THE HEART AND THE EYE IN *KING LEAR*

Jean-Jacques Chardin
University of Strasbourg

ABSTRACT
This paper aims to analyse how Shakespeare's *King Lear* revisits the traditional discourse on the heart and the eye as presented in medical and moral treatises of the early modern period. In the play the eye is disallowed as a valid instrument of perception and of cognition. Lear's and Gloucester's initial mistakes, *i.e.* banishing their children from their sight, are emblematic of their physical and intellectual short-sightedness. Under the guidance of the Fool's and Tom's benevolent tuition, Lear is shown the language of the heart made of tenderness, tears and compassion. Recognizing responsibility for the other and seeing beyond ego, Lear can deliver to the blind Gloucester a lesson on how to gaze perspectively. Yet it is significant that even after their eyes have been taught both aged fathers fail to acknowledge the causelessness of the world they inhabit. The spectator's response to the play is divided between the wishful acceptance that emotional engagement can help restructure human relationships and the disheartening experience that the language of the heart may not be an apt answer to the cruelties shown on the stage.

KEYWORDS: *King Lear*, heart, eye, emblems, emotion, perspective view, audience response

There are more than thirty references to the heart in *King Lear* and as many to the eye and to vision. The heart was described in medieval and Renaissance medical treatises as a vital or "spiritual" organ associated with *spiritus* or *pneuma* (Siraisi 107) whose function is to maintain life. Burton defined it metaphorically as "keeping its court, and by arteries communicating life to the whole body" (Burton 150). But the heart was also conceived as the seat of emotional life, as stated by Timothy Bright in his treatise on melancholy: "The hart is the seate of life, and affections, and perturbations, of love, or heate, like, or dislike; of such thinges that fall within compasse of sense; either outward or inward; in effect, or imagination onely" (Bright 47). The heart belongs to physiological and psychological life and all that comes from the heart is considered to be stamped with sincerity and truth, as stated by Valeriano for whom a true heart cannot lie: "Ut vero a corde exoriamur […] probi hominis orationem indicabat ut qui mentiri aut fallere nesciret" (241).

Renaissance medecine established a connection between the heart and the eye. The heart disseminates *spiritus* throughout the body by the arteries, and the spirits carrying the power of seeing circulate through the brain, the seat of *anima* (or the soul), to the optic cavity (Siraisi 108). Combining *spiritus* and *anima*, the eye was conceived as the priviledged organ of perception, the "most pure spirit of

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sense," according to Achilles in *Troilus and Cressida* (III.3.103), and its perceptive and cognitive functions were stressed in many treatises. In Sonnet 24, Shakespeare elaborates on the conceit of the eye as a window showing the speaker's image of his lover enshrined in his heart:

> Now see what good turns eyes for eyes have done,
> Mine eyes have drawn thy shape, and thine for me
> Are windows to my breast, wherethrough the sun
> Delights to peep, to gaze therein on thee.

The eye connects oustide and inside, and links physical and emotional. The eye/window image suggests that the heart can be seen and known easily: Valeriano writes that the eye is the door of the soul and can reveal the intentions of the heart: "occulos esse tanquam fores animi […] nonnulli occulum verum cordis nuncium dictitarunt" (233). Lear unintentionally rephrases Valeriano when he imagines he can see Regan's heart in her evil looks: "here's another whose warped looks proclaim / What store her heart is made on" (III, 6, 52).[1]

The heart-eye nexus in *King Lear* is clearly shaped by medical and moral discourses common in Renaissance culture but Shakespeare adapts and revisits the tradition by exhibiting a high degree of skepticism. I would like to address two questions in this paper: how far can it be said that the gaze in *King Lear* is a valid tool of cognition, and what is the function played by emotions in the derelict world shown on the stage?

