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Traces of Inconclusiveness:
Polysemy and Ambiguity in *King Lear*

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Orientador: Luiz Fernando Ferreira Sá

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Chief Poet! and ye clouds of Albion,
Begetters of our deep eternal theme,
When through the old oak forest I am gone,
Let me not wander in a barren dream,
But when I am consumed in the fire,
Give me new Phoenix wings to fly at my desire.
John Keats, *On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again*

Abstract

Set in a supposed ancient Britain, *King Lear* materializes the anxieties of Early Modern England through a tendency towards ambiguity that characterizes the play's polysemic construction and, by consistently challenging any assurances regarding the human condition, it brings about a growing sense of inconclusiveness that culminates in its bleak ending. The major objective is to demonstrate how *King Lear*'s polysemy is built upon ambiguous uses of language as the moments of irresolution in the play grow stronger. In order to do so, other important objectives are contemplated throughout this Master's thesis. Epitomized by ambiguous and paradoxical utterances, the play's polysemic construction is scrutinized to reveal in under what conditions: the process of cultural analysis affects the textual devices; the tendency towards ambiguity generates the sense of inconclusiveness; and the recurrent betrayal of expectations concerning the plot reflects the correspondence between the tragic ending and the indeterminacy derived from the dramatic rhythm. Finally, it is analyzed how specific passages that bring about the drama of finitude not only confront the play's desolate atmosphere, but they are also at the core of an implicit concern about what is left regarding the human condition.

Keywords: Polysemy, ambiguity, ambivalence, King Lear, paradox, inconclusiveness

Resumo

Ambientado em uma suposta Bretanha antiga, *King Lear* materializa as inquietações da Inglaterra recém-moderna através de uma tendência à ambiguidade que caracteriza a construção polissêmica da peça e, ao desafiar consistentemente quaisquer certezas acerca da condição humana, traz à tona um crescente senso de inconclusão que culmina em seu final soturno. Objetiva-se majoritariamente demonstrar de que forma a polissemia de *King Lear* é construída em torno de usos ambíguos da linguagem à medida que os momentos de indecisão da peça intensificam-se. Para alcançar o proposto, outros objetivos importantes são contemplados ao decorrer desta dissertação de mestrado. Caracterizada por discursos paradoxais e ambíguos, a construção polissêmica da peça é detalhada a fim de revelar sob que condições: o processo de análise cultural afeta os elementos textuais; a tendência à ambiguidade gera o senso de inconclusão; e a recorrente frustração de expectativas referentes ao enredo reflete a conexão entre o final trágico e a indefinição decorrente do ritmo dramático. Por fim, analisa-se de que forma passagens pontuais que trazem à tona o drama de finitude não apenas confrontam a atmosfera desoladora da peça, mas também impactam em uma preocupação implícita sobre o que resta acerca da condição humana.

Palavras-chaves: Polissemia, ambiguidade, ambivalência, King Lear, paradoxo, inconclusão

Contents

Introduction

Centuries of Shakespeare criticism show that embracing the challenge of analyzing *King Lear* might sound like a lifelong endeavor. Not only the extensive critical tradition, but also the wide range of interpretations might promptly discourage any scholar interested in doing research on the play. Surprisingly, that is not what has happened: fierce debates in academia continue to grow strong parallel to repeated attempts to solve the play's critical mystery. What if this so-called mystery was never to be solved? Such a question stands for one of the most intriguing aspects of *King Lear* – that is, its ongoing capacity to frustrate critics and readers alike concerning a definitive interpretation. Regardless of the level of acquaintance with the play's numerous nuances, even the most experienced scholars find themselves hesitant about drawing conclusive notions, especially with regard to the tragic ending. Yet, far from constituting an insurmountable obstacle, this sense of indeterminacy makes the play more topical and compelling than ever. From the cultural forces that interfered in the composition to the dramatic rhythm that guides the betrayal of expectations, several textual elements contribute to arouse such an interest as emblematized by the recurrent confrontation of absolute notions regarding existence. In order to comprehend those elements, this Master's thesis aims to demonstrate how *King Lear*'s inconclusiveness is built upon a polysemic construction wherein ambiguous and paradoxical uses of language are manifested.

Despite using a pre-Christian era as background, the play does not correspond to an artistic recreation of an imaginary past to be analyzed from a distant perspective. In fact, the cultural context that interfered in the composition proves the contrary. Set in a supposed ancient Britain, *King Lear* materializes the anxieties of early modern England through a tendency towards ambiguity that characterizes the play's polysemic construction

and, by consistently challenging any assurances regarding the human condition, it brings about a growing sense of inconclusiveness that culminates in its bleak ending. Instead of supporting a sort of close reading, contemporary Shakespeare criticism reveals that the comprehension of how such a sense came about is conditioned to the intrinsic correspondence between cultural anxieties and textual elements. In this respect, the emphasis on emblematic issues – from familial to generational ones – are fundamental to clarify the ambivalence embedded in the play's polysemy. Furthermore, the analysis of cultural practices – for instance, the emergence of skepticism through the practice of Renaissance disbelief – sheds light on the tendency towards ambiguity that emerges from the play. As soon as those issues and practices are taken into account, the priority given to the textual devices leads to an effective understanding of that tendency within *King Lear*. Carrying out a nuanced cultural analysis is therefore the first step to come to terms with the irresolution that characterizes the play as a whole.

Marking a significant shift in contemporary Shakespeare criticism from the 1980s onwards, the practice of cultural analysis tends to condition the wide network of cultural practices to the notion of the human subject as the ideological product of the relations of power in a particular society. With regard to this Master's thesis, the acceptance of power structures dictating the process of interpretation – as illustrated by some of Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicist studies and Jonathan Dollimore's *Radical Tragedy* (1984) – is abandoned and gives place to the impact of the cultural context on the play's tendency towards ambiguity. In light of such analysis, it is implied that "texts are not merely cultural by virtue of reference to the world beyond themselves; they are cultural by virtue of social values and contexts that they have themselves successfully absorbed" (Greenblatt *Critical Terms* 226). As for the textual elements, the existence of a critical debate over the Folio and the Quarto constituting two distinct literary works reflect the complexity involved in

analyzing a supposed unified text as well as the confrontation of the play's objective existence as a text. Nevertheless, other than the differences between both versions not being substantial, *King Lear* is not a historical document that "must only be preserved in some imagined state of purity" (Marjorie Garber 577). For that reason, this Master's thesis also contemplates both texts by using the Folio as an implicit primary source – as presented in the annotated edition of *King Lear* (2007) edited by Burton Raffel – and indicating those passages that are exclusive to the Quarto when appropriate.

Stemming from the recurrent confrontation of absolute notions, *King Lear*'s ambiguity led generations of Shakespeare scholars to great difficulties in properly addressing the play's textual elements. For instance, the prominent scholar A. C. Bradley in *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904) inaugurated a critical tendency that prevailed throughout most of the twentieth century when it comes to regarding the play as poetically relevant and stylistically flawed. Although such a perception has long been surpassed by contemporary Shakespeare criticism, incomprehensibility about *King Lear* still finds resonance in many recent critical analyses. Reflecting upon a so-called textual instability, Jonathan Goldberg states:

> These scenes, I would argue, do not allegorize a notion of the text itself. Rather, they point to a textuality that is radically unstable, upon which plots move, characters are (de)formed, language and observation is (improperly) staged. They point, that is, to historical and cultural demarcations, to what passes for essences, desires, knowledge, and the like. (217)

Despite coherently emphasizing the relevance of the cultural context, Goldberg is misled by his interpretation of the play as inherently ambiguous. Rather than reflecting a pejorative overtone, ambiguity is actually a tendency in *King Lear* that leads towards the play's polysemy. Knowing what distinguishes tendency from construction in relation to

ambiguity and polysemy, respectively, is fundamental to avoid the emergence of some misconceptions about the textual elements throughout this Master's thesis. Furthermore, such a distinction enables the comprehension of inconclusiveness as a systematic process derived from the tendency towards ambiguity that is far from being random or even incomprehensible.

Greatly influenced by the cultural context as a whole, *King Lear*'s inconclusiveness initially occurs through the ambiguous use of words – such as *nature* and *justice* – that relativize the meanings of established concepts and, consequently, open up to contrasting interpretations. Parallel to those words, the materialization of a set of concepts – that is, blindness, madness, and nothingness – into the play brings about paradoxical manifestations of language to be outlined. Constantly evoking the polysemic construction, key passages of Lear's and Gloucester's journeys of disillusion – as examples, the storm scenes and the wanderings on the heath – are scrutinized to illustrate the importance of those ambiguous words and paradoxical concepts mentioned above when it comes to challenging any absolute truths. After that, the partial inefficacy of language and the respective impossibility of conveying the extremity of human experience are also contemplated. In this regard, passages that engender unutterable emotions – where such an inefficacy is translated into concepts like the rhetoric of silence – exert a huge impact on the sense of indeterminacy that resonates through the play's desolate atmosphere. Guided by this sense, the correspondence between the catastrophic events and the inner truths felt by Lear, Gloucester, and Edgar is what allows for the occurrence of questions about the real extent of human capacity to endure despite *King Lear*'s overarching bleakness.

Inherent in the polysemic construction, the uncertainty that revolves around *King Lear*'s atmosphere is enhanced through dramatic devices – such as obliquity, sense of space and double plot – aligned with a process of failed expectations. Based on the

tendency towards ambiguity, the lack of clear motivations in passages like the love test as well as the elusiveness that characterizes the wanderings outdoors in the storm scenes are amplified by the parallel stories of Lear and Gloucester. Moreover, the similarities of the double plot are analyzed to reveal under what conditions established patterns and fixed categories are disrupted. In order to understand the betrayal of expectations, this Master's thesis scrutinizes in which way the play's dramatic rhythm not only delays the actions, but it also defies any ideas that lead to closure. Culminating in the tragic ending, such rhythm has its most emblematic representation through the ambiguous lines uttered by Lear, Kent, and Edgar in the last scene wherein no resolution is signaled. In this respect, when all hopes for redemption seem lost, passages that bring about the drama of finitude – from small gestures of companionship to the overwhelming reconciliation between Lear and Cordelia – are evoked to evaluate what is left regarding the human condition. Taking the set of emotional scenes into account, *King Lear*'s polysemic construction create the conditions for the revaluation of the overarching bleakness in a way that inconclusiveness ends up being consistently foregrounded.

Chapter One

The tendency towards ambiguity through anxieties of early modern England

1.1 Political ambivalence in the project for union

Set in the opening scene, Lear's decision to divide the kingdom among his three daughters and retire from the duties of monarchy is the pivotal event that puts the play in motion. Arguably, this decision constitutes the source of all tragic events that are unveiled throughout the narrative. However, the division goes way beyond that: this idea as a whole carries a cultural significance that is at the core of *King Lear*'s first ambiguous themes. According to Philip Schwyzer, that happens because "the play is so cagey and ambiguous on the union question that it admits of flatly contradictory readings" (160). Investigating what lies behind such a question is therefore a practice of foremost importance to comprehend that many of those passages not only share an utter correspondence, but also stem from a major historical moment – namely, King James's first years as the new English monarch and his intention to unify England and Scotland. Far from being isolated, that moment is integral to a large cultural spectrum in which the transition towards a new era created a widespread sense of uncertainty that escalated in the years following James's ascension to the throne and reached its peak with the debate over union. As the fictional Lear made a decision that turned out to be catastrophic, the actual English king contemplated a theme that condensed the main anxieties of England in the early seventeenth century as they were incorporated into *King Lear*'s atmosphere.

When Lear makes his first appearance in the play, the first words uttered by the old king bring about his "darker purpose" (1.1.40) when it comes to dividing the kingdom. In *King Lear*'s ancient Britain, such an announcement stands for a transitional act in which an old order gives place to a new one. In comparison to the late Elizabethan period, the

imminent death of the queen, at the same time that it meant the possibility of a fresh start for many Englishmen, was synonymous with a deep anxiety about the way that everyday life would be affected in the near future. Reflecting upon the transition to the so-called Jacobean era and its impact on *King Lear*, Jean Brink states:

> The accession to the throne of James I was not the bright beginning of a new age that Shakespeare and his contemporaries may have initially anticipated. The Stuart succession was at best a mixed success. James's succession was peaceful, but we know that by 1606 there was already nostalgia for the old queen; phrases such as Jacobean melancholy have been invented to describe the malaise of the early seventeenth century. (226)

The ambivalent expectations regarding a new period stem mainly from James's status as a foreigner and "the general perception of him as weak and untrustworthy, characteristics that understandably created uncertainty and anxieties about his fitness to rule over England" (Susan Doran 224). Upon the death of Queen Elizabeth in 1603, despite the outbreak of plague that devastated London, James managed to quickly ascend to the throne. In this respect, his succession was as sudden as Lear's announcement in the opening act: in both cases, the act of transition occurred without much further ado. In the following years, however, instead of being put aside, the initial uncertainties were only confirmed. As a Scottish king, James personified a drastic change in national identity and, consequently, contributed to the general belief that Englishness would soon be replaced by a new British system. Despite being at the top of James's agenda since the very beginning, English and Scottish union turned into a possibility only in 1606 – not coincidentally, around the time that *King Lear* was believed to be composed and performed – when the king officially pressed the Parliament to secure the case. In the meantime, the Jacobean melancholy mentioned by Brink grew stronger parallel to a new era in English history that,

notwithstanding its official start inaugurated by James's ascension, was still deeply attached to an Elizabethan way of life.

Because of the high expectations about the changes yet to come, the unpredictability that characterized the reign of James I during its first years generated severe anxieties that were materialized into the narrative. Among these anxieties, the one that remarkably occupies a seminal role in the play is the debate over union. According to James Shapiro, "in pressing the case for Union, James had foisted upon his subjects an identity crisis where none had existed before" (ch. 2). In view of the imminent unification, it was believed that traditional English values and beliefs were to be combined with Scottish ones or, worst case scenario, bound to disappear. Such a notion was directly transposed to *King Lear* through the choice for a pre-Christian Britain and the fact that "the myth of a historically united British kingdom was also valuable in that it could help prove that James was not technically – even legally – an alien" (Doran 222). Validated by an ancient past, the existence of a supposed British identity conveniently mirrors the desires of the new English monarch. On the other hand, it goes against the sense of Englishness that culturally prevails in Jacobean England. In relation to the play, such an identity is promptly questioned in the aftermath of Lear's announcement rather than being used as a mere device to please James. Initially reflecting the ambivalence regarding the debate over union, the depiction of identity crisis in the play is conditioned to the comprehension of the political connotation in order to reach a broad cultural significance.

Other than the thematic choice for a pre-Christian British era, the English succession generated an ambiguous understanding regarding the theme of unification. In light of the project for union, it is likely to conclude that the play not only shows the perils of division, but also portrays Lear as an anti-type to King James. However, things were far from being that simplistic. At the same time that a unified Britain reflects the realization of

a project idealized by James and its fragmentation is synonymous with political chaos, the kingdom's division in *King Lear* does not occur against the monarch's will: it is actually the result of a veiled agreement between Lear and his sons-in-law. In this sense, Ralph Berry clarifies:

> In what sense is the Britain of the play's opening a unitary state? It is already divided, as it must be, into regional suzerainty, with a quantum of bad feeling thrown in ('future strife,' predicated on the understandable attitudes of the three daughters to each other). What maintains unitary rule, of a sort, is precisely the policy of sectional division which Lear has successfully pursued. (91)

Even before Lear's announcement, it is implied that the British fragmentation was previously established: Albany and Cornwall had precedence over the succession not only for being married to the old king's elder daughters, but also for carrying the names of historical regions within the kingdom. The act of division was therefore mandatory to avoid a catastrophic war in the wake of Lear's imminent end. Nevertheless, rather than guaranteeing stability, this act turned out to be the starting point for the calamities in the narrative. Presupposing a prior knowledge about the cultural anxieties of James's transition, the materialization of the case for union into *King Lear* occurs through an ambivalent choice that that do not point to an ideological position. Whether being pro or against the project of union, Lear's act of division also brings about an identity crisis that goes beyond its initial portrayal as a matter of British interest. Thus, instead of being restricted to a mere political ground, this act ends up mirroring multiple anxieties typical of the period.

1.2 Familial issues and identity crises

Evoking a striking uncertainty, the concept of identity presented in *King Lear* cannot be limited to a single pattern and simply taken for granted. For that reason, defining one as British or English is a simplification bound to crumble as soon as the first tragic events unfold. As Paul Cantor points out, "having begun the play as a firm believer in the identity of nature and convention, Lear comes to believe in their complete disjunction" (232). Triggered by the act of division and the subsequent familial rejection, Lear's process of self-discovery acquires different nuances that transcend his mere political role as a monarch. Throughout the narrative, other characters and passages are incorporated into the old king's journey to reveal the fragility behind any absolute concepts as well as the existence of a broad cultural context in disregard of any reductionist notions. In this respect, Lear's identity crisis intertwines with a multiplicity of themes that, in their tendency towards ambiguity, paves the way towards the play's polysemic construction. Most importantly, the mentioned crisis condensed other anxieties – familial, generational, social and philosophical ones – that not only evoked long-time concerns of early modern period[1], but also reflected a conflict of contrasting ideas typical of a world on the brink of profound changes.

In *King Lear*, the emergence of cultural anxieties is initially observed through the love test employed by Lear. Integral to the act of division, such a scheme represents the means to guarantee a peaceful transition in view of the old king's retirement from public life as well as "Lear's pride and his interest in staging a public ceremony in which his

[1] Linda Charnes and Dennis Kennedy state that "the early modern period includes overlapping epochs that have been variously called the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Restoration, the Enlightenment, the Age of Reason, and the Age of Revolution" (184). From a historical standpoint, the term *early modern* is used to describe Europe and England from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries concerning the gradual developments in Western culture – from religious to scientific ones – as illustrated by the movements mentioned above. Going beyond a mere chronology, the totality of cultural practices – including phenomena as diverse as aesthetic production and political concerns – is also integral to the social history of the period.

daughters pay tribute to him as their royal father" (Brink 225). From a cultural standpoint, the term *royal father* shows that the interaction of Lear with his daughters is far from implying a single connotation: in the patriarchal society of early modern England, fathers were the unquestionable authorities in their respective households in a sense analogous to the relation between the king and his nation. By enjoying the condition of a symbolic father, any monarch was supposed to receive nothing but unquestioned love and obedience. Reflecting upon the impact of Lear's dual role in *King Lear*, Greenblatt states that "if, as the play opens, the aged Lear, exercising his imperious will and demanding professions of devotion, is 'every inch a king,' (4.6.106) he is also by the same token every inch a father, the absolute ruler of a family" (*The Norton Shakespeare* 535). For that reason, Lear's announcement of the kingdom's division cannot be regarded as a mere reflection of the political tensions about James's transition. Deeply embedded in the cultural conception of family, it actually encompasses a transition in its broad significance – that is, the unavoidable expectations of a father facing the imminent loss of his natural status in the family.

Built upon the implicit condition of any English monarch in early modern period, Lear's dual role as king and father works as "a metaphoric legal device to protect the continuity of the Crown and prevent the splitting up of the nation" (Millicent Bell *Tragic Skepticism* 159). In this sense, it mirrors a widespread belief that, in a patriarchal society, the ruler had to choose a sole heir: the first-born son had precedence over the others and, worst case scenario, the inheritance was to be thoroughly divided in order to avoid future strife. The love test employed by Lear, however, ignores any established precepts: it is initially defined to fragment the kingdom into three parts and set aside a "third more opulent" (1.1.88) part to Cordelia. By performing the succession in his own terms, Lear ends up confirming that "the inadequacy of his action purely as that of a father, as opposed

to its patent folly as the decision of a king, is attendant, not upon the division as such, but rather upon the inequality of the division" (Thomas McFarland 103). The immediate implication is that the old king acts like a father rather than a king as soon as he conditions his succession to a love test. In spite of being based on a royal prerogative, the previously established unequal division that intends to favor Cordelia, the most loved daughter, is majorly motivated by paternal feelings. As a consequence, Lear turns out to amplify his initial identity crisis as a monarch on the verge of stepping away from power based on his incapacity to conciliate both roles.

Other than conveying an inherent incompatibility, the theory of the king's two bodies in *King Lear* also occurs through the way that the love test is employed. Intrinsic to an established royal identity, Lear's two roles in life coincides with the notion that any choice made by the monarch was infallible. Conversely, the play's catastrophic events not only prove the contrary, but also show that "the corruption arises not from the abdication and division but from the 'love test' by which Lear initiates the division" (Edward Rocklin 299). Foregrounding the love test is not a matter of identifying a cause for the catastrophic events: it actually reveals the sheer ambiguity involved in a process that interweaves a royal prerogative with familial issues to a point where *King Lear*'s tragic descent seems inevitable. In this regard, the cultural belief in the monarch's infallibility is confronted by the confusion of the mentioned roles that takes place throughout the love test. Alongside the failure of Lear's scheme, such confusion calls attention to the frailty regarding kinship as an absolute notion. By building the love test upon his condition as father in disregard of that of a king, Lear ambivalently goes against the nature and custom that he so fiercely defends throughout the narrative.

