

TAKE (META) PHYSIC, POMP:  
*KING LEAR* AND (DIS) ORIENTED ONTOLOGY

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## ABSTRACT

“‘Take (Meta) Physic, Pomp’: *King Lear* and (Dis)oriented Ontology” negotiates the intersection between ontology—our abstract, philosophical conception of reality—and practice—how characters relate to objects in the play. In chapter one, I use Object-Oriented Ontology to demonstrate that Lear’s interaction with human and non-human objects does not fundamentally change from act one to act five, which supports the conclusion that the king’s cognitive resistance to resolution echoes the play’s dramatic desolation. By examining several of *Lear*’s object-oriented speeches alongside their representations on stage and film, I show how Lear’s preoccupation with the superficial aspects of objects—as opposed to their interiority—indicates his perceptive crisis. I argue that analyzing *King Lear* using Object-Oriented Ontology exposes Lear’s philosophical framework as a basis for the play’s cosmic tragedy.

In the second chapter, I examine the diverse ways productions have depicted objects in the play and how these depictions modify each production’s thematic and dramatic structure. I analyze the coronet and map in the first scene, and the glass and feather in the last scene, to argue that Peter Brook’s minimalist production beautifully intensifies the play’s tragic, irreconcilable ending. I suggest that a minimalist aesthetic appropriately amplifies *Lear*’s emphasis on nothing, value, and irresolution.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my loving, supportive family. I would like to thank my parents, Greg and Becky Smith, for their constant encouragement and their inspiring pursuit of knowledge. Most of all, I would like to thank my loving wife, Molly Lockart, whose love, like Harman's objects, is inexhaustible.

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INTRODUCTION:  
*KING LEAR* AND THE PERFORMANCE OF ONTOLOGY

Since the material turn, many critics have embraced the call to consider connections among, embeddedness in, and the vibrancy of objects. *King Lear* is concerned not only with matters of symbiosis and enchantment in the physical world, but also with posthuman reality bereft of a benevolent nature or—to say the least—humanity’s former average life expectancy. *King Lear* is remarkably compatible with material studies because of the play’s assessment of nature, perception, and interconnectedness; and the play is acutely aware of Renaissance scientific and philosophical transitions, which further extends the compatibility between the play and 21<sup>st</sup> century innovations in theory. It is helpful, therefore, to take stock of these similarities in order to examine the historical changes that might inflect Lear’s philosophical framework. *King Lear* chronicles the Early Modern “change in thinking about the environment from organic to mechanistic world views” (Estok 26) just as contemporary worldviews are transformed by “the transition to a posthuman condition [that] occurred with the mathematical demonstrations that information could be measured as a quantity distinct from the medium conveying it” (Hayles 11). Shakespeare’s play foregrounds massive shifts in social and cultural institutions.

Much of the anxiety *Lear* elicits, for Early Modern and contemporary audiences alike, is the play’s treatment of a kingdom being utterly torn apart: it is, as Northrop Frye puts it, “an image of nature dissolving into its primordial elements, losing its distinctions of hierarchies into

chaos” (114). Those distinctions and hierarchies, which postmodernism sought to expose and posthumanism may understand further, are what humans typically rely upon to order society; it is to distinctions and hierarchies that humans often revert when searching for answers. *King Lear* exposes the structural instability of those hierarchies as the play is—according to Stephen Greenblatt—“part of an intense and sustained struggle...to redefine the central values of society” (*Shakespearean Negotiations* 95). *King Lear* questions the break from organicism to mechanism, but the play also deals with important ruptures between Lear’s ontological psyche and his actual kingdom.<sup>1</sup>Lear’s feudal kingdom is characterized by homage<sup>2</sup>, community<sup>3</sup>, and hierarchy<sup>4</sup>, which are challenged by an individualism that upsets the very basis of feudal structure. According to Object-Oriented Ontology, as I suggest in chapter one, humanism “undermines” reality by the human subject’s implicit monopoly on meaning-making; and organicism “overmines” reality by perceiving objects as mere substrata in a larger holistic structure. While Jonathan Dollimore has convincingly shown that *Lear* resists humanistic valuation, I argue that one can glimpse nascent posthumanism in *King Lear*. On a surface level, Lear’s perception of himself in relation to the plight of others has been thoroughly examined, but his ontological confusion, which is useful in clarifying a crucial transition, has been less emphasized. The desolation that saturates *King Lear* is ultimately due to substituting perception of objects for reality; indeed, the play is a kind of unfolding of that binary: it begins with an emphasis on an

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<sup>1</sup> In *Advancement of Learning*, Francis Bacon argues that “the human mind, if it acts upon matter, and contemplates the nature of things, and the works of God, operates according to the stuff, and is limited thereby” (140). For Bacon, examining the material world is the basis for knowledge. This view contradicts medieval scholastics and their emphasis of speculation and superstition, which Bacon deems “subtleties and matter of no use” and seem to be an “old man’s idle talk” (141). Bacon, then, represents a transition similar to the one I trace in *Lear* from organicism, which relies on the same superstition that the scholastics emphasize, to mechanistic perception.

<sup>2</sup> Boehrer, Bruce. “King Lear” and the Royal Progress: Social Display in Shakespearean Tragedy.” *Renaissance Drama* 21 (1990); 243-61.

<sup>3</sup> Meer, Zubin. *Individualism: The Cultural Logic of Modernity*. Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2011, pages 63-68. Print.

<sup>4</sup> Kronenfeld, Judy. *King Lear and the Naked Truth*. Durham: Duke UP 1998, page 123-70. Print.

objectifying perception that produces the play's central tragedy, and by the time Lear arrives on the heath all reality is obfuscated (disguise, madness, dissimulation, and subversion flourish<sup>5</sup>). As the play ends and reality begins to thwart perception, the king and his kingdom disintegrate. I propose that Lear's emphasis on perception is connected to an ontological perspective endemic to feudal society. In *King Lear*, Shakespeare examines the problems pertaining to feudal society and in doing so he implicitly invites his audience to connect those issues to contemporary social issues. The function of the theater, like that of the 17<sup>th</sup> century printing industry, was inherently political; indeed, some playwrights suffered execution or imprisonment for their work and the very foundation of the theater challenged sumptuary and decency laws. Theater as a "public sphere" was as subversive as it was entertaining. Feudal power, according to Jürgen Habermas, was dependent on objects deployed in order to manifest potency, and those symbols of power were the means by which political leaders created and performed their authority. Habermas argues that the private and public spheres were united in the monarch as body politic, but "it was no accident that the attributes of lordship, such as the ducal seal, were called "public"; not by accident did the English king enjoy "publicness"—for the lordship was something publicly represented" (Habermas 7). Furthermore, that "presentation pretended to make something invisible visible through the public presence of the person of the lord" (7). In the play's first scene, Lear deploys objects as a representation of his power, but because the play interrogates social structures and their concomitant ontological confusions, the use of objects fails Lear

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<sup>5</sup> Gabriel Egan, in *Green Shakespeare*, submits that Shakespeare purposely deceived his audience through 'three shocks': 1) his contemporaries would have thought that Lear's pleas in the storm would elicit a response from the heavens, 2) the audience would believe that Gloucester is truly at the verge of a precipice until the moment of his fall, and 3) Cordelia's death was entirely unexpected (137-143). According to Egan, Shakespeare intends for the audience to be consistently and thoroughly shocked, which leads to a sort of philosophical decentering. If Shakespeare destabilized theatrical traditions, then the audience would then be invited to share in Lear's own philosophical confusion.

throughout the play. Shakespeare mobilizes these anxieties so that Lear can encounter the thing itself and explore the ways society might be impacted by a desacralization of public symbols.

In the second chapter, I examine three film productions of *King Lear* while arguing that a minimalist aesthetic is most effective in intensifying not only the play's tragedy but also its philosophical arc. I situate Peter Brook's minimalist film between Michael Elliot's and Richard Eyre's more opulent versions. Brook's aesthetic captures the tragic desolation by staging the opening scene in a sparse, primitive hovel and the last scene in an immense, desolate tundra. These settings correspond to the play's overall dramatic arc by capturing the transition from grandeur to barrenness. I argue that Lear's grandeur in the first scene is not directly tied to wealth or symbols of power but to his manic severity, which Paul Scofield, as Lear, skillfully represents. The two other films, directed by Elliot and Eyre, fail to extract the same dramatic effect because the transition in settings and acting do not accentuate the cosmic anguish as fully as Brook's film. I argue that tight close-up shots on Lear in the hovel highlight his authoritarian potency, and fractured shots in the last scene—with Cordelia alive behind Lear in one frame and then in the next lying dead beside him—distance the audience from Lear and forces the audience to become intellectually engaged. In laying to rest the royal Lear, Brook's film denies resolution, sympathy, or reverence; furthermore, the film questions the legitimacy of power when it is divorced from reason. To take a fragment of Greenblatt's analysis in "Shakespeare and the Exorcists," I suggest that Brook's *Lear* desacralizes the symbols of kingship and power. I examine Brook's use of important symbols of power, the map and coronet, in the first scene, arguing that the film emphasizes Lear's tactics of intimidation and severity. In the play's final scene, I explore the use of the feather and glass, asserting that these objects confirm Lear's return to the same superficial methods of calculating value and meaning that he exhibited in the first

scene. The staging, acting, and use of objects in Brook's film interrogate the ethical problems of how humans calculate meaning and, as Hugh Grady notes of *Lear*, "this separation of name and thing, of symbolic title and actual political power...de-center[s] power from its legitimating signifiers of royalty" and underscores the imperious ritualism of King Lear and the play's deeply tragic irresolution (143). I begin my second chapter considering the ways in which the map and coronet, in the first scene, and the feather and glass, in the final scene, elucidate how Lear's philosophy affects his relations with others.

In the first chapter, I use Object-Oriented Ontology to explore the relations between human and nonhuman objects in *Lear* and the philosophical structures that reinforce those relations. Object-Oriented Ontology, as the name suggests, decenters human perception and experience so that nonhuman objects are afforded more stable footing in a "flat ontology." Object-oriented philosophy resists the anthropocentrism of correlationist philosophies that tend to privilege human perception by presuming that things are either falsely deep (overmining) or not deep enough (undermining). These two ways of perceiving objects generate ethical consequences: on the one hand, philosophies that overmine reality appeal to normative universals in order to justify their ethical program; on the other hand, philosophies that undermine presume that ethics boil down to *just* a will to power, Freudian drives, or interpellation. The only correct way to encounter reality, according to Object-Oriented Ontology, is to "let it be" (Heidegger 83). The second chapter traces the ways that *Lear* fails to let things be, showing that an Object-Oriented perspective clarifies the philosophical foundations of that failure as well as its emotional and psychological consequences. I argue that *Lear*'s caustic behavior is founded upon a vertical ontology that confuses the external properties of a thing for the internal reality of it, and that his relations with human and nonhuman objects exposes a

patterned refusal to acknowledge interconnectedness, dependency, and the authentic value of a thing. Cavell famously argues that Lear encourages flattery because authenticity “threatens to expose” Lear’s “terror of being loved, of needing love,” and that his inability to recognize himself provokes his confused wrath (63).