To see and to know

The beginning of the play shows a series of mistakes made by Lear and Gloucester. The division of the kingdom is first a political and a moral issue. It had been admitted from the Middle Ages that a king's property, passed on to him from earlier generations, was inalienable (Bell 160), consequently Lear is not entitled to scissor up his kingom. Kent voices his rejection of the way Lear violates this principle and urges him to "[r]eserve [his] state" (I.1.149)[2] at the moment he banishes Cordelia. On top of that, Lear mistakes hypocrisy for sincerity, flattery for honesty, and lies for truth, and believes Goneril's and Regan's words to be the true language of their hearts. Lear understands linguistic signs at their face value and cannot imagine that a statement can lie. He is blinded by a conception of language relying on the assumption that signifiers bear a one-to-one relationship with signifieds, a position reminiscent of that of Cratylus, who argues in Plato's discourse that words are naturally tied to the objects they signify. The performative language of authority he speaks in the opening scenes of the play allows for no space between words and

[1] All quotations from *King Lear* are taken from William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. George Hunter, Penguin Shakespeare (2005).
[2] The 1608 *Quarto* version has only "Reserve thy doom," with less emphasis than the *Folio* version on the political nature of Lear's transgression.

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meanings, as he threateningly makes it clear when he summons Kent not to "come betwixt [our] sentence and [our] power" (I, 1, 121-2). Lear's subsequently banishing Cordelia and Kent from his sight ("Hence and avoid my sight" 1.1.123; "Out of my sight" 1.1.157) comes as an ironic confirmation of his self-inflicted blindness.

Gloucester's mistake reduplicates that of Lear in the sense that he too is blind to the value of signifiers. Gloucester sees Edgar's hand in the letter forged by Edmund, and perusing the letter means just as much to him as seeing the hand that wrote it. Abused by Edmund's deceitful rhetoric, Gloucester concludes that he can have direct access to Edgar's heart: "had he a hand to write this? A heart and brain to breed it in?" (I.2.58). Even though Edmund cunningly suggests that the hand, *i.e.* writing, might be dissociated from the heart, *i.e.* feeling ("It is his hand, my lord; but I hope his heart is not in the contents," I.2.68), Gloucester obstinately adheres to the signifying chain made by letter, hand and heart. In his view, the heart is a text that can be read by the eye. The fact that the letter has been written by Edmund's hand and that Gloucester is unable to scrutinize the bastard's heart doubly testifies to the old man's incapacitating short-sightedness. Lear's and Gloucester's reverential adherence to a quasi-mystical semantics is ironically debunked by Goneril's, Regan's and Edmund's linguistic strategies. Lear's and Gloucester's blind trust in the (Platonic) "nomina sint numina" theory is echoed by their misreading of the relationship between nature and man.

The two aged fathers share a conventional view which confounds the world of nature and the world of men. Gloucester relates the fractions in the kingdom and in his own family to perturbations in the cosmos ("these late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us," 1.2.103–4); and in the storm scene, Lear apostrophizes the wind and rain by claiming that they are less unnatural than his daughters: "I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness; / I never gave you kingdom, called you children; / You owe me no subscription" (III.2.16–17). Lear anthropomorphizes the storm by using metaphors and images which convey human features to it ("Blow winds and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow! […] Rumble thy bellyful! Spit fire!" III.2.1; 14), as does the Knight in the previous scene, when answering one of Kent's questions about who is on the heath ("One minded like the weather" III.1.2). Lear even connects the human order to a sacred order by appealing to "the operation of the orbs" and "the sacred radiance of the sun" when he casts Cordelia out (I.1.109–11). The assimilation of nature to human, or to culture, is one of the manifestations of what philosopher Jürgen Habermas referred to as "mythical thought" for which "nature […] is outfitted with anthropomorphic features and […] culture […] is naturalized and absorbed into the objective nexus of operations of anonymous powers" (Habermas 47, quoted in Mousley 34). And the anonymous powers in operation are divine designs which Elizabethan ideology considered to be at work in nature itself. Lear, Gloucester and the Knight express their belief in the stability of a world order in which human life is shaped by a heavenly, although immensely inscrutable, determinism. Richard Hooker, one of the main propagandists of the ideology of providentialism, forcefully argues in *Of the Lavves of Ecclasiastical Politie* that there exists a connection between Nature, God and man and that man's

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infinite duties need no further proof of their goodness than being accepted as God's benevolent prescriptions:

> The generall and perpetuall voyce of men is as the sentence of God him selfe. For that which all men have at all times learned, Nature her selfe must needes have taught; and God being the author of Nature, her voyce is but his instrument. By her from him we receive whatsoever in such sort we learn. Infinite duties there are, the goodnes whereof is by this rule sufficiently manifested, although we had no other warrant besides to approve them (63).