Echoing the play's tendency to embrace contrasting themes, the ambiguity that resonates through Lear's dual status is integral to other aspects that confirm the centrality

of family to the narrative. Other than the expectations regarding succession and inheritance, the love test materializes the anxieties of fathers in early modern England when it comes to retirement and relationship with their children. As observed in the close correspondence between division and abdication in the opening scene, the formal procedures of Lear's scheme is put forward to conceal the fact that most of the familial tensions from that period emerge from the "fear of humiliation, abandonment, and a loss of identity in the wake of retirement" (Greenblatt *Will in the World* ch. 12). From a cultural standpoint, the idea of retirement was incompatible with kinship and its everlasting aura. Yet, Lear's paternal anxieties compelled him to embrace this idea as a means of confirming whether his daughters were capable of fulfilling their expected roles or not. In this moment, "the way Lear proposes the love test is in itself unconventional, but he relies on the power of convention to make the love test work to implement his plan for the succession" (Cantor 237). By implementing an unconventional scheme of public affection, Lear confronts his own established tradition as a means of doing away with his growing anxieties. As the confusion between the two roles indicate, the reliance on convention turns out to be a misconception: in addition to the collapse of the plans for a peaceful succession, his daughters' behaviors in the narrative are responsible for the consummation of those impending fears.

Although Goneril and Regan's immorality stand for the actual materialization of familial crisis in *King Lear*, Cordelia's refusal to comply with the public conventions during the love test suffices to confirm the king's worst nightmares at first. Confronted by Cordelia's stubbornness when it comes to officially declaring her love, Lear revolts against an apparent filial ingratitude and, in an outburst of anger, disinherits her. Furthermore, the full rejection of his youngest daughter is the immediate sign of a familial crisis that is extended to the double plot of Gloucester and his sons. Similar to Lear, Gloucester

promptly rejects Edgar after hearing Edmund's forged story about his brother's treason. With regard to both fathers, those actions "represent a challenge to their patriarchal authority, an abdication of familial duty" (Dollimore 200). Instead of verifying whether their suspicions are unfounded or not, Lear and Gloucester take for granted any evidence that point to the confirmation of filial misbehavior. By refusing to contemplate any act that confronts their authority, they also condition familial relationships to a matter of public obedience disregarding the personal level at which love and affection are truly expressed. Epitomized by Lear and Gloucester's paternal misjudgment, the confrontation of absolute values that do not guarantee stability turn out to bring about the collapse of family as it is culturally conceived.

As demonstrated by the parallel plots of Lear and Gloucester, the familial matter in *King Lear* is intensified from the moment that the identity crises – no longer a singular concept – transcend the political sphere and reach an interpersonal level. At the same time that Edmund, Goneril, and Regan's wicked acts confirm previous paternal anxieties, both fathers share their responsibility in the awakening of those crises. Incapable of looking beyond superfluous customs and formalities, Lear and Gloucester behave in such a way that the tensions within the very structure of the family end up reiterating the sense of ambiguity in the play from a cultural standpoint. Based on the escalation of those tensions throughout the narrative, Philip McGuire states:

> The play insists upon a terrifying truth at the core of the relatedness that helps make us human. We are most vulnerable to those from whom we most want to receive and to whom we most want to give love, to those whose flesh and blood we share: our parents, our children, our brothers and sisters, our spouses. Our vulnerability to them is, simultaneously, a vulnerability to

> ourselves – to our need for love and our appetites for power and pleasure. (99)

Lear and Gloucester's tempestuous reactions convey not just a mechanism of defense motivated by their deepest fears, but also an utter disappointment to their expectations regarding filial love. Concealed in the midst of public demonstrations, love seems to be the only concept to be accepted towards the recuperation of familial bonds and, eventually, the possibility of saving the characters from the impending disaster. On the other hand, it is implied that Goneril, Regan, and Edmund's resentment stems from the conviction of not being properly loved by their fathers: as examples, Edmund's soliloquies on bastardy and Goneril's "He always loved / our sister most" (1.1.290-291) in view of Lear's behavior in the love test. The conception of paternal love being at the same time salvation and motivation for the cruel acts committed in the play represents an ambiguity that suffices to foreground the familial matter. Additionally, such a conception may be read alongside the "paradoxical oppositions that compose Lear's condition" (Arthur Kirsch 39). To illustrate this, the fact that the old king is shockingly unfair to Cordelia and blinded to her true intentions sheds light on the first inversions of seeing and blindness as well as justice and injustice central to the storm scenes. Triggered by this initial correspondence, the occurrence of ambivalent attitudes in the play reaches a wider cultural significance through the conflicts among opposing groups of characters as they profess their antagonistic worldviews. As a result, these familial tensions end up being transposed to a matter of generational and even religious concern.

1.3 Emergence of skepticism through Renaissance decay

At the core *King Lear*'s first act, the love test translates the main political and familial anxieties of the Jacobean Period into ambiguous themes – such as paternal love and the case for union – strictly identified with the first representations of identity crisis in the text. Most importantly, its unexpected outcome – culminating in Lear's rupture with Cordelia and Kent – stands for the starting point for the generational conflicts that become a tendency in the narrative. From that moment on, the collision between an older generation and a younger one is recurrently widened according to the juxtaposition of the parallel plots. At first, this collision might sound like a clash between antagonistic forces restricted to anxieties derived from James's ascension to the English throne. However, it goes way beyond that: behind the imminent departure of a set of beliefs belonging to an older Elizabethan generation lies a widespread sense of Renaissance decay in which "the world was deteriorating and men also appeared progressively smaller and shorter-lived" (William Elton 247). In early modern England[2], the image of an evanescent world was a long-time cultural concern that existed regardless of generational issues signaled by the end of the Elizabethan era. In this respect, the Renaissance disbelief in man's rational capacity was broadened so that none of the assurances regarding existence proved to be immune to criticism. Guided by this sense of incredulity, the depiction of generational conflicts initially occurs through ambiguities within each perspective that is interwoven to integrate a more complex circulation of cultural forces.

[2] In comparison to the term *early modern*, Charnes and Kennedy argue that Renaissance is "an uncritical word that celebrates the revival of classical learning and the flowering of arts at the expense of what was happening among the peasantry, the lower classes, and in women's lives" (184). In other words, whereas *early modern* presupposes the complex network of practices that constitute culture as a whole, *Renaissance* is connected to a past critical tradition that privileges humanism in disregard of other cultural manifestations. On the other hand, contemporary criticism still refers to the confrontation of absolute values of the period as part of a Renaissance tradition. In order to avoid generalizations, the use of *Renaissance* turns out to be the most adequate choice to illustrate the way that such tradition directly affects the philosophical and religious thinking in early modern England through the influence of classical culture.

1.3.1 Generational conflicts

For an older generation, the ominous prospects of Renaissance decay spoke louder for obvious reasons: as time went by, annihilation was an idea to be necessarily contemplated. Consequently, natural anxieties were amplified by the possibility of new values arising in the awakening of the Jacobean era. Being the cultural symbol of an old generation in the play, Lear incorporates all those tensions. His constant outbursts of anger and denial in the narrative reflect the way that the play "juxtaposes the difficulty of aging, and especially of confronting the marriage of a favorite daughter, with the harsh necessity of preparing for death" (David Bevington *Modern Critical Interpretations* 54). Throughout his journey of self-discovery, Lear's utterances, in the face of numerous disillusions, convey a complete inability when it comes to coping with aging and imminent death. For that reason, the more the old king clings to the traditional values that epitomize his worldview, the more disenchanted he becomes. Other than proving to be ineffective, those values make Lear vulnerable to the highly disruptive deeds of a young generation – as an example, the harsh treatment of his elder daughters in the first two acts – and, eventually, cannot save him from his greatest dread: annihilation. In this regard, the vision of a world on the brink of destruction suggests the necessity of abandoning any absolute truths in order to readjust to a world fashioned by new practices. On the other hand, in a betrayal of all hopes for resolution, the brutal practices professed by characters like Edmund confirm the pessimistic notions regarding a cultural decadence that seems inevitable. The immediate impact is an utter sense of desolation that resonates through *King Lear* from any perspective.

Conditioned to the comprehension of Renaissance decay, the generational conflicts in *King Lear* bring about the vision of a desolate world rather than merely represent a

dispute of contrasting energies. The catastrophic events are therefore set in motion every time a character aims to profess his worldview. Conversely, there are some passages that emerge from the narrative to confront this recurrent image of decay. Consistently refusing generalizations, unrequested manifestations of companionship show the ambiguity in every act taken as absolute. Initiated by Kent's loyalty to Lear, questions over the real validity of traditional attitudes are put forward. Investigating the cultural significance of those attitudes, David Margolies states:

> In *King Lear*, the old men, though not completely associated with the good, represent certain positive aspects of society which are disappearing in the present. Lear, Gloucester, Kent, Albany, the old tenant all display some shared sense of a social world into which they are integrated, a sense clearly absent among the youth representatives of individualism. (73)

Other than Kent, the loyalty manifested by the group of characters mentioned by Margolies reflects a traditional value characteristic of an older generation. Not only do their actions counterbalance the play's tragic choices, but they also show that values like that cannot be simply disregarded. At the same that traditional practices might sound inadequate, they still stand for the most effective antidote against the savage acts committed by the villainous characters in the narrative. Such ambivalence reveals that analyzing the generational conflicts is not a matter of good versus bad or even choosing sides in a clash of beliefs: it actually involves a method of juxtaposing contrasting views in order to evaluate whether any insightful notion can be reached or not. The ambivalent portrayal of the old generation's beliefs is just one example out of many in which that juxtaposition translates the textual ambiguities regarding a specific image or theme into a matter of broad cultural significance. By incorporating this significance, the play follows the precepts of a so-called

Renaissance skepticism when it comes to interrogating established ideas to a point where even their supposed derogatory conception turn out to be relativized.

As even traditional practices cannot be taken for granted, a sense of Renaissance disbelief enabled the emergence of skepticism as a philosophical practice at the core of the play. According to Elton, "the use of the term skepticism, following perhaps the best recent account of English Renaissance disbelief, implies a tendency to challenge received opinions or the dicta of established authority and to submit them to the tests of reason and experience" (53). In other words, this tendency occurs through the practice of questioning established ideas and eventually assessing the real extent of their efficacy without running the risk of creating other absolute truths. In relation to *King Lear*, the skeptical attitude is most obviously perceived in the dispute of generations in which "the traditional social order is presented both critically and as one in the process of disintegration" (David Aers and Gunther Kress 98). To illustrate this, every time Edmund, to reach his goals, acts in disregard of any moral scruples, the vulnerability of an older generation is suggested. Arising from familial anxieties, the confrontation of the traditional order is therefore affirmed through the sequence of amoral acts performed by Edmund, Goneril, and Regan and the way that they implicitly test the cultural significance of values that were on the verge of disappearing. The generational conflicts, however, only grow stronger according to the observance of more intricate religious issues of early modern England. Revolving around interrogations about divine providence, those issues mirror the main philosophical discussions from that time as they were materialized into the narrative.

1.3.2 Cultural crisis of divine providence

In early modern England, the crisis of Renaissance belief guided the confrontation of established beliefs that were transposed to *King Lear*'s setting. Among those beliefs, the existence of a divine providence that rules human life occupies a central role for enabling the depiction of other controversial themes – ranging from stoic philosophy to individualistic determinism – as immediate counterparts. Intensifying the ambivalence of generational conflicts, the philosophical debate over religiosity brings about the most emblematic skeptical attitude that emerges from the play. First, the comprehension of divine providence and its cultural relevance is conditioned to the traditional correspondence between God's will and man's role in the world. According to Northrop Frye, such a correspondence derives from "the assumption that God had made the world primarily for the benefit of man, and although the original creation is in ruins, we can still see many evidences of design in it with a human reference" (19). In a deeply religious society like the Jacobean one, the infallibility of God's precepts represents a fundamental principle to be preserved at any cost. Moreover, it confirms the notion of man's centrality in the universe. From a traditional standpoint, it is implied that, however troublesome times are, believing in justice brought about by a superior force is a practice of foremost importance in dealing with life's uncertainties. Consequently, questioning divine providence brings about an inevitable collapse of any absolute idea regarding existence.

Sustaining religious faith was an arduous task to be upheld by anyone facing harsh times. In a Jacobean society devastated by recurrent outbreaks of plague, it was undoubtedly a monumental effort. It is therefore not a coincidence that the belief in providence was most vulnerable to the resurgence of Renaissance skepticism during that time. As outlined by Dollimore, "the way that man was conceptualised as a dependent

creation of God, to deconstruct[3] providence was also, necessarily and inevitably, to decentre man" (60). In other words, challenging such a belief as an established truth corresponds to a practice that deeply affected the understanding of the human condition in early modern England. Other than bringing about a severe religious crisis, the disbelief in providence unlocked existential issues that were opposed to the traditional worldview derived from classical humanism. As man no longer occupies the center of a theocentric universe, his own capacity for reasoning is questioned. Additionally, the abandonment of man in a desolate world leads towards the idea that God's will is actually faulty. Incompatible with arbitrariness, the conception of divinity is also challenged to a point where its own inexistence ends up being questioned. In this respect, the Renaissance crisis of providence engendered a disbelief that focuses on the inadequacy of both God's precepts and man's capacity. In relation to the play, this inadequacy initially occurs through Lear's supposed god-like condition.

Regarded as absolute concepts from a traditional standpoint, Lear's dual status as king and father are also correlated with the skeptical attitude towards providence. First, as a king, he perfectly epitomizes the idea of man as the center of the universe. Furthermore, as the representative of the gods[4] on earth, Lear's choices are authorized by divine providence and, consequently, synonymous with justice. Conversely, the failure of the love test was sufficient to prove that his methods were far from being infallible. Despite carrying the

[3] By using the word *deconstruct*, Dollimore calls attention to the refutation of God's intelligible design with regard to the humanist exaltation of man's unique power of reasoning. From the moment that this exaltation is questioned, the idea of man detached from God grows stronger. The result is the emergence of an unknowable providence that constantly attests to the limitations of human reason.

[4] The previous references to *God* in the singular and capitalized form were far from being gratuitous: the impact of Renaissance disbelief on the crisis of divine providence is made in observance of a Christian tradition and, consequently, the existence of an all-powerful entity. Conversely, the present choice for the plural form reflects not only the uses of the word in *King Lear*, but also the fact that the play is set in a pagan Britain. This seeming ambiguity is explained by the difficulty in addressing controversial religious issues in early modern England: "given the constraints on how characters could express themselves, it was much easier locating plays in classical or pagan lands than in Christian ones" (Shapiro ch. 11). In this sense, those cultural debates were safely translated into a pagan background. In order to avoid misconceptions, the plural form *gods* is used in this Master's thesis in reference to passages in the play that do not necessarily evoke the Renaissance controversy over providence. Still with regard to pagan and Christian representations, the way that both beliefs are interwoven and materialized into the narrative is eventually analyzed in the paragraph about creation *ex nihilo*.

first signs of disbelief with regard to the established order, Lear's blindness to the injustice involving Cordelia and Kent's dismissals still shows an utter reliance on a traditional worldview. Only the experience of rejection illustrated by the prospect of living with Goneril makes the old king evaluate his own beliefs for the very first time. In this sense, Robert Lanier Reid claims that "the encounter with Goneril, focusing the initial cycle, dismantles the superego's contrived image of parental-kingly-Godlike authority" (130). From the affront of Oswald's misbehavior to the shock of Goneril's rebuke – "Are you our daughter?" (1.4.199) – the old king's sense of filial ingratitude is amplified to a matter of high cultural resonance in which initial familial anxieties intertwine with other ones related to his god-like status. Most importantly, such a sense constitutes the starting point for a process of disillusionment that reveals the frailty of the three mentioned roles concerning the eventual loss of identity. From that moment on, Lear's journey of self-discovery is guided by a growing skeptical attitude directed to a traditional set of values.

During the encounter with his eldest daughter in the first act, Lear is stricken by the harsh reality of his lost identities: in addition to not being a king anymore, Goneril's mistreatment materializes his declining fatherhood. Although the king's dual status does not turn out to be infallible, there is an unshakeable belief regarding his god-like authority. In this respect, the angered Lear resorts to a superior power as a means of legitimizing the act of cursing his daughter with sterility: "Hear Nature, hear dear goddess, hear!" (1.4.253). Reflecting upon the impact of Lear's imprecations in the mentioned scene, Bevington clarifies:

> The god-father who has created life now claims the power to undo life, though in fact he is impotent to do so. These implorings of the gods, usually looked at as part of the question, do the gods exist and do they listen, are no less useful as a way of seeing how Lear thinks of himself; he supposes that

> he is, like the gods, beyond mortal vicissitude, able to strike others in the name of justice and above all to ensure his immortality. (*Modern Critical Interpretations* 58)

Emblematized by his outbursts of anger, Lear confounds himself with the gods, imploring them to intervene and guarantee the validity of his worldview by punishing the wrongdoers. Most importantly, those outbursts strengthen the traditional irrefutability of divine providence on account of the king being regarded as the paragon of justice anointed by God. In this sense, his reaction stands for an act of resistance performed by an older generation that refuses to abdicate its absolute truths. Ambiguously, it also conceals deepest fears in which a skeptical attitude towards providence is manifested – namely, that he does not have god-like authority, or that the gods are not listening, or that they are not even real. Stemming from the cultural crisis in divine providence, this attitude is reinforced by the old king's encounter with Regan in the second act and amplified throughout the narrative – reaching its summit during the storm scenes in the third act. Regardless of the extremity of his imprecations, Lear's attempts to communicate with the gods as a means of restoring his former condition is always punctuated with silence and more disillusions. Other than undermining the irrefutability of a supposed god-like status, those attempts correspond to one of the most important facets of the cultural debates over divine providence.

In view of the everyday calamities of early modern England, the belief in a superior entity ruling one's life was deeply disallowed: it seems that God's will was either arbitrary or, worst case scenario, inexistent. In this way, the Renaissance disbelief in divine providence also resulted in "the breakdown of the traditional analogy between Creator and creature, in the reawakened consciousness of fallen man's rational incapacity" (Elton 29). Taking the limitations of human reason into account, the mystery surrounding the

motivations of an omnipotent force could not be properly solved. It was therefore not a matter of questioning divine justice or even the existence of God: providence does make the world go round, but, for being unknowable to man's reason, gives birth to several misconceptions concerning a godless world. On this point, the shift to human responsibility reaffirms the existence of a divine providence that does not resort to conventional ways to bring about justice. At the core of *King Lear*'s atmosphere, the conception of a hidden divinity is first noticed in the way that the gods do not intervene and are always silent throughout the narrative. Aligned with an utter inability to cope with unexpected events, the journeys of Lear, Gloucester, and Edgar culminate in the limitation of rationality to convey the extremity of human suffering rather than the notion of faulty gods. Following the series of tragic events, the sheer vulnerability of the human condition detached from the divine sphere turns out to become a theme integral to the play.

Parallel to the limitations of man's rational capacity, the debate over divine providence acquires an ambivalent tone according to the confrontation within the context of Renaissance disbelief. Philosophically, it is implied that skepticism is a practice that challenges even its own established tradition. For that reason, the existence of God in its inscrutable conception is incorporated into skepticism to a point where misconceptions regarding a mere atheist practice end up being challenged. Not only could the skeptical attitude make use of religious belief, but it might also integrate any Christian doctrine without disallowing its fundamental dogmas. Analyzing the sheer ambivalence that emanates from that attitude, William Hamlin clarifies:

> By the middle of the sixteenth century, scepticism could be and had been perceived as both compatible and wholly incompatible with Christian doctrine. In so far as it was accepted, there was no consensus of opinion among Renaissance thinkers in their attitude toward scepticism: some found

> it useful in promoting religious belief, others saw it as detrimental to every religious emotion. (25)

Carrying an ambivalent connotation that follows the tradition of religious debates in early modern England, philosophical skepticism initially engenders a tendency to challenge absolute notions regarding established religion. Ambiguously, the same tendency also leads to an acceptance of an unknowable providence. To illustrate this, during the love test, when Cordelia offers no other response than *nothing* to the demand of public affection, Lear says: "Nothing will come of nothing" (1.1.92) – that is, there is no possibility of existence without a distinct beginning. From a religious standpoint, his reply goes against the doctrine that God created the world out of no prior material. By contradicting the so-called creation *ex nihilo*, it is suggested that "Lear's declaration would have been felt to be skeptical heresy" (Bell *Modern Critical Interpretations* 148). On the other hand, the skeptical interrogations intrinsic to his journey of self-discovery allowed him to acquire a new perception of divine providence by the end of the play. In the reconciliation scene with Cordelia, for instance, the character that had previously taken his skeptical attitude to the last consequences is willing to embrace with his daughter an unfathomable providence: "And take upon's the mystery of things, / As if we were God's spies" (5.3.16-17). As illustrated by those contrasting passages of Lear's journey, skepticism pervades the narrative in a way that ambiguities concerning the role of religion in the play end up being foregrounded.

