The Tragedy of Human Conventions:
  *King Lear* as Allegory

When considering the thematic potency of *King Lear*, the play’s breadth can make an analysis overwhelming, for how does a reader decipher a play so rooted in universally felt dramas like familial strife, ungraceful aging, violent mercilessness and unexplainable death? Perhaps it is these intensely personable themes, combined with what is arguably Shakespeare’s most exquisite verse, that elevate *Lear* from one of the four great tragedies to “the best of all Shakespeare’s plays” (Hazlitt 13). Yet the multitudinous emotions in the play make chaos of any linear approach to critical analysis. For this reason, it is useful to heuristically focus on a few of the most striking exhibitions of these themes. Specifically, critics have focused on *Lear’s* passionate poetry, its supremely tragic events, and its inherent dualities as areas that separate *Lear* from the other three great tragedies and Shakespeare’s canon in general. With these ideas in mind, the vastness of *Lear*’s thematic content can be concentrated into a more easily identifiable battle between what A.C. Bradley terms “Love and Hate” (33), what John F. Danby terms Middle Age morality and Hobbesian morality (120), and what I term “Nature” and “human nature” (Johnson 9). Regardless of the terminology, in *Lear* Shakespeare creates an allegory of epic proportions, an allegory that creates obviously positive and negative characteristics, but does not automatically attribute success to the moral “right” or “wrong.” Instead, Shakespeare displays the meaninglessness of human-fabricated terms, and depicts the tragedy of a world guided by them.

Almost every critic in the history of Shakespearean criticism has deemed *Lear*’s poetry the Bard’s *pièce de résistance*. Evidenced in multiple places throughout the text, the economy and impact of Shakespeare’s verse are extraordinary, and have been acknowledged as early as Samuel Johnson, William Hazlitt, and Charles Lamb. However, two of the most widely cited critiques of *Lear*’s style are by Harley Granville-Barker and A.C. Bradley. Granville-Barker cites the opening scene, recognizing that the rapid shifts in style quickly establish complex character traits (70). Lear’s excessive use of the royal “we”, as in “which of you shall we say doth love us most” (1.1.151) reveals the hubris that results in his downfall. I noticed the variety of rhetorical composition as well, juxtaposing Goneril and Regan’s “flowery speech” with Cordelia’s style that “abstains from excessive language” (Johnson 1). Goneril and Regan mask their true intentions by pandering to their father’s massive ego, only showing their true colors when they abruptly switch to business-like prose the at scene’s end (1.1.283). Contrasting her sisters’ deception is Cordelia, whose dialogue doesn’t span longer than three lines at a time, until her entreaty to France toward the end of the scene (1.1.223-33). In this way, Cordelia’s rhetorical strategy is the polar opposite of her sisters; she remains quietly modest until her livelihood depends upon her speech, while Goneril and Regan romantically boast until Lear leaves and they can show their true selves. Through the use of varied rhetorical styles, Shakespeare paints a portrait of a dysfunctional royal family and establishes the familial strife that propels the entire plot.
But these expositional applications are not the only exemplary usages of language. A.C. Bradley believes the strength of Lear’s poetry resides in the “simplicity of language” that creates the personability and universality that the play has become known for (46). In my critical reception essay, I chose Lear’s death speech as a perfect example of this simplicity:

And my poor fool is hang’d! No, no, no life!
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
And thou no breath at all? Thou’lt come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never.
Pray you undo this button. Thank you, sir.
Do you see this? Look on her! Look her lips,
Look there, look there! (5.3.304-312)

Bradley recognizes that the short, monosyllabic sentences contrast greatly with the extended, existential death speeches of Othello and Hamlet, creating a more accessible tragedy for the audience or reader (46). Granville-Barker also sees the “reiterations” of words as a primary emotional vehicle in Lear (76), which I also discovered in Cordelia’s “supreme display of saintliness” (Johnson 10) when she forgives her father with only four words: “no cause, no cause” (4.7.75). The monosyllables and reiterations force the reader to deeply consider who is speaking the words and why. Shakespeare has granted beautiful philosophical waxing and waning to simpleton characters like Lorenzo (Merchant of Venice) and Caliban (The Tempest), showing that oftentimes Shakespeare can create speeches that stand separated from the character that is speaking them. However, by eliminating rhetorical flourishes, Shakespeare puts precedence on the audience’s knowledge of the character’s disposition at the time they are speaking. To elucidate, Lear’s cry of “never, never, never, never, never” is not extraordinary poetry when only the words are considered, just as Cordelia’s forgiveness loses impact when her father’s transgressions against her are left out of the picture. I couldn’t agree more with Bradley and Granville-Barker’s assertions regarding the magnificent verse of Lear. Shakespeare’s expert blending of language, character, and plot stems from his restrained diction, which creates speeches and lines that transcend each word’s superficial meanings, and ultimately apply to the play as a whole.