Among those duties is the necessity to worship God and honour one's parents. The cornerstone of such a view of nature is that man's moral laws are dictated by the prescriptions of Nature:

> the knowledge of every the least thing in the whole world, hath in it a second peculiar benefite unto us, in as much as it serveth us to minister rules, Canons, and lawes of men to direct those actions by, which wee properly terme humaine.
>
> (Hooker 64)

Similarly Lear and Gloucester view Nature as a divinely structured syntax creating duties that man has to obey: "Thou better knowest / The offices of nature, bond of childhood, / Effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude," as Lear reminds Regan in II.4.172–4. Regan is supposed to be instinctively, or rationally, instructed about her duties to her father. Other characters in the play share a similar body of beliefs, like Kent and Cordelia. Cordelia knows her sisters' fulsome rhetoric to be a pack of lies and defiantly proclaims the final victory of truth: "Time shall enfold what plighted cunning hides" (I.1.280). Although she can see more accurately than her blind father, Cordelia is more spoken that speaking, as she ventriloquizes the discourse of early modern humanists about truth being the daughter of time: the *Veritas filia temporis* adage harks back to antiquity and was used in many historical tracts and philosophical treatises in the Renaissance.[3] One of the possible sources of Cordelia's *sententia* is a paraphrase written by Richard Taverner of Erasmus's adage "Tempus omnia revelat," in a text printed in 1539: "Time dyscloseth all thinges. Nothinge is covered, but shalbe reveled, nothing is hyd, that shal not be knowen, sayeth Christe" (fol. xxxvii). And even though Cordelia may be "the true blank of [her father's] eyes," her view of time is fashioned by tradition which her unnecessary death at the end clearly invites to reconsider.

Lear's, Gloucester's and Cordelia's conceptions of a "fixed system of relation in nature and society" (Bell 153) are challenged by Edmund's more autonomous, anti-essentialist conception of nature which excludes all values except profit, business, domination and control. Edmund's view of nature expressed in the opening soliloquy of I.2 is consonant with Montaigne's scepetical teachings on laws

[3] See, for instance, "Temporis Filia Veritas" (Wilson, 1957); "Veritas Filia Temporis" (Saxl, 1935).

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and customs expressed in some of his essays, in particular "De la coutume et de ne changer aisément une loye recüe," although, as rightly observed by Robert Ellrodt, Montaigne still recommends to submit to them (1362)[4] whereas Edmund offhandedly discards them altogether. There is no sense of natural feelings, no place for fatherly or filial love in Edmund's conception of nature, no place for tenderness, and the painful realisation that the world is ruled by egotistical self-interest dawns on Lear and Gloucester in their parallel ordeals.

Can the heart help to see better?

The Fool and Poor Tom lead Lear and Gloucester along the path to clear-sightedness. The Fool keeps alive in Lear the memory of his past mistakes. His concrete, visual imagery helps Lear to see the state of confusion to which the world he now inhabits has come: "I have used it [singing], nuncle, e'er since thou has madest thy daughters thy mothers; for when thou gavest them the rod and puttest down thine own breeches, / Then they for sudden joy did weep […]" (I.4.168–71). The image of Lear putting down his breeches to his daughters is degrading and registers the king's powerlessness, now that he has willingly parted his kingdom. Lear's "emasculating disempowerment," in Ewan Fernie's words (197), reveals his empty inner identity as he feels his self has been utterly obliterated: "Does any here know me? This is not Lear […] / Who is it that can tell me who I am?" (I.4.221). The Fool's tuition focuses on having and preserving and his words sound like a catechism replete with common sense aphorisms, which Lear never seemed to have recognised before:

> Have more than thou showest,
> Speak less than thou knowest,
> Lend less than thou owest,
> […]
> Set less than thou throwest;
> […]
> And keep in-a-door,
> And thou shalt have more
> Than two tens to a score. (I.4.117–26)

In the same way as he admonishes Lear, the Fool advises Kent against taking Lear's part in his downfall: "There, take my coxcomb! Why, this fellow has banished two on's daughters, and did the third a blessing against his will. If thou follow him, thou must needs wear my coxcomb" (1.4.101–4). And yet he is the one who refuses to abandon Lear when the storm is about to break out:

> That sir which serves and seeks for gain,
> And follows but form form,

[4] See Ellrodt's notes to *King Lear* (1362).

