "challenged this view of nature, the generation gap, or the sense of a child's need to replace his father" (Hunter 18). In fact, Stephen Greenblatt points out that, "In Shakespeare's imagination, the decision to withdraw from work—'To shake all cares and business from our age,' as Lear says, 'Conferring them on younger strengths'—is a catastrophe" because "once a father had turned over his property to his children, once he had lost his ability to enforce his will, his authority would crumble away . . . he would become what is called a sojourner ( Will in the World 359).

If we view this generational conflict as a microcosm of evolutionary conflict, it is clear that Shakespeare not only enters a dialogue in the middle of social evolution, but he also creates a play that dramatizes that evolution.[3] In discussing Cordelia's alternative language in the love test scene, Judy Kronenfeld points out that "if a demand really establishes an arbitrary hierarchy of knowledge that seeks to silence or dominate alternative modes of inquiry, how can one evaluate

the results of those presumably valuable modes of inquiry?" (11). Kronenfeld shows that alternative dialogues are necessary, and that their very existence transcends the arbitrary.

## "impetuous blasts, with eyeless rage": Finding Meaning in a Meaningless Storm

The Lear universe, as Jan Kott presumes, seeks no meaning: "all that remains at the end of this gigantic pantomime is the earth – empty and bleeding" and that "on this earth, through which tempest has passed leaving only stones, the King, the Fool, the Blind Man and the Madman carry on their distracted dialogue" (118). Kott argues for the absurdity of Lear's rage, but he fails to see that, "When he is on the heath King Lear is moved to pity" and "as unaccommodated man he feels what wretches feel. For the humanist the tragic paradox arises here: debasement gives rise to dignity and at the moment when Lear might be expected to be most brutalized he becomes most human" (Dollimore 189). It is when Lear and Gloucester reach the apogee of absurdity that they have their epiphanies, when Gloucester remarks "I'the last night's storm I such a fellow saw; / Which made me think a man a worm" (4.1.37-38). The storm turns Lear's mind inward, beginning with a raging plea that nature herself should "strike flat the thick rotundity o'the'world," which develops into a confession: "I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness. I never gave you kingdom, called you children . . . Here I stand your slave, A poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man" (3.2.7, 17-20). Lear moves from revenge: "Rage, blow . . . Till you have drenched out steeples, drowned the cocks," which turns into grotesque and absurd mutterings: "Rumble . . . rain! Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire are my daughters . . . But yet I call you servile ministers, / That will with two pernicious daughters join / You high-engendered battles 'gainst a head / So old and white as this" (3.2.2-4, 14-25). This cycle continues to an Edgardian endurance, saying, "No, I will be the pattern of all patience. I will say nothing" (3.2.38). Brian Sheerin illustrates that Lear's epiphany runs in inverse relation to his royal identity, saying "sovereignty . . . in its purest form is characterized by a paradoxical absence of temporality and ontology in relation to the rest of the world; it is a state in which the individual transcends the day-to-day forces of cause-and-effect, utility, and economy" (789). Danby points out that "when Lear is exposed to the storm, he realizes for the first time what 'poor naked wretches' must ordinarily suffer from the elements," but at this

point his Christian charity maintains a "traditional perspective with its ideal of an organic hierarchical state . . . the remedy for the suffering of the poor is that the rich should treat them better, not that they should demand redress of their own initiative" (435).