Speaking of the language at play’s end leads to a discussion of another critical hot topic: the play’s preeminent tragedy. Critics have never come to consensus when considering the reasons behind Cordelia’s death. In “King Lear and Tragedy,” William Ferguson Tamblyn deems it “one of those mysteries of fate” (67) when “calamity springs from virtue” (98); while G. Wilson Knight believes “the tragedy is most poignant in that it is purposeless, unreasonable” (98). I follow a similar route in my analysis, citing the deaths of Ophelia and Desdemona as well, questioning, “in tragedy, does being inherently virtuous also ensure death?” (Johnson 9). The play’s characters share the same questions:

KENT: Is this the promis’d end?
EDGAR: Or image of that horror? 5.3.264-65

The words of Kent and Edgar mirror the feelings of the audience: how could “someone as innocent as Cordelia” be dead “now that evil has been vanquished?” (Johnson 12). Bradley explains it as an “indictment of prosperity” (50); Goneril, Regan, Cornwall, and Edmund, the most power-hungry characters, have shown that their ambitions are profoundly influential to the plot, and Bradley does not see a place for Cordelia’s innocence in such a corrupt world. This seems like a viable interpretation, yet the analysis of Cordelia’s death has never been consistent throughout Lear’s critical history. In my reading, I saw Cordelia’s death as “the death of human
innocence,” and unlike many critics, I stopped my search for meaning there, saying “ultimately, King Lear provides no answers to these fundamental questions, only raises them and marvels at their complexities” (Johnson 12).

However, Cordelia’s death is not the only incredibly tragic event in Lear. Other than her death, Gloucester’s blinding has been the most consistently treated topic in Lear criticism, and through analysis the scene reveals a core theme in Lear: moral blindness. During the Enlightenment, Samuel Johnson saw the graphic violence of the scene as “too horrid to be endured in dramatic exhibition” (2), and even Bradley determines it an exhibition of “monstrosity” (34). Yet, despite its grotesqueness, the scene is also, as espoused by Harry Levin in “The Heights and Depths: A Scene from King Lear,” “a literal climax to a whole train of metaphors involving eyesight and suggesting moral perception” (147), something I also noted in my analysis: “Shakespeare’s eyesight metaphors reach their peak in the infamous blinding of Gloucester” (Johnson 7). Metaphors comparing eyesight and moral “sight” pervade the play, beginning as early as the first scene when Kent tells Lear to “see better” after Lear’s dismissal of Cordelia (1.1.158). Gloucester’s moral blindness also manifests through metaphors early on, such as when he ironically exclaims, “I shall not need spectacles” when reading Edmund’s forged letter that slanders Edgar (1.2.35). Shakespeare’s harping on eyesight metaphors renders Gloucester’s blinding as the tragic consequence of his particular hubris. Gloucester recognizes his hubris after his blinding, determining, “I have no way, and therefore want no eyes; / I stumbled when I saw” (4.1.18-19). This anagnorisis completes Gloucester’s tragic circle, and helps his tragedy serve as a counterpart to the “catastrophe of Lear,” who is also morally blind, creating a tragic doubling unique among the four great tragedies (Granville-Barker 71). By creating two seemingly unjustifiable tragic events that both comment on the same theme, Shakespeare generates a plot of unrivaled tragic potential.

This doubling and duality of the play’s plots and characters are also regularly addressed in criticism. Bradley determines the “double action” creates a feeling of inevitability, and makes events appear to be not mere “accidents” (32). The dualistic nature of Lear manifests in multiple critical analyses, from Maynard Mack’s “monarch and beggar” and “beastly behavior and angelic” (36), to L.M. Storozynsky’s “real and imagined” modes of Lear’s consciousness (163). I recognize some of these dualities as well, specifically in Lear’s descent from king to fool, when I cite the line “[Lear] wouldst make a good Fool” (1.5.38) (Johnson 3). I also note dichotomies in the battle scene, separating “forces of good (France, Cordelia, Lear)” from “forces of evil (Britain, Edmund, Goneril, Regan)” (Johnson 11). Bradley goes so far as to delineate two distinct factions that symbolize the play’s dichotomous nature: Cordelia, Kent, Edgar, and the Fool versus Goneril, Regan, Edmund, Cornwall and Oswald (33). Bradley sees these oppositional groupings possessing qualities such as unselfishness versus selfishness, and ultimately, an allegory of “Love” versus “Hate” (33).