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> Will pack when it begins to rain,
> And leave thee in the storm;
> But I will tarry, the fool will stay,
> And let the wise man fly.
> The knave turns fool that runs away;
> The fool no knave, perdy. (II.4.74–81)

In contradistinction to the worldly wisdom he had been advocating, the Fool now chooses to remain faithful to his old master and opts for a wiser, kinder and more spiritual wisdom, although it might appear foolish in the eyes of the worldly. It would just be foolish to leave Lear now that he is most in need and faithfulness is the wisdom of the fool. The Fool speaks the language of the heart and his words prove useful to Lear, who can now experience what tenderness is. At the very moment his wits begin to turn, Lear takes pity on the Fool and feels for all humiliated creatures in a way he had never done before:

> Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,
> That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
> How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
> Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you
> From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
> Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;
> Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
> That thou mayst shake the superflux to them. (III.4.28–35)

These lines can be considered to exemplify the Christian values of patience and compassion embodied by the Fool and now by Lear. They can also be construed in more Levinassian terms as reflecting concern for "the Other [who] hails me and signifies to me, by its nakedness, by its destitution, an order. Its presence is its summons to respond" (Lévinas 33). The passage expresses Lear's construction of a new self in terms of attention to, and responsibility for, the other. Concern for the other is another version of the Aristotelian concept of *philia*, i.e. the form of friendship which makes one recognise the other as one's equal (*Nichomachean Ethics* VIII.8). The Fool's wisdom and the ordeal on the heath teach Lear to recover the otherness which, in Terry Eagleton's words, is "essential for self-knowledge" (183). Attention to the other also foregrounds Lear's progressive consciousness of having, and of being, a body, a body made of flesh and blood, a body in need, a body suffering, a body stinking of mortality, a body crying: "when we are born we cry that we are come / To this great stage of fools" (IV.6.182–3). Lear embraces the frailty and the inanity of the human condition and his vision of himself complements Poor Tom's picture of human nature as a mechanism all busy with eating and copulating, the ultimate essence of which is "the thing itself."

Attention to the body and its passions register Lear's sensitivity to tears and shame. Renaissance anatomy explained that tears were produced by contractions of the heart, whose vapours rise to the brain, which also contracts, so that tears

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eventually flow through the eyes. Tears are the language of the heart, to which Lear is not prepared to listen at the beginning of the play, as he fears he will lose his manhood and his identity:

> I'll tell thee—life and death! I am ashamed
> That thou hast power to shake my manhood thus,
> That these hot tears which break from me perforce
> Should make thee worth them. (I.4.293–6)

But tears shift to more a cathartic and cognitive experience, and, in the words of Ewan Fernie, they "shame him into reformation" (76). Tears and shame re-establish his relationship with Cordelia, as in the scene where Lear is restored to life, and secure a new sense of self: "as I am a man, I think this lady to be my child, Cordelia" (IV.7.69–70). Through guilt, tears and shame, Lear intuits that the self cannot exist without recognising the world outside it. Seeing beyond ego and transgressing the boundaries of the proud self of the beginning, Lear can deliver his visionary lesson to the blind Gloucester in one of the most poignant scenes of the play:

> What, art mad? A man may see how this world goes with no eyes. Look with thine ears. See how yon justice rails upon yon simple thief. Hark in thine ear—change places and, handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief?
> (IV.6.151–5)

The whole passage focuses on the gaze and the distraught Lear invites Gloucester to see the world more acutely, not by the eye, but by his other senses, like hearing. Lear seems to have grown aware of the necessity to consider things from various points of view. When the viewer changes places, he no longer knows who the justice and the thief are. Lear's implicit lesson to Gloucester is that a direct, straightforward gaze can never manage to get to the core of things, whereas oblique vision offers a wider and more trustful scope. Lear restates Montaigne's advice in the essay entitled "De l'Institution des enfans" on the way to consider the world by gazing awry: "Ce grand monde, que les uns multiplient encore comme especes soubs un genre, c'est le miroüer où il nous faut regarder pour nous connoistre de bon biais."