## "Reason in Madness" and Evolution of Reason

Lear realizes what Edmund never recognizes, the necessity for cooperation and solidarity, and it is that 'social contract' that precludes Edmund from becoming the 'new man.' Lear's apotheosis has not been achieved, but by divesting himself of his revenge – of his right as absolute monarch to exact revenge – he has unburdened himself of one of the transgressions tethering him to the wheel of fire. By saying nothing he begins his transformation, but he is still fixated on his daughters and what they owe him. Lear's prediction of his own madness commences in this scene: his concern "O, let me not be mad . . . Keep me in temper," (1.5.39-41) and his keeping in temper, is indulged by raging at the sky, until he notices that "My wits begin to turn" (3.3.68). Reason in madness allows him immediately to recognize the Fool's humanity for the first time, saying "How dost, my boy? Art Cold? . . . The art of our necessities is strange / And can make vile things precious" (3.3.69-71). The Fool's song "Must make content with fortunes fit, / Though the rain it raineth every day" (3.3.76-77) is absorbed by Lear when he says "The tyranny of the open night's too rough / For nature to endure . . . When the mind's free, / The body's delicate" (3.4.2-3, 11-12). As many scholars have noted, Lear's madness is concomitant with his return to nature, and although this seems reductive there is a connection between his abdication of self, a kenosis of identity, and his madness. Lear's madness runs in inverse proportion to his reason – as his reason descends his madness ascends, but like the wisdom of the Fool his distance from normative reason produces a natural insight. Lear is transformed when he recognizes that "The tempest in my mind / Doth from my senses take all feeling else, / Save what beats there: filial ingratitude . . . No I will weep no more. In such a night . . . Pour on, I will endure," to which he famously adds, "O that way madness lies. Let me shun that" (3.4.6-22). A major element concerning Lear's reason is its progression – some scholars argue he loses it in the first scene, some argue that "thou shouldst not have been old before thou hadst been wise" shows he never had proper reason, but it is clear that Lear's madness is a microcosm of sociopolitical evolution (1.5.38-39).

Lear's cognitive path is an evolution; it is not linear but serpentine. Steve Mentz shows that Lear's madness has consequences outside his solipsistic perception, saying "reading the storm scenes through their parallels with the post-equilibrium shift in ecological thinking brings out their powerful representation of natural chaos," and that the "storm functions as a boundary between raw experience and the narrative humans create to order experience" (145). The heath is the watershed, the cognitive climax that urges Lear's evolution of thought and by extension an evolution with sociopolitical implications. Lear, in losing his mind and being forced to wrestle with notions of kingship, identity and the plight of others, is able to re-order experience and his madness is a part of the evolutionary process that will mark the equilibrium shift away from feudal reason and values and its Machiavellian antithesis to an evolved synthesis of the two.[4] In the previous lines Lear sees nature as a proxy for his kingship, but only as a metonymy; his lack of control over the storm represents his lack of control over the kingdom and his mind. Kent begins Scene 4 saying "The tyranny of the open night's too rough / For nature to endure," and Bradley notes that it is here (and due to a lack of sleep) that Lear's madness truly begins: "henceforth he is mad . . . his recovery, it will be remembered, is due to a long sleep artificially induced" (3.4.2-3, 238). Lear divests himself of much in the play, some of his own volition (his kingship) and some by force (his retinue), but here Lear willingly divests himself of his reason in a deliberate attempt to "achieve the sunshine of a spotless mind" (Pope 104).

Lear is aware that nature cannot endure the ravages of the storm and he is aware of the force of the storm, but his lines, "This tempest will not give me leave to ponder / On things would hurt me more" highlight his awareness that the storm is driving his reason from him, but it saves him from thoughts that "would hurt me more" (3.4.24-25). The proceeding lines are "those passages which make one worship Shakespeare" (Bradley 237), the lines that urge Delany to argue that Lear and Gloucester "must make their agonized passage through the lower depths of their country and of their consciousness," an agony that concludes in a realization that "what are symptoms of decline for one class may be portents of liberation and fresh opportunity for another" (429). Lear's calculated descent into madness is not unreason; it is a harrowing of his mind's hell and strapping himself to Ixion's wheel. To perceive the action as purgative or redemptive is falling too near the

side that believes it is “a tale of redemption through suffering” (Elton 3) but rather, it “can be regarded as a study of patience unrewarded although achieved” (Danby 105).

In Scene 4 Lear has two major realizations and both demonstrate an evolution of the mind, and mark the psychological progression needed in order to gain insight and begin to reassess his identity and values. The famous lines “Take psychic, pomp, / Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel, / That though mayst shake the superflux to them / And show the heavens more just” (3.4.33-36) are – according to Delany – residual traditional perspectives of Christian charity in accordance with the notion of ‘the deserving poor’ (435). Delany notes Shakespeare’s distrust of the proletariat, saying “deserving poor – long-suffering peasants or devoted menials—Shakespeare usually presents them sympathetically; but if they resort to direct action on their own behalf they mutate into that old standby the mindlessly destructive Shakespearean mob” (435). Delany insists that the old men get close to genuine plight but the call of tradition is too strong to enact an equilibrium shift of values amongst this generation. This is true of those particular lines, but this scene shows a progression of Lear’s divestment. In the “Take, physic” speech Lear exposes himself to the notion that other people are capable of value and that they feel just as he does, which he immediately acts on by allowing the fool into the hovel before him. This is a divestment of his narcissistic megalomania.