By examining his refusal to acknowledge the independent value of others, I argue that Lear’s avoidance of love is a result of avoiding the democracy of objects, and that an Object-Oriented perspective can open up innovative interpretations through its emphasis on the interconnectivity of objects and the myriad relations involved in the production of a text or performance. In “The Avoidance of Love,” Cavell observes that the theater “giv[es] us a place within which our hiddenness and silence and separation are accounted for, it gives us a chance to stop” (104). An Object-Oriented approach similarly freezes a text so that the critic can explore the separation and interrelations between objects, and, as exemplified in Lear’s proclivity to avoid, it is often the sites of separation and disconnect that reveal most about a character, text, or performance. Minimalist productions and an Object-Oriented interpretation locate and expose similar analytical trajectories; namely, a minimalist production, such as Brook’s, stages relations and connectedness by removing excess distractions. The abdication scene in Brook’s *Lear*, for instance, captures the intensity, frustration, and avoidance by staging the characters in a relatively barren setting, which compels the audience to view the unfolding drama rather than the setting itself. Furthermore, in the few scenes that require the character to interact with props, such as the garland of weeds or the glass, those objects are rendered more significant and thus worthy of due attention. A minimalist production emphasizes the objects that matter, and in an Object-Oriented reality where all objects matter, concentrating on the objects of dramatic or psychological significance is critical. Minimalism and Object-Oriented Ontology both attend to

the primacy of objects; minimalism reduces surplus objects and centers on the dramatic relations between things rather than spectacle, and Object-Oriented Ontology centers on objects and their relations. Jane Bennett recognizes that literature reveals some vibrant aspect of reality, noting that “texts are bodies that can light up, by rendering human perception more acute, those bodies whose favored vehicle of affectivity is less wordy” (232). *King Lear* lights up objects and their relations by building a reality where a feather can redeem all sorrows yet “nothing” can set father against child.

CHAPTER ONE:  
*KING LEAR* AND (DIS) ORIENTED ONTOLOGY

The tragedy in *King Lear* is explained by conflicting structures of meaning-making. The drama of the first and last scenes, which is the topic of this analysis, condenses to a single contradiction: a king perceives people as objects that signify his power, but those people refuse objectification. Lear perceives people as objects, as symbols of his power, and he consistently underestimates the value of both humans and nonhumans. Lear relies on his daughters, the map, and the coronet to be signifiers of his authority, and in the last scene Lear relies on the glass and the feather to be signs that will “redeem all sorrows” (5.3.263)<sup>6</sup>. The drama resulting from this contradictory ontological system ultimately derives from an interior ontological confusion. Lear’s confused perception of others intersects with Object-Oriented Ontology, a philosophy that rejects the anthropocentrism of correlationism, which presumes that the perceived object depends on the perceiving subject by “disqualifying the claim that it is possible to consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another” (Meillassoux 2008, 5).<sup>7</sup> The subject never apprehends an object in itself apart from its relation to the subject; furthermore, the assumption that the subject transforms the object through perception produces a teleological dilemma whereby an object serves the purpose *of* or is caused *by* the subject. With correlationism, objects in the world are perceived as screens on which we project our intentions.

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<sup>6</sup> Quotations are taken from the 1997 Arden *King Lear*.

<sup>7</sup> Correlationism is the view that being only exists for subjects, and that the subject’s mind have no access to the material world except through cognition, which makes any claim to think about or discuss an object fanciful. Meillassoux defines correlationism as “the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other” (5).

I will contend that Lear's fatal error—which produces the ensuing drama—is that he perceives objects, whether inanimate or human, as screens for his projections.

At a basic level, Lear fails to understand the meanings of nothing and something; he places value in things because he relies on appearance.<sup>8</sup> Though many characters in *Lear* perceive objects in relation to their presence, Lear is given a panoply of inanimate and animate examples that reveal his ontological confusion, and he is given more interior depth in terms of how he relates to objects. For that reason, I will focus my analysis on Lear and his interaction with objects. One of the primary tenets of Object-Oriented Ontology is that objects never touch, and while interaction constantly occurs throughout the universe, the reason for their inability to touch is that they necessarily *withdraw* from one another. Graham Harman, the founder of Object-Oriented Ontology, notes that objects “withdraw from human view into a dark subterranean reality that never becomes present to practical action any more than it does to theoretical awareness” and those things “distance themselves not only from human beings, but from each other as well” (2002, 1-2). This is clearly a step away from Lear's more correlationist view that an object “can only be thought as it is given *for the subject*” (Bryant 2011, 14). The metaphysical understanding that objects are animated and given purpose by the perceiver becomes ethically problematic as the play unfolds. Lear's estimation of others' value becomes apparent in the first few scenes when Lear says that Cordelia's “price has fallen” to which France remarks that Cordelia “was your best object, / The argument of your praise, balm of your age”

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<sup>8</sup> In “On the Affection of Fathers for their Sons,” an essay that Stephen Greenblatt says inspired the Gloucester subplot, Michel de Montaigne argues that the defect “of not realizing in time what one is, of not being aware of the extreme decline into weakness which old age naturally brings to our bodies and our souls...has ruined the reputation of most of the world's great men” (155). Montaigne's advice to Lear might be that an old man should not “make a binding gift of our property and not be able to go back on it” (156). Like Montaigne's old man, Lear does not realize in time what or who he is. Lear's divestment, like the binding gift of property, is the external manifestation of the old man's detachment from reason.

(1.1.197, 220-1). Gloucester, upon hearing that Edmund thrust “nothing” into his pocket, replies that “the quality of nothing hath not such need to hide itself...if it be nothing, I shall not need spectacles” (1.2.34-36). The connection between objects, value, and sight is echoed by Lear as he begins to drift into madness: “Does any here know me?...Where are his eyes?...Either his notion weakens, or his discernings are / lethargied” (1.4.217-20). Lear and Gloucester hinge their perceptions of things with their understanding of nothing; they instill their own interpretations into nothing. Gloucester interprets nothing as furtive while Lear interprets nothing as a rejection of his love. How they interpret *nothing* is important to their interpretation of *something*. If Lear imbues his perception of nothing with his own misguided perceptions, then one can expect the possibility that he will do the same to a thing. Indeed, Lear assumes the cause of Tom’s unhappiness must be the same as his own unhappiness. Lear perceives others as *nothings* into which he can place his perceptions. The perception of an object is connected with value and that value fuels the play’s tragedy. Lear reveals that the structure of his perception is founded upon market-place calculations and arbitrary systems of value. Object-Oriented Ontology helps to explain the underlying cause of this problem. I will investigate Lear’s value system, his objectification of objects, and how objects and Lear simultaneously withdraw from each other.<sup>9</sup> I will also examine the degree to which the text itself is an object and how it interacts with, or is subject to, the same methods used to inspect philosophical artifacts.

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<sup>9</sup> Renaissance thinkers, too, expressed a belief similar to withdrawal. Montaigne notes that “if what we saw of the world were as great as the amount we now cannot see, it is to be believed that we would perceive an endless multiplication and succession of forms. Where Nature is concerned, nothing is unique or rare; but where our knowledge is concerned much certainly is...offering us a very false idea of everything” (341). Harman, like Montaigne, suggests that human knowledge can only perceive the object in its relation to us at a certain time, but that its ‘endless succession’ of relations causes that object to be inexhaustible.

## Object-oriented ontology

A cursory overview of Object-Oriented Ontology's terminology is necessary in order to examine its utility in Shakespearean studies. One of the delights of reading Shakespeare is the text's tenacious penchant for tunneling into our thoughts, informing our philosophy, our ideology, and remaining as a welcome passenger in our intellectual lives. Each text becomes an object that modifies as we uncover new insights, an object that is deeply contextual but never fully exhausted. Objects, like texts, resist resolution. Harman repurposes Martin Heidegger's distinction between "present-at-hand" objects and "ready-to-hand" objects, by adding the caveat that "our primary interaction with beings comes through 'using' them," which diminishes the object as it is perceived primarily in relation to our explicit activities (2002, 18). "Present-at-hand" is the conception of an object through theorizing about it or viewing its "ontic" (external) properties rather than its "ontological" (internal) reality. "Ready-to-hand" is the interaction with a thing without speculating about it. Heidegger's much-used example is that of a hammer: when we use a hammer we do not think about all its constituent parts, but when the hammer breaks it becomes present to us. We do not normally go about life theorizing on the complexity of the object until it no longer functions.<sup>10</sup> When an object breaks, it takes on an 'unreadiness-to-hand,' which can be conspicuous (it is damaged), obtrusive (a part is missing), or obstinate (when the object obstructs our ability to complete a task) (Blattner 2006, 57). This distinguishes between "objects as explicitly encountered (present-at-hand) and these same objects in their withdrawn executant being (ready-to-hand)" (Harman 2002, 160). When one perceives Present-at-Hand, the object is examined by its properties or traits or it is broken into its constituent parts. Ready-to-

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<sup>10</sup> Perceiving objects Present-at-Hand attempts to theorize and break the object into its components; likewise, mechanism attempts to explain an object or system by constructing an exhaustive catalogue of causal relations, which reduces that object to its meaning *to us*.

Hand, however, is the ordinary way humans perceive objects, which is to say the mode of perceiving a thing as simply close to us.<sup>11</sup> Being, therefore, is prior to the perceiver's analysis of an object.<sup>12</sup> Harman expands Heidegger's work by arguing that "contrary to the dominant assumption of philosophy since Kant, the true chasm in ontology lies not between humans and the world, but between *objects and relations*" (2002, 2). Because an object is ontologically withdrawn, it is never fully exhausted by its relations or its contexts. This theoretical approach, when used for literary analysis, turns texts into case studies that highlight the practical and ethical benefits of perceiving both the texts and objects in texts as inexhaustible resources of being.

Object-Oriented Ontology lends itself to an analysis of *King Lear* because the tragedy is ultimately a result of misperception. The text offers readers an opportunity to slow down and examine the ways in which Lear fails to understand his reality. Harman notes that literary texts depict objects "in the act of executing themselves," those zoomed-in, slowed-down moments that allow the reader to observe the unimaginable profundity of objects (2005, 105). The reader has the ability to slow down, rewind, pause, and analyze a text that itself examines the relations between Lear and his kingdom, his daughters, and his reality. Simon Palfrey argues that in *King Lear*, Shakespeare "is generating a completely different ontology from anything social" (2014, 60). The text, like an electron microscope, pauses events so we can examine the quantum weirdness of interaction and action. *King Lear* is replete with such images. In the play's opening scene, Lear's daughters serve as an emblem of his power. Indeed, Lear's human interactions are consistently framed in ways that objectify. Lear banishes those from his sight that do not

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<sup>11</sup> Which Heidegger calls the primordial or pre-theoretical.

<sup>12</sup> In much the same way that, for existentialists, existence precedes essence.

conform to his intentions. Lear exiles Kent once he “come[s] between our sentence and our power,” and once Cordelia resists Lear’s love test she becomes “as a stranger” to him (1.1 173, 116). Once Kent and Cordelia refuse his desires, they become present-at-hand, but instead of examining why they refuse, he thrusts them from his sight. He beckons nature to do his will (1.4.268-82), he equates Tom’s condition with his own (3.4.47-48), and he expects Regan to “reason not the need” as he and his destructive retinue shake all care from their age. Nature, Tom, and Regan are blank slates upon which Lear inscribes his own perceptions and desires. Lear dies relying on objects as the basis for his perception: “Do you see this? Look on her... This feather stirs...if it be so, / It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows” (5.3.285-262-63). In the hovel scene Lear nearly reaches an understanding of his place in the world, but all progress disintegrates as he turns back to anger (“A plague upon you” [5.3.243]) and a delusional mastery over objects (“This feather stirs. She lives” [5.3.239]). Lear’s relations revolve around what objects can do to serve his purposes, but Object-Oriented Ontology demonstrates that we inhabit a reality in which the human-world relation is not the governing form of ontology.

Much of Harman’s ontology relies on the inexhaustible nature of objects. If objects are defined by their relations, then their being is effectively exhausted as they would be subsumed into a systematic totality. “Relational theory,” according to Harman, “has already performed its historical mission, and is now burdening us with its own excesses” (*Tool Being* 86). The object belongs to a world-system that, in its enormity and inexhaustibility, swallows up relations and components. Objects permeate our reality; they seamlessly and ceaselessly alter their context, and every modification, from an electron jumping an orbital to an oil spill, changes the makeup of the entire universe. This confirms that the “universe is made up of objects wrapped in objects wrapped in objects wrapped in objects” and “every object is both a substance and a complex of

relations” (2005, 83). Interpreting a text through Object-Oriented ontology understands that the text, its characters, and its meanings cannot be totalized. This approach brackets, in order to deconstruct, analyze, and reconstruct, those events in *Lear* when the king most disregards the autonomy of the things he interacts with and those moments when the text itself withdraws.