And when Lear suggests that Gloucester should get "glass eyes," he may refer not only to spectacles, which Gloucester ironically claimed he did not need to read his son's letter (I.2.35), but also to a perspective, the instrument used in the Renaissance for viewing objects with. Significantly, at the very moment he corrects Gloucester's gaze, Lear imagines different types of people, as though humanity in its varied diversity was made apparent to his now unsealed eyes, and diagnoses that the law of the world is nothing but appetite, lechery and vice:

> Thou rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand.
> Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thy own back.
> Thou hotly lusts to use her in that kind

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> For which thou whipp'st her. The usurer hangs the cozener.
> Thorough tattered clothes great vices do appear. (IV.6.161–5)

Echoing Lear's enlightened vision, Gloucester evidences the paradox that one does not need eyes to see and now accurately perceives the destitution of the old king and the decay of his world: "O ruined piece of nature, this great world / Shall so wear out to naught" (IV.6.135–6). The world's wearing out to naught is the sign of cosmic decay, a concept originating in the atomist philosophy of Lucretius, for whom the world's imperfections are the causes of its irreversible decline. Decay is identified by Jonathan Dollimore in *Radical Tragedy* as a cause of melancholy and pessimism, informing such texts as *King Lear* or John Donne's *First Anniversary* (99–103). At that stage, Gloucester seems to be gifted with a proleptic view of the cataclysmic ending of the play and forebodes the nothing that the Lear world is to become.

Act IV scene 6 shows reason in madness and vision in blindness, but it also subtly hints at blind spots that the characters fail to overcome. Although Gloucester sees more keenly, his vision remains blurred by illusion till he dies. When he is convinced that he has jumped from Dover cliff and that his life is a miracle, Gloucester is abused by Edgar, in the same way as he was deluded by Edmund previously, although Edmund's intentions were evil, whereas Edgar aims to cure him from his despair. It might be argued that Edgar's stratagem is as cruelly deceptive as Edmund's, by resorting to a similar manipulation of signs, and is conducive to little less than affliction and despair, as admitted by Edgar himself: "Why do I trifle thus with his despair / Is done to cure it" (IV.6.33–34). Despair is more than sadness or grief, it is the contrary of hope, and hope (*spes)* is one of the three theologian virtues, together with faith (*fides*) and love (*caritas*). Despair is the feeling of being abandoned by God. In his intention to bring comfort to Gloucester, Edgar appears as the voice of retributive justice: "The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices / Make instruments to plague us," as he later claims to Edmund (V.3.167–8). And much though Gloucester vituperates against the gods, he never questions divine justice in the way Job does in the Bible. Lear too is convinced of the justice of the gods. When he is conveyed to prison with Cordelia, he still finds justification in suffering and claims his belief in patience, forgiveness and sacrifice in lines packed with biblical echoes:

> We two alone will sing like birds i'the cage;
> When thou dost ask me blessing I'll kneel down
> And ask of thee forgiveness.
> […]
> Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia,
> The gods themselves throw incense. (V. 3. 9–21)

He and Cordelia can become "sacrifices" because, in his view, love is more powerful than all calculations and betrayals. The heart speaks in him but his sight is still strongly abused now, just as previously he meant to find logical causes to things and believed that he could anatomize Regan to see what breeds about her heart

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(III.6.73). Lear's attachment to autopsy, which is to both dissection and seeing with one's own eyes, sounds tragically ludicrous in the world of causelessness he inhabits. Significantly, when, in the storm scene, he asks Tom about the cause of thunder, Tom remains silent (III.4.151). Lear cannot come to the realisation that there is no cause to thunder, or to ingratitude, or to evil, or even to love: there is "no cause, no cause" as Cordelia programmatically suggested in the reconciliation scene (IV.7.75). In the world of Lear, all connections between causes and effects have been lost and the horrific recognition of the causelessness of things is the ultimate tragic anagnorisis Lear experiences in the final scene of the play: "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life, / And thou no breath at all?" (V.3.304–5). The same experience of meaninglessness shapes the spectator's reaction to Lear's and Gloucester's ordeals.