His encounter with Edgar in the next lines illustrate a divestment of identity. The previous lines allow the possibility that others feel, the next lines enact that concept as he attempts to see Tom O’Bedlam, not as an extension of Lear – because “the monarch is the epicenter of presence within the kingdom—the head apart from which the body becomes both inert and meaningless” – but as man’s identity in-the-world![5] This hurdle is directly connected to Lear’s view of Tom as the philosopher (Sheerin 801). Lear goes from, “Has his daughters brought him to this pass?” to, “Death, traitor!” but concludes with, “Is man no more than this?” (3.4.60, 67, 96). Lear sees in Edgar’s misery a reflection of himself and Lear’s madness evolves as he chips away the varnish of affectation. Charles Bucknill points out that before this change Lear “has placed a high value upon appearance and outward respect; man’s need must not be argued; the gorgeous robes and appurtenance of royalty are of exaggerated value in his eyes” (202). After Lear recognizes the superficial as valueless, he tears off his clothes seeing them as pretense. This shift underscores

the important social change that King Lear "functions at one level as an exercise of the political unconscious: as a play about problematical changes in current social practice, and specifically in the display of royal power" (Boehrer 245). The feudal traditions of gift-giving and homage are central to Lear's kingship as a gesture of success, but when he strips off his clothes and embraces his non-royal identity, "he reveals the natural body of the king as one that appears to bear little value in its own right . . . stripped of retainers, patronage, patrilineal authority" (Tennenhouse 139). In these lines Lear's cognitive evolution is readily apparent and his transformation is a microcosm of larger sociocultural evolution.

Lear asks Edgar, "What hast thou been?" and at this point he is not confusing himself with Edgar or raving at fortune, but he shows genuine curiosity in his former subject's life (3.4.79). It is at this point that Lear begins genuine evolution. Although most scholars argue that Lear initiates his ascension or reaches his zenith at the "unaccommodated man" or the "take physic" lines, it is here that he shows unadorned humanity for the first time. Lear's dejection in the "unaccommodated man" speech highlights his uncertainty concerning "the nature of his own status and identity, the nature of knowing, the nature of need," (Nowottony 36) and Delany rightly questions the altruism of the "take physic" speech, but in his concern over a subject he perceives himself as distinct from others. The evolution of Lear's mind parallels the kingdom's progression, for "while the world at large lives out the effects of those decisions Lear made in that 'thrice of time' at the beginning of the play, Lear is kept near it, at it, forced to understand himself as cause, or his relation to cause, made to seek . . . his order, his life" (Robinson 44). This evolution of knowing as manifested by madness agrees with Michel Foucault's notion that the "the king is reduced to impotence" when he is "isolate[d] from the outside world, and, as well as preventing him from hearing and seeing the outside world, prevents him from communicating his order to it" (Psychiatric Power 21).[6] The analgesic or restorative powers of madness has been discussed at great length, but the hardly mentioned Foucaultian power\knowledge dyad is crucial when connected with social evolution. Foucault states that "power produces knowledge" and they "directly imply one another," (On the Government of the Living 27) which has obvious social ramifications when "the former is used to control and define the latter" when "madness was used to categorize and stigmatize not just the

mentally ill but the poor, the sick, the homeless, and anyone whose expressions of individuality were unwelcome" (Stokes 187).