Cordelia’s love test is perhaps the most obvious example of how this methodology works. By proposing that their love for the king transcends all language and value, the sisters proclaim their love in inarticulate and incalculable terms. Cordelia, then, is left with nothing for only ‘nothing’ can outdo ‘everything.’ Lear’s conception of love is quantifiable and embodied by rhetorical flourish, but the charade ends when Cordelia says “Nothing, my lord” (1.1.87). She instantly becomes ‘present-to-hand’ as she has become an ‘Obstinate’ object, which is an entity that hinders the realization of some project. Tools become ‘present-at-hand’ when they break or otherwise fail to achieve the task that connects it to the perceiver. Harman notes that humans are normally absorbed and involved with things in their world, and the self normally forgets its relation to tools that it takes for granted; in fact, it is only when a tool breaks that “we discover what is unready-to-hand whenever we are surprised to find it missing” (2007, 74). In that way, the chemist usually interacts ‘ready-to-hand’ with the Bunsen burner, the fume hood, the structural integrity of the laboratory, and the left ventricle as she absorbs herself in her project; moreover, it is only when one of those things stops working that she becomes aware of them. Instead of treating his daughters as distinct subjects, Lear reduces them to their ability to proffer saccharine love-images, and he is capable of transitioning from ‘ready’ to ‘unready-to-hand’ because he treats them as objects.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Lear treats his daughters as Ready-at-Hand in the sense that he is merely using them as instruments to fulfill his own goal, but those objects become Unready-to-Hand when those objects are perceived as broken or obstinate.

## The division of Lear's objects

Lear fails to recognize the fluidity of networks or that connections between objects constantly modify; instead, he believes that his word brings things into existence. This confusion derives from a miscommunication between the two capacities of the king: the body natural “consisting of natural members as every other man has” and the body politic wherein “he and his subjects compose the corporation...utterly void of infancy, and old age, and other natural defects” (Kantorowicz 1957, 7). He cannot harmonize his body natural and body politic because he cannot recognize that in reality humans are both subjects and objects.<sup>14</sup> Entities that interact with Lear are merely wallpaper: two-dimensional, teleological, and decorative. When Lear interacts with Tom O’Bedlam, he instantly assumes Tom’s misery must be less than his own, saying “Hast thou given all to thy two daughters?” (3.4.48) Tom’s essence, his reality, withdraws from Lear as the king inscribes his own qualities onto Tom. The king also fails to recognize the degree to which the imperial edict, the voice of the body politic, fails him. Upon the heath Lear is under the delusion that he is still “every inch a king” and that “When I do stare, see how the subject quakes” (4.6.107-08). That delusion is challenged by his musing on social upheaval and the “great image of authority,” but Lear’s reflection is quickly overwhelmed by his body politic: “I am king, my masters, know you that?” (4.6.154-55, 196). On the one hand, Lear’s body politic is compromised due to the initial division, and on the other hand, his body natural is broken, battered, and blasted by the frozen landscape and his frozen daughters. Lear’s confusion upon hearing Cordelia reply “nothing” results from a belief that imperial desire is binding, and it is

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<sup>14</sup> In fact, Lear’s attempt on the heath, to feel what wretches feel, is to be both the king and the subject as wretch.

only when Cordelia breaks the procedure that his reality begins to fracture. The daughters serve as animate objects that symbolize his love and power.

The inanimate objects in the division scene are visual representations, much like word-images, of Lear's power. They serve to broadcast Lear's power, but like Cordelia they withdraw from Lear when he relies on them most. While Lear describes the "shadowy forests" and "plenteous rivers" he marks the land, calculates, and draws boundaries by the power of imperial edict, showing that his interaction with the map is simultaneously relational and reductive. King Lear undermines objects that he interacts with by reducing them to *only* their relation to him—the map is *just* an apparatus for illustrating imperial desires and Tom O'Bedlam is *just* a duplication of his own grief. The king's imperiousness falters for a moment when he asks Cordelia to "speak again" and "mend your speech a little." This is seemingly the first time Lear has encountered an object that resists his decree, the first object that presents itself as "present-at-hand," and the first object that instantly withdraws from him.

The map and coronet: "part betwixt you"

Lear gleefully divides the kingdom by making a series of decrees, but the map is an inert receptacle of meaning. Its tool-ness is relative to those agents who interact with it; the map as tool means something entirely different to Lear than it does to Cordelia. As with Cordelia, the map's real qualities—its inner reality—is concealed from view. Both objects are even further withdrawn from those, like Lear, who interact with them on a "present-at-hand" basis. Lear presents visual proof of his love and expects oral proof from his daughters, but Lear attempts to trade a love with boundaries for a love that is incalculable. As he speaks to Burgundy, Lear confuses the sensual object (external sensory experience) and the real object (the hidden interior)

of Cordelia, saying “When she was dear to us we did hold her so, / But now her price is fallen,” and Lear mistakenly connects the monetary value of her dowry to her human value: “If aught within that little seeming substance, / Or all of it...She’s there” (1.1.201-206). Lear treats Cordelia as he does the map; he rejects value and interiority when it resists his intent. He is mistaken in assuming that the divisions he makes, the proclamations he utters, or the tests he administers deal at all with the interior of things.

He cannot force Goneril and Regan to express authentic gestures of love, and, as R.A. Foakes notes, Lear’s gesture of love is pointless because “the kings could not transfer land except by an open letter of authorization conferring the title, written on parchment and with the great seal attached...Lear’s giving away of his lands is thus both foolish and illegal” (1996, 278-79). Lear believes his pronouncements determine the kingdom, but the plurality of an object is never comprehended. Indeed, maps intend to illustrate boundaries impartially, but, as contemporary events demonstrate, maps are often extensions of social and political arrangements. Maps illustrate how all objects objectify each other differently, and that reality is a constantly shifting torrent of relations in which the object is enmeshed. The map is reduced to the false hope Lear projects in his mind, and even though his declarations have little real effect in the play’s universe, it helps to articulate the action in the scene. It is a reminder of the kingdom he lost and acts as a barrier between the king and his subjects. As a prop, the map has been a small leather hide, an expansive parchment that Lear walks over, a rolled up paper that Lear rips, or a document that Lear carves with a knife as he delivers the pieces to Goneril and Regan. This highlights the depth of an object: no matter what form it takes, it is always the same. The map and Cordelia withdraw into utter isolation from Lear. Though perhaps unknowingly,

Shakespeare demonstrates the boundlessness of being by creating characters whose complexity resists totalization.

For Lear, the map and Cordelia are no more than simple projections of Lear's future desire to "unburthen'd crawl toward death" (1.1.40). Lear perceives these objects as "ready-to-hand" without theorizing or considering their full depth, and when the objects resist him, they become "unready-to-hand" and utterly withdrawn. To Lear, the scenes between the division and Cordelia's death are a series of attempts to conceive of objects as "present-at-hand." After the division, Lear begs his daughters to "reason not the need" of how many things he ought to have (2.4.262). He considers his place in relation to the "poor naked wretches" and, in an effort at solidarity, he expresses a desire to "Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel" (3.4.28, 35). Lear questions his identity ("is man no more than this"), the value of objects ("Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life"), and the cause of his tragedy ("Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts") (3.4.101, 5.3.321, 3.6.76-77). Lear's "present-at-hand" observations expose a tendency to perceive himself only in relation to the object's external properties. Winifred Nowotny argues that "the play is inexhaustibly patterned, and any act of critical consideration of its patterns must be at best limited," which highlights the similarity between a play and a methodology that resists totality (1982, 35). Cordelia, the map, and the play itself are equally inexhaustible, but Lear mistakenly believes he can define the map's borders or Cordelia's value. This is not an isolated event; it is not an initial ontological attitude that he atones for in a series of redemptive acts because his perceptual misapprehension is patterned. In Lear's universe there is no redemption, and in this world turned upside-down, relations are torn asunder and meaning is torn apart.

“Take (meta) physic, pomp”

Though he nearly attains an understanding of the complexity and autonomy of objects upon the heath, Lear never fully understands his place in reality. As the body politic, he sees himself as the adhesive that binds reality together or the *élan vital* that infuses meaning into lifeless masses, but he never properly understands his body natural or its relation to other things. Harman’s universe is deeply relational. It is the product of collisions between objects that interact superficially but never intimately, and *King Lear*’s action is the result of a titanic and imperious king colliding with objects, though never intimately. He treats every object as a tool with a finite amount of value. Ever the epitome of correlationism, Lear perceives objects only in relation to his projection, perceiving nature as a punitive tool: “Hear, nature, hear; dear goddess, hear! Suspend thy purpose,” and he calls upon nature to enact his revenges, imploring “thou, all-shaking thunder, / Smite flat the thick rotundity o’ the word! / Crack nature’s moulds” (1.4. 268-69, 3.2.6-8). He approaches understanding, saying “I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness. / I never gave you kingdom, called you children...No, I will be the pattern of all patience,” which still avoids personal responsibility, but he immediately turns to the assumption that he is “More sinned against than sinning” (3.2.16-17, 37, 59). While I suggest that Lear oscillates between objectification and an attempt to overcome that objectifying perception, Lear’s next speech inadvertently gestures towards correlationism. “The art of our necessities is strange,” Lear says, “and can make vile things precious” (3.2.69-70). In the early modern period, ‘art’ generally refers to “skill in doing something, esp. as the result of knowledge or practice” (“Art” n.1.1 *OED*). Because of knowledge or practice, then, Lear begins to understand the *art* of necessities. For Object-Oriented philosophers, the error of correlationism derives from a conflation of thinking and being; namely, that with knowledge the perceiving subject can

eventually entirely understand a thing's being. In this speech, then, Lear assumes that by knowing need he can understand the needy, and Lear's interactions with Kent further demonstrate that Lear fails to empathize with others because he only perceives them from his own point of view.

Lear's treatment of Kent in the first scene is harsh, and he is treated as little more than an object as the play continues. Upon finding Kent in the stocks, Lear mocks him saying "Ha, ha, look, he wears cruel garters," but when Lear hears that Cornwall is the cause of this treatment, he says "They could not, would not do't—'tis worse than murder / To do upon respect such violent outrage" (2.2.198, 213-14). Lear is not concerned with Kent's welfare; rather, Lear is angered that others abused his object. Kent becomes a tool in the Heideggerian sense because he is perceived only in relation to Lear's purpose or as an extension of Lear himself. Lear laughs at first sight and is quickly moved to a fury, bellowing "Vengeance, plague, death, confusion" when he realizes it was not accidental (2.2.284). Because of his solipsistic ontology, Lear is confined to perceiving how tragic circumstances affect him. Lear's casual dismissal of misfortune is not uncommon; he mocks Gloucester's blindness on the heath, saying "I remember thine eyes well enough. Doth thou squiny at me?" (4.6.129-30) Lear's interactions can be condensed to what those objects do for Lear. The king defends his right to retain the riotous knights because they "support the worships of their name," highlighting Lear's perception of the knights as an extension of himself (1.4.256-57). The knights, as symbols of his power, define Lear. Like Kent, the knights are an extension of Lear himself, and they emerge as broken, Unready-to-Hand objects that obstruct how Lear perceives himself. Because of Lear's holistic philosophy, which is demonstrated by his belief in order and custom, I suggest that Lear has difficulty constructing an identity apart from symbols that exemplify his power; namely, that, at

this point in the play, Lear cannot conceive of himself apart from his retinue. Although Lear consistently demonstrates an objectifying perception towards others, he gestures towards a broader perspective when he seeks to expose himself to what wretches feel.