The mentioned confrontation of creation *ex nihilo* brings about another ambiguous perception of Lear's skepticism. As the play is set in a pre-Christian Britain, the old king's repudiation of creation from nothingness stems from the fact that he is a pagan. By professing paganism, he is actually acting according to his religious beliefs rather than committing heresy. In the eyes of a Renaissance audience, however, Lear is negating a

fundamental principle of Christianity. In this regard, Elton claims that, "in rejecting creation *ex nihilo*, Lear was a pious pagan but a skeptical Christian; and the manifold hermeneutic of the Renaissance allowed for such a multiple interpretation" (188). From a cultural perspective, the ambivalent religious behavior embodied by the old king opens up to multiple interpretations in a way that sheds light on the formation of the play's polysemic construction. On the one hand, Lear, as a pious pagan, dismisses his own gods over his process of disillusionment. In an analogy easily applicable to Christian faith, he is committing a heresy from any religious standpoint. On the other hand, Lear, being a skeptical Christian, challenges his traditional faith and eventually comes across its own frailty. Finally, he walks towards a renewed conception of providence as illustrated by the scene wherein he reconciles with Cordelia. In a world that recurrently attests to man's helplessness, the confrontation of divine providence in *King Lear* leads towards the notion that any practice that evokes a skeptical interrogation is made in observance of culture as a whole instead of a limiting Christian or pagan sphere.

1.4 Responses to Renaissance disbelief

Throughout the narrative, the inscrutability of divine providence exerts a huge impact on the way that the characters strive to comprehend their reality. The fact that the gods do not engage in human affairs makes urgent a response that would put an end to the tensions that arise from the play's tragic events. From a cultural standpoint, any attempt at a response varies according to the major philosophical tendencies of early modern England. Among them, notions related to the so-called stoic philosophy reflect a close connection to the established values of an older generation. Analyzing the relevance of this tendency to *King Lear*, Bevington states that stoicism "invites one to consider whether

forthright action is best, or whether one should adopt a more passive and reflective invulnerability to the assaults of injustice and misfortune" (*Shakespeare's Ideas* 151). In other words, a stoic attitude brings the assurance that anyone, through reason and prudence, is able to suppress his emotions, however unbearable the situation is. Foregrounding man's rational capacity, such an attitude towards life intertwines with the vision of a traditional world immune to the confrontations of Renaissance disbelief. With regard to *King Lear*, an essentialist perception regarding human rationality is severely challenged not only by the refutation of stoicism, but also by the degenerate view of man and the respective clash between individualistic and superstitious practices.

1.4.1 Refutation of Stoicism

Based upon precepts of prudence and resignation, stoicism guides the play's calls for patience as a means of alleviating suffering and disillusion. When Lear is confronted by Regan's harshness, his resort to a superior force – "You heavens, give me that patience, patience I need" (2.4.267) – reveals that stoic philosophy becomes integral to religious faith for aligning human endurance with belief in providence. In the same passage, Lear's inability to cope with filial ingratitude illustrates the limitations of this philosophy in a way that is recurrently reproduced in the narrative. When the play reaches its catastrophic ending, it is suggested that "the lesson has been learnt that stoic comfort will not do, that it is better to 'speak what we feel' than 'what we ought to say'" (Jonathan Bate *King Lear* ch. 3). In this regard, the final image of the miserable king holding his dead daughter takes the confrontation of stoicism to its last consequences: the poignancy of the scene disallows any attempt to make use of reason and resignation. Conversely, it is also implied that utterances related to patience are far from being misplaced. Throughout the narrative, the disguises of

Edgar and Kent as Poor Tom and Caius, respectively, are manifestations of stoic endurance applied to their loyalty to Lear and Gloucester. Once again, the ambiguity inherent in a desolate world emanates from the play: traditional values are constantly challenged and at the same time indispensable. The difference is that, on this point, ambivalence is amplified: the characters that manifest stoic beliefs go beyond the mere duality of generational depictions.

This disparity between generations is questioned as soon as the stoic utterances proliferate in *King Lear*. With regard to the Renaissance debates, those utterances were supposed to epitomize a traditional view professed by an older generation. Ambiguously, Edgar is the character, among the younger group, that most notoriously incorporates a stoic attitude towards life. Apart from the unorthodox speeches, his disguise as Poor Tom aims to test his resilience in the awakening of paternal rejection. When he lucidly reappears in the opening of the fourth act, Edgar manifests a conventional faith in the future: "The lamentable change is from the best, / The worst returns to laughter" (4.1.4-5). Based on the stoic utterances of characters like Kent and Albany, it is suggested that "his adherence to convention, courageous though it may be, involves an acceptance of the structure of the world that produced such tragedy" (Margolies 29). Arising from the tragic experience in the storm scenes, this reinforced belief in stoicism is soon discredited by the image of the blind Gloucester: "O gods! Who is't can say 'I am at the worst'? / I am worse than e'er I was" (4.1.25-26). Yet, Edgar is far from rejecting his worldview: despite being constantly confronted by the sheer misery of the human condition, his resilience seems to be only surrendered in the play's catastrophic ending. Alongside Edgar, Cordelia is another character that disrupts that dualist notion by maintaining a stoic silence during the love test. Throughout the scene, her impassiveness is illustrated by a seeming resignation of her fate: "The jewels of our father, with washed eyes / Cordelia leaves you" (1.1.270-271). Acting

according to stoic principles, both characters show that the portrayal of traditional behavior transcends the limitations of generational conflicts. On this point, such ambivalence is heightened through the same logic of inversion for an older generation.

Supposedly, the characters connected to a traditional set of beliefs are expected to provide a paragon of stoic behavior. Nonetheless, that is not what happens: as the most notorious members of an older generation in the play, Lear and Gloucester turn out to be completely unable when it comes to rationalizing and suppressing their emotions. Reflecting upon their attitudes, Elton argues that "Gloucester finds Stoic death by suicide and Stoic life by endurance both difficult; and, like Lear's, his end is hardly a Stoic one" (99). In this regard, Lear and Kent cannot cope with the overwhelming images of Edgar's revelation and Cordelia's death, respectively. In addition to those passages, the outbursts of anger displayed by both characters – starting from the love test onwards – reiterate their inability to resort to patience as a principle at the core of their cultural tradition. In Kent's case, notwithstanding the loyalty to Lear and fortitude when put in the stocks by Cornwall, his supposed stoic patience is contradicted by his fierce quarrels with Oswald. By taking the ambivalent depiction of stoicism to a higher degree, the irrefutability of an established tradition impervious to generational disputes is undermined. The most immediate result is the limitations of human rationality and the respective questioning of man's relevance in the world.

1.4.2 Degenerate view of man: animal imagery and folly

From a cultural standpoint, the major skeptical confrontations depicted in *King Lear* may be read alongside the French philosopher Michel Montaigne. Not only does Montaigne revolt against the precepts of stoic rationalism, but he also embraces the

conception of an unknowable divine providence similar to the one suggested in the play. With regard to the extent of human rationality, it is believed that "no other writer in the period does more to decentre man" (Dollimore 173). Sustaining the practices of Renaissance disbelief, Montaigne deeply rejects the essentialist view of man occupying the center of the universe. Additionally, human capacity is questioned to a point where controversial comparisons with other living beings concerning the real significance of reason are embraced. Investigating the impact of Montaigne's philosophy on *King Lear*, Bell emphasizes:

> Montaigne undertakes to show, in the most famous of his essays, the 'Apologie de Raimond Sabond,' that man's supposed superiority to the rest of animal nature is without basis, though these 'other' animals are without the immortal souls that have been said to be our special distinction. . . . The animal comparison serves also, in Montaigne, to reinforce skepticism about the reliability of human perceptions and the vaunted power of that faculty of reason by which we think ourselves so privileged by God. (*Modern Critical Interpretations* 140)

From the fiercest creatures to the most despicable ones, the animal imagery in the play parallels the gradual disbelief in human superiority. For that reason, this imagery confirms Montaigne's skeptical teachings regarding man's capacity. First, from Lear's perspective, it becomes evident that "the images are evoked to express or to intensify his anger, rejection, indignation, wrath, and vengeance" (John McCloskey 321). Throughout his process of disillusionment, Lear's initial comparison of his anger to "the dragon and his wrath" (1.1.124) culminates in the association of humans with worms: for instance, Gloucester's "I such a fellow saw / Which made me think a man a worm" (4.1.32-33) in allusion to Poor Tom. On this point, man is regarded as the lowest of creatures rather than

a superior being. As for the other comparisons made in the narrative, the main images emerge from the atrocities perpetrated by Edmund, Regan and Goneril. The fact that those characters were capable of committing brutal acts against their own fathers "raises the question of what (if anything) truly and profoundly distinguishes man from beast" (Leon Craig 134). As a result, the bestiality of evoked animals such as wolves, tigers, and vultures as well as the possible correspondence to mankind challenges any absolute notions of reason as the highest faculty. Other than reverberating Montaigne's skepticism, the derogatory use of animal imagery in *King Lear* points to the idea that rationality is no longer a valid option when it comes to facing an appalling world.

In the play's vicious atmosphere, where children prey upon their fathers, rationality becomes synonymous with a distorted and even immoral view of the world. Taking into account the limitations of stoic philosophy, folly arises as an alternative for bringing about a straightforward way of apprehending reality. Stemming from the teachings of the Dutch humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam, the portrayal of folly in the play revolves around the importance of embracing feeling rather than relying on empty rationalizations. Analyzing the impact of such a portrayal on the limitations of stoicism, Bate clarifies:

> The Stoic philosopher tries to be ruled by reason rather than passion. But for Erasmus the notion that to be wise you must suppress the emotions is inhuman. The most important thing is to 'feel'—as Gloucester has to learn, to see the world not rationally but 'feelingly.' Folly points out that friendship is among the highest human values, and it depends on emotion. The people who show friendship to Lear (Fool, Kent as Caius, Edgar as Poor Tom and then as Peasant) and to Gloucester (Servants, Old Man) are not the wise or the rich. (*Soul of the Age* ch. 22)

Regardless of the extremity, accepting suffering in order to achieve true wisdom constitutes a necessity in *King Lear*, even at the risk of losing one's sanity. For that reason, it is implied that behind the Fool's apparent unreason lies knowledge about the human condition. This insight stems from the way that Erasmus used foolishness "as an emblem of the deepest Christian wisdom, revealed only when the pride, cruelty, and ambition of the world are shattered by a cleansing laughter" (Greenblatt *The Norton Shakespeare* 541). Once again, the play reflects the skeptical confrontation of an established dichotomy – namely, reason opposed to folly – that eventually acquires an ambiguous tone. Occurring mainly through the Fool's speeches, the interweaving of both concepts engenders a revaluation of man's role in the midst of a desolate world. In this sense, Lear was sane when he committed his most foolish act: making his immoral daughters his mothers. On the other hand, the experience of insanity allowed the old king to look beyond the futility of his former god-like status and wisely question what is left regarding humanity. As an alternative manner of approaching life, his new-found perception is conditioned by the emotional interaction with the group of characters mentioned by Bate in a way that the immersion in folly becomes integral to the idea of Christian revelation.

Analogous to the skeptical interrogations about stoicism, the conception of folly presents an ambivalent correspondence to Christianity. Other than reflecting a rationalization recurrently disallowed in the narrative, resorting to stoic patience constitutes a practice that presupposes a religious faith in divine providence or, in the eyes of a Renaissance audience, a Christian stoic resignation. Challenged by the emergence of overwhelming images of suffering, such a practice loses even more its significance in view of the insights of wise folly in the play. Conversely, Lear's immersion in insanity foregrounds two basic Christian principles: dispossession and compassion. Stemming from Erasmus' notion of Christian madness, the old king's journey initially echoes "the

fundamental folly of Christianity and its demand that you throw away your possessions" (Bate *Soul of the Age* ch. 22). Starting with his daughters' mandatory dismissal of a retinue, Lear's gradual loss of identity coincides with the skeptical confrontations of his established worldview. Yet, his outbursts of anger constitute an obstacle to the definitive rejection of an ineffective stoic tradition. Only when Lear is dispossessed of his sanity during the storm scene does he acquire an implicit Christian wisdom regarding the need to value the bare necessities of life. From that moment on, compassion arises as an alternative to face the bleakness of *King Lear*'s atmosphere.

Throughout his process of disillusionment, Lear is far from being alone: enlightened by the wise foolishness of Poor Tom and the Fool, the old king senses that the mystery of salvation is hidden from rationality and given to the most helpless people. Instead of negating, he starts to regard suffering as a valuable lesson, not only to self-knowledge, but also to comprehend the pain felt by the poor naked wretches that he comes across. Reflecting upon the emotional interaction between Lear and those wretches like Poor Tom, Kirsch states that "compassion is important and deeply moving: the sympathetic experience of pain establishes a human community in a play that otherwise seems to represent its apocalyptic dissolution" (40). Being a fundamental Christian virtue, compassion is conditioned to the knowledge of human frailty previously amplified by both personal and collective painful experience. Guided by folly, those experiences correspond to the antidote against the acts committed by the villainous characters that, although they are intensely dysfunctional, are still shockingly rational. For that reason, the emphasis on compassion tends to coincide with "a dialect of folly and madness, to be heard in counterpoint with the language of an evil that remains horribly sane" (Frank Kermode 102). Concomitant with the emergence of unusual utterances, the Fool and Poor Tom's unconditional companionship, for instance, counterbalance the evil deeds and,

consequently, prevent the catastrophic events from being the only conclusion to be contemplated as soon as the play ends. As the last instance of Erasmus' notion of Christian madness, the correspondence between compassion and folly calls attention to the complexities within an entire cultural tradition.

1.4.3 Superstition versus individualism

As fundamental lessons to be taken into account in a devastated world, the Christian notions provided by folly are still contrasted to two opposing attitudes towards life: Gloucester's superstition and Edmund's individualistic determinism. Transcending the mere generational conflicts, cultural evidence "makes it clear that Edmund's opposition to Gloucester's views, far from merely expressing villainy, was part of a continuing Renaissance debate" (Elton 156). In *King Lear*, both father and his bastard son share their views with other characters in a way that the collision of contrasting views is recurrently intensified. Apart from their obvious differences, those views are also motivated by the skeptical interrogations about the essentialist notions of man and divine providence. From a Renaissance culture prior to skepticism, the fact that man occupies the center of the universe implies his inherent immutability[5]. For that reason, it was long believed that to "eternalise the nature of man is to render the destiny of people apparently unalterable" (Dollimore 271). The emphasis on destiny was a seminal concept to oppose the mentioned attitudes: whereas Gloucester believes that human fate is predetermined by astrological disposition, Edmund argues that man alone is responsible for whatever happens to him. Other than dismissing the role of divine providence, both views stand for extremist

[5] Analyzing the Renaissance development of classical humanism, Dollimore calls attention to the existence of a Christian humanist tradition in which "man exists at the centre of a theocentric universe and is rational by nature" (162). In this respect, the central role occupied by man is legitimized by God's eternal law. As both human and divine spheres are inter-connected, it is implied not only the irrefutability of man's reason, but also the immutability of this divinely ordered universe.

attitudes in early modern England. However, they are far from being absolute: in their interaction with other characters, Gloucester and Edmund manifest the influence of other contrasting attitudes within their own respective views.

Guided by a worship of fortune, Gloucester's superstitious view reflects a fatalistic approach to reality in which, because of an inescapable destiny, there is nothing left but interpreting the heavenly signs and evaluating how ominous they are. Alongside Gloucester, the depiction of superstition in *King Lear* also occurs through Kent's reliance on the stars – "The stars above us, govern our conditions" (4.3.33) – and Poor Tom's allusions to devils – such as "Flibbertigibbet" (3.4.105), "Mahu" (3.4.131) and "Frateretto" (3.6.6) – that signal the world's growing decay. From a cultural standpoint, such a depiction was an easy target for Renaissance disbelief: "common-sense doubts regarding ghosts, witches, dream visions or astrological prediction figure significantly as instances of popular scepticism (Hamlin 121)". Dating back to a time when man's capacity was unquestionable, superstition was already incongruous with Christian faith for being purely regarded as a purely pagan practice. Eventually, it was even more challenged by Renaissance skepticism on account of being used as a means of transfering human responsibility to a supernatural cause. On the other hand, the crisis in divine providence made urgent the emergence of responses capable of tackling the mysteries of an unknowable God. Among them, the superstitious behavior followed such a crisis by also manifesting a lack of faith in providence: in view of the immutability of one's destiny, the importance of a superior force ends up being relativized. Thus, the depiction of superstition in the play, at the same time that it was connected to a questioned essentialist tradition, became integral to the skeptical confrontations of providence.

Instead of being isolated, the superstitious practices interfere in the stoic attitudes professed mainly by Gloucester and Kent. In this sense, superstition and stoicism are

contrasted to reveal the complexity of human life when it comes to embracing a single view point among the multiple cultural manifestations of the early modern period. Based on an ambivalent relation with providence, Gloucester and Kent oscillate between the fatalistic belief in planetary disposition and stoic resignation to cope with catastrophic events. As for Edgar, his disguise as Poor Tom, apart from implying a test of stoic endurance, enables the absurd evocations of names of demons as superstitious responses to the absence of the gods in the play. Overall, those attitudes, rather than strengthening their cultural relevance by mutual intertwining, turn out to be as faulty as the divine providence that they recurrently contemplate. Analyzing the inefficacy of superstition in the play, Greenblatt argues:

> *King Lear* is haunted by a sense of rituals and beliefs that are no longer efficacious, that have been emptied out. The characters appeal again and again to the pagan gods, but the gods remain utterly silent. Nothing answers to human questions but human voices; nothing breeds about the heart but human desires; nothing inspires awe or terror but human suffering and human depravity. (*The Greenblatt Reader* 215)

Opposed to stoicism and its emphasis on human capacity, superstitious behavior revolves around inalterable forces that range from astrological influences to the inalterability of destiny. In this regard, this behavior still expresses the belief in a supernatural cause analogous to the one in divine providence. In *King Lear*, not only is this belief discredited in view of the tragic events, but it also reinforces an utter sense of isolation that emanates from the play: whether one assumes a superstitious or religious attitude, man is impervious to the supernatural sphere and, consequently, alone in a godforsaken universe. As a result, the growing disbelief in providence follows the failure of superstition in such a way that the limitations of man's rationality become even more latent. Nevertheless, the superstitious

practices in the narrative are not portrayed just to be simply discredited by skepticism. Reinforced by the cultural significance behind Poor Tom's evocations, they actually integrate an established tradition which, because of its recurrent inadequacy, is on the verge of being replaced by other attitudes that resort to pragmatism as a means of facing a bleak world. To illustrate this, the names of devils mentioned by Poor Tom bring about poignant images of superstition that confirm that notion of a world in decay.

In addition to being confronted by a skeptical tradition, Poor Tom's evocations were long regarded in Protestant England as heretical imagery derived from a Catholic past. In the Jacobean Period, King James took that confrontation to its peak by repudiating all kinds of superstitious manifestations, especially those ones related to possessions and exorcisms. In this sense, Samuel Harsnett' *Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*[6] (1603) was the work that best captured this spirit: written in the late sixteenth century, it lists numerous cases of fraudulent exorcisms conducted by Catholic priests. As a favorite of James, "the unrelentingly vicious, scabrous, and manipulative world of the *Declaration* – a world in which what people do to each other is more cruel than anything thought up by devils – is a disturbing social universe not all that far from the one imagined in *King Lear*" (Shapiro ch. 4). Taking human cruelty into account, Poor Tom's devils – taken directly from Harsnett's work – acquire an ambiguous relevance to the play. On the one hand, they are far from representing a threat: "by echoing Harsnett's exposure of fraudulent exorcisms, Edgar's ghoul-babble seems to parody Gloucester's superstitious credulity" (Reid 120). Intrinsic to Edgar's disguise, those odd names stand for mere imprecations derived from an innocuous tradition of superstitious beliefs. On the other hand, Poor Tom's babble materializes *King Lear*'s growing bleakness by echoing Lear's painful journey. In general, it is suggested that the ominous aspects to be taken seriously in the play are not the

[6] For a thorough comprehension of the impact of Harshnett's *Declaration* on Jacobean society, see Shapiro, James. "Possession." *The Year of Lear: Shakespeare in 1606*, Simon & Schuster, 2015.

demoniacal or even the astrological ones, but actually the atrocities perpetrated by Edmund, Regan, and Goneril as they profess their worldview and put in motion the downward direction of the play.