By asking "what hast thou been", Lear illustrates an evolution from feudal notions of monarchy and community to a more communal hierarchy, a humanistic value system. Carroll posits that "Lear begins to construct a utopia in the hovel where one can live and die as king. Lear declares himself king of this new world order and is flanked by fools and the wretched of the earth" (Evolution and Literary Theory 210). So thunder is the device by which Lear is driven to divest himself of the appurtenances of royal progress, and as Caudwell suggests, "[T]o every bourgeoisie it seems as if his instincts—his 'freedoms' are intolerably restricted by laws, right and restraints, and that beauty and life can only be obtained by the violent expansion of his desires" (92). Lear frees himself of the restraints of normative behavior and royal progression by stripping himself of his clothes and disregarding the traditional notions of value. James Kearney notes that Lear recognizes in Edgar an insight bereft of the trappings of the court, and "Lear's extravagant desire to make Edgar's flesh meaningful is a sign to the audience that Lear is both coming undone and attempting to cling to some sense of self," and that his "mad narcissism is a dramatic indication that Lear is, at this moment, either faltering in the face of alterity or incapable of experiencing alterity" (458-59). Lear's struggle here is similar to Edmund's in that he "is not a co-operative member of a grand community" but, "He embodies something vital which a final synthesis must reaffirm," which is the notion that "society exists for man, not man for society" (Danby 46-50). Lear is beginning to learn how a man operates as a part of a community, a community for which the part is equal to the whole in value. While "Lear's is the feudal state in decomposition," Edmund's values are "based on unfettered competition, and the war of all against all" (Halpern 216). Because "King Lear is above all a play about power, property and inheritance" (Dollimore 197), it can be implied that Lear's abdication of and divestment from those superfluities echoes the sociocultural progression away from feudal emphasis on them to what Dollimore calls a "humanist view" (188), or balancing "Christian redemptionist readings . . . and liberal humanist interpretations" (Ioppolo 60).

The benefit of mixing Kott's absurd and grotesque, Danby's binaries and Delany's sociocultural readings into an evolutionary matrix is that it highlights the protean nature of both Lear and King Lear. Michael Hays argues that "it is precisely this multiplicity of possibilities which is central to

King Lear. The play is not about the conflict between two groups or classes . . . Shakespeare's genius is to have brought these multiple and conflicting positions on stage in the interaction between individual characters" (Bucknill 115). Terry Eagleton supports Hays' multiplicity, noting the play's performativity: "communications which bring men into relationship and community by externalizing their private experience, making it open to public judgment and response" (72-73). These insights, along with Ioppolo's awareness that theory "contributes to the redefining of King Lear," highlight the need for a consilience offered by evolutionary criticism (60). The hermeneutical approach to sociopolitical upheaval is not framed as a confirmation of bias, but as a means to explain a natural phenomenon with impartial rigor. Kott's absurd and Bradley's redemptionist readings are extreme ends of the spectrum, which can be resolved by refusing to assert meaning apart from the principal that "it is not the strongest or the most intelligent who will survive but those who can best manage change" and that – although Johnson might disagree – "there is a grandeur in this view of life" (Darwin 490). This reading removes implications of a theodicy and justice in the play, and it also serves to explain some of the social and cultural results.

## An Appropriate Longue Durée

The evolutionary critic Joseph Carrol points out that many literary interpretations of historical events "invest culture with a quasi-Hegelian power of autonomous, teleological development that is supposed to ultimately culminate in human 'perfection' . . . [which] separates idealist cultural theory from Darwinian naturalism" (Evolution and Literary Theory 17). Paul de Man notes a similar peculiarity in theoretical perceptions of history, saying,

> *Instead of being mere copies of a transcendental order, Nature, or God, 'all things below' are said to be a part of a chain of being, underway to its teleological end. The hierarchical world of Ideas and Images of Ideas becomes a world of means moving towards an end and ordered in the prospective temporality of genetic movement. (70)*

De Man attempts to illustrate the complexity of history and he attempts to dismantle the genetic pattern by disrupting generational continuity, or the notion that assumes narrative events "spring from a common source and converge toward a common end" (de Man 83). This view of history, of

narratives and events, seeks to offer a symphony of reasons working in harmony that work to produce the whole, as opposed to monolithic constructs. In King Lear there is "a steady progress from beneficent, reasonable, harmonious order envisioned by the middle ages, to the Hobbesian view of Nature as malignant and hostile, a perpetual war of appetites," but "for the ground of every spring is a winter, of every birth, a death" because those representing Hobbesian values "cannot contain their appetites, in the end they prey on each other. Destructive evil cannot knit its forces into a viable and self-regenerative order" (Horowitz 123, 96, 125). Danby's assertion falls because, as Bradley rightly points out, "Edgar [is] faultless but without virility . . . we seem to be confronted, not with certain men . . . but with mankind" (176). Harold Bloom says that Edmund is "Shakespeare's most original character" not because of his natural charm and charisma, but for "assuming responsibility for his own amorality, his pure opportunism" (Bloom 500). Danby mirrors the utopian tradition, saying that Edmund,

> *Embodies something vital which a final synthesis must reaffirm. But he makes an absolute claim which Shakespeare will not support. It is right for man to feel, as Edmund does, that society exists for man, not man for society. It is not right to assert the kind of man Edmund would erect to this supremacy. (50)*