Instead of retreating to the pastoral countryside and receiving nature's bounteous restorative powers, Lear accuses nature for being the cause of his despair: "But yet I call you servile ministers, / That will with two pernicious daughters joined... 'gainst a head / So old and white as this" (3.2.21-24). An Object-Oriented reality is one where the perceiver actively and conscientiously listens to the human and nonhuman voices that form the human. It is our job as objects to listen to our surroundings and recognize our place. Lear never attempts to fully understand the reality he inhabits, but he is protected from the pain of recognizing his insignificance by "The name, and all the additions to a king" (1.1.39). Harman, channeling Heidegger, notes that the human has *angst* just like any other temporal state of mind, but "Angst has no object. What gives us Angst is not some particular thing, but rather being-in-the-world" (2007, 70). To Heidegger, there is a great deal of this *angst* that one necessarily deals with after being thrown-into-the-world. "Thrownness" is simply the quality of being in relation to things; we are thrown into reality and we must recognize our role in it. After Regan throws Lear into the world, he undergoes the *angst* of uncovering his place in that world. The progress in Lear's sensitivity towards other objects is contradicted by a persistent selfishness. A mere 22 lines after Lear professes to feel what wretches feel, he entirely ignores Kent's and Gloucester's pleas to cover themselves and Tom's distressing conduct. Lear does not consider the fact that Tom says "Bless thy five wits, Tom's a-cold"; instead, Lear continues his barrage of inert philosophical inquiries (3.4.57). He assumes that because Tom is unhappy it must be for the same reason he is: after Tom mentions that he is cold, Lear asks if he has daughters, asks what work he does, then

praises the already cold man for being the “unaccommodated man” (3.4.105). Tom mentions that he is cold 86 lines after his initial complaint, but Lear—again—says “First let me talk with this philosopher: / What is the cause of thunder” (3.4.150-51). Tom mentions a third time that he is cold (3.4.169), but Lear says he “will keep still with my philosopher” (3.4.172). Lear is moved to pity but not to recognition and certainly not redemption. Though he attempts to uncover his “throwness,” Lear persistently confirms that he is tethered to the self-centered view of reality to which he will always return. He does not care if Kent is in the stocks but that others used his object without permission; furthermore, Lear shows no concern for the shivering Tom as he is too busy speculating on nakedness to notice that it is Tom’s nakedness that causes his shivering. Lear consistently confuses the external fluctuating properties of a thing for the thing itself. However, texts reveal the world into which we are all thrown by painting a frozen reality where one can isolate events, identify their causes, and learn from their consequences.

The text unfolds “what plaited cunning hides”

*King Lear* exemplifies the dire consequences of perceiving others as objects and ignoring the inexhaustibility of their interior being. Like all objects, the text withdraws, which is an example of an object’s boundless reservoir of being. Terence Hawkes notes that “there is no final ‘play itself’ to which we can at last turn...what does exist is a material object, or set of objects, on which we can and do operate in order to produce a range of ‘meanings’” (*William Shakespeare: King Lear* 61). *King Lear* takes on new meaning as new objects interact with it in different contexts. Before his supposed storm-soaked conversion, Lear banishes Kent, Cordelia, and the coronet—objects that defy his intentions—from his sight (1.1.125, 116-17, 139). Why is it, then, that Lear strips himself of the appurtenances of royalty and the additions of a king is viewed as gesturing towards a noble understanding of value? Lear cries “Off, off, you lendings!

Come. Unbutton here” not as a clarion call for the democracy of objects, but because he confusedly thrusts off the clothes thinking that Tom’s apparent contentment is due to his lack of things. Margherita Pascucci argues that “money is the thing itself, the unknowable a priori medium of exchange,” but Lear’s fixation is more relational than monetary (2013, 194). In the king’s mind money does not have nearly as much purchasing power as authority, and as the number of his decrees that go unheeded increase, the understanding of his place in the web of relations becomes increasingly more significant.

Lear approaches a democratic understanding of reality as he contemplates the thing itself; in fact, the thing itself is the most ontological examination in the play. The thing itself is deeply object-oriented; it is humanity as close to the real object before being withdrawn; it is humanity apart from royal addition; it is a “thing” without name; it is an object (“it”) and subject (“self”); and its meaning depends on nothing but “itself.” Lear questions what a human would be like without all the objects we gather to “plate sin with gold” (4.6.161). “Off, off” is not a magnanimous display of the former king’s redemptive arc, but it is a moment of panic as he ponders his identity apart from the body politic. Lear believed that all the externals were a part of a tapestry that articulated his entire being, but he realizes here—in part—that there is a hidden surplus in humanity. When Lear dares to “Take physic” and become exposed “to what wretches feel” he does so with the intent to consider “the thing itself” (3.4.34-35, 104). The king approaches such an understanding but fails to make that understanding permanent; indeed, he allows the Fool to enter the hovel before him and he falls to his knees to beg forgiveness of Cordelia (3.4.26, 4.7.70-74). These moments of dramatic authenticity move the audience, but they should also remind us of their “inexhaustibly patterned” opposites: when Lear refused to allow a freezing Edgar to seek shelter in the hovel and he knelt to beg Regan for more things

(3.4.150, 2.4.149). After returning to Cordelia, Lear seeks clarity once more, saying “we’ll live...Talk of court news, and we’ll talk with them too—Who loses and who wins, who’s in, who’s out—And take upon’s the mystery of things” (5.3.12-17). Lear’s projection is a utopia free of externals. The only relation he holds dear is that to his daughter, but the tragedy in the play’s final moments disintegrates that projection and force Lear to retreat into a reality determined by objects.

### The object of Lear’s horror

Between Edmund’s questionable decision to fight Edgar (5.3.147) and Lear carrying Cordelia’s body onto the stage (5.3.255) there is a sense that things are coming to a rather redemptive end, but the inert body—a sobering symbol of humans as objects—signals the return of Lear’s dependency on objects and the destruction of all he had done to understand others. Lear subjected himself to privation and nakedness to learn what it is like to be an object. Before the division, Lear was seemingly guided by the principle that his word brought things into existence, and everything he does after the division is part of an attempt to comprehend a disturbingly Realist reality he cannot control. Indeed, the very banner of that disturbing reality is his interaction with the “image of that horror,” the lifeless body of Cordelia (5.3.262). After the love test, Lear is disturbed by the horror that he cannot control Cordelia, but holding her dead body he might realize his mistake in ever attempting to contain her. When Lear turns to objectification of others, he exhibits two suggestive traits: a delusional reliance upon objects to validate his preconception of reality and an accusing, hyperbolic fury, which are both demonstrated in this final dramatic spectacle. Lear does not simply regress to earlier objectifying perceptions, but he responds to tragedy by objectifying others. The “image of that horror” causes Lear to howl, curse the onlookers, and then reach for a “looking-glass” thinking “If that her breath will mist or stain

the stone, / Why then, she lives” (5.3.259-61).<sup>15</sup> Lear ascends the stages of grief from anger to bargaining, saying “This feather stirs. She lives. If it be so, / It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows / That ever I have felt” (5.3.261-64). Lear attempts to make meaning out of this pattern by turning to the objectification of others. Indeed, his desire to “wear out” in a “wall’d prison” accomplishes the goal he meant to accomplish through the love test (5.3.18-19). Cordelia responds to the capture, saying “For thee, oppressed king, am I cast down,” which can be read as either a moment of altruistic sacrifice or a scathing accusation. The intensity of desolation in the play lessens ancillary concerns, and all that is left to examine is what little truth may be salvaged from this dramatic black hole. Edgar remarks that “we that are young / Shall never see so much, nor live so long,” which speaks to the self-subverting nature of the play, but he concludes by musing that in a world so torn and gaping there is nothing else to do except “Speak what we feel” (5.3.322-35). If, as Simon Palfrey suggests, Edgar is saying these lines alone onstage, then “we” is directed to the audience (2014, 247). Critics have often suggested that because Shakespeare’s ending rewrites Holinshed’s romantic endings as uncompromisingly tragic, Early Modern audiences would be astonished, and Derek Peat argues that *King Lear* “forces every spectator to choose between the contrary possibilities it holds in unresolved opposition” (1981, 43).<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Palfrey asserts that Edgar exists in “both an exploded and unexploded state, a principle of doubled ontology” (2014, 55). Tying both these observations together, it appears as if—in these last lines of the play—in a show of overt metatheatricity Shakespeare is directly inviting the audience to consider the multiplicity of subjectivity and the complex network of

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<sup>15</sup> In the lines, “Had I your tongues and eyes, I’d use them so that heaven’s vault should crack,” Lear turns to his earlier dependency on imperial edict, assuming that the potency of his tongue and eye—as symbols of his power—would move the heavens (5.3.256-7).

<sup>16</sup> For the impact Shakespeare’s ending would have had on Jacobean audiences see: Gabriel Egan *Green Shakespeare* (132-147) and Donna Woodford *Understanding King Lear* (1-6).

being. It is up to Edgar, and the audience he addresses, to make meaning out of apparent meaninglessness, and the first-person subjective “we” places the audience alongside the “thing itself.”

### Objects and the structure of meaning

The Object-Oriented approach stresses equality between things, whether they are linguistic propositions or humans, and that equality between things is the truth Lear searched for. Rather than turn towards the real Cordelia, Lear returns to a “present-at-hand” examination of his surroundings. Edgar’s surprise at this “horrific image” returns to the pattern of sight and epistemological uncertainty. Edgar is not entirely sure if this is reality or if he is a part of the fiction he created at Dover Cliff. After Lear thinks he sees signs of life in Cordelia, Albany claims that Lear “knows not what he says and vain is it / That we present us to him,” but the Quarto reads “He knowes not what he sees” (5.3.291-92). While either word is appropriate to describe the malfunction of Lear’s sensual faculties, the Quarto line is more accurate in describing the profundity of his misperception. The issue is not just Lear’s sensual awareness but a deeper, more insidious ontological confusion. Lear makes his hope his reality, insisting on visual proof to verify a reality his delusion generated. The story seems to promise a sense of redemption before the “horrific image” undermines all hope of restoration; likewise, Lear’s slow progress atop the heath and in the prison with Cordelia suggests a movement towards an authentic reality. These incremental progressions coax the audience into a false sense of hope, but the progress is subverted by the very images and symbols that proclaimed hope. *King Lear’s* characters and patterns break down and reverse upon themselves. Objects react to perception in a similar way.

The play's objects frustrate the characters and audience, which gives the play a rich three-dimensionality. As Lear leans down to Cordelia's lips, the audience struggles to see if her chest heaves or the feather trembles. We, like Lear, put great faith in objects. Lear's progress is disappointed not by Cordelia's death, but by the object that symbolizes her death. Although he admits that Cordelia is "dead as earth," he instantly asks for a looking glass and feather that would symbolize her life. Lear depends on objects in this moment of crisis, and he immediately returns to his resting state of fury, saying "you are men of stones" and "A plague upon you murders" (5.3. 255, 259, 267). In his grief, Lear curiously has time to brag about killing the hangman as well as his former glory as a swordsmen, saying "with my good biting falchion I would have made him skip. I am old now and these same crosses spoil me" (5.3.274-6).<sup>17</sup> In his final moments, he recycles the pattern of blame, accusing other objects of living when Cordelia is dead: "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life" (5.3.305). Lear asks to have his button undone, then cries "Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips, / Look there, look there!"(5.3.308-09). If the button is Cordelia's, then that was the object that restricted her breathing, which leads Lear to the delusion that the object was the only impediment to life. If it is his button, then it restricted his breathing, which leads him to believe that object releases him unto death. The object is that which bestows or takes away life, and the line "Do you see this?" demonstrates that Lear's understanding of reality relies on the confirmation of objects. The meaning Lear ascribes to an object collapses, whether in the form of a divided map or a lifeless Cordelia, which frustrates the expectations of the former king and the audience. Lear's initial reaction to Cordelia's death is to blame those around him, but he immediately turns to objects to

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<sup>17</sup> The word "crosses" can refer to the general troubles that Lear has encountered as well as a pun on swordplay. The word, in effect, conflates Lear's tragic woes and a preoccupation with himself. Likewise, the line "Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones!" can be read as both an utterance of Lear's dejection or an imperative that others share his grief (5.3.255). Lear frequently inscribes his own grief upon others.

substantiate his perception. He asks for a looking glass and any accompanying mist on the lens would be proof of life. He also uses a feather to corroborate his delusional perception, claiming that if the feather stirs it would “redeem all sorrows / That ever I have felt” (5.3.263-64). It is important to note that the feather stirring, not Cordelia’s life, is what would redeem all sorrows. He is not begging that Cordelia live, but that a proxy object symbolizing Cordelia give evidence of her life. Much like the map or the coronet, the feather would be a surrogate for Cordelia, but Lear is not directly concerned with Cordelia’s life; instead, his interest is focused on the object that through the transitive property would confirm her survival. One can see glimmers of Lear’s concern for *real objects*, but in moments of distress he turns towards the *sensual object* or proxy objects to ‘redeem’ his reality.