In view of the frailty manifested by the previous responses to unknowable providence, the possibility of a more pragmatic approach to life arises as a valid alternative in *King Lear*. Doing away with any interference from an established tradition, such an approach represents a radical form of skepticism that directly confronts its reality in order to establish a new-found practice. By negating all absolute notions regarding the human condition, this practice revolves around the belief in "the man who, following Machiavelli, defines himself as first and foremost himself, in contrast to the 'old man' who would have defined himself in terms of the old hierarchies as a dutiful subject to his prince and son to his father" (Bate *Soul of the Age* ch. 4). From a cultural standpoint, the choice for a new individualistic philosophy acquires an ambivalent connotation in view of the uncertainties that arise from early modern England. In this regard, rejecting traditional practices could be promptly regarded as the fundamental step towards a more prosperous era. Other than anxieties related to the Jacobean Period, this possibility is soon questioned by the Renaissance disbelief in man's capacity: because of human limitations, it was unlikely to expect that the adoption of a new philosophical attitude would bring about any changes for the better. In the play, the atrocities committed by Edmund and his peers in their individualistic determinism seem to radically point to that tragic perspective. Conversely, the choice for a more extreme skeptical practice corresponds to the most urgent option to put an end to the innocuous customs that contaminate the play's atmosphere from the very beginning.

In early modern England, the occurrence of a new pragmatic behavior reflects the fears concerning the establishment of an amoral political philosophy connected to the

Italian thinker Niccolo Machiavelli. As a type already existent in English drama from that time, the so-called Machiavellian villain adopts an opportunistic attitude to succeed in society in disregard of any moral scruples. In this respect, individualism is initially associated with an attempt to thrive at any cost, even if it means crushing all traditional values. In *King Lear*, this association occurs through the group of evil characters – mainly, Edmund, Regan, and Goneril – as emphasized by Theodore Weiss:

> The villainous ones in the play, self-insulated, willful creatures, never acknowledge forces, larger than they are and mysterious, at work on them. Utterly practical, busy, rational beings, they are preoccupied with their own material desires, passions, plots. They live in one world only – this one – and have little use for images and imagining. They have successfully suppressed the dialogic, the other voice, in their natures. (73)

Different from the other characters, the evil ones never resort to divine providence as a means of facing reality: they are only obsessed with achieving their goals. Deprived of any supernatural element, the play's world inhabited by gullible people attached to traditional values creates the perfect scenario for them to prosper. As hypocritical disbelievers, Goneril and Regan easily deceive Lear during the love test and, eventually, do not hesitate when it comes to mistreating their father. Replicated by Oswald, that mistreatment is soon surpassed by Edmund's betrayal of Gloucester that led his father to be blinded by Cornwall. Overall, all those distinct passages filled with cruel acts culminate in the inevitable correspondence between individualistic determinism and human cruelty. Nevertheless, any reductionist notions are once again disallowed: despite embodying a new pragmatism portrayed in the play, Edmund's behavior proves to be incompatible with generalizations. By transcending the mere Machiavellian role attributed to his group of characters, he shows the ambiguous nuances in any adopted practice.

Confronted by his father's superstitious thoughts, Edmund makes his first appearance in the play by manifesting contempt for astrology as a reliable concept. In view of the inadequacy of Gloucester's conventional speech, any practice that, rather than focusing on human responsibility, aims to attribute one's failings to a supernatural agent ends up being greatly discredited. In this sense, it is implied that Edmund "is a true sceptic in the sense of interrogating received opinion, refusing to accept its timeworn notions without objective verification" (Bevington *Shakespeare's Ideas* 168). Derived from an individualistic determinism, his adopted skepticism presupposes the confrontation of absolute notions that no longer find resonance in a changing world. Additionally, his own condition as a bastard, taken as a stigma for a Renaissance audience, unmasks the social injustices built upon a rigid hierarchical order. From a cultural standpoint, Edmund and his villainous group voice the widespread discontentment of many outcasts in early modern England that were unable to find their place in society because of birth or social status. In relation to this group, the transposition of a sense of injustice to the narrative reveals that "even at their worst they always speak a kind of hard truth, and their energy, daring, and practical political skills always command dramatic if not moral admiration" (Alvin Kernan 20). Guided by such overwhelming energy, any idea that points to amorality in the play acquires an ambiguous connotation for its importance as a matter of broad social interest. Apart from the committed atrocities, even Edmund's individualistic behavior carries a high cultural significance for taking the Machiavellian type to a level of complexity where the urges within an unfair society become evident.

As initially demonstrated by Cordelia's attitude during the love test, the individualism professed by Edmund is not exclusive to his group of Machiavellian characters. Despite the obvious differences in comparison to those characters, Cordelia refuses to take part in the public demonstrations of affection in a way that anticipates

Edmund's rebellion against the "plague of custom" (1.2.3). Throughout the scene, her stoic silence also displays a rejection of the empty formalities even at the risk of being disinherited by her father. In this respect, Margolies claims that "the virtue of Cordelia, which is undisputed, is then seen to be not simply the following of social good but an active, critical relation to reality which could be mistaken for pride" (29). Other than challenging Lear's traditional values, her virtuous behavior encompasses a skeptical approach to reality that unmasks Goneril and Regan's hypocritical declarations even before the beginning of the play's tragic descent. In this moment, she is not only looking through her sisters' deceit, but also confronting their announced determinism. Unfortunately, Cordelia is absent throughout most of the play and therefore the real extent of her individualism cannot be properly measured. Yet, her straightforward attitude is poignant enough to counterbalance the amoral ones embraced by the villainous characters. As a consequence, the occurrence of Cordelia's selfless determinism contrasting *King Lear*'s amoral pragmatism corresponds to a fundamental distinction towards the refutation of individualism as a mere derogative practice.

In *King Lear*, superstitious and individualistic practices are contrasted so that their relevance in the early modern period turns out to be properly assessed. Following the precepts of Renaissance skepticism, those practices are also transposed to the play in their sheer ambiguity rather than being depicted as absolute truths effective against life's uncertainties. In this regard, Cordelia's individualism is foregrounded in its contrast to the pragmatic behavior professed by the group of wicked characters in the play. Alongside other small gestures of compassion and companionship depicted throughout the narrative, her attitude integrates a set of meaningful passages – for example, Cornwall's servant intervening to prevent his master from blinding Gloucester – that, despite culminating in irresolution when it comes to questions surrounding human existence, is capable of

outweighing the acts of cruelty in a godforsaken world. Based on the contemplation of an unknowable providence, it is implied that "the mysteries of all things in the world, and of human fates, become what to the skeptic mind they must remain, mere speculations for philosophic reflection" (Bell *Tragic Skepticism* 190). From stoicism to amoral determinism, a multitude of responses is interwoven so that inconclusiveness concerning existence end up being increased. To illustrate this, it is impossible to attest if Lear and Cordelia reunite after their deaths or not: *King Lear* offers numerous alternatives with regard to belief in divine providence, but refuses to choose a definitive one. Deeply embedded in skepticism, the immediate result is that the basic conditions for the indeterminacy manifested in the play's textual devices are created.

Chapter Two

Polysemy and the confrontation of language as an absolute notion regarding existence

2.1 Ambiguous manifestations of language

In *King Lear*, the occurrence of political anxieties from the Jacobean Period is amplified by the cultural relevance of Renaissance disbelief and, consequently, exerts a huge impact on the tendency to challenge absolute notions regarding existence. From the king's royal condition to the belief in divine providence, several notions are gradually interrogated on account of their inadequacy in a bleak world. In this respect, the way that man's rationality is nullified occurs through interrogations about the real efficacy of human communication. Intrinsic to the interweaving of cultural energies in early modern England, *King Lear* engenders an "accumulating scepticism about the claims of language to display adequately the extremity of human experience" (Gamiri Salgado 34). As a conventional worldview revolves around the validity of words, any disturbance in the irrefutability of rationality directly impacts the use of language as an unquestioned form of expression. In the play's godforsaken reality, where man constantly comes across his appalling isolation, such a disturbance is triggered by skeptical confrontations as they are conveyed through the limitations of language. Coinciding with the extremity of human suffering, the mentioned limitations are epitomized by words and utterances that, in their ambiguous use, generate multiple possibilities regarding meaning and interpretation. As a result, the language initially manifested in the distinct conceptions of nature and justice throughout the narrative gradually contributes to an adequate understanding of the play's polysemic construction.

2.1.1 Ambiguous depiction of nature

Present in the opening dialogue, the idea of illegitimacy constitutes the starting point for *King Lear*'s ambiguity because it bears the first occurrence of *nature* to be eventually challenged through distinct connotations. Previously discussing the act of division to be taken place, Gloucester introduces Edmund to Kent and refers to him as "knave" (1.1.20) and "whoreson" (1.1.22) in comparison to Edgar, defined "by order of law" (1.1.18). Despite adopting a jocular tone towards his bastard son, Gloucester makes use of words that have a distinctively pejorative meaning in the narrative. To illustrate this, *whoreson* appears in some imprecations being synonymous with the lowest images, such as Lear's "you whoreson dog" (1.4.75) and Kent's "thou whoreson zed" (2.2.59). As for *knave*, it is used as a curse several times by different characters, ranging from Cornwall's "you beastly knave" (2.2.64) to Kent's "plain knave" (2.2.106). It is suggested that, however well-intentioned he was by referring to his son's inferior status, Gloucester "presses home the stigma of bastardy, calling Edmund *knave* and *whoreson*, words which are repeated throughout the play as labels of contempt" (Claude Summers 227). Carrying a strong connotation, those words, at the same time that they reinforce that stigma, reflect the values of a hierarchical order that leaves social outcasts like Edmund on the margins of society. Additionally, they stem from a preconceived notion of *nature* that promptly labels any gesture of defiance against that order as unacceptable. Consequently, the implicit reasons for Edmund's contempt are placed as a prelude to the subsequent uses of the word in their multiple manifestations.

Among the numerous examples of foul language in *King Lear*, *knave* and *whoreson* are emblematic for introducing the correlation between illegitimacy and unnatural behavior. By going against a stable order bound by custom, bastardy implies an innate badness that stands for a threat to the first conception of *nature* in the play. Based on an

ordered view fiercely defended by Lear half way through the narrative, the concept "includes what is peculiarly natural to man, an order of existence in which love, obedience, authority, loyalty are natural because they are genuinely human" (Frye 18). Taking into account those absolute notions, Lear conditions the division of the kingdom in the opening scene to a love test, as a means of certifying the infallibility of that order. Unexpectedly, he is soon confronted by acts of disobedience: Cordelia refuses to take part in the public demonstrations of affection and Kent angrily vouches for her. From Lear's perspective, both characters display unnatural behavior that, regardless of their superior status in society, suffices to justify their rejections. As an example, Cordelia starts to be regarded by him as a "wretch whom Nature is ashamed" (1.1.213), but, as the events unfold, the actual "unnatural hags" (2.4.274) turn out to be his other sisters in their amoral disregard of traditional values. Since the very beginning, it becomes evident that *nature* is a concept that conveniently changes according to the adopted attitude: despite their legitimacy, Lear's daughters are treated by him as bastard children as soon as they confront their father. Thus, the dubious use of the word deeply affects not only conventional language, but also the stigma of bastardy initially announced – and yet to be embodied – by Edmund in the narrative.

Other than contrasting the acknowledgment of unnatural behavior in the love test, Edmund's revelation in the following scene allows for the occurrence of a new language that intensifies the initial opposition to the conventional use of *nature*. After Lear's rejection of Cordelia and Kent, Edmund shows his true colors for the first time in *King Lear* through a soliloquy that reveals his compromise on a different conception of the word: "Thou Nature art my goddess, to thy law / My services are bound" (1.2.1-2). In this moment, the previous idea of filial obedience representing a natural condition is consistently disregarded through the confrontation of any language that alludes to bastardy:

"Why brand they us / With base? With baseness, bastardy? Base, base?" (1.2.9-10). Guided by his sheer individualism, Edmund manifests a pragmatic behavior directed to thrive in society at any cost. Investigating the correspondence between this new view of *nature* and the mentioned allusions to illegitimacy in the inaugural soliloquy, Aers and Kress state:

> The comparison of *base, baseness, bastardy* shows Edmund's awareness of the source of abstract concepts: they derive from actions performed by human agents. He is not gulled by the reifications with which his society confronts him. . . . These actions happen because Edmund intends to make them happen. And only then, only under those conditions, which he has made, does he invoke the *gods*, ironically – for he makes his own success. (101)

As the narrative progresses, the incompatibility between two contrasting views of *nature* – one that motivates sheer pragmatism and the other one that demands unconditional obedience – remains latent. By putting his free will above his stigma of bastardy, Edmund takes the fundamental step towards that incompatibility. For that reason, when he mocks Gloucester's superstitious beliefs in his second soliloquy, the prevalence of determinism over illegitimacy is reiterated: "I should have been that I am, had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardizing" (1.2.123-5). On the other hand, those allusions to bastardy as well as his self-proclaimed stigma – for instance, "Edmund the base / Shall to' th' legitimate. I grow, I prosper. / Now gods, stand up for bastards!" (1.2.20-22) – point to an intention to embrace his supposed inherent condition, as mentioned by Aers and Kress above. In other words, "Edmund paradoxically sees himself as overdetermined by his bastardy even as he fiercely affirms his freedom" (Harold Bloom 6). Despite pledging allegiance to a distinct conception of *nature*, Edmund ends up fulfilling the expectations of an established order when it comes to atrocities that a bastard like him would *naturally*

commit. Characterized by paradoxical language, the interference of opposing conceptions of illegitimacy within the same speech indicates the growing ambiguity that arises from the play from that moment on.

Intensified by the play's double plot, contrasting allusions to *nature* are manifested after Edmund's soliloquies in a clear opposition between a traditional connotation and an individualistic one. For Lear's group, the traditional sense is immediately perceived as certain utterances – for example, Gloucester's "unnatural, detested, brutish villain" (1.2.74) in view of Edgar's supposed treason – attempt to aggressively do away with the threats to established worldviews. As for the individualistic connotation, this perception is not that obvious: in many passages, Edmund and his peers make use of a language that is manifested either in a traditional meaning or as a mechanism of deception. In the first case, Cornwall, for instance, scolds Kent for his attack on Oswald that "constrains the garb quite from his nature" (2.2.92-3). In this sense, it is implied that "Kent's bluntness shows him to be acting a part not proper to his nature which here means something like his servile place" (Kermode 112). Although his conception of *nature* carries the influence of amoral pragmatism, Cornwall reveals to be ambivalently attached to the language of a hierarchical order by mistreating Kent in accordance with his low status. In the second situation, Edmund resorts to a traditional sense of *nature* as a way of concealing his true intentions when it comes to succeeding at any cost. By plotting against Edgar, he convinces Gloucester that his brother manifests an "unnatural purpose" (2.1.50). Such a hypocritical response is one example out of many in which it is implied that "Edmund's true view of nature is disclosed only in his soliloquy" (Bell *Tragic Skepticism* 170). Thus, those occurrences of *nature* not only confirm the notion of language as not being entirely reliable, but they also reiterate the ambiguous interweaving of distinct connotations of the word in the play.

Located within Lear's and Gloucester's utterances in the first two acts, the opposing conceptions of *nature* also occur though contradictions related to the passages where Cordelia and Edgar are rejected. Starting with Lear, he accuses Cordelia of unnatural behavior based on her seemly rebellious attitude. Ambiguously, it is suggested that "Lear's rejection of her seems unnatural on the literal as well as the symbolic level" (Kirsch 47). Despite clinging to a traditional sense of *nature* irrefutable for him, the old king ends up breaking with the established conventions of the love test and disinherits his only honest daughter. In this respect, Lear mistakes the natural for the unnatural by favoring Goneril and Regan. Similarly, Gloucester rejects his wronged son for being unable to look beyond deception. This time, however, the mistake is inverted: the bastard Edmund, notwithstanding his supposedly inherent badness, is regarded as natural. Moreover, Gloucester resorts to an ambiguous idea of *nature* as synonymous with illegitimacy by calling Edmund "loyal and natural boy" (2.1.84). In this moment, it is impossible to know for sure if he is referring to Edmund's achieved status after Edgar's persecution or to the fact that his bastard son was conceived in the basest way possible. Regardless of the perspective, the dichotomy that initially emerges from the contrasting depictions of *nature* in *King Lear* is challenged by ambiguities related to the correspondent use of language. The immediate result is that the traditional sense of the word starts to lose its unquestioned meaning through derogatory descriptions, such as "subdued nature" (3.4.65), "loathed part of nature" (4.6.39) and "ruined piece of nature" (4.6.134). By relativizing the previous absolute connotations, those descriptions coincide with distinct manifestations of *nature* that are built upon a set of appalling images from the third act onwards.

Parallel to the pejorative references to *nature*, the encounter between Lear and Edgar disguised as Poor Tom on the heath enables the occurrence of a new comprehension of the word in contrast to the previous ones related to obedience and individualism. During

the encounter, the image of the natural man, capable of embodying a language that was previously taken for granted, emerges from the narrative as a notion at the core of Lear's journey of self-discovery. On this point, Poor Tom becomes the epitome of *King Lear*'s "poor naked wretches" (3.4.28) responsible for awakening in the old king the misery of the human condition fundamental to his learning process in the storm scenes. Analyzing the stages that characterize such a process, Wilson Knight states:

> Lear revolts from man, tries to become a thing of elemental, instinctive life: since rational consciousness has proved unbearable. Hence the relevance of animals, and animal-symbolism, to madness. For madness is the breaking of that which differentiates man from beast. So Lear tries to become naked, bestial, unsophisticated; and later garlands himself with flowers. The Lear-theme is rooted throughout in nature. (209)

From the moment that Lear comes cross the "unaccommodated man," (3.4.98) – which means Poor Tom in his bare state – he is immersed in a revealing insanity about his true condition. Later, the animal figures evoked by Lear – like "thou owest the worm no silk" (3.4.95) and "the little dogs and all" (3.6.24) – indicate that he is amidst the great chaos of elemental nature: a place where even the beasts are less cruel than humans. Surrounded by that chaos, the old king is "exposed to naked nature and, stripped bit by bit, to his own naked human nature" (Weiss 80). On this point, *nature*, in its implicit bare sense, acquires a dubious function: despite presupposing a radical deprivation, it stands for the crucial insight of Lear's journey regarding the frailty of human existence. Reduced to an animal-like state, Lear walks out of the storm scene possessing a vision of that word opposed to the other ones presented in the narrative. Embedded in degenerate images regarding the limitations of man's rationality, this vision is what the old king refers to when he describes himself to Cordelia's attendants in the fourth act: "I am even / The natural fool of fortune"

(4.6.188-189). Emblematized in this previous line, the centrality of Poor Tom's presence in the second half of the play, at the same time that it relativizes the meanings of *nature,* leads to the notion of language as increasingly unreliable.

Intensifying *King Lear*'s polysemy, the scene in which Lear and Cordelia reconcile brings about a redemptive vision of *nature* that directly confronts the language manifested up to that moment. Absent since the first act, Cordelia is described by her attendant, even before the mentioned scene, as a daughter "who redeems nature" (4.6.202). In this regard, she stands for the symbol of a renewed sense of *nature* as indicated by her responses to Lear in the love test: "I love your Majesty / According to my bond" (1.1.94-95). As the narrative progresses, "Cordelia's claim of a natural 'bond' between parent and child is juxtaposed to an image of the 'natural' in its most anarchic and destructive form" (Garber 586). In this respect, her embodiment of the word is implicitly opposed to the allusions made by Edmund and Lear in the passages mentioned above. When the reconciliation scene takes place, Lear interacts with his daughter in his wretched state – that is, as the natural man weakened by his "abused nature" (4.7.17) – which allows previous manifestations of *nature* to be outweighed by Cordelia's forgiveness as the old king reminisces about his miserable condition and past mistakes. Putting an end to the familial misunderstandings in the love test, her attitude confirms the necessity of rebuilding the world upon the natural bond of father and daughter instead of merely taking the consequences of radical deprivation – as illustrated by the animal imagery in the storm scenes – for granted. More than a mere redemptive sign, Cordelia's embodiment of *nature* counterbalances preceding connotations of the word and, consequently, greatly contributes to the establishment of the play's polysemic construction.