Indeed, the idea is that man must make do with Edgar, "machiavel of goodness," but it is clear that Edgar is entirely too milquetoast and jejune to inspire the allegiance needed to support the kingdom's regeneration (Danby 89). Man must endure the ravages of the equilibrium shift in order to fully evolve, and the proportion to which things die is equal to nature's ability to evolve, because, "For this darker vision of human relationships, Shakespeare borrows from Montaigne's unsentimental account of the nature of fathers and children, who have good reason to hate each other as they compete for scarce resources. Generations always threaten to eat each other like creatures of the deep. They must, if they try to preserve themselves" (Skura 122).

The reader may notice that King Lear "explores the tragic side of 'dying generations'" – by the thematic connection between birth and death, the reader is shown that death and birth are inseparable: "when we are born we cry that we are come to this great stage," but "Thou must be patient . . . We came crying hither. Thou know'st the first time that we smell the air we wawl and

cry" (Skura 123, King Lear 4.6.167-72). Therefore, Lear's "pelican daughters" do not deserve the curse he laid on Goneril's womb or the invocation of "the barbarous Scythian, / Or he that makes his generation messes / To gorge his appetite (1.1.118-20). Lear initiates the evolutionary process in that invocation, not as a religious spite on ungrateful children, but he initiates the condition by which the young generation eating the old is acceptable – even evolutionarily profitable to become "like monsters of the deep" (4.2.51). There is no Fortinbras or Octavian, or restoration of the kingdom, but there is a healing of the land and a hope that the next generation will be the more 'fit' synthesis of the Lear versus Edmund dichotomy. There is no need for such artificial resolution because this is a play dominated by nature. Lear is correct in fearing his "pelican daughters" (3.4.70). Edmund gives voice to Shakespeare's own fear of becoming a sojourner, saying, "That which my father loses—no less than all. / The younger rises when the old doth fall (3.3.21-22). Lear echoes de Man's conception of history as a generative process that must be dismantled, saying, "Crack nature's molds, all germens spill at once / That make ingrateful man!" (3.2.8-9). By the play's end, the notion that the young must consume the virility of the weak in order to survive and evolve is clear, but the redemptionist reading is impossible because this generation's "Humanity must perforce prey on itself / Like monsters of the deep" (4.2.50-51). The ground is laid fallow so that it may be fecund for the coming generation, so the very notion of a resolution would dilute nature's restorative efficacy. Darwin laments the appeal of finding solace in moralizing, saying "so profound is our ignorance, and so high our presumption, that we marvel when we hear of the extinction of an organic being; and as we do not see the cause, we invoke cataclysms to desolate the world," rather than recognizing the harmony that "inhabitants of each successive period in the world's history have beaten their predecessors in the race for life, and are, insofar, higher in the scale of nature" (73, 345). The play, then, is a punctuated equilibrium, the phase that follows a mass extinction but provides the necessary sociocultural ingredients for Mentz's post-equilibrium shift. This reading gives meaning to Kott's absurd, but meaning apart from Bradleyian redemptionist readings, and it provides valuable connective tissue that fuses Ioppolo's claim that "all . . . approaches . . . whatever their differences, have contributed to a redefining of the nature and status of King Lear" into one coherent whole; that utilizes myriad methodologies, not to redefine, but to broadly analyze this 'reason in madness' (60).

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[1] He is full of sound and fury throughout much of the play, and he cannot appreciate that he signifies nothing.

[2] For more on this see: Paula Blank's "Shakespeare's Social Arithmetics: Checking the Math of King Lear" or Terence Hawkes Shakespeare and the Reason.

[3] The play uses the generational conflict as a microcosm for universal evolutionary trends, so it is a microcosm within a microcosm, the other being the play as a microcosm of humanity.

[4] His epiphany and transcending parallels, as an echo or augur of, the social evolution.

[5] I use Heidegger's term because Lear's dilemma is similar to the existential crisis of being 'thrown-into-the-world' without the assistance of 'care' in alleviating that shock.

[6] The utopian tradition has an answer to the power\knowledge binary in Bacon's 'Salomon's House,' and More's notion of the Utopian's right to knowledge and education. This situates King Lear into the utopian tradition and the tradition that seeks to understand the role of knowledge, reason, madness and power in an evolving society.

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