The Object-Oriented approach examines specific events of interactions between objects and reveals particular moments when Lear shows genuine concern for other objects, such as letting the Fool enter the hovel first and asking Cordelia’s forgiveness. While Lear does show signs of empathy, it is covered over by the rubble of ontological confusion. For Heidegger, *care* is an essential basis of being-in-the-world. *Care* is the “alongside-ness of things,” or the awareness that “I reside alongside” other objects (2000, 84). Lear’s *care*, his ability to view himself in an equal relation to others, is hidden under layers of a confused ontology. Renaissance monarchs dealt with their subjects indirectly through intermediaries. Lear does so by dealing with objects metonymically and transitively: he shows love to his daughters through a map, his power through his coronet, and the hope that Cordelia is alive through the feather. Both the map and the feather operate as symbols that point to some hidden ontological state, yet the king’s ontological confusion forces already withdrawn objects to withdraw even faster and further. The power of Lear’s delusion convinces him that the feather stirs and Cordelia’s lips move, showing

how withdrawn the object is from Lear. The object does not necessarily become more important or more valuable to Lear, but because he perceives the world through a human-centric realism, the object will always undermine his projection as it inevitably withdraws. Lear's failing eyes demand a verification for the reality he—and the audience—so desperately wants. The object is an endorsement of life and love, but objects also hinder Lear from grasping “the thing itself.” Lear uses objects to define and bound his reality, but the very nature of *Lear* is its indefiniteness, and the very nature of objects is that they resist penetration. Terence Hawkes argues that “the true nature of things may be said to lie not in things themselves, but in the relationships which we construct, and then perceive, between them” (1977, 17). To take another of Hawkes's musings, one might argue that “Shakespeare doesn't mean: we mean by Shakespeare,” so that—finally—we mean by Shakespeare through a network of relations between things in their moments of relation (1992, 3). Though critics attempt to trace a redemptive arc in the story, Lear dies with a focus on objects. Coppelia Kahn shows that Lear never lets go of the image of Cordelia as the negation of his adversaries or the “fantasy that a prison can be a nursery in which Cordelia has no independent being and exists solely for her father” (1986, 49). The king begins and ends the play relating to things as if they were a projection—without any subjectivity—and those objects continually withdraw from him as he struggles to bend them to his will. Just as Lear projects meaning onto objects, readers project meaning by *Lear*. If his plays are any indication, Shakespeare recognized the *meaning* contained in objects: Shylock's turquoise ring, Desdemona's handkerchief, Romeo's name, and Coriolanus's scars. Each object carries immense significance and is entangled in the vast world of relations the playwright created. To Shakespeare, the cannon in Henry VIII was especially significant.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### “THE ART OF OUR NECESSITIES”: *KING LEAR* AND MINIMALISM

King Lear, bare-headed and defying a raging tempest, acknowledges that “the art of our necessities is strange” and “can make vile things precious” (3. 2. 70-71). In this scene, upon the heath, Lear seemingly renounces courtly opulence and seeks to embrace mere necessities. Some critics, such as Andrew Hadfield, posit that Lear’s “redemption begins on the heath” (98). Other critics, however, argue “against the view of *Lear* as a story of redemption, and against revisionist humanist claims that it dramatizes self-redemption through knowledge” (Dollimore 60). The play’s progression is not toward redemption, but a refashioning of identity and value; indeed, *King Lear* is defined by an underlying suggestion that “the value of a figure is contingent upon its ‘place’—its relationship to other human or numerical figures” (Blank 122). Because materialism and social value play a pivotal role in critical analysis of the play, a *Lear* production benefits from dramatizing the tension between excess and necessity as a concrete instantiation of value. In dramatic terms, this tension may be considered to be the difference between opulent and minimalist productions. Jonathan Bate asserts that “minimalist design and physical proximity to the audience help tremendously,” but an opulent “fancy design on a cavernous stage...can all too often lead to a train wreck” (“What Makes a Great King Lear”). A theatrical train wreck fails to demonstrate the dramatic and emotional intensity by relying upon theatrical mechanics and visual effects. For a production to avoid such a train wreck, it should use set design to emphasize the dramatic elements and not allow the aesthetic to overshadow the drama.

As far as *King Lear* and minimalist staging goes, the dramatic elements are narrative elements that propel the play's action as well as the dramatic intensity of the play, which is often connected to the play's narrative pacing. This chapter will examine the way a minimalist production highlights integral themes of value, nakedness, and desolation by focusing on Peter Brook's 1971 film as the standard for this design. I will then demonstrate the ways Richard Eyre's 1998 film and Michael Elliot's 1984 film fail to underscore the tragedy, nakedness, and value that minimalism explores.<sup>18</sup>

Lear's divestment in the first act reveals that kingship is a metonymy imposed on the material subject. Because bestowed with all the appurtenances of a king, Lear perceives himself as a reified symbol of kingship and therefore one who determines value. As he begins to appreciate the world of those "poor naked wretches...that bide the pelting of this pitiless storm," the performance benefits from highlighting the king's movement away from the trappings of kingship (3.4. 28-29). A minimalist aesthetic underscores Lear's transition from valuing external trappings to valuing "unaccommodated man" (3.4.100). He recognizes the disparity between interior value and exterior pageantry by recognizing that "Through tatter'd clothes small vices do appear; / Robes and furr'd gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold" (4.6.158-59). Peter Brook, in *Quality of Mercy*, states that a director should not "make King Lear frail too early" because "if he is not a man of richness, power, and consequence, how can you watch his decline for three hours?" (72). For the scope of this analysis, minimalism is defined by its manifestation in performance and setting. In performance, its qualities are a subdued acting style with limited

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<sup>18</sup> This chapter will not examine films that do not directly confirm or contradict the objective of this examination. Trevor Nunn's 2008 production, with Ian McKellan as Lear, contains remarkable performances and minimalist techniques in its staging, but this chapter will not examine the film because it does not directly connect minimalist aesthetics to the elements of expansiveness and pervasive desolation that I investigate.

physical gesturing and a tonal consistency (the opposite of which would be performers who are prone to gratuitous bursts of passion). A minimalist setting deemphasizes the set itself as a way to emphasize the action on the stage.

Minimalist setting allows the characters and language to play center stage, and the set pieces are those objects that Lear might call ‘the bare necessities.’ Brook’s *King Lear* was heavily influenced by Jan Kott’s *Shakespeare our Contemporary*, which argues that “in *King Lear* the stage is empty throughout: there is nothing, except the cruel earth, where man goes on his journey from cradle to the grave” (372). “The stage must be empty,” Kott continues, because “on it a suicide, or rather its symbol, has been performed” (371). Kott argues that through his tribulations Lear becomes an Everyman figure, becoming a symbol of humanity, and that “Nature has evaporated from [civilization] almost completely. Man is confined to a room and surrounded by inanimate objects...He has been brought down to the level of inanimate objects and has become an object himself” (364). For Kott, the emptiness of the stage reflects human objectification, and Lear’s objectification of Cordelia and Kent is clearly connected to his instrumental objectification of the map, coronet, glass, and feather. The empty stage of Brook’s *King Lear* intensifies the drama by elevating Lear to the status of a symbol. *New York Times* theater critic Arnold Aronson notes that in Brook’s production “gone were romantic and quasi-realistic settings, replaced by austere yet bold scenography that often revealed the mechanics of the stage” (Peter Brook: The Empty Stage”). Such setting depicts the text laid bare by concentrating the atomic bits of Shakespeare—the language, themes, and characterization—to their most pure forms. Brook, in *The Empty Space*, claims that he “can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged” (11). In contrast to Bate’s

theatrical train wreck, Brook emphasizes dramatic tension by de-emphasizing objects. A minimalist setting adds to Lear's literal rejection of materialism, but a minimalist setting also emphasizes the inversely proportional relationship between madness and material. As Lear moves into madness he begins to reject the value of material objects, but when he cradles Cordelia's dead body in the last scene he turns to an emphasis on objects. The relation to Lear's perception of material objects is intimately connected to his perception of material reality, his ontology. This move is most thoroughly captured by pitting opulence and minimalism against each other on stage as much as it is in the text. Lear begins the play in an opulent court, expecting opulent love, and once he is cast out of court and familial love, he examines human relations shorn of opulent external properties. One can clearly hear the reverberations of opulence in Lear's statement that "all these bounds even from this line, to this, / With shadowy forests and with champagnes riched" (1.1.60-1). Those proclamations, and the gestures that accompany them, must be large and exaggerated in order to illustrate that Lear believes that his imperial edict is as good as divine fiat. That opulence is a type of royal showmanship, but opulent language takes a darker turn when he begins to threaten all those that resist the potency of his decrees. By the end of the first scene, Lear's opulence has transitioned into a sort of defeated, smoldering rage, which is illustrated in his lines "Nothing, I have sworn, I am firm" (1.1.244). The first scene is a sort of microcosm of the entire play. In the first scene, and the entire play itself, Lear's perception of himself in relation to others develops in three stages. In the first stage, Lear unequivocally trusts the power of opulence whether that is manifested in grand gestures, material objects, or language. The first stage is characterized by a distant, ready-to-hand relation to objects. The second stage is marked by a crisis in his conception of objects, and that crisis is represented as a transition from opulence to minimalism. This second stage is

understood as the transition from rage, which is directed at Kent in the first scene, to an evaluation of an object's value: "When she was dear to us, we did hold her so, / But now her price is fallen... Will you with those infirmities she owes... Take her, or leave her?" (1.1.193-203). In the second stage Lear begins to examine the object as present-at-hand. In the third stage, Lear descends into his resting state of petulant fury, which is most notable in his rebuking of Cordelia, "Better thou hadst / Not been born than not t'have pleased me better" (1.1.232-3). One can almost hear Lear second guessing his earlier proclamation, but because he believes in the royal decree so fully, he must double down on his word; indeed, when Burgundy asks Lear for a parcel of land in Cordelia's dowry, Lear responds "Nothing, I have sworn, I am firm" (1.1.244). I suggest that, at this point, Lear regrets his earlier rage, but his perception of imperial obligation as unapologetic and unwavering forces his hand, and Lear's moments of regret are systematically undermined by his failed perception and tendency to revert to anger.<sup>19</sup>

As a macrocosm, this three-stage sequence is demonstrated by the opulence of the first few scenes, the transition into fury at his daughters and at nature in the middle, and his final transition from mad to the hope of restoration to a final madness. In terms of production, the opulence of materialism and language in the first stage can be accompanied by an opulent direction, which would use grand props and gestures to accentuate courtly excess. The second stage should be marked by a desolate minimalism, which slows the pace of the actor's delivery and places the actor in direct relation to the object. Lear's "When she was dear to us" speech, in the second stage, should be delivered slowly and carefully in order to heighten the degree to

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<sup>19</sup> By reverting to an ontology dependent upon objectification, Lear also ends up reverting to an ideological structure of exploitation. According to Dollimore, "those in power react to crisis by entrenching themselves deeper within the ideology and social organization responsible for it" (200). I argue that Lear's ontology is constructed by ideology

which Lear scrutinizes the object.<sup>20</sup> The third stage should end on a minimalist note in order to capture the play's unmediated tragedy. The "Nothing I am firm" speech should emphasize the degree to which Lear has driven others away, which can be achieved by the actor delivering the lines brusquely and showing Lear in isolation on the stage.<sup>21</sup>

Minimalism accentuates the play's structural progressions and focuses on the dramatic tensions between characters and their values. An opulent aesthetic, however, assumes a distinct shape in both performance and setting. An opulent performance is often marked by grand physical gestures and a tendency to emphasize the delivery rather than the substance behind it. Laurence Olivier and Ian Holm are classified as those belonging to the "more orotund, self-consciously musical tradition" that showed a Gielgudian emphasis on verse-speaking and precision (*Shakespeare: An Illustrated Stage History* 224). Peter Brook, however, notes that actors must not start with the verse, but they must "find the essential meaning within the context of the play at that moment" ("Peter Brook in Conversation"). An opulent performance tends to diminish the nothingness (in costuming and relationships) inherent in the play in favor of the language, dramatics, and setting. Like Lear himself, an opulent performance focuses too much on superficial appearance rather than the action, which works to underscore the materialism in *Lear's* first scene.<sup>22</sup> An opulent setting also foregrounds the space and design rather than what takes place on the stage, but a minimalist design foregrounds the dramatic action by minimizing the attention given to props and setting. One could say that in opulent performances props and

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<sup>20</sup> Macbeth's "Is this a dagger" speech would be another example of how a character's examination of an object should be of primary concern.