Triggered by Cordelia's appearance in the fourth act, the emergence of a renewed view of *nature* supposedly creates a definitive dichotomy between a redemptive

connotation and an amoral one. However, the last occurrence of the word within Edmund's final insight into his condition reveals that *King Lear* is incompatible with any conclusive notions regarding existence. In the last scene, when the order for the deaths of Lear and Cordelia is countermanded, Edmund's "Some good I mean to do, / Despite of mine own nature" (5.3.219-20) reveals the incompatibility between his intention to do good and his actual condition. Taking into account the references to bastardy throughout the narrative, Elton argues that "in addition to sensitivities deriving from an illegitimacy which his father insensitively emphasizes at the start of the play, Edmund comes to some self-knowledge of the evil determining his nature" (136). In spite of ambiguously embracing his illegitimacy since the very beginning, Edmund has an insight into the difficulties in breaking with the stigma of his *nature* as a bastard. In other words, he attests to his free will by showing that not even an amoral individualism is absolute. On the other hand, this insight ends up confirming the initial paradox displayed in his first soliloquies: by contemplating the evil of his acts, Edmund does reveal himself to be overdetermined by bastardy. In this respect, his final reference to *nature* increases the ambiguity concerning his illegitimacy rather than confirms a redemptive connotation personified by Cordelia. As a result, both occurrences of the word heighten the sense of irresolution that resonates through *King Lear*'s polysemic construction.

2.1.2 Ambiguous depiction of justice

Encompassing a wide range of words and utterances, the language related to justice in *King Lear* initially stems from the paradoxical depiction of paternal authority in the double plot. Analogous to *nature* in its traditional sense, this authority revolves around the observance of a hierarchical order in which the implicit laws of unconditional obedience

gain prominence. In this regard, any act that defies that order simultaneously presupposes unnatural and unjust behavior. By conditioning the division of the kingdom to a love test, Lear aims to show that his fatherhood, other than walking parallel to the precepts of divine providence, is sufficient to disallow the emergence of deviant behavior. Investigating the correspondence between justice and paternal authority, Cantor claims:

> Lear believes that the natural and the divine orders are one and the same, and both are aligned with human justice and law. One reason he is certain that his plan for disposing of his kingdom will work is that he has no doubt that his authority as a father is independent of his political position and will consequently survive his abdication of power. (232)

From Lear's perspective, the idea of fatherhood involves the compliance with the laws of an ordered society and, consequently, becomes synonymous with justice. Similarly, Gloucester regards his patriarchal status as irrefutable by taking filial obedience for granted. At the beginning of the play, however, their authority is soon challenged by Cordelia's and Edgar's supposed rebellious acts: for both fathers, filial ingratitude is the epitome of injustice and has to be expurgated at any cost. In terms of utterances, the difference is that "Gloucester does his best to bring Edgar to justice whereas Lear is concerned with the more primitive thought of vengeance, and invokes the heavens and nature to aid him" (Knight 217). In an urge to punish the wrongdoers, the language that evokes justice in the first two acts alternates between Lear's references to superior forces – such as "by Jupiter" (1.1.180) and "sweet heaven" (1.5.38) – and Gloucester's obsession with Edgar's apprehension: "Not in this land shall he remain uncaught" (2.1.58). Paradoxically, the way that both characters strive to do justice is profoundly unjust: their accused children are not only innocent, but they are also victims of wrong decisions. Eventually, the language mentioned above is promptly devoid of meaning by the

hypocritical speeches uttered by Goneril, Regan, and Edmund. Resulting from the frailty behind Lear and Gloucester's irrefutable authority, the initial manifestation of justice anticipates an inadequacy that turns into a recurrent theme in *King Lear*.

From the moment that Lear is confronted by the ingratitude of his elder daughters, the references to justice are multiplied according to the growing manifestations of cruelty in the play. Previously personifying justice through their authority, Lear and Gloucester become the most notorious victims of a notion that they paradoxically inaugurated in *King Lear*: human injustice. Emblems of suffering, both characters call on divine intervention to punish their wrongdoers and make up for their miserable condition. On this point, William Empson adds that "the sort of justice imputed to the gods is what is called 'poetic,' happening through agencies which obviously have no real sense of justice" (207). Far from showing effectiveness, the belief in those agencies reveals that the more Lear and Gloucester resort to superior forces, the more they realize that the heavens are indifferent to man's atrocities. Conversely, the allusions to poetic justice do not lose their relevance in the narrative even in view of Lear's process of disillusion. After facing the harshness of Goneril and Regan, the old king refers to *justice* for the first time in a monologue that reflects an urge to compensate for the extremity of his afflictions:

> Let the great gods, / That keep this dreadful pudder o'er our heads, / Find out their enemies now. Tremble thou wretch, / That hast within thee undivulgèd crimes, / Unwhipped of justice. (3.2.46-50)

Deeply infuriated, Lear evokes the *great god*s to persecute the *unwhipped of justice* as those who escape punishment. After this monologue, the answer to his pleas is characterized by the usual silence of divine providence and the intensification of his sufferings to the point of madness. Simultaneously, other characters reproduce his speeches in passages that the gods are uselessly called on to intervene – for instance, Gloucester's

"O cruel! O you god" (3.7.67) after his blinding and Albany's "the gods defend her" (5.3.231) to Cordelia's imminent death. Overall, the references to poetic justice are emblematic because they call attention to the inadequacy of language that is consistently discredited in the play's succession of catastrophic events.

Concomitant with the depiction of poetic justice, the interweaving of contrasting utterances concerning a fair attitude becomes recurrent as the group of wicked characters makes use of a dubious language. As an example, when Edmund reveals the letter that proves Gloucester's treason, he cunningly asks Cornwall: "I must repent to be just?" (3.5.7). In this question, he ironically refers to an elusive form of justice by informing on his father's intentions whereas his true individualistic convictions are only implied. As the play progresses, it is noticeable that "Edmund, like his colleagues, has followed the principle of personal, direct, and harshly 'appropriate' retribution, or *lex talionis*" (Elton 107). In its pragmatic sense, this so-called an eye-for-an-eye justice is used by Edmund and his peers as a means of punishing whoever goes against their will. Eventually, the more atrocities are committed, the more urgent the calls for the gods' intervention become. In this regard, Gloucester's blinding stands for a passage that emblematizes the collision of contrasting conceptions of justice in *King Lear*. Angered by Gloucester's treason, Cornwall announces that, despite not being able to kill him "without the form of justice," (3.7.24) – which evokes the use of the word in its traditional sense – he is ready to punish him properly. After being mistreated, Gloucester's "But I shall see / The winged vengeance" (3.7.62-63) attests to his belief in divine intervention through the expression of *see*. In a clear choice for an eye-for-an-eye justice, that expression is what motivates Cornwall when he decides to punish the old man with the loss of his vision. As a consequence, those allusions to justice reflect a sheer ambiguity that arises from Edmund's and Gloucester's utterances and from the way that they convey opposing connotations in a single passage.

From the perspective of Lear and his group, the conception of human injustice is eventually connected to a pragmatic individualism that, in its disregard of any absolute values, engenders the occurrence of atrocities throughout the narrative. Epitomized by Gloucester's blinding, such a conception is soon disrupted by ambiguities related to the notion of retributive justice as merely derogatory. After partially blinding Gloucester, Cornwall is surprisingly interrupted by one servant who refuses to take part in the punishment. As pointed out by Garber, "this nameless servant provides not only a model of hospitality and decency but also an example of a *good* rebellion against nature and social order" (601). By taking the law into his own hands, he echoes his master's notion of justice – for instance, his "Nay then come on, and take the chance of anger" (3.7.76) in defiance of Cornwall – and ends up killing him. Most importantly, the servant's intervention shows that an eye-for-an-eye justice can be also motivated by amoral principles and nonconformist attitudes against human cruelty. In *King Lear*'s godforsaken world, the choice for retribution arises as a new option to be contemplated by Lear's group against the appalling individualism of Edmund and his peers. After Gloucester's blinding, that choice is reproduced in passages such as the duel of Edgar and Edmund as well as the killing of Cordelia's executioner by Lear. Following the example of Cornwall's servant, retributive justice has its ambivalent notion heightened parallel to the confrontation of a derogatory connotation throughout those passages.

Initially illustrated by the duel between Gloucester's sons, the previous manifestations of justice are intertwined throughout *King Lear*'s last act so that their manifest ambiguity becomes even more intense. When Edgar appears unmasked in the announced duel, the way that he defies Edmund – "Thy arm may do thee justice" (5.3.122) – evokes the retributive justice adopted by his brother's wicked group. After Edmund is fatally wounded, this resemblance is reinforced by Edgar's allusion to his father's blinding:

"The dark and vicious place where thee he got / Cost him his eyes" (5.3.166-167). In other words, he declares that Gloucester, for having committed adultery, deserved to be punished accordingly. Analyzing the importance of the duel passage to comprehend the real extent of Edgar's conception of justice in the play, Maynard Mack claims:

> In Edmund's brother Edgar we see a character whose possible morality backgrounds are still more various. His unblinking attitude toward his father's transgressions and his strict code of retribution, both expressed as his wicked brother lies dying under his judicial hand, are less (one must think) characteristics of the solicitous and patient guide of Gloucester and the pitying observer of Lear than necessities of his role as presenter of legitimacy and polar opposite to his brother's appetite. (61)

Similar to Cornwall's servant, Edgar seems to partake of the same eye-for-an-eye perspective shared by Edmund and his fellow characters. By resorting to a strict code of retribution as a means of setting things right, he also shows the importance of taking practical measures to properly confront his brother's immorality. In the same passage, Edgar also manifests his faith in divine providence – "the gods are just" (5.3.164) – and surprisingly juxtaposes the notion of retributive justice with its immediate counterpart in the narrative – namely, the poetic one. Later, this interweaving of contrasting concepts is amplified as the dying Edmund admits to his defeat. On this point, "his sense that 'the wheel is come full circle' (5.3.168) confesses some kind of justice in his death" (John Turner 110). In this regard, even Edmund, who despises the superfluous customs of society, sees at the same time a kind of moral logic and closure of a natural cycle to his passing. Furthermore, in contrast to Edgar, who adopts a punitive behavior originally associated with the wicked characters, Edmund ends up surrendering to a sense of poetic justice characteristic of his brother's group. As Edgar and Edmund manifest behaviors that

are not exclusively theirs, the portrayal of justice in the duel passage leads to an ambiguous use of language that directly challenges the dichotomy between a retributive conception of the word and a poetic one as well as any attempt to categorize both conceptions.

Although Edgar's victory against Edmund points to a supposed validity of human justice in its traditional sense, the play's final act suffices to betray any expectations regarding a definitive concept prevailing over the other. Before being regenerated by Cordelia, Lear conveys his disbelief in justice through two main passages. First, the fantasy trial[7] of Goneril and Regan promoted by the mad king on the heath mistakes Poor Tom and the Fool – respectively, "robbed man of justice" (3.6.30) and "yokefellow of equity" (3.6.31) – for judges responsible for punishing filial ingratitude. Other than enabling Lear to voice his rage, those characters ironically engender the "recognition of the profounder breakdown of justice on the divine as well as secular levels" (Elton 225). Put in motion by the inertia of divine punishment, this tragicomic trial awakens in Lear the futility of man's attempt to mitigate suffering. Eventually, such a perception is transposed to the passage in which Gloucester comes across the mad Lear adorned with wildflowers. Shocked by the news of Gloucester's blindness, Lear calls attention to the impossibility of distinguishing right from wrong in his bleak reality: "which is the justice, which is the thief?" (4.6.151). Aligned with the play's ambiguity, this question anticipates the breakdown of justice to be caused by Cordelia's death. During the scene, Albany's demonstrations of faith in a "judgment of the heavens" (5.3.208) are immediately emptied out by the image of the old king carrying his dead daughter. Additionally, Lear's taking the law into his hands to kill Cordelia's executioner challenges the supposed efficacy of Edgar's punitive attitude in the duel passage. Whether poetic or retributive, *King Lear*'s ending shows that justice, in its

[7] The fantasy trial is a passage exclusive to the Quarto version. For that reason, the lines quoted above – as well as other passages related to the Quarto in this Master's thesis – stem from the integral version presented in the following edition of *King Lear*: Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. Edited by Stephen Greenblatt, W. W. Norton, 1997.

contrasting occurrence, is a concept ambiguously evoked only to have its inadequacy stated by the sequence of tragic events.

2.2 Materialization of paradoxical cycles

Built upon distinct occurrences of nature and justice, the emergence of a polysemic construction in *King Lear* leads towards an increasing sense of ambiguity in which the limitations of language are systematically contemplated. Throughout the narrative, this construction is intensified as the depiction of certain concepts, such as eyesight and nothingness, transcends their verbal expression and turns into paradoxical cycles. Constituting a prolific imagery, those concepts characterize a language that changes from metaphoric to literal as soon as they are materialized in specific passages. Being applied to the double plot since the very beginning, utterances related to eyesight originate the first metaphoric expressions that emerge from the play. According to Zulfikar Ghose, "the preponderance of the imagery involving eyesight undoubtedly point to a significant meaning of the play, that which advances ideas concerning foresight, perception, and blindness to truth (106)". Connected to words such as *sight*, *eye*, and *see*, this set of ideas ranges from the most obvious act of recognizing others to metaphoric references to feeling. To illustrate this, Edgar's "piercing sight" (4.6.85) and Lear's "dull sight" (5.3.257) combine the physical aspect of recognition with exclamations that attempt to convey moments of extreme intensity. With regard to the concept of blindness to truth evoked by Ghose, the acts to be analyzed stem from the paradox of seeing in spite of blindness. Manifested in passages concerning Lear's and Gloucester's mistreatment of their innocent children, such a paradox becomes integral to the concept of wise madness and, concomitantly, allows for the emergence of nothingness as a paradoxical notion.

2.2.1 Paradox of eyesight and madness

Inaugurated by Lear's attitude in the love test, the paradoxical manifestations of eyesight revolve around the absurdity concerning Cordelia's rejection and Edgar's persecution. After disowning his youngest daughter, Lear comes across Kent who tries to intercede on her behalf. Infuriated by his objections, the old king's "out of my sight," (1.1.159) which expresses his discontent, is immediately retorted by Kent through analogous language: "See better, Lear, and let me still remain / The true blank of thine eye" (1.1.160-61). Other than displaying Lear's incapacity to look beyond Cordelia's rebellious behavior, those previous allusions to eyesight indicate the metaphoric blindness of his current condition. In the subsequent scene, Gloucester, despite being absent during the love test, proves to be fully aware of the unfair circumstances of Cordelia's rejection: "The noble and true-hearted Kent banished! His offense, honesty!" (1.2.109). Nevertheless, he doubles Lear's mistake by persecuting his only honest son. In this respect, Stephen Booth adds that "Gloucester joins us in recognizing Lear's blindness about Cordelia but is himself blind to Edmund's wickedness and Edgar's virtue" (50). Ironically, even before being informed of Edgar's supposed treason, Gloucester fearlessly announces his reading of the forged letter: "Let's see. Come, if it be nothing, I shall not need spectacles" (1.2.35). Contradicting this assurance, he ends up taking Edmund's allegations for granted and falls blindly into his trap. On this point, the evoked images reflect the use of language as unreliable: in spite of claiming the opposite, the old man does not *see* properly and therefore does need *spectacles*. Based on the paternal misjudgment shared by Lear and Gloucester, blindness arises from the paradoxical imagery of eyesight as a metaphor that emblematizes the condition of both characters from that moment onwards.

Before reaching its materialization into Gloucester's trial, the metaphor of blindness is mainly displayed through Lear's outbursts of anger in the first two acts. Shocked by his daughters' harshness, Lear resorts to such metaphor when he contemplates the prospect of impinging blindness on himself as well as seeking revenge – as examples, his "Old fond eyes, / Beweep this cause again, I'll pluck ye out" (1.4.280-281) and "You nimble lightnings, dart your blinding flames / Into her scornful eyes" (2.4.161-162). Despite pointing to the old king's metaphoric blindness, those lines fail to awaken in him a true perception about his paternal misjudgment for transferring his sufferings to external images. Only in the blinding scene of Gloucester does the imagery of eyesight reach a literal connotation based on the character's appalling condition. Emphasizing the importance of Gloucester's trial to the re-significance of that imagery, Paul Alpers states:

> In *King Lear* an unusual amount of imagery drawn from vision and the eyes prompts us to apprehend a symbolism of sight and blindness having its culmination in Gloucester's tragedy. . . . The blinding of Gloucester might well be gratuitous melodrama but for its being imbedded in a field of meanings centered in the concept of seeing. This sight pattern relentlessly brings into the play the problem of seeing and what is always implied is that the problem is one of insight. (251)

Revolving around Gloucester's gory punishment, Alpers's reference to a field of meanings culminates in the simultaneous inversion and strengthening of the paradox of eyesight. Before Cornwall's attack, the insistence on words like *see* is once again foregrounded by Gloucester's "But I shall see / The winged vengeance overtake such children" (3.7.62-63) and savagely nullified by Cornwall's "See't shalt thou never. Fellows, hold the chair. / Upon these eyes of thine I'll set my foot" (3.7.64-65). Reiterating a growing sense of inefficacy, any expectations regarding vengeance are promptly betrayed as soon as the

mentioned atrocity is perpetrated and Cornwall goes unpunished. Consequently, a new paradox arises from the moment that the injured Gloucester acknowledges the truth about Edgar's unfair treatment: "O my follies! Then Edgar was abused" (3.7.88). After that, the blind man starts to manifest his capacity of seeing by referring at the same time to his unique insight and his metaphoric eyesight concerning a possible encounter with the wronged Edgar – as respectively shown by his "I have no way, and therefore want no eyes. / I stumbled when I saw" (4.1.18-19) and "I'ld say I had eyes again" (4.1.24). Translating the metaphor of blindness into action and emblem, the blinding of Gloucester inverts the allusions to eyesight previously uttered by Lear to a point where their paradoxical meaning is amplified. From both quotes, words like *see* and *eyes* constitute a vocabulary of contrasting meanings that inaugurates the idea of those who, seeing, see not, and, eventually, replaces such an idea by the conviction of those who, not seeing, see like never before. Reinforcing *King Lear*'s polysemic construction, the occurrence of a double paradox related to the same imagery directly affects the use of language as increasingly ambiguous.

Interweaving Lear's and Gloucester's plots since the very beginning, the language of eyesight also allows for the emergence of madness as another fundamental concept to be incorporated into the play. Although it is not as prolific as that language, the paradox of sanity generating folly becomes evident from the moment that Lear attests to his metaphoric blindness by disinheriting Cordelia. In this regard, Kermode argues that "the dreadful emphasis on blindness is the prime mark of Lear's madness and the play's cruelty" (108). Analogous to the language of eyesight, the starting point for the paradox is the passage in which Kent intercedes on behalf of Cordelia. Enraged by Lear's unfairness, Kent tries to call his master's attention to the foolishness of his act: "Be Kent unmannerly / When Lear is mad. What wilt thou do, old man?" (1.1.147-48). Nonetheless, his efforts

turn out to be useless as the old king is metaphorically, though not yet literally, blind and mad. Eventually, Lear's embodiment of this double metaphor is indicated by the Fool when he refers to blindness as a means of unmasking his master's current state. For instance, his "Fathers that wear rags / Do make their children blind" (2.4.46-47) and "All that follow their noses are led by their eyes but blind men" (2.4.66-67) function as unorthodox analogies to the old king's insistence on being treated accordingly by his elder daughters. In the first two acts, not only do the allusions to madness confirm the Fool's perception, but they also anticipate the materialization of the paradox of sanity in the storm scenes. Most importantly, those allusions resonate mainly through Lear's journey of self-discovery to call attention to the fact that Lear's symbolic blindness is also applicable to his incapacity to wisely comprehend the real extent of his foolish acts.

Manifested in outbursts of anger caused by the harsh ingratitude of Goneril and Regan, Lear's metaphoric blindness displays an inability to confront the sheer folly of seemingly sane acts. Infuriated by the treatment received, he resorts to imprecations and calls for divine intervention in a way that strengthens the close correspondence between blindness and madness. Concomitantly, the paradox of insanity within sanity is deepened as Lear's anger and sufferings grow stronger throughout the first two acts. In this sense, Frye states that "at the beginning of the play Lear is technically sane, but everything he says and does is absurd" (30). The absurdity concerning the old king's attitudes is noticeable from numerous remarks made by the Fool – such as "I had rather be any kind o' thing than a Fool" (1.4.168) and "thou wouldst make a good Fool" (1.5.32). On the other hand, the several times Lear mentions madness – "O, let me not be mad" (1.5.38), "do not make me mad" (2.4.214) and "O Fool, I shall go mad" (2.4.282) – are used as a means of attesting to a sanity that, despite being endangered, is still prevalent. In spite of foreshadowing a literal connotation, those expressions are far from translating an insightful

thought: up to that point, they are mere devices used to reveal utter discontent on account of growing afflictions. Thus, it is Lear's paradoxical folly and his refusal to accept it that initially prevents him from having insights into his actual state.