The eye versus the heart

Watching *King Lear* is a disconcerting experience. Like Gloucester, the spectator progressively learns to see feelingly and empathises with the suffering of the characters. Shakespeare follows Aristotle's prescriptions that tragedy should arouse pity. This is particularly true in the storm and the cliff scenes. The cliff scene is structured like a play within the play, in which the blind Gloucester is cheated by the power of Tom's poetic language. The spectator is carried away by the sheer power of words to create dramatic illusion, and because he focuses on the trick played on Gloucester, he forgets that the encasing drama, *King Lear*, is as much of a fiction as Edgar's deceitful verbal construction. As a result, the spectator feels for Gloucester, and his sense of pity is aroused when he realises the way Gloucester is eventually deprived of the thing that he wants most, death. But as soon as the spectator recognises the fiction that *King Lear* is, his sense of pity recedes and he suddenly grows aware of the way he has been manoeuvred to experience pity. The spectator's reaction is divided between the wish to accept that in the world of dereliction the play shows, love, compassion and tenderness, i.e. the language of the heart, are still appropriate answers to cruelty, and the disquieting realisation that it is the fiction and its internal laws which drive him to experience such feelings. On top of that, the play disallows pity. Pity may be a prerequisite to compassionate action, but it does not prevent the final catastrophe and, in the case of Gloucester, it even seems to heighten blind man's torments. Pity is inappropriate and potentially callous. What the spectator's heart feels, his eye then denies. And pity moves to horror with Cordelia's death. When we see Lear carrying Cordelia's corpse in his arms, we cannot but give in to an intense feeling of waste. Cordelia's corpse is utterly meaningless, it is abject, in the sense Julia Kristeva gives to this concept, that is: "the jettisoned object [which] is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 11).

Cordelia dies for no purpose, and her death frustrates us of the ending we would have liked. But Cordelia's death is entirely contrived by Shakespeare and is then part of the dramatist's strategy to manoeuvre the audience's reaction. Graham

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Bradshaw persuasively argues that the reason why we feel so horrified at Cordelia's death is that Shakespeare shows us the world not as we would like it to be (or the way Lear or Gloucester or Edgar would like it to be), but the world such as it is. Cordelia's death invalidates the significance that we had patiently projected on Lear's and Gloucester's sufferings, and the play dramatizes the spectator's vain hope to impose meaning on contingent horrors. Cordelia's death lends itself to no straightforward reading: Lear's vague impression that Cordelia might still be alive is a pure fantasy and Kent's and Edgar's horrified interrogations, "Is this the promised end? Or image of that horror?" remain tragically unanswered. What the spectator has felt desirable is forcefully denied by the utter poignancy of the final scene and the spectator leaves the theatre without experiencing that his feelings of pity and terror have been cleansed.

In *King Lear*, Shakespeare revisits the dominant ideas of his time and his treatment of the eye and the heart challenges the absoluteness of words and questions common beliefs in coherence and ultimate meaning. In *King Lear*, the eye is disallowed as an invalid instrument of cognition. Lear and Gloucester evolve from the blind, hubristic posture of the beginning towards a new subjectivity, compassionate and attentive to others, yet they fail to see that the world around them no longer operates according to the rules they still believe in. The prescriptions of the heart may temporarily restore the self to wholeness, but they are not more efficient than the affirmations of self-interest epitomised by Edmund, Goneril or Regan. Like Lear and Gloucester, the spectator temporarily accepts that love, tears and forgiveness are redemptive, but the bleak, ruthless tableau the play concludes upon denies the cathartic power of emotion. Not all humanist concepts and ethical concerns are completely evacuated from *King Lear*, but the play balances between an acknowledgement that emotional engagement can help restructure human relationships and the disheartening acceptance that "an enriched sense of human experience," in Kent Cartwright's words (19), is perhaps worth nothing. The spectator is left with a blank which neither his heart nor his eye can fill entirely.

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