<sup>21</sup> The play's final scene, with Lear holding the dead Cordelia, should also play on this isolated despondent fury.

<sup>22</sup> This is also evident in *Richard II* and *Timon of Athens*. In Act 4 Scene 1 of *Richard II*, the mirror scene is an example of a character moving from previous excess and objectification (ready-to-hand) to an examination of objects (present-at-hand). Likewise, in *Timon of Athens* Act 4 Scene 1, Timon transitions from treating human community as a mere fact (ready-to-hand) to musing on the 'broken bond between men' (unreadiness-to-hand).

setting become characters, but in minimalist performances props and setting merely lay the scene. If opulent design is not intended to highlight thematic elements, such setting may drown out subtleties. Due to this tendency to obscure the drama, G. Wilson Knight noted the difficulty of integrating the “dramatic quality” into the performance, and that the “theatrical technique” is unable to penetrate the “deeper meanings” that are only accessible to “literary analysis” (vi). A minimalist staging, such as Brook’s *King Lear*, deploys the theatrical techniques necessary to clarify the play’s dramatic qualities as fully as any literary analysis. The difference between opulent and minimalist staging is paralleled by Lear’s own transition from opulence to minimalism.

Lear’s own transformation can be improved by a transition in production, but both must be executed sensibly in order to depict a believable transformation. Lear renounces material trappings, but by “gaining deeper wisdom he loses control of his mind” (Kernodle 377). Jonathan Bate suggests that if Lear “give[s] too much to the anger in the first half you’re too exhausted for the madness in the second half, but if you have too much control to begin with, the transition into madness can seem too sudden” (“What Makes a Great King Lear”). Though the advice is directed to the actor playing Lear, this instruction can inform the aesthetics of the entire production. The transition from materialism to madness is directly proportional to the transition from theatrical opulence to minimalism. The tension between opulence and minimalism echoes the leitmotifs of nothing, nakedness, and materialism that define the nature of humanity in *Lear*’s universe. One must justify the use of minimalism as a viable aesthetic to examine how language, staging, and performance are enhanced by a minimalist *Lear*.

The language of *Lear* clearly indicates tonal and dramatic shifts for the actors to follow. The motifs of nakedness and value are best illustrated by the fact that “*King Lear* uses repeated

cues throughout, forcibly pointing shifts of mood or power” (Palfrey and Stern 240). The aural cue of hearing ‘naked’ spoken would be isolated and accentuated by pointing to the literal cue of Lear’s shifting power. Ben Crystal notes that “the language, while beautiful, is sparse” and that the “play is bleak” (104). The actor ought to bellow “Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks” (3. 2. 1) and whisper “No, I will be the pattern of all patience; / I will say nothing” (3. 2. 35-36). A tonal transition stresses the transition in Lear’s mind. Noam Chomsky, in *The Minimalist Program*, asserts that language systems have been “optimally designed—that the connection of sound to meaning was forged as simply as possible” and that a minimalist approach “takes a linguistic expression to be nothing other than a formal object that satisfies the interface condition in the most optimal way” (157). Like Brook’s minimalist staging, minimalist use of language asserts that dramatic meaning need not be encumbered by grandiose delivery and excessive intonation. Given Chomsky’s estimation of language, Cordelia’s terse “Nothing” satisfies the obligations of the love-test as much as Lear, Goneril, and Regan’s superfluities.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the most optimal performance of *Lear* is one that draws attention to the beautifully sparse language, which is achieved by a performance that employs the minimalist aesthetic in its set design.

A minimalist set design highlights dramatic action by focusing on the language rather than stage ornamentation, which is integral to a play that some believe is “too huge for the stage” (Bradley 247). Theater historian Olivia Eisinger avers that “if there is one predominating aesthetic theory within modern set design, it could be summarized in the Brechtian phrase of ‘rich minimalism,’ a careful selection of props, objects and costumes which collectively provide

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<sup>23</sup> In this scene the grandeur of Lear is located in his language, temperament, and delivery, but Cordelia’s presence is minimal in both language and delivery. Minimalism, in this case, is located in the setting and language, but its reverberations are felt in the way the audience perceives each character: Lear is perceived as grand and authoritarian while Cordelia is minimalized in his titanic shadow.

a framework of imagery for the production” (930). Some unfortunate performances follow Charles Lamb in assuming that “the greatness of *Lear* is not in corporal dimension, but in intellectual,” which renders *Lear* “essentially impossible to be represented on a stage” (121). Indeed, Lamb assumes that *Lear* is too vast and profound to be performed, and that the play’s anatomization of the human condition is all too despairing. Harold Bloom, who happens to concur with Lamb, notes that “*King Lear*, the modern touchstone for the sublime, hollows out if *Lear*’s greatness is scanted or denied” (512). *Lear*’s greatness should not be scanted or denied, but it is precisely the sublime element in *Lear* that makes the play eminently fit for the stage. It is the sublime that defines *King Lear*, for the play is deeply concerned with the intersections between humanity and nature and terror and ecstasy. *Lear*’s pathology is characterized as a “mind [trying] to grasp at something towards which it can make approaches but which it is incapable of attaining” (Wordsworth 28). *Lear* productions are most poignant when they extract that element of the sublime: the king’s initial opulence and his subsequent collapse should leave the audience in a state of awe. This is achieved by building the tension between *Lear*’s distorted values, through opulent set design and performance in the opening, and a subsequent minimalism that reveals his isolation and his examination of worth. This transition is made more poignant by a reversal in the last act, which shows that *Lear* attempts to grasp toward an understanding, but he is ultimately incapable of attaining it. A production that employs minimalist language and set design, which is in proportion to the dramatic shifts, will unify the production and clarify themes explicit in the play.

The opening scene should be performed with as much opulence as befits the succeeding minimalism. The opulence in the first scene is characterized by either setting (large, grand structures), language (archaic pronunciation and elongation in speech), or in acting (grand

gestures). In a review of Peter Brook's 1971 film, Laurence Kitchin remarks that "I like a touch of baroque excess in my Lears, on the lines of Michelangelo's Moses" but "[Lear's] best moments are downbeat," and Kitchin summarizes the need for consistency: "there is a glimpse of the royal, tragic hero who gets elbowed out of this rendering far too often" (72). Kitchin shows that one should not disregard excess or royalty, for the nakedness and weeds of Act III are given more significance when contrasted by the splendor Lear lost. Oliver Ford Davies notes the connection between setting and Lear's royalty, saying "Jan Kott sees the second half of the play as 'four beggars wandering in a wilderness'...Peter Brook said that 'all periods are inappropriate,' but in a smaller space with less formal costuming, he thought you would naturally veer towards what he called 'Mister'" (38-39). For Brook, allowing Lear to become 'Mister,' to become a representation of the human condition, is located on an empty stage. In the first scene, the audience must be shown the royalty of Lear so that the subsequent nakedness of Lear is agonizing; however, if the play begins with a minimalist setting, then the nakedness of the minimalism succeeding it would be less tragic.

*King Lear* productions have set the first scene in many ways, but the 1971 Peter Brook film most successfully contrasts the grandness of Lear in the opening scenes with his desperation in the later ones. In Brook's film, Lear's grandness is not located in opulent setting or the actor's delivery, but it is in the control Scofield exerts over others through his menacing gaze and gnarled voice. Brook's *Lear* begins with anonymous faces locked in a petrified gaze towards the king. The court consists of a single pillar in the middle of a sparsely decorated room that resembles a mixture of a stone-age hovel and a science fiction prison cell. The camera fixates on Lear, which exposes his tyrannical control, and behind him are a massive steel door and two slits in a drab stone wall that resemble ancient burial tombs. This chronological *mélange* implies that

he somehow resists time, which is supplemented by only two mobile set pieces: a stone coronet and a map seemingly fashioned from an animal's hide. 'Mobile' pieces are objects with which the characters interact. The significance of mobile set pieces is reused in the last scene, which illustrates Lear's emphasis on the value of objects. The set pieces that the actors interact with, the map and coronet, serve important functions in the scene.

In Brook's film the map is small and the coronet is an indication of Lear's royalty alone. This would suggest a grandness of Lear's presence, relying on individual severity rather than material opulence. Brook's film cuts the 'part betwixt you' line and the gesture that accompanies it, which implies that Lear means to retain more of his kingdom than a "reservation of an hundred knights" (1. 1. 131). The coronet itself is never seen after it is brought in, and Scofield neither wears the crown nor refers to it, showing that Lear rules by personal authority rather than symbolic representation. These 'mobile set pieces,' which are the set pieces that characters interact with, are significant objects of worth to Lear that return in the play's last scene. Scofield's grandeur is not based on objects; instead, it is based on his piercing gaze and the scorn in his voice. Davies rightly claims that the setting should indicate that Lear's fixation on opulence "is about the thin buttress of our acquired surroundings keeping chaos at bay" (162). The theatrical space, as well as the appurtenances of royalty, should speak to Lear's command over his kingdom.

Scofield's grimacing face and severe voice make the scene frightening and punitive rather than the product of a feeble old man's senility. Lusardi and Schlueter, in *Reading Shakespeare in Performance*, claim that the map is a physical token of Lear's 'darker purpose,' and that the coronet is a "documentation of Lear's potency" (32). They argue that both pieces are not "merely property that assists Lear," but when "prominently displayed, [they] become a

means of exposition and a richly evocative visual diagram of the several but connected actions in the scene” (32). The coronet and map are visual representations of Lear’s power, which are the very trappings he must overcome as he begins to adopt a minimalist perspective. Lear’s disavowal of these objects is not an indication of his pursuing an ethical ontology. They are merely objects that he thrusts away in a moment of anger because they present themselves as unready-to-hand<sup>24</sup>. The language of the first scene speaks to Lear’s initial focus on the value of gestures and objects. Lear connects gesture and object by forcing Cordelia to partake in his delusion, saying “what can you say to draw / A third more opulent than your sisters?” (1. 1. 83-84). Harry V. Jaffa proposes that Lear orchestrated a complex scheme wherein “Lear was certainly using the dowries, and the marriages, as instruments of policy,” so that his “scheme of marrying Cordelia to Burgundy gave good promise of leading to a stable international system” (414-15). The way Lear uses the map, coronet, and love test suggests that Lear intends for Cordelia to sustain his dynasty, but I propose that it indicates that the king envisions Cordelia to rule in the same fashion he had ruled.