On Lear's journey of self-discovery, the madness embodied by the Fool and Poor Tom arises as an emblem capable of releasing the old king from his metaphoric blindness. At the beginning, the occurrence of a non-conventional language is responsible for reaffirming the paradox of folly in passages that precede the storm scenes. As an example, the Fool's clever remarks on his master's paternal misjudgment bring about a paradoxical notion of wise foolishness as perceived by Kent in the following lines: "This is not altogether fool, my lord" (1.4.140) and "Where learned you this, Fool?" (2.4.84). Going beyond those remarks, Poor Tom stands for a living metaphor that speaks directly to Lear's condition. For that reason, his encounter with the old king leads not only to an immersion into lunacy but also into an insightful perception of human misery. In this encounter, Lear embraces an insanity that is strikingly sane. Furthermore, "as he simultaneously sees the reality of human bonding and the pervasiveness of inequity, he begins to demonstrate the indefinition of reason, its alliance with an insightful mode of madness" (Reid 114). Anticipating the blinding of Gloucester, the materialization of madness in the storm scenes corresponds to the fundamental inversion of a paradoxical concept that replaces symbolic blindness for insight. To illustrate this, Lear reaches enlightening perceptions, saner and wider than ever, that ranges from filial ingratitude – "Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" (3.6.38) – to the baseness of human existence: "Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal" (3.4.98-99). By exposing the limitations of man's reasoning through insanity, this perception amplifies the correspondence between the paradoxes of eyesight and madness as they epitomize the turning point in Lear's journey.

Transcending the boundaries of the double plot, the encounter between Lear and Gloucester on the heath is emblematic for strengthening the paradoxes of madness and of blindness as those characters successively recognize each other. Archetypes of paternal misjudgment, both old men have their tragedies intertwined in the fourth act so that their respective insights end up being foregrounded. In this regard, their unusual dialogue during that encounter brings back the language of eyesight as a fundamental aspect of their respective journeys. Taking Lear's recognition as the starting point for that language, Salgado argues:

> In the encounter between the blind Gloucester and the crazy king and in Lear's taunting of the blind man, – 'I remember thine eyes well enough' (4.3.136) – the verbal and visual resonances of both stories come together with a terrible poignancy and generate a further connection between the ideas of apparent madness and genuine insight. Thus, though one may artificially and temporarily separate one thread of imagery or ideas for discussion, the play itself, in the closeness and complexity of its interweaving, finally frustrates any effort to unravel its unity. (37)

Although discussions about the play's unity are not relevant to this Master's thesis, Salgado shrewdly refers to a complex interweaving of ideas that becomes clear as soon as both characters start to interact. After recognizing Lear's voice, Gloucester replies to a request to read an imagined piece of writing: "were all the letters suns, I could not see one" (4.6.139). A few lines later, when the mad king questions his double's blindness, Gloucester's "I see it feelingly" (4.6.147) corresponds to an answer that, other than contradicting the previous reply, attests to the insightful mode in the paradox of blindness. Guided by his lunacy, Lear also reveals to be moved by Gloucester's deplorable state as his insights evolve, this time, from a desolate view on the human condition to a more acute

notion of the world's bleakness: "When we are born, we cry that we are come / To this great stage of fools" (4.6.180-81). In view of the mad king's wise utterances, Edgar's "reason in madness" (4.6.173) appears as an obvious remark in light of the paradox of madness. Most importantly, the old king's "if thou wilt weep my fortunes, take my eyes" (4.6.174) to Edgar's previous remark ambiguously allude to his own paradoxical situation and Gloucester's actual one: at the peak of his insane wisdom, Lear is endowed with an almost unbearable vision that replaces the reflections on paternal foolishness with a great understanding of human existence. For seeing in each other the most representative image of their afflictions, Lear and Gloucester end up intensifying the insights of their actual conditions. Thus, the correspondence between the related paradoxes of eyesight and madness in the double plot enables the proliferation of ambiguous utterances that become integral to *King Lear*'s polysemic construction.

2.2.2 Paradox of nothingness

Thematically central to *King Lear*, nothingness constitutes another fundamental concept that, in its paradoxical depiction, emblematizes Lear's and Gloucester's condition as they embark on their journeys towards disillusion. Different from the imagery of blindness and madness, this depiction follows more directly the play's tragic descent to the growing interrogations about the possibility of some kind of redemptive notion coming out of an utter bleakness. On the one hand, the succession of catastrophic events seems to point to nothingness as synonymous with the annihilation of any hope regarding existence. On the other hand, the fact that the play also reflects a "preoccupation with the word *nothing*, leads not just to the idea of emptiness but to its paradoxically full feeling" (Kirsch 36). At first, the possibility of tragic events being outweighed by true manifestations of feeling is

what allows for the emergence of a paradoxical notion. That becomes evident since the very beginning of the play when Lear and Gloucester reject their children with the same references to *nothing*: respectively, Cordelia's "nothing, my lord" (1.1.88) concerning her requested speech in the love test and Edmund's "nothing, my lord" (1.2.32) with regard to the letter that supposedly proves his brother's treason. Despite presenting the word in its conventional sense, the replies uttered by both fathers – Lear's "nothing will come of nothing" (1.1.92) and Gloucester's "the quality of nothing hath not such need to hide itself (1.2.34) – indicate that they actually see *something* behind those rebellious acts. Concealed in manifest negations, Cordelia's stubbornness and Edgar's forged treason engender responses that reveal anxieties about filial ingratitude rather than seeming indifference. Embedded in those anxieties, the paradox of nothingness emerges from the play as a concept integral to the tragic events that characterize the double plot.

After the love test, Lear and Gloucester's group of characters succumb to a tragic descent wherein the first scene of *everything* – based on the old king's absolute notions, such as royal condition and filial love – moves towards a growing contemplation of *nothing*. By incorporating this descent, Cordelia's rejection ends up epitomizing the paradox of nothingness as illustrated by the passage in which her marriage is decided. Facing the real extent of her dispossession, France, one of the suitors, refers to Cordelia as "most rich, being poor" (1.1.252) and "most loved, despised" (1.1.253) before announcing his intention to marry her. In this moment, the proportions of paradox employed by him stem from reversals like the poor becoming rich and the outcast as the first to be chosen. Reflecting upon France's language, Turner clarifies that "these paradoxical figures of speech, so typical of the inversions found throughout the play, suggest the idealization of which the characters will now stand in need if they are to accommodate themselves to the increasing restrictions of the real" (102). In spite of her metaphoric state of nothingness,

Cordelia is endowed with *everything* that is worth fighting for. In other words, France's previous lines as well as his "this unprized precious maid" (1.1.261) show the honesty and good attributes incalculable in themselves. In this respect, her conception in the form of a living paradox functions as a symbol for the journeys of negation – or restrictions of the real as named by Turner – embarked on by Lear, Gloucester, and Edgar. As soon as the play's tragic descent is set in motion, such a conception is consistently questioned by the sheer devastation that those characters encounter. Following the growing atrocities that reinforce its negative aspect, the paradox of nothingness initially personified by Lear's youngest daughter exerts a huge impact on the double plot and, consequently, remains as a permanent image that compensates for Cordelia's absence throughout most of the play.

Transposed to Edgar's role in the double plot, the paradoxical depiction of nothingness after the love test is gradually defied by the emergence of negation in its most extreme manifestation. After becoming an outcast, Edgar announces his intention to be "brought near to beast" (2.3.9) – that is, adopting a disguise as Poor Tom – through a soliloquy that culminates in the following line: "that's something yet, Edgar I nothing am" (2.3.21). According to Lawrence Danson, "the statement is too optimistic; the 'I am' frustrates the intention of being 'nothing' and keeps Edgar still suspended" (130). Rather than stemming from adverse circumstances, this declaration reflects the choice for a base identity that brings about an optimistic motivation. Moreover, it joins two contrasting words – *something* and *nothing* – in a way that suggests hope for some effective learning from this desolate scenario. From that moment on, Edgar disguised as Poor Tom accompanies Lear in his process of disillusion as a means of testing the validity of that statement. Only when he appears as himself through a soliloquy at the beginning of the fourth act does the real extent of the lessons learned as a degenerate madman arise:

> Yet better thus, and known to be contemned, / Than still contemned and flattered to be worst. / The lowest and most dejected thing of fortune / Stands still in esperance, lives not in fear. / The lamentable change is from the best, / The worst returns to laughter. Welcome, then, / Thou unsubstantial air that I embrace! / The wretch that thou hast blown unto the worst / Owes nothing to thy blasts. (4.1.1-8)

In the soliloquy, Edgar expresses a renewed conviction against the miserable experience in the storm scenes by making use of a language that is based on pejorative words and negations – such as *lowest*, *worst*, and *nothing*. Nevertheless, the succession of poignant passages over the fourth act – for instance, the blind Gloucester wandering on the heath and the uncanny dialogue between Lear and Gloucester – leads to the betrayal of any positive outcome as illustrated by Edgar's "The worst is not / So long as we can say, 'This is the worst'" (4.1.26-27). Directly contracting the words used in the soliloquy, the hopelessness displayed in those occurrences of *worse* is soon amplified in the Dover cliff scene. In response to Gloucester's confusion concerning his voice, Edgar's "in nothing am I changed" (4.6.8) ambiguously calls attention not only to his likeness, but also to his actual state of nothingness. Moreover, this ambiguous *nothing* confronts the mentioned soliloquy by compelling the contemplation of an absolute negation as an inevitable practice. As a result, the paradox of nothingness is dragged by its negative connotation in an almost irreversible way up to that moment.

In contrast to *King Lear*'s desolate atmosphere, nothingness emerges once again as a paradoxical concept in the reconciliation of Lear and Cordelia. Throughout the passage, the interaction between both characters revolves around repeated negations that evoke the importance of authentic manifestations of feeling. First, after being rescued by Cordelia's attendants, the afflicted old king awakens and comes across his youngest daughter in a

dream-like moment for him. Astonished at her presence, Lear refers to his miserable condition through several negations – such as "do not laugh at me" (4.7.63), "I know you do not love me" (4.7.68) and "do not abuse me" (4.7.73) – that summarize his deepest anxieties regarding filial love. After that, Cordelia comforts her father by uttering another negation that reveals the paradox of nothingness in all its poignancy: "no cause, no cause" (4.7.70). Investigating the importance of Cordelia's attitude in the fourth act, Garber clarifies:

> Crucially, she speaks, and in speaking avoids the ambiguity or supposed equivocation that has led to misunderstanding – and to tragedy. 'No cause, no cause' (4.7.70). Her affirmation itself comes as a negative. Something *can* come of nothing . . . The fourth act of the play closes on this redemptive vision, and even the agonizing events to come cannot render this scene anything but central to the lessons of the play. (610)

In a re-enactment of the love test, such an attitude saves Lear's negations from dissolving into a mere confirmation of his appalling state. Furthermore, her n*o cause* affirms the existence of some valuable lesson – arguably, the unconditional love that stems from familial bonds – within the sheer nothingness intrinsic to the play's bleakness. From that moment onwards, the paradox of nothingness is incorporated into Lear's condition and, eventually, becomes a redemptive notion to be evoked in those moments that denial seems the only form of expression available to cope with *King Lear*'s tragic descent. To illustrate this, the old king, when captured by Edmund's troops, makes use of several negations to display his resoluteness when it comes to facing an uncertain destiny alongside Cordelia: "No, no, no, no! Come let's away to prison, / We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage" (5.3.8-9). Instead of carrying a pessimistic connotation, those repetitions of *no* actually stand for an affirmation: regardless of any deprivations, the singular prospect of enjoying

his daughter's company suffices for the regenerated Lear. That is another fundamental passage at the core of the play's paradoxical cycles, especially when it is subsequently counterbalanced by Lear's final reaction to Cordelia's death: "Thou'lt come no more, / Never, never, never, never, never" (5.3.282-83). Although such a reaction stands for a destructive vision, the reconciliation between both characters still points to the recuperation of filial love that not even recurrent negations are capable of emptying out. As a consequence, the paradoxical depiction of nothingness upon those previous passages are built turns out to challenge *King Lear*'s ending and its supposed absolute bleakness through the implicit emphasis on true manifestations of feeling.

2.3 Partial inefficacy of language

From a broad perspective, the tendency towards ambiguity that emanates from *King Lear*'s textual devices is consistently attested to alongside the confrontation of absolute notions regarding existence. Gradually, the paradoxical use of words amplifies their corresponding meanings to a point where the play's polysemy ends up corroborating the notion of language as unreliable. The immediate result is that "the very language which would seem (to us) solidly to locate the world slides into an abyss, an uncreating, annihilative nothingness" (Jonathan Goldberg 544). Obviously, stating that the play's textual devices culminate in their utter refutation is too extreme to be totally accepted: despite their inadequacy, words still stand for a valid form of expression available to cope with reality. In this sense, a supposed collapse of human communication is revealed every time its inefficacy is partially implied. Yet, nothingness remains as an emblem at the core of the play for guiding the process of confrontation that recurrently triggers that collapse. As previously outlined, this process is most obviously manifested in a co-related set of

words that varies from simple inversions to a more complex interweaving of ideas. Nevertheless, it only reaches its peak through a sequence of catastrophic events that drives the narrative from the storm scenes to its ending. Before that, unconventional speeches that stem from those events have their occurrence triggered by a cluster of images – such as thunder and nakedness – in which the limitations of language are foreshadowed.

2.3.1 Unconventional language: thunder and nakedness

Echoing the disbelief in man's rationality, Lear's tempestuous reactions to his daughters' ingratitude brings about the first incompatibility between the tragic side of human existence and the limitations of conventional language. In the first two acts, the old king's outbursts of anger function as a prelude to his outpourings in the storm scenes as pointed out by Emily Leider: "the scenes immediately preceding the storm present the painful dissociation between Lear's words and his deeds, between speech and action: we witness Lear's deterioration into verbal impotence" (48). During the encounters with Goneril and Regan, Lear attempts to punish his daughters' misdoings through the useless evocation of supernatural powers. For that reason, his imprecations are filled with pejorative images – for instance, "darkness and devils" (1.4.229) and "vengeance! plague! death! confusion" (2.4.91) – motivated by an inability to fully express his deepest afflictions in conventional words. Only when Lear stands up against the forces of nature in the storm scenes do the limitations of language reach their peak. During those moments, he makes use of a harsh speech that, in its verbal directness, incites the fury of the tempest through monosyllabic commands – for example, his "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow" (3.2.1). Intensifying the previous imprecations, this kind of speech, associated with the sounds of the storm, metaphorically turns the thunder into the most

effective voice against the limitations of language. As Lear forms a thunderous duet with his environment, the inadequacy related to the available forms of human expression becomes increasingly noticeable.

As another central metaphor of Lear's journey of self-discovery, the imagery of clothes functions as a sign of the progressive dismissal of eloquent language in *King Lear*. Investigating the relevance of that imagery, Salgado clarifies that "this theme finds a parallel in the progressive denudation of language from rhetorical richness to the stark, rocky directness of 'unaccommodated' speech" (35). During the love test, the old king shows that his worldview is synonymous with the preservation of his royal condition – that is, the necessity to "retain the name, and all th' addition to a king" (1.1.138). In this respect, the observance of superfluous conventions coincides with the sophisticated speech of the love test. As soon as Lear is eventually confronted by filial ingratitude, those conventions have their importance diminished as a new comprehension regarding existence is contemplated. For instance, in the encounter with Regan, Lear's "nature needs not what thou gorgeous wear'st" (2.4.265) accuses the extravagance of his daughter's apparel in a way that reveals his yet incipient view of reality. Gradually, the imagery of clothes leads to the idea of embracing a bare condition as an option to human misery. Culminating in the storm scenes, such an idea is illustrated by the impact of the Fool's "raggedness" (3.4.31) and Poor Tom's "uncovered body" (3.4.94) on Lear's decision to tear off his clothes: "off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton here" (3.4.100). Through their state of semi-nakedness, both characters awaken in the old king not only his madness, but also an unconventional form of expression. It is therefore not a coincidence that Lear's mad speeches are uttered by him when he is either deprived of clothes or adorned with wildflowers in the fourth act: being integral to the contempt for superfluous acts, the naked body emblematizes a language that is symbolically stripped down to essentials.

From the moment that the metaphor of the "unaccommodated man" (3.4.98) is incorporated into Lear's journey, a set of unorthodox utterances proliferate through the narrative parallel to a growing confrontation of conventional language. Ranging from repetitions to nonsensical metaphors, those utterances are engendered by the sequence of unusual speeches uttered by the Fool, Poor Tom, and Lear. The immediate impact of such a sequence on the play is that "Tom's cryptic mutterings and the Fool's impromptu riddles and quibbles, like Lear's topsy-turvy reason in madness, expose the limits of conventional language in the act of transgressing them" (Kiernan Ryan 387). Other than his wise admonitions, the Fool delivers nonsensical monologues – for instance, when he accompanies Lear during the encounter with Goneril – that are reproduced by the mad king in the fourth act. Breaking with an established language, those monologues allow for the emergence of a plain language in which fundamental insights into existence are contemplated. That is illustrated by the correspondence between the Fool's "thou art nothing" (1.4.176) at the beginning of the narrative and the culmination of Lear's following monologue uttered during the encounter with Gloucester on the heath:

> Ha! Goneril with a white beard? They flattered me like a dog, and told me I had the white hairs in my beard, ere the black ones were there. To say 'ay' and 'no' to everything that I said. 'Ay,' and 'no' too, was no good divinity. When the rain came to wet me once, and the wind to make me chatter, when the thunder would not peace at my bidding, there I found 'em, there I smelt 'em out. Go to, they are not men o' their words, they told me I was everything. 'Tis a lie, I am not ague-proof. (4.6.96-104)

In this monologue, Lear replaces the rhymes of his old sophisticated speech with the prose of mad utterances directly inspired by the Fool in an attempt to convey the lessons learned in the storm scenes – that is, he is not *ague-proof*. Moreover, the disjointed images as well

as the monosyllabic simplicity of his adopted speech epitomize the progressive dismissal of words as adequate devices to convey tragic experience. It is therefore implied that only when the old king transgresses the limitations of conventional language does he acknowledge the truth about his deplorable situation. Analogously, Poor Tom's recurrent mutterings – as an example, "O do, de, do de, do, de" (3.4.55) in his first appearance – anticipate Lear's practice of repeating words as another alternative to the limitations of rationality. Going beyond the occurrences of madness in the storm scenes, this practice corresponds to the play's most characteristic act of subverting a language that cannot bear the weight of true feelings. That becomes noticeable when the regenerated Lear resorts to repetitions in two contrasting moments in the last act: to display the joy of Cordelia's company through the use of *no* after their arrest and to utter words such as *howl* and *never* in view of the extreme agony of Cordelia's death. In general, *King Lear*'s catastrophic events lead to the establishment of utterances that seek to compensate for the growing incompatibility between overwhelming emotions and available forms of human expression.

2.3.2 Language in passages related to unutterable emotions

Following the play's tragic descent, the acknowledgement of the limitations of language also occurs through passages related to unutterable emotions where the use of words finds its sheer inadequacy. Under the pressure of overwhelming experiences, a so-called "rhetoric of silence" (Garber 581) arises as an option to replace the emptiness of utterances that are increasingly ineffective. Emblematizing such rhetoric, Cordelia's behavior during the love test sheds light on her subsequent appearances in *King Lear*. In view of her sisters' hypocritical declarations, Cordelia disregards her expected active role – as announced by her "Love, and be silent" (1.1.64) – and, notwithstanding the direct

confrontation of Lear's misjudgment, remains speechless throughout most of the scene. Reflecting upon her brief participation in the love test, Bell claims:

> Cordelia has nothing to offer in the place of her sisters' empty conventional avowals without resorting to language they have debased. Her 'nothing' is a despairing renunciation of all language as inadequate to express the truth. . . The collapse of language that she represents may suggest the surrender of all trust in the terms that express love or any other ideal conception. (*Tragic Skepticism* 166)

Manifesting a refusal to partake in the love test, Cordelia's attitude calls attention to her sisters' speeches and the fact that the most eloquent language hides deceitful intentions. Additionally, her insistence on *nothing* implies that feelings like filial love can never be properly displayed. At the end of the scene, the idea of true emotions residing in near-silence reaffirms that initial implication. Eventually, Cordelia's embodiment of the rhetoric of silence is amplified in the fourth act through the description given by an attendant concerning her reaction to Lear's sufferings. In that description[8], she appears split between smiles and tears – like "sunshine and rain at once" (4.3.17) –, incapable of speaking on account of her love and pity. Conversely, the collapse of language mentioned by Bell is far from standing for a definitive conclusion manifested in those passages. As an example, in the reconciliation with her father, Cordelia speaks and, in speaking, not only avoids the misunderstandings caused by her speechless attitude in the love test, but she also enables the recovery of Lear. Based on this ineffable reconciliation of father and daughter, it is suggested that, while resorting to silence can be more eloquent than any form of expression, the importance of words can never be totally disregarded. As a result, those

[8] This description stems from a passage exclusive to the Quarto wherein Kent inquiries an attendant about the sudden return of the King of France to his land and gives a brief account of Lear's appalling condition in an attempt to assist him against the threat of Albany's and Cornwall's troops.

distinct passages that revolve around the rhetoric of silence contribute to the use of language in its partial inefficacy.

Apart from Cordelia's rhetoric of silence, expressions of sheer agony that stem from unutterable emotions are also used to attest to the limitations of language. Throughout the narrative, those expressions are uttered by characters like Edgar and Kent who most directly follow the play's tragic descent. To illustrate this, Kent's "O Pity" (3.6.20) and Edgar's "My tears begin to take his part so much, / They'll mar my counterfeiting" (3.6.22-23) painfully conveys their shock at Lear's madness in the storm scenes. In his wanderings on the heath, Edgar also resorts to utterances that uselessly aim to express, this time, moments of even higher intensity – for instance, his "I am worse than e'er I was" (4.1.26) and "O thou side-piercing sight" (4.6.85) to the astonishing image of the blind Gloucester and the mad Lear, respectively. Nevertheless, it is not until the catastrophic ending that the inadequacy of those utterances reaches its most poignant representation. Evaluating the impact of *King Lear*'s ending on a supposed absolute collapse of language, James Robinson clarifies:

> It is as though the play takes us to an edge where jagged notions of time and place and space are giving way to the possibility of a new perception for which we have no language. But the possibility is there only as possibility, not as realization. And thus the possibility of a life to come remains in suspended juxtaposition with the alternate possibility that the final shattering may be just that, a shattering, a destruction, annihilation. (38)

Triggered by Lear's entrance with the dead Cordelia, the edge mentioned by Robinson is consistently built upon the view of language as incompatible with the unutterable emotions in the play's ending. Initially, Kent and Edgar pose desperate questions – respectively, "is this the promised end?" (5.3.237) and "or image of that horror?" (5.3.238) – that barely

convey their actual feelings. Later, speeches that previously replaced a conventional language are brought back in all their sheer inadequacy – that is, the monosyllabic commands in Albany's "fall, and cease" (5.3.239), the plainness in Edgar's "very bootless" (5.3.271) and the repetitions in Lear's "no, no, no life" (53.280). The immediate result is that the forms of expression mentioned above seem to have their usefulness completely denied. In this sense, Edgar's speechless reaction throughout most of the passage brings about a striking passivity that echoes Cordelia's rhetoric of silence. On the other hand, Robinson shrewdly calls attention to a possibility, rather than a realization, of such a destructive vision. As illustrated by "speak what we feel, not what we ought to say" (5.3.299), Edgar's final speech "points to the fact that language is just about the only thing that fights for genuine humanity in this blinded world" (Frye 25). By breaking with the idea of silence prevailing over language, this speech shows that words, provided that they are aligned with true feelings and inner truth, can still be redemptive. It is therefore implied that language, notwithstanding the decay of its irrefutability through multiple manifestations of ambiguity and inefficacy, represents the only form of expression that can outweigh *King Lear*'s bleakness.

Chapter Three

Inconclusiveness and final questions about the human condition

3.1 Dramatic devices: obliquity, sense of space and double plot

From a cultural standpoint, the correlation between anxieties typical of early modern England and *King Lear*'s textual elements stems from the skeptical tradition of confronting absolute notions regarding existence. Directly materialized into the narrative, this tradition is emblematized by the partial inefficacy of language, which reflects human limitations in conveying moments of extreme intensity. The immediate result is the occurrence of a polysemic construction in which the tendency towards ambiguity coincides with the emergence of multiple interpretations. As the available forms of communication become increasingly inadequate, a sense of inconclusiveness emanates from the narrative and exerts a huge impact on the lines responsible for the play's polysemy in the first place. This sense, however, is only properly manifested in dramatic devices directed to "promote the erasure of motive and destabilize character, to disconnect plot and make events inexplicable, and to deny the reliability of human impressions" (Bell *Tragic Skepticism* 24). Intrinsic to the polysemic construction, the way that the narrative is structured provides not only the fundamental conditions for the ambiguous and paradoxical utterances to thrive, but it also betrays any expectations concerning plot and the human condition. Concomitant with the parallel stories depicted in the double plot, the uncertainty of specific passages is amplified every time the characters' motivations are omitted or a sense of space is evoked. As a consequence, indeterminacy arises from the main characters' journeys as a concept that pervades the play as a whole.

Disregarding any simplistic explanations, *King Lear*'s obliquity corresponds to the first dramatic device that enhances the sense of inconclusiveness suggested by the

ambiguous and paradoxical uses of language. Based on the lack of key explanatory elements, the obliquity occurs through interrogations of the characters' motivations. Initially, the reasons behind Lear's choice for dividing the kingdom among his three daughters inaugurate an elusiveness that becomes integral to his attitude throughout the play. As pointed out by Kirsch, the love test "almost entirely shears away such surface motives and rationalizations for Lear's action in order to make its underlying motive of denial more stark and more compelling" (46). At the beginning of the scene, the opening announcement – "Meantime we shall express our darker purpose, / Give me the map there" (1.1.37-38) – shows that the division has already been settled. Yet, the old king decides to stage an innocuous formality as a means of doing away with the anxieties that motivated, in their vagueness, this *darker purpose*. Deprived of a clear rationale, it is impossible to know if those anxieties – concealed in denials and outbursts of anger after the failure of the love test – reflect a desire to be praised publicly or a real concern regarding filial love. For that reason, the elusive portrayal of Lear's feelings contributes to the indeterminacy of a language that reaches contrasting connotations. As an example, the concept of natural behavior initially implies an unconditional obedience connected to that urge for praise and, eventually, starts to evoke the importance of true manifestations of feeling. Foregrounded from the very beginning, the inconclusiveness that revolves around Lear's rationale is emblematic for creating a textual opacity in which the tendency towards ambiguity inherent in the play's polysemy is constantly reiterated.

Alongside Lear's attitude in the love test, Edgar's choice for acting incognito constitutes the most representative portrayal of obliquity manifested in the absence of an explicit rationale. In view of Gloucester's persecution, Edgar disguises himself as Poor Tom based on an instinct of self-preservation: "Whiles I may 'scape, / I will preserve myself" (2.3.5-6). As the play progresses, the fact that he insists on hiding his identity by

adopting different disguises in passages – like the storm and the Dover cliff scenes – that supposedly do not bring any real threat to him remains deeply elusive. Reflecting upon Edgar's attitude during those passages, Stanley Cavell states:

> Why does Edgar delay? 'Delay' implies he is going to later. But we do not know (at this stage) that he will; we do not so much as know that he intends to. In terms of our reading of the play so far, we are alerted to the fact that what Edgar does is most directly described as avoiding recognition. That is what we want an explanation for. (ch. 10)

Isolated from the group of wicked characters, Edgar accompanies the mad Lear and his blind father on their respective journeys of self-discovery. By consistently avoiding recognition, his actions, despite being fundamental to assist both characters, seem utterly arbitrary. On the other hand, the lack of clear motivation engenders changes in the language that resembles Lear's situation in the love test. According to Samuel Goldberg, "Edgar is not assuming a disguise but stripping himself of the qualities of human civility, including the power to comprehend and to direct experience by means of suitably complex and reflective language" (117). First, the immersion in Poor Tom's role, at the same time that it disregards the eloquent speeches placed at the beginning, also enables the proliferation of utterances that range from nonsensical mutterings to painful exclamations. During the Dover cliff scene, as Edgar replaces his former disguise with that of a peasant, the lyrical description of an imaginary landscape soon shifts to a plain form of expression more aligned with this new role. To illustrate this, the use of *look* in the following lines reveals a contrast in both speeches: "I'll look no more, / Lest my brain turn, and the deficient sight / Topple down headlong" (4.6.22-24) is therefore opposed to "Look up a-height, the shrill-gorged lark so far / Cannot be seen or heard" (4.6.58-59). Despite continuing to disguise himself for no apparent reason, Edgar embodies multiple

manifestations of language that only occur in light of his concealed identity throughout most of the narrative. Thus, the close correspondence between the play's obliquity and its polysemic construction ends up being reinforced.

Other than Lear's and Edgar's elusive motivations, obliquity also occurs through a set of questions that follow *King Lear*'s tragic descent to a growing uncertainty. Posed by the old king at the summit of his journey of self-discovery, those questions foreshadow the striking inconclusiveness characteristic of the play's ending. Initially, during the storm scene, Lear tries to convey the extremity of his sufferings through interrogations such as "Is man no more than this?" (3.4.95) in view of Poor Tom's degenerate condition and "Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" (3.6.38) regarding his daughters' harshness. In spite of failing to properly express such an extremity, his attitude "recalls and keeps alive the tragic awareness that, in a society where the reciprocities of authority and service have broken down, there are no answers to such questions" (Turner 105). In the play's bleak atmosphere, it is suggested that any interrogation that aims to contemplate the misery of the human condition is bound to meet no response. In this sense, the occurrence of other questions – for instance, "what is the cause of thunder?" (3.4.142) and "which is the justice, which is the thief" (4.6.151) – encapsulates *King Lear*'s tendency towards growing irresolution. Finally, when Lear is seen with the dead Cordelia in his embrace, Edgar's "or image of that horror?" (5.3.238) represents a sort of paradoxical response to Kent's "is this the promised end?" (5.3.237): from either perspective, neither question is resolved. Shaping the catastrophic ending, the lines mentioned above frustrate any attempt to convey the poignancy of human suffering. As a result, inconclusiveness emerges as one of the most representative notions of a play wherein multiple interrogations remain emblematically unanswered.

As another seminal dramatic device, the sense of space in *King Lear* brings about an atmosphere of uncertainty in which the ambiguous manifestations of language find deep resonance. Built upon numerous acts of dislocation, that sense emanates from the group of mistreated characters wandering outdoors through vast locations. Apart from words and utterances, the recurrent movement from one place to another corresponds to an alternative available in view of the succession of catastrophic events. For that reason, this movement has, along with the play's polysemic construction, a huge impact on the play's inconclusiveness. In this respect, Weiss argues:

> Like its words the play's world itself is a plenitude out of strict economy, vastness and immense bustle out of emptiness; a stage almost as empty as the wind-swept moon encourages a bewilderment that hardly lets us know where, when, who, and what we are. (68)

By metaphorically alluding to a wind-swept moon, Weiss calls attention to the largeness of a world that increases the indefinite aura of *King Lear*'s setting. After being dismissed by his elder daughters, Lear and his group of outcasts wander around an unlocalized heath, facing the storm and harsh deprivations. In the last two acts, the locations of the heath are replaced with even larger ones merely referred to as *near Dover*. Similar to the tendency towards obliquity, the elusiveness that resonates through those vague locations creates the necessary conditions for the respective journeys of self-discovery to be prolonged according to the emergence of insightful perceptions regarding the human condition. Throughout the rest of the narrative, the feeling of vastness is heightened as more characters – such as Edgar assisting Gloucester and the attendants of Cordelia running after the mad king – keep roaming around wide and empty scenarios. Furthermore, the act of walking aimlessly is followed by moments wherein those characters find themselves completely perplexed by the turn of events – as examples, Gloucester's "Now, good sir,

what are you?" (4.6.218) addressed to the disguised Edgar and Lear's "Where have I been? Where am I? Fair daylight?" (4.7.51) asked to the forgiving Cordelia. Evoking the poignancy of passages related to unutterable emotions, the movement towards unspecified destinations brings about a type of bewilderment that reinforces the impression of sheer indeterminacy. Consequently, the sense of space mentioned above pervades *King Lear*'s tragic descent in a way that inconclusiveness ends up being systematically expanded.

At the core of *King Lear*'s structure, the double plot occupies a central role in intensifying the uncertainty manifested by the other dramatic devices. As previously pointed out, Lear and Edgar share an analogous obliquity in their decisions to employ a love test and to adopt a disguise, respectively. Furthermore, the play's sense of space is amplified as Gloucester, guided by Edgar on the heath, re-enacts Lear's aimless dislocations in the storm scenes. Built upon a striking parallelism, the journeys of both old men create a pattern responsible for associating passages that are seemingly disconnected. Despite suggesting a unifying effect, this pattern is disrupted by the sequence of tragic events. Evaluating the correspondence between those events and the double plot, Elton claims:

> *King Lear* is not *about* ideas at all but acts out rather its essential tragedy of human experience. Ultimately, then, the double plot is an instrument of complexity, the assurance of a multifaceted ambivalence which, contrary to the salvation hypothesis, probes and tests, without finally resolving, its argument of mysterious human suffering. (283)

At first, the likeness between the two corresponding stories – such as Edgar and Cordelia being victims of paternal misjudgment and Edgar and Kent concealing their identities – outweigh any disparities that arise from the narrative. As the play gets closer to its ending, however, these stories have their similarities clearly undermined. Whereas madness serves

to awaken in Lear fundamental insights, Gloucester's blindness produces a deeper passivity based on an implicit renunciation of the world. Moreover, Gloucester's suicidal attempt in at Dover cliff differs completely from the old king's brave challenge to the natural elements in the storm scenes. Based on those contrasting passages, it is suggested that the stronger the emphasis on suffering grows, the more incompatible the intertwined plots become. Uttered during the encounter with Gloucester on the heath, Lear's "Gloucester's bastard son / Was kinder to his father than my daughters" (4.6.113-114), as another example, shows a reflection upon his miserable condition by means of unequal comparison. For that reason, such an inequality allows for the emergence of indeterminacy as a revealing concept: if all fixed patterns are broken, it might be useless to scrutinize any definitive ideas regarding the human condition even when they seem to be reinforced through parallel stories. In its multifaceted ambivalence, the double plot enhances inconclusiveness not only out of actions that mirror each other, but also when any sense of likeness is reversed by the poignancy of human misery.

3.2 Dramatic rhythm and the betrayal of expectations

Epitomized by the ambiguous manifestations of language, the confrontation of absolute notions regarding existence in *King Lear* is only partially heightened through the dramatic devices mentioned above. From a broad perspective, the contrasting connotations acquired by distinct textual elements converge into a vision that seems to point to polysemy as a sort of conclusive notion about the available forms of human expression. Nevertheless, it takes only a glance at the plot to discover that any attempt to establish a definition is promptly disallowed: culminating in the catastrophic ending, the plot as a whole is organized to defy ideas that lead to closure. In this regard, the play's polysemic

construction is actually guided by its dramatic rhythm wherein a striking sense of irresolution is recurrently manifested. Aligned with that sense, "the movement of plot toward the happy ending that will never come holds in suspension one set of expectations, delaying the moment when proleptic form will at long last coincide with plot to fulfill the contrary set of expectation" (Edward Tayler 37). Since the very beginning, the interaction among characters thwarts the expectations announced in their utterances so that the actions to be performed are constantly delayed. As the play progresses, those expectations are betrayed to a point where even the similarities of the double plot turn out to be subverted. Other than allowing for the comprehension of such a betrayal, the analyses of passages triggered by the dramatic rhythm are essential to scrutinize the meanings behind each parallel story. Thus, *King Lear*'s ending has its emblematic inconclusiveness conditioned by a process that is gradually enhanced.

Resulting in a complete failure, the love test inaugurates the close correspondence between Lear's journey of disillusion and the constant delay of actions throughout the play. Based on an unusual scheme, the division of the kingdom brings about the betrayal of the old king's expectations regarding unconditional love. As pointed out by Samuel Goldberg, "the very first scene, which determines so much for the rest of the play, leads us from a detached acceptance and expectancy to disappointment, dismay, indignation, and pity" (16). After the love test crumbles, the resulting expectations are directed to the prompt clarification of paternal misjudgment, such as the elder sisters' hypocrisy being unsmasked and Cordelia being restored to her rightful place. In the first two acts, what happens is Lear's foolish insistence on unquestioned obedience as illustrated by the encounter with Goneril replicated in the following scenes presenting Regan and Cornwall. From both encounters, the recurrent curses and outbursts of anger lead to no resolution but to the image of filial mistreatment. To illustrate this, Lear's retort, "I'll resume the shape which

thou dost think / I have cast off for ever" (1.4.287-88), represents both a threat to Goneril's harshness and a promise never to be fulfilled. Stemming from the love test, those encounters also evoke the opening speech when it comes to the intent to "unburthened crawl toward death" (1.1.42) as soon as the formalities of the division were done with. In spite of poetically alluding to the vicissitudes of old age, *crawl* becomes the world that most emblematically defines *King Lear*'s dramatic rhythm: instead of walking towards death, the old king keeps on confronting the troubled relationship with his daughters. Transcending the boundaries of the first scene, the emphasis on filial ingratitude creates the initial obstacles for the events to proceed to a place where indeterminacy is supposed to be resolved.

Intrinsic to Lear's journey of self-discovery, the succession of delayed actions in the storm scenes replicates the same pattern of betrayed expectations that takes place in the first two acts. After being rejected by his elder daughters, Lear starts to wander with the Fool on a tempestuous heath and is soon joined by the disguised Kent who advises him: "Gracious my lord, hard by here is a hovel . . . Repose you there" (3.2.58-60). Despite the entrance in the hovel being an obvious urgency, this destination is never properly reached. Calling attention to the relevance of this line to the following events, Garber states that "the sudden appearance of Kent/Caius upon the heath sets the expectation that underlies everything that is to take place in this great third act, everything that makes up its dramatic pattern" (597). In response to Kent's assistance, Lear's "come, your hovel" (32.68) and "come, bring us to this hovel" (3.2.76) reflect his intent to find shelter. As the narrative progresses, however, that intent is once again falsely manifested: "But I'll go in. / (*to Fool*) In, boy; go first" (3.4.25-26). Later, the wanderings outdoors continue parallel to the old king's immersion in madness and the repeated obsession with filial ingratitude. In this respect, the continuous delays in the plot set off his learning process – from the

acknowledgment of paternal misjudgment to the contemplation of man's misery – towards its climax. Finally, when the characters are noticeably sheltered in the last of the storm scenes, the location, rather than Kent's alluded hovel, is actually *a room in a farmhouse* where no destination is signaled. Deriving from a set of broken promises, the uncertainty resonating through those desolate scenarios makes the play's dramatic rhythm more and more connected to a strong tendency towards irresolution.

Alongside the failed dislocations to the hovel, the Fool's speeches in the storm scenes contribute to the violation of expectations in a way that perfectly encapsulates *King Lear*'s inconclusiveness. At first, this violation occurs through the paradoxical notion of wise folly: going beyond the limitations of his clownish role, the Fool persistently makes clever remarks on Lear's condition. During the third act, such a notion is counterbalanced by the proliferation of absurd utterances – for instance, a meaningless song about a "little tiny wit" (3.2.73) – adopted to slow down even more the pace of the narrative. The immediate impact is that, "when we expect the solution, the Fool produces nonsense and anticlimax" (Gary Taylor 201). Among those utterances, the one that most notoriously emblematizes the play's dramatic rhythm is the following prophecy uttered at the end of the first passage in the storm:

> When priests are more in word than matter, / When brewers mar their malt with water, / When nobles are their tailors' tutors, / No heretics burned, but wenches' suitors, / When every case in law is right, / No squire in debt, nor no poor knight, / When slanders do not live in tongues, / Nor cutpurses come not to throngs, / When usurers tell their gold i' the field, / And bawds and whores do churches build, / Then shall the realm of Albion / Come to great confusion. / Then comes the time, who lives to see't, / That going shall be used with feet. (3.2.78-91)

By delaying the conclusion of the scene, this unorthodox prophecy participates in the systematic frustration of Lear's movement towards the hovel. In this sense, the superfluous repetitions reproduce a tendency towards indeterminacy instead of simply predicting future events. As reiterated by Booth, "the prophecy duplicates the general pattern of the play by failing to come to a conclusion when it signals one" (42). First, the repetitions of *when* impede the Fool to advance to the *then* clause in which his announced prediction was supposed to be made. When such a clause finally comes, it does not convey any comprehensive insight but the reference to a *great confusion*. Corroborating the sense of bewilderment, the use of a second *then*, at the same time that it continues to interrupt the pace of the narrative, indicates the lack of a final notion in this absurd speech. On top of that, the word *feet* and its meaningless implication in the closing line joins other nonsensical descriptions – such as nobles being tailor's tutors and whores building churches – so that the fixed idea of the Fool's speeches always presupposing wise folly ends up being greatly confronted. Overall, the way that the prophecy is structured leads the betrayal of expectations to a point where irresolution emerges from the storm scenes as a seminal notion for the rest of the play.