In the love test, he exposes the Machiavellian tactics to Cordelia that he used to maintain power. Lear imposes a feudal emphasis on gift-giving and the importance of objects as an antithesis—exemplified in Edmund—to an emerging proto-capitalism and the importance of the individual. Indeed, Habermas understands authority to be a “kind of status attribute” that underlines “the staging of the publicity involved in representation” through objects—like coronets—or through conduct—like gesture (6-8). Lear stages the love-test to reinforce the

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<sup>24</sup> I would suggest, furthermore, that Lear’s frustrated “Off, off, you lendings” is not itself a recognition of the inherent value of an object. While one may read that short speech as a growing acknowledgement of ‘the thing itself,’ Lear still depends on objects to fashion his identity. Instead of the coronet symbolizing his power, the lack of lendings, in his mind, symbolizes his plight.

feudal conception of objects as a reified symbol of imperial power. Edmund represents emerging ideologies, such as those of proto-capitalism and the individual, but he also represents the shift away from the feudal tendency to represent power by objects. With this reading in mind, Lear is not a doddering old fool but a Scofieldian ruler who imposes conformity. This interpretation can be supplemented by playing Lear as both determined to execute his monarchical demands and foolishly insistent on maudlin displays of affection. Obviously, maudlin and authoritarian do not easily co-exist, and “Cordelia’s refusal to participate in the love test, therefore, seriously flawed Lear’s carefully conceived succession design,” which plays exceedingly well alongside a self-indulgent and narcissistic king (Lusardi and Schlueter 28). Therefore, Lear’s subsequent awareness of the plight of others is all the more convincing. When Lear muses “Take physic, pomp; / Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel” he addresses the part of himself that favored exterior display over interior authenticity (3.4. 33-34). Therefore, the heath is the space where he embraces an intrinsic part of his character, and it is the space where minimalism finally begins to triumph. While Tom and Lear are naked in the rain, the production should mirror their physical transition by embracing a naked, minimalist aesthetic. The heath scene depicts Lear attempting to comprehend the plight of others, but the play’s last scene is of more significance because it so perfectly comes full circle whence it began.

The heath scenes depict the sublime in *Lear*, and the literal expansion of space mirrors the transition from domestic drama to global tragedy. The space Lear inhabits in the opening scenes reflects his royalty, but the heath reflects Lear’s inner turmoil and the cosmic implications of the all-encompassing tragedy. The tempest relates to the tempest in his mind but also the tempest that he has afflicted on his kingdom, causing the play to be a comment on global social and political issues rather than a domestic confrontation. The play is, as Jonathan Dollimore

points out, “about power, property, and inheritance” (197). Scenes like the heath scene and Brook’s staging of the final scene in a vast, desolate tundra, create the sense that the play’s tragedy cannot be confined by political boundaries. Laurence Olivier commented on the difficulties of playing Lear, saying “when you have the strength for it, you’re too young, when you’ve the age you’re too old” (Quoted in Crystal 4). Tucker Orbison supports this understanding, claiming that “*King Lear* is one of those big plays which will not be squeezed into a small box. Reduced...to spatial bankruptcy, it cannot meet its emotional commitments” (216). Orbison goes on to say that Olivier’s film “shuns the two sentimental extremes of comforting reassurance and cynical despair (Brook’s cosmic, existential film, for example)” (215). Brook does not bankrupt the spatial elements of *Lear*, and Scofield avoids Olivier’s problem by finding an energy and command in psychological presence. Brook’s lack of spatial context “depict[s] the range of loci, and thus the range of reality’s planes...its literal emptiness,” which makes a break away from realism and subscribes to minimalism (Counsell 147). Scofield balances between the seemingly fragile Olivier and “the barnstorming style of Sir Donald Wolfitt” (Bate “What Makes a Great Lear”). This necessary balance is most evident in the final scene, which reverses all the progress that Lear has made.

The heath of Elliot’s and Eyre’s films upholds the tradition of pouring rain, but the heath of Brook’s film is a desolate Northern wasteland. If the heath is meant to suggest Lear’s internal state of mind, Brook’s depiction elicits the cold desolation and loneliness that connects to the play’s final scene, and the sparse setting highlights the words rather than the background. Indeed, the nakedness of the setting underlines the physical nakedness Lear undergoes as his mind, clothes, titles, and kingdom are stripped from him. Kott notes that in the mid-nineteenth century, “theatrical machinery was more and more perfect, so that the storm, wind, and rain could drown

the actors' voices more and more effectively," but in such a theater Shakespeare became "untheatrical" (361). In the late nineteenth century, however, "the storm was to rage in Lear's and Gloucester's breast rather than on the stage. The trouble was...he suddenly became ridiculous" (361). If setting the heath scenes in specific, historical locations is untheatrical and making the storm an internal storm alone is pathetic, then the only way to set the scene is in a no-place, an unlocalized place.<sup>25</sup> Staging the scene upon an unlocalized place emphasizes dramatic exposition and tension over the obtrusive stage mechanics to which Kott refers. The bleak isolation of such a setting also stresses Lear's torment. Brook's film not only "lay[s] to rest the royal Lear," but it also refuses any resolution (Tynan "The Triumph of Stratford's Lear"). A minimalist aesthetic extracts the play's focus on desolation and its aesthetic of indefiniteness.

The play patterns itself on uncertainty, whether it is perceptual or conceptual, and *Lear* resists resolution every time a character approaches epiphany. Albany's premature speech just before Lear's death "claims a return to order and gratifies one's assumptions that the norms of society and the norms of plays can be counted on" (21, 27). Lear commences the play as imperious, severe, and deluded, and Walter Foreman notes that by the play's end, Lear "recapitula[tes] the emotional responses to the world that he has exhibited throughout the earlier parts of the play...the primary emotional pattern here is cyclic—despairing and hopeful according to whether Cordelia is dead or alive" (155). Proving that the wheel has truly come full circle, the final scene invalidates Lear's earlier attempts to acknowledge the value of others. This interpretation of the last scene is in harmony with a minimalist performance and setting.

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<sup>25</sup> Alan Dessen argues that unlocalized places are "constructed and employed to tell a story as vigorously and excitingly and as intensely as possible, with spectators informed about the locale 'by the words they heard, not the sights they saw,' so that 'place was given specific emphasis only when and to the degree the narrative required' (85).

In a fury similar to the first scene, Lear rages at the onlookers who are “men of stones,” and Lear relapses into raging at nature and the gods, saying “Had I your tongues and eyes, I would use them so, / That heaven’s vault should crack” (5. 3. 257-59). After he realizes the futility of his rage he mutters “She’s gone forever,” and then he turns to valuing a reality based on objects—appurtenances of appearance—demanding that objects validate his delusions: “Lend me a looking glass...This feather stirs, she lives” (5.3. 261, 265). Lear returns to objects because he depends on them to grant him meaning. He does not know who he is apart from royal authority; indeed, Goneril rebukes him for being an “Idle old man, / That still would manage those authorities / That he hath given away” (1.3.16-18). Throughout the play Lear continues to think of himself as king even though he holds no real power (2.4.91, 4.6.187-89). Not only does Lear not know himself, but what little he does understand is founded upon the external symbols of power. Lear attempts, as he had done upon the heath, to bargain with fate, the elements, or the gods, claiming that if the feather stirs it would “redeem all sorrows” (5.3. 266). He turns to the same focus on external objects that he displayed in the first scene. In these lines it is the feather, not Cordelia, that would redeem all sorrows. The heath, and everything between the first and last scene, is enveloped by Lear’s futile attempt to acknowledge the value of objects. Richard Proudfoot remarks that Brook’s film displays this lack of redemption, saying “on no account must the shaken audience be allowed any reassurance before leaving the theatre” (166).

The image of Scofield holding the dead Cordelia, played by Anne-Lise Gabold, alone on the wasteland, indicates that there is no resolution, and that “image of our horror” confirms Edgar’s closing speech (5.3.279) Many critics have attempted to interpret meanings behind Edgar’s last lines, but it is certain that these lines “defy the decorous pattern of the usual ending” and that “Shakespeare implies that any return to routine after the events of this tragedy would constitute

an outrage to one's sense of moral justice as well as to one's sense of artistic rightness" (Shaw 264). Edgar's bleak observation "we that are young / Shall never see so much, nor live so long," is in direct contrast to Albany's earlier lines "What comfort to this great decay may come / Shall be applied...All friends shall taste / The wages of their virtue" (5. 2. 328, 297-304). Albany coaxes the audience into believing that some degree of resolution is possible, but Edgar's lines recognize the pervasive barrenness of *King Lear* that a minimalist direction captures. The ending of Eyre's *Lear*, like its first scene, employs minimalist staging and cinematography; however, Holm's calculated delivery and Eyre's setting choices make it seem as if *Lear* is more reasoned than mad. The setting is surgically clean: a uniform orange in the first scene is swapped for a consistent black in the last scene. In keeping with minimalist aesthetics, Holm carries Victoria Hamilton, as Cordelia, on a stage that is encompassed by black nothingness, which illustrates the theme of 'nothing' and an objectifying ontology, but the enclosed set fails to speak to the play's cosmic scope.

Brook's film foregrounds the pervasive tragedy of the drama. Jay Halio notes that in Brook's production "the emphasis was clearly on the actors and the language they spoke, not spectacle," but one of the main thematic and characterization elements is Lear's confusion, which makes *Lear* inherently concerned with spectacle and displays of worth (110). That spectacle, however, is illustrated by Scofield's seething fury and terrifyingly barren landscapes. Halio remarks that Brook's production favors "a timeless setting, a setting that conveyed very harsh, cruel and realistic situation" (101). Setting the play in a confined cell brilliantly contrasts the expansiveness in later scenes. This notion connects to Bate's assertion that giving too much too early reduces the momentum later in the play. Bate points to the inevitable compromise a minimalist setting must make, for if a production gives too much minimalism in the beginning,

the minimalism by play's end is trite; conversely, if Lear gives too much passion in the beginning, the intense passion that should be reserved for the last scene is equally trite.

Scotfield's early potency is contrasted by the despondency of the last scene, which he evokes by a trembling voice and weakened physical presence. The last scene, as Edgar notes, should leave the audience questioning how life can continue, and Peter Brook's setting and cinematography—along with Scotfield's raspy, staccato delivery—capture this balance perfectly. The setting of Brook's *Lear* alternates from claustrophobic rooms to the vast expanses of a snow-covered wasteland, capturing Lear's movement from grandeur to minimalism.<sup>26</sup> Scotfield dominates the confined room in scene one, but when Lear is exposed to the expansive beach in the last scene, the camera, Scotfield's voice, and Lear's mind become fragmented. Scotfield's Lear has a grand presence in a confined minimalist setting, but in the last scene he is enveloped by the setting's openness, underscoring both the pervasive implications of the tragedy and how fractured the once opulent king has become. The beach may appear to swallow Lear entirely, but the close-up, fractured shots—with Cordelia at once alive behind him and then lying dead on the ground—give an intimate insight into Lear's perspective. Brook's setting and directing maximize thematic elements within the text by using minimalist techniques. In the first scene Scotfield remains perfectly still, which demonstrates that grandeur is located in individual vigor rather than material symbols of power. Brook's minimal set corresponds with Scotfield's severe looks and gravelly voice. The set illustrates the 'great decay' of the play, and as Lear mourns Cordelia

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<sup>26</sup> In Brook's film, Lear is grand in small rooms; his voice, gaze, and personality are like a black hole that overwhelms by the force of his magnetism. In the vast expanses of the later scenes, however, Lear is minimized in comparison the frozen wasteland that surrounds him. In small rooms his imperious makes him imperial, but in nature he is an Everyman; he is, as all humans are, dwarfed by nature.

on a desolate beach the audience must wonder if he deliriously imagines Albany and Edgar and if—due to the weight of this sad time—we will ever see so much or live so long.