After the desolate passages in the storm, the culmination of the respective journeys of Lear and Gloucester directly interferes in the recurrent practice of failed expectations that paves the way towards the play's ending. Half way through the fourth act, such a practice is triggered by key advances in the narrative – that is, Edgar guiding the blind Gloucester and Cordelia searching for Lear. In contrast to the increasing tragic descent, those advances point to a sort of resolution systematically avoided in the previous acts. Conversely, the succession of poignant images keep delaying the action and, consequently, frustrating any promise of an eventual reconciliation between the miserable fathers and their wronged children. In this regard, Salgado clarifies:

> The frustration of our hopes at every turn is not merely a dramatic device to wring as much suspense out of the action as possible. It is profoundly true to the tragic insight which informs the play: namely, that human cruelty and the vagaries of chance can exceed our worst forebodings. (41)

As the encounter between Lear and Cordelia is delayed up to the last scene in the fourth act, the desolation that resonates through *King Lear*'s atmosphere grows stronger. Among the characters wandering aimlessly on the heath, Edgar becomes the one who most remarkably embodies the tragic insight mentioned by Salgado. Inspired by Gloucester's restored faith after the Dover cliff scene, Edgar's "Bear free and patient thoughts" (4.6.80) is soon reversed by the image of the mad Lear adorned with wildflowers as manifested in his "O thou side-piercing sight" (4.6.85). That is one example out of many in which the hope for an optimistic outcome is promptly confronted by the appalling turn of events. Even when the old king finally reconciles with Cordelia and resolution seems closer, the same process is repeated once again. To illustrate this, Edgar's "If ever I return to you again, / I'll bring you comfort" (5.2.3-4) to his father is placed right before the lost battle against the British forces and after the reconciliation scene. However redemptive a scene might be, the reversal of expectations consistently defies any ideas that imply closure. As a result, a widespread feeling of uncertainty turns out to follow the narrative up to its final moments.

Leading the dramatic rhythm to its peak, *King Lear*'s last scene has passages that, placed between the triumph of Edmund's army and Lear's final entrance, leave the possibility of a bleak ending in suspense. When the executions of Lear and Cordelia are ordered, anxieties regarding the upcoming outcome are diverted by the duel between Gloucester's sons. On this point, Edmund's "the wheel has come full circle" (5.3.168) after being fatally wounded expresses a recognition concerning the arrival of a long awaited

resolution. Nevertheless, what happens is a sequence of interruptions that takes Edgar's victory in the duel as the starting point. From that moment up to Cordelia's death, "we seem to move from episode to episode without much sense of what the final destination is to be . . . there is always an element of unpredictability in what comes next and the form in which it comes" (Emrys Jones 155). First, Edgar's "brief tale" (5.3.175) of his past activities – from his disguise as Poor Tom to Gloucester's end – is followed by the account of Kent's story[9]. The correspondence between both stories – as illustrated by Gloucester's heart "burst smilingly" (5.3.198) and the strings of Kent's life "began to crack" (5.3.216) – give the impression that they are over. As soon as Edgar is done with his reports, two passages are put in sequence: the entrance of a desperate attendant and Kent looking for his master. Other than proving that his story had not finished, Kent's appearance evokes the fact that Lear and Cordelia's fates are still unresolved. Similarly, the attendant's "o she's dead" (5.3.201) in reference to Goneril's passing is mistaken by an allusion to Cordelia's unknown destiny. Directly confronting the supposed resolutions, those surprising interventions reflect the process of failed expectations that, rather than being left aside in the play's last scene, is consistently enhanced parallel to the closing moments of the narrative.

Guided by the unpredictability of previous passages, the announcement of Cordelia's death intensifies the play's bleakness in a way that the final movement towards closure finds its most emblematic refutation. Repeating the recurrent betrayal of expectations, Edmund's "some good I mean to do" (5.3.219) and Albany's "the gods defend her" (5.3.231) are immediately emptied out by Lear's entrance carrying his dead

[9] Exclusive to the Quarto, this story refers to Kent's appearance after Gloucester's death. In spite of Albany's request to spare him of more tragic news, Edgar reports how Kent comforted him and "told the most precious story of Lear and him that ever ear received" (5.3.210-211). Other than contributing to delay even more the pace of *King Lear*, such a passage shows through its opening lines – "This would have seemed a period / To such as love not sorrow" (5.3.200-201) with regard to the previous account of Gloucester's story – that irresolution is aligned with the recurrent betrayal of expectations.

daughter. In addition to breaking with a prolonged suspense, the poignancy of this entrance prevents the present characters from contemplating anything but the old king's fate. Unexpectedly, the aftermath of that tragic moment is delayed by a sequence of other interventions – that is, a nameless captain confirming the overwhelming news and Kent revealing his identity as Caius – that seems utterly pointless. When Lear finally dies of broken heart, "the ending is indecisive, and the question of damnation or salvation is diverted, or dissolved under the pressure of a more primal question, whether there is anything at all beyond the edge" (Robinson 35). After the report of Edmund's death by the captain, the first step towards resolution is taken by Albany in his speech addressed to restore the old order. Nevertheless, this speech is interrupted by Lear's dying utterance and therefore never fulfills its purpose. Later, Albany makes a new request to take charge of the throne that is also ineffective: other than Kent's refusal, Edgar's closing lines – "we that are young / Shall never see so much, nor live so long" (5.3.300-01) – manifest an obscure reflection upon the future instead of a resolute acceptance. Thwarting all hopes for restoration, the resulting desolate scenario confronts any attempt to draw a definitive conclusion. As a consequence, the unresolved questions that pervade the play's dramatic rhythm are transferred from the boundaries of the plot to the possibility of existing any meaning behind the catastrophic events once the narrative comes to an end.

3.3 Final irresolution and the drama of finitude

Enhanced by the dramatic rhythm, the tendency towards ambiguity in *King Lear* occurs parallel to a sense of indeterminacy increased by the constant subversion of expectations. In passages such as the storm scenes and the wanderings on the heath, where the action is consistently delayed and no destination is foreseen, words and utterances

manifest ambivalent meanings – as illustrated by the depiction of retributive justice and the paradoxical notion of wise folly – that contribute to the emergence of a polysemic construction. Rather than carrying an irrefutable status, those devices have their efficacy questioned every time the limitations of language are attested. Yet, it is not until the play's ending that ambiguity and inconclusiveness find their most intrinsic correspondence. In this regard, Ryan states that "*King Lear* culminates notoriously in a stammer of false endings and dashed hopes, which peter out in ambiguity, leaving us uncertain whether Lear dies under the delusion that Cordelia lives and unsure of who will take his place as ruler" (386). As previously analyzed, Edgar's last lines and his elusive attitude towards Albany's proposed restoration establish an atmosphere of uncertainty systematically announced in the play. Before that, such an atmosphere is heightened by a set of dubious lines – among them, Lear's delusion concerning Cordelia's death – placed right after the failure of Albany's closing speech. The immediate impact is that even the play's bleakness ends up being counterbalanced by the drama of finitude implicitly manifested in those lines. Analogous to the confrontation of language, the emphasis on inner truth directly challenges the belief in an absolute negation and, consequently, amplifies the questions about what is left regarding the human condition.

In response to the series of catastrophic events, Lear's dying speech inaugurates a set of ambiguous lines that stresses the importance of emotional passages to the play. Foregrounding the old king's journey of self-discovery, the first of those lines – "and my poor fool is hanged" (5.3.280) – seems to allude to the Fool's disappearance in the last of the storm scenes. In this respect, it is impossible to verify if the reference to hanging stands for an explanation for that disappearance or for a reaction to Cordelia's death. In addition to such ambiguity, it is evident that "Lear's Fool vanishes, but the displaced wisdom of his folly lingers in the king's final return to a sublime madness" (Bloom 5). From a broad

perspective, the notion of wise folly mentioned by Bloom is what allows the fundamental insights into paternal misjudgment to evolve to those[10] into the misery of the human condition. That is why Lear is capable of posing the following question about the unfairness of his daughter's passing in comparison to other inferior beings: "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life, / And thou no breath at all?" (5.3.281-282). Most importantly, the expression of *fool* evokes the relevance of a character that had become absent for no apparent reason half way through the play. Other than anticipating the paradox of wise folly embodied by Lear in his learning process, the Fool's unquestioned obedience integrates the meaningful gestures at the core of *King Lear*. To illustrate this, he accompanies his master even when the old king becomes "an O without a figure" (1.4.174) and is protected by him in the most frightening moments during the storm: "in, boy; go first" (3.4.26). It is therefore implied that the Lear's ambiguous allusion to *fool* reflects the emotional bonds between both characters and the respective drama of finitude in which manifestations of unconditional loyalty greatly contribute to outweigh the overarching bleakness.

Other than the dubious reference to the Fool's fate, the last lines uttered by Lear and Kent in the play also evoke, through ambiguity, passages where the emphasis on unconditional love is implied. First, the ending of Lear's dying speech – "Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips, / Look there, look there" (5.3.285-286) – does not specify what is really contemplated when he *looks* at his inert daughter. According to Derek Peat, "there are two distinct possibilities: either Lear dies believing Cordelia lives, or his heart breaks as he realizes the shattering reality of her death . . . the text supports all these possibilities"

[10] Triggered by Lear's immersion in madness, these insights are epitomized by the following lines and their corresponding suggested topics: the baseness of human condition in comparison to other living beings ("unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal" [3.4.98-99]); the frailty of supposed life's certainties like power and reason ("they told me I was everything. 'Tis a lie, I am not ague-proof" [4.6.103-04] and "I am a very foolish fond old man" [4.7.55]); the view of life as ephemeral ("Let me wipe it first, it smells of mortality" [4.6.133]); the absurdity inherent in human justice ("See how yond justice rails upon yond simple thief" [4.6.149-50]); and the view of existence as an inescapable tragic experience ("When we are born, we cry that we are come / To this great stage of fools" [4.6.180]).

(44). From both perspectives, the impact of these overwhelming emotions on the old king reflects the recognition of Cordelia's value as previously depicted in the reconciliation scene as well as the utterance subsequent to father and daughter being sent to prison: "When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down / And ask of thee forgiveness (5.3.10-11). Additionally, the idea of Lear being motivated by ambivalent feelings deeply resembles the account of Gloucester's death and the fact that the old man, divided between "two extremes of passion, joy and grief, burst smilingly" (5.3.192) after Edgar reveals his identity. A few lines after the old king dies, Kent reveals his choice for an ambiguous destination: "my master calls me, I must not say no" (5.3.297). In this moment, his real intent is concealed: the word *master* might contain a reference to Lear and a desire to meet him by means of suicide or the allusion to a superior force and the start of a spiritual journey. Regardless of the possibilities, such a demonstration of unquestioned loyalty is foregrounded so that other analogous passages – especially, the ones where Kent and Edgar, both adopting disguises, accompany Lear and Gloucester during the storm scenes and locations of the heath – end up being recalled. Once again, *King Lear*'s desolate atmosphere is confronted by the ambiguity of lines that point to the centrality of true manifestations of feeling to the play.

Adopting an ambiguous tone, Edgar's final speech follows the same procedure of the ones mentioned above and closes the play in an analogous emphasis on the drama of finitude. As previously observed, Albany's attempt to divide the kingdom between the surviving characters is followed by a reflection upon the overarching bleakness that suggests, in the best-case scenario, a reluctant acceptance. In comparison to Lear's and Kent's utterances, the importance given to inner truth, this time, is more explicit than ever: "The weight of this sad time we must obey; / Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say" (5.3.298-99). On this point, Edgar seems to be stricken by Lear's death – as illustrated

by his previous uttered lines “He faints, my lord, my lord!” (5.3.287) and “He is gone indeed” (5.3.290) – instead of directly responding to Albany’s request. Far from carrying a mere concern about the future, this affliction shows that Edgar’s lines are actually connected to emotional moments of Lear’s journey. Evaluating the real impact of those moments to the conclusion of the play, Reid states:

> The ending of *King Lear* suggests that the wheel of Lear’s destiny, not just the resolutional cycle of acts four and five but the drama as a whole, is moved by love. It is a force much larger than Lear himself, as shown by the many who extend it so assiduously on his behalf (Cordelia, Kent, Albany, Gloucester, Edgar, the King of France, gentlemen, servants) and by Lear’s persistent failure to receive and reciprocate it with grace. (131)

Poetically referring to inconstancy as the wheel of destiny, Reid shrewdly focuses on the importance of love to outweigh the play’s tragic choices. Aligned with the drama of finitude, the passages in which that importance is implied integrate Lear’s learning process, but do not remain limited to it. Throughout those passages, the eloquence of empty speeches is replaced by meaningful gestures consistently repeated in the play – namely, the taking of hands and the respective need for touch. Initially, acts of companionship come as a relief in the growing sense of bewilderment engendered in the storm scenes: as examples, the attendant’s “give me your hand” (3.1.29) to Kent as they start to look for the old king and Kent’s “give me thy hand” (3.4.39) to the frightened Fool as he comes across Poor Tom. Later, the references to *hand* increase as Edgar strives to guide his blind father on the heath. Finally, when the reconciliation scene – arguably, the most redemptive passage in the play – takes place, it is not a coincidence that the word is used as the starting point for the process as a whole: Cordelia’s “hold your hands in benediction o’er me” (4.7.52) conveys an affectionate approach responsible for her father’s recuperation. Encompassing

distinct moments of Lear's journey, the need for contact and its related gestures join other unrequested demonstrations of love – such as France's choice for the disposed Cordelia and Cornwall's servant's attempt to prevent Gloucester from being blinded – to form a sort of language capable of displaying a felt inner truth as indicated by Edgar's last utterance. For that reason, the urge to speak what one feels has more to do with past events built upon love than a contemplation of human misery only inspired by Lear's death. Most importantly, such an urge becomes an emblem of humanity that challenges the appalling atmosphere characteristic of the catastrophic ending.

As soon as the narrative ends, the emergence of questions about the real extent of Edgar's final speech greatly contributes to the intensification of *King Lear*'s indeterminacy. Following the ambiguity of the last lines uttered by Lear and Kent, it is not specified any direction to be taken in response to Albany's request regarding succession. Similarly, the emphasis on a straightforward form of expression elicits interrogations about the possibility of true feelings overcoming the final sense of desolation. On the one hand, the set of emotional passages points to the occurrence of a lesson in which "to be human is to see feelingly, not to fall back on easy moralizing, the *ought to say* that characterizes people like Albany" (Bate *King Lear* ch. 4). In this respect, the occurrence of catastrophic events is believed to strengthen one's capacity to endure and to triumph over any adversity. On the other hand, it is suggested that the vision of love as redemptive is far from being absolute. For instance, Edgar saves the blind Gloucester from despair on the heath, but he also in some sense breaks his father's heart when he reveals his identity. Furthermore, Cordelia's attempt to save Lear leads simultaneously to the awaited reconciliation and to the death of both. Culminating in disastrous consequences, the examples mentioned above show that even authentic manifestations of love attach an ambiguous significance to the play. Guided by such ambiguity, discussions about the existence of a single lesson or

meaning behind the deaths of Lear and his beloved daughter suggest an urgent question: what is left regarding the human condition in the last scene? As Garber clarifies, “the play poses this question, but will not answer it: the question remains open; it is not foreclosed, even in the direction of nihilism” (613). From redemptive to tragic readings, the evocation of distinct passages allows for contrasting interpretations, but never a definitive one. Thus, inconclusiveness becomes the notion that epitomizes not only the pace of *King Lear*, but also the unresolved confrontation between bleakness and the drama of finitude.

Final Considerations

Analyzing the anxieties of early modern England, so far as *King Lear* is concerned, constitutes a practice that sheds light on the tendency towards ambiguity and inconclusiveness. Influenced by the political debates over union, the kingdom's fragmentation is far from being the only cause that triggers the sequence of catastrophic events: other than being previously settled, the announcement of division is made according to Lear's love test. In this moment, the old king's confusion of his traditional roles – namely, anointed by God, king and father – reflects not only the obliquity in his attitude, but also the implicit concerns over the real extent of filial love from a cultural standpoint. The way that the love test is employed also transposes to the play the generational conflicts typical of the transitional period of Jacobean England. Embedded in a sheer ambivalence, those conflicts are portrayed in a way that any attempt to simplify the confrontation of opposing generations as a matter of good versus evil is challenged: whereas unquestioned obedience stems from traditional values like Kent's loyalty, individualism originates contrasting attitudes such as Edmund's amorality and Cordelia's honesty. Similarly, the paradoxes of madness and blindness – and their respective inversions and materializations during the third and fourth acts – defy any reductionist vision regarding words and utterances implying only their established connotations. From ambivalent attitudes to paradoxical speeches, the impossibility of taking absolute concepts for granted gradually enhances the uncertainty inherent in the play's atmosphere.

From a broad cultural perspective, the emphasis on skepticism inaugurated a widespread sense of Renaissance decay in which established truths about the human condition end up being severely questioned. Among those truths, the irrefutability of man's rationality is confronted by the tendency towards ambiguity at the core of *King Lear*'s

polysemic construction. In this respect, the limitations of human reason bring about the notion of language – ranging from the contrasting meanings of words such as *nature* and *justice* to the constant betrayal of stoic utterances – as a form of human expression that is not reliable. Additionally, such a notion is reinforced by the contemplation of an unknowable providence and its impact on the narrative: in addition to the unresponsive calls for the gods, the emblematic silence of providence deeply affects passages related to unutterable emotions wherein the partial inefficacy of language is most notoriously manifested. In view of the decay of human rationality, Christian folly also arises as one of the most valid responses to Renaissance disbelief when it comes to the importance given to authentic representations of feeling in the play. For that reason, this response, at the same time that it allows for the emergence of insightful notions within the paradox of wise madness embodied by Lear, reflects a cultural debate about the precedence of compassion over empty rationalizations. Indicating this precedence, the emotional passages that foreground the Fool's wise remarks find their importance amplified parallel to the ambivalence of language that, despite its increasing inadequacy, stills corresponds to the only available form of expression to convey the extremity of both suffering and inner truth.

Following the dramatic rhythm, the tendency towards ambiguity that emanates from *King Lear*'s textual devices greatly contributes to an increasing indeterminacy and to the way that any sense of pattern is systematically broken. Initially connected to an antagonism between Lear's group and the villainous characters, the distinct connotations of *nature* and *justice* have their categorization disrupted as soon as contrasting occurrences of those words are ambivalently manifested in the last act – that is, Edgar resorting to divine and retributive justice as well as Edmund being overdetermined by bastardy. Moreover, the similarities between the parallel stories are undermined when the journeys of Lear and Gloucester diverge according to the different ways that both characters cope with their

disillusions. Alongside the partial inadequacy of language, the betrayal of expectations seems to lead to the play's tragic descent as an irreversible process. On the other hand, such a betrayal is capable of evoking the emphasis on a felt inner truth despite the bleakness outside. Similar to the implications of wise folly, the paradox of nothingness personified by Lear suggests the existence of some comfort behind several negations as manifested in the reconciliation with Cordelia and the moment that father and daughter are sent to prison. Overall, the impossibility of relying on absolute notions – from actual utterances to a supposed fixed pattern – simultaneously confirms the uncertainty and the drama of finitude that surround the play up to its final moments.

Defying any hopes for closure, the last scene displays emblematic themes analyzed in this Master's thesis so that the emergence of interrogations about what is left regarding the human condition become inevitable. From the moment that Lear is seen with the dead Cordelia in his arms, the immediate impact is the confirmation of cultural anxieties concerning the limitations of man's reason to convey the poignancy of suffering. Other than the stoic utterances of Edgar and Albany being emptied out, the old king resorts once again to animal imagery – the fact that "a dog, a horse, a rat, have life" (5.3.281) – as a means of expressing the uselessness of his daughter's death and, consequently, the baseness of existence. In relation to this baseness, the rhetoric of silence personified by Edgar throughout the scene joins the unanswered questions and the vain attempts to bring comfort. Concomitantly, the irresolution that resonates through the constant delay of actions points to an inescapable desolate scenario. Conversely, the ambiguous final speeches uttered by Lear, Kent, and Edgar call attention to the use of language aligned with true manifestations of feeling as evoked by passages that bring about the drama of finitude. When the ending finally comes, the play seems to focus on the necessity not only to stand, but also to stand in awe in view of the misery inherent in existence. Yet, no destination is

signaled and the questions about any sort of redemptive lesson arising from such bleakness remain. Triggered by the cultural context as a whole, inconclusiveness becomes the notion that epitomizes *King Lear*'s textual elements – from utterances to dramatic devices – and the way that they consistently betray any attempt to look for absolute truths or definitions regarding the human condition.

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