Elliot chooses to stage the tragic finale in the same setting as scene one, but Lear is surrounded by close to a dozen actors. Halio notes that “in more recent productions, such as Laurence Olivier’s portrayal, Lear has assumed a more human, rather than titanic, stature,” which underestimates the scope of the play and assumes that tragedy must be downplayed to make Lear more human (99). Anthony Davies argues that a performance should not deny the play’s sociopolitical ramifications because “In making *King Lear* ‘so much a story of our time,’ it is arguable that the play has been reduced to the dimension of a domestic quarrel” (251). The pervasive bareness of Brook’s film forces it to become globalized. Northrop Frye suggests that “it takes a madman to see into the heart of tragedy...I’ve often come back to the *titanic* size of Lear, which is not a size of body or ultimately social rank, but of language” (119, emphasis mine). Kenneth Tynan testifies to the unique passion of Scofield’s delivery: “one notes at once the old man’s trick of dwelling on unexpected vowels and lurching through phases as if his voice were barely under rational control” (“The Triumph of Stratford’s Lear”). Scofield’s delivery—with his clipped speaking and long pauses—highlights his humanity and gives him a three-dimensionality that makes him seem lifelike. Scofield’s initial simmering rage also makes the transition into the mad rage of the later scenes more convincing. A minimalist delivery, like a minimalist set, captures and extracts the play’s uncompromising tragedy.

By reducing the amount of tonal and physical excess, the production can draw out the most intimate aspects of the unfolding drama. Peggy Phelan notes the necessity for open space in the play’s coda: “Lear’s question, ‘Who is it that can tell me who I am?’ is theatre’s, and our own most intimate question. Without a fixed boundary in time or space, theatre strips us of our

location and gives us a taste of a property-less being” (33). For the audience, this theatrical nakedness makes the drama ubiquitous, or what Phelan calls “the final revelation that *you are this*” (33). Olivier and Holm’s polished delivery puts a barrier between the audience and the character, making Lear appear rather formal in as his life utterly unravels. Brook’s film begins in a confined space and opens up to an expansive space that suggests ‘*this space is yours.*’ The ease with which one can see themselves as Lear is what drives its horror and tragedy. It is the terror that comes from seeing oneself in Lear that makes this tragedy horrific; the audience should detest Lear and identify with him. G. Wilson Knight notes that “we do not watch Lear: ‘We are Lear.’ There is no visual effect, no rigid subject-object relation...but an absolute unspatial unity of spirit” (113). Minimalism amplifies the all-consuming tragedy because it maximizes unspatial unity—as Brook’s vague wasteland so expertly exemplifies—for the audience can quickly situate a production based on sociohistorical images. Brook’s production simultaneously suggests future dystopia and pre-civilized Scandinavia. A *Lear* production *becomes* the audience proportional to the degree that it disregards spatio-temporal limitations, and it will fully exhibit the unremitting tragedy of the play by making accessible to the audience.

The dramatic elements that minimalist productions fully explore tend to be abstract and difficult to stage, but the aesthetic draws out the moments of sublimity and psychological desolation that are essential to *King Lear*. A.C. Bradley—like Bloom, Knight, and Lamb—believed that *Lear* is utterly unable to be captured on stage in its entirety. Bradley avers that “the immense scope of the work; the mass and variety of intense experience which it contains; the interpenetration of sublime imagination...the vagueness of scene where the action takes place...interfere[s] with dramatic clearness,” which results in Bradley’s assertion that “the theatre not only refuses to reveal itself fully through the senses but seems to be almost in

contradiction with their reports” (247). Bradley argues that the sublime and the intensity of the play make it uncontainable. So why attempt to contain it at all? A minimalist production emphasizes these concepts by refusing to contain them, and such a production accentuates the sublime by showing images that “arouse enjoyment but with horror” (Kant 47). The minimalist directing and staging of Brook’s film, with tight shots and time-neutral sets, highlights the degree to which Lear’s universe is saturated with tragedy. Indeed, the close-up shots, combined with Scofield’s performance, suggest that his despotic immensity pervades all. A production of *Lear* captures these elements by reducing them to their most elementary form, and because “the minimalist aesthetic derives from reductionism” it eliminates unnecessary ornamentation and “emphasizes structural logic and clarity of style” (Holmberg 81). Because devastation permeates throughout the play, an austere, naked production makes the destruction more visceral. Although *King Lear* may be difficult to stage, reducing the play to its bare necessities grants the clarity and structural trajectory that Bradley assumes is absent from the text. The play’s abstract themes, desolation and value, are fully manifested in a minimalist production, and the audience witnesses the evidence of that desolation rather than merely allowing the text to suggest it. For the audience, the dramatic response to seeing tragedy in the acting and setting enhances the text’s tragic qualities, and the ubiquity of that tragedy exemplifies the pervasiveness of suffering and intensifies the intimate relationship between Lear and the audience. Lear must divest himself of the unnecessary ornamentation that diverts attention from the reality he—and the audience—seek to embrace.

## CONCLUSION:

### ‘TIS THE INFIRMITY OF OUR AGE TO SLENDERLY KNOW ANOTHER

Shakespeare's canon is rife with objects that allure, resist, and relate, but *King Lear*, perhaps more than any other play, utterly dissolves material reality, exposing unaccommodated humanity. *Lear*'s tragic irresolution thrusts human and nonhuman objects into the foreground. Reducing the quantity of objects renders the significance of remaining objects more meaningful. Although Shylock may lose his possessions, Venice will remain, and although Denmark's royal lineage may be extinguished, global, if not local, restoration is at least conceivable. *King Lear* does not offer its audience such optimism, and the play's barrenness accentuates authentic value. Because the play deals explicitly with mastery of nature, it is necessary to parse the ontological structure that supports such a worldview.

King Lear's perception of himself in relation to others is an illustration of Early Modern anxieties concerning the transition from organicism to mechanism. Robert Watson notes that in the Renaissance there existed an "effort to recover simple experience out in the fields or the wilderness, to re-immense oneself in the natural order," which was "partly fueled by a craving for unmediated knowledge in any form," (3) yet "empirical science...attempted to break through the barriers that forestalled full knowledge, and hence full possession, of other minds and physical objects" (33). Lear reveals a concern that he is just a part of the whole or just a mechanical process and he responds to the concern by attempting to master nature. One of the problems

Object-Oriented Ontology addresses is the subject-object dualism that was inherited from the Enlightenment, which shifts investigation of reality from epistemological to ontological.

This ‘Copernican Revolution’ asks not what objects *are* but how we *know* they are. Levi Bryant argues that this shift “condemns philosophy to a thoroughly anthropocentric reference...being is thereby reduced to what being is for us” (19).<sup>27</sup> Though correlationsim is an Enlightenment shift, it is similar to the Early Modern dispute between organicism and mechanism that saturates *Lear*. Part of Lear’s ontological confusion is his position on the spectrum between organicism and mechanism. Lear’s belief in custom, social order, and divine order confirms his belief in a holistic, structured reality but perceives himself as outside that structure.<sup>28</sup> Lear and Gloucester, representing the older generation, perceive reality as organic, and, as Gabriel Egan points out, they believe that “society *is* like a body, like a family, and like the Earth” (143). Egan argues convincingly that rethinking organic unity and holistic structures, such as his references to the Gaia Hypothesis, is a useful solvent to the post-Enlightenment thought. Edmund represents the shift towards mechanistic thinking by challenging nature, and Simon Estok notes that this challenge “reflects the erosion of analogical thinking under the early modern winds of mechanistic change” (26).<sup>29</sup> For Edmund, the great foppery of the world is maintaining custom. He attempts to dissolve the organic bonds that seemingly hold society together; however, Lear preempts Edmund in dissolving those organic bonds through his own organic correlationism. Lear’s organic reality is ordered and holistic, but because of his

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<sup>27</sup> Object-Oriented philosophies push back against the tradition of asking how we know by underlining the perennial question: what is being? Asking *how* we know a thing assumes the object is either static or that it is reducible.

<sup>28</sup> It is as if Lear believes that his imperial will vitalizes inert matter: he imprints his past upon Tom, he exerts his will upon his daughters, and he assumes nature will do his bidding.

<sup>29</sup> Mechanistic thought presupposes that all entities are reducible to their component parts, functions, and effects, which evaporates any holistic structures. “The task confronting biology as a science,” for Heidegger, “is to liberate ourselves from the mechanistic conception of life” (“The Question concerning Technology” 285).

correlationism, Lear repeatedly shows that he perceives above nature, Kent, his daughters, and nonhuman objects as subject to his will.<sup>30</sup> Object-Oriented Ontology is in the unique position of offering a solution to both of these similar binaries by showing that holistic order and mechanical processes are not mutually exclusive; indeed, mechanical processes, such as ATP-synthase that—operating like a rotor—generates energy, routinely work simultaneously alongside organic processes.

The divide between epistemology and ontology is bridged by Heidegger's assertion that being-alongside leads to knowing, and his philosophy attempts to show that speculating upon an object's being, as opposed to scientific analysis, is the key to understanding our own conscious being. In a delightful tirade against Object-Oriented philosophies, Peter Wolfendale argues that "Harman claims to get at the reality that the sciences can never describe by closely describing the structure of seeming. Far from challenging the retreat of philosophers from the world into the bastion of consciousness, he has simply extended the domain of consciousness into the world" (365). Wolfendale's exposes the problem of animism in Harman's Realism. If Harman's reality is replete with objects of equal and inexhaustible agency, then questions of responsibility and agency necessarily arise. In their writings, Object-Oriented authors tend to be more concerned with theoretical issues, and while the democracy of objects is theoretically appealing, it is rarely applied to contemporary issues.

Object-Oriented work is inclined to detached theoretical disputations rather than investing itself in practical concerns or demonstrating how such a perspective can produce tangible results. Because a 'flat ontology' situates itself in between an organic 'overmining' and

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<sup>30</sup> Lear believes in holistic structures, custom, and order, but he undermines those structures by assuming that he is not subject to those natural bonds. Because Lear assumes his will is superior to others' (correlationism), he destroys those structures.

a mechanistic ‘undermining,’ the human subject unfortunately becomes flattened in the process. In order to develop, Object-Oriented Ontology must demonstrate the consequences of correlationist perspectives and the demonstrable benefits that ‘flat ontology’ provides. Timothy Morton argues that Object-Oriented Ontology is “the only non-reductionist, non-atomic ontology on the market,” but in order to validate that claim, Morton and his colleagues must distinguish their Ontology from systems theorists, Deleuzians, Latourians, and process philosopher, and they must penetrate the fog of metaphysical polemics, which, for the most part, take place on the philosopher’s personal blogs (165). It is odd, then, that more Object-Oriented work does not make use of Heidegger’s ‘letting be.’

What is a political policy that lets things be? How would Lear respond to recognizing the value in letting things be? Object-Oriented Ontology diagnoses philosophical predicaments but it largely fails to treat them. One way to respond to this too-speculative Speculative Realism is to reinstate the human subject in a constructive, emancipatory role. For Heidegger, the human perceiver discloses nature by being-alongside it, but humanity has existed one-dimensionally, perceiving our environment as raw material. George Sessions maintains that “our theoretical science can be used to appreciate and understand the world and produce ecologically benign technology, or we can erroneously try to dominate the planet with it. Our self-reflexivity has made us aware...so that we can correct ourselves” (19). In his attempt to persuade critics of Heidegger’s usefulness in deep ecology, Michael Zimmerman argues that the “environmental crisis is a symptom of a still deeper crisis: a humanity made arrogant by its blindness to what it means to be human,” and that, according to Heidegger, “human existence is not the master of entities, but rather is in service of the self-manifesting of entities” (201).

In order to offer meaningful antidotes to anthropogenic issues, whether environmental, social, or political, Object-Oriented Ontology should reinscribe the human subject's role in generating benign technologies, public policies, or simply proposing practical suggestions. One way to contest anthropocentric ontology is to examine the consequences, as I hope to have done through an analysis of Lear, but confronting the consequences must be supplemented by action. It is not enough for Lear to recognize the error of his ways, as he does briefly upon the heath, but resolution must accompany recognition. If we are to ever but slenderly know ourselves, humans must face responsibility, and as Sessions argues, we must apply our self-reflexivity and technology to attenuate existing crises. In his lecture on poetry, Heidegger asserts that contemporary human's dwelling alongside nature is "completely unpoetic...because of a peculiar excess of raging, measuring, and calculating" (Heidegger qtd. in McWhorter 19). No three words more accurately describe Lear's, and our own, dwelling alongside others.

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