Bradley’s allegorical interpretation of Lear reduces the play’s plots and characters to their essentials. As I acknowledge on page seven of my reader-response, immediately before Gloucester’s blinding, Edmund is in effect adopted into the “hegemonic family of Regan, Goneril, and Cornwall” (Johnson 7) when Cornwall refers to him in the plural “our” (3.7.7). I also recognize that the characters twist “their morals […] to their own advantages,” which coincides with Bradley’s division of unselfishness versus selfishness (Johnson 7). In support of these theories, in a speech by a Gentleman to Kent, Shakespeare renders Cordelia’s personality as the antithesis of her self-seeking counterparts:

Not to a rage, patience and sorrow strove
Who should express her goodliest. You have seen
Sunshine and rain at once; her smiles and tears
Were like a better way: those happy smilets
That play’d on her ripe lip seem’d not to know
What guests were in her eyes, which, parted thence,
As pearls from diamonds dropp’d. In brief,
Sorrow would be a rarity most beloved,
If all could so become it. (4.3.16-24)

This passage creates a picture of Cordelia as “opposite of her sisters in every way; where they are emotionless and entirely self-consumed, Cordelia abounds with multiple emotions at once,” not thinking of herself, only “the injustices weighed against her father” (Johnson 9). Shakespeare, characteristically, bends this passage toward his desired end, even down to the minutest detail (Cordelia doesn’t even smile boastfully, displaying only modest “smilets”). While the “Hate” group only exhibits negative traits, Cordelia’s negative trait, “sorrow,” exhibits itself positively as “patience.” The virtue of “self-sacrifice” (Johnson 9) is not limited to Cordelia, who would give her entire “outward worth” to see Lear restored to health (4.4.10); Edgar and Kent also incorporate “self-sacrifice” as a “central value” (Johnson 9). Specifically, Kent suffers a day in the stocks instead of defaming Lear, his master (2.2), and Edgar masks his true identity from his father to prevent the old man from dying of shock, sacrificing reconciliation (4.6.33-34). The selflessness and selfishness of these character groupings create a heuristic for explaining the seemingly unjustifiable tragedy at the play’s end: “Hate” cannot endure and will ultimately destroy itself, but it also has the ability to destroy “Love,” which cannot exist in a world in which “Hate” is so pervasive. To deny that Lear can be interpreted as an allegory of the grandest stature is ignorant of the distinct alignments of extreme character traits.

This being said, an allegorical interpretation of King Lear can take many different shapes. In his seminal historicist reading, Lear: Shakespeare’s Doctrine of Nature, John F. Danby interprets the play’s character alignments as representative of “two societies”: “sixteenth century and before” and “sixteenth century and after” (46). He attaches these “societies,” respectively, to Cordelia, Edgar and Kent, and Edmund, Goneril and Regan. Danby believes that Lear represents a cultural shift that was taking place at the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Cordelia, Edgar, and Kent represent those obedient to the feudalily governed mindsets of the Middle Ages; they are honor-bound to their superiors, Lear and Gloucester. Cordelia and Edgar specifically are observant of filial piety; this is shown at Lear’s expectations that Cordelia will flatter him and will tend to him in his old age (1.1.124), and in Edgar’s assistance to Gloucester even after he was wrongly banished (4.1.51). Kent exhibits his loyalty on too many occasions to list, and arguably he is an allegory for the trustworthy, loyal knight-at-arms, for even after Lear’s death he seeks to do his monarch’s bidding: “My master calls me, I must not say no” (5.3.323). These three characters believe in a “natural arrangement” of humans, animals, and spirits (Danby 15)—otherwise known as the Chain of Being—and they do everything in their power to uphold this arrangement, prizing duty above all else.

Opposing these duteous three, Edmund, Goneril, and Regan represent what Danby attributes to the teachings of Thomas Hobbes. Specifically, Danby cites Edmund’s reluctance to be a “cooperative member of a grand community,” and all three characters’ ambitious natures. The only “nature” they adhere to is human nature; they are only limited by their own natural abilities. The most explicit example of this perspective is Edmund’s infamous soliloquy:
Thou, Nature, art my goddess, to thy law
My services are bound. Wherefore should I
Stand in the plague of custom, and permit
The curiosity of nations to deprive me.
For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines
Lag of a brother? Why bastard? Wherefore base?
When my dimensions are as well compact,
My mind as generous, and my shape as true,
As honest madam’s issue? (1.2.1-9)

The “Nature” addressed by Edmund is not the orderly arrangement Cordelia, Edgar, and Kent subscribe to. Edmund questions this stringent framework in society, wondering why he must “stand in the plague of custom” when his body is just as well made and his “mind as generous” as a legitimately born man. I note this social custom in my essay as well, saying, “Edmund’s status as a bastard establishes him as a symbol of moral corruption” (Johnson 2). Edmund sees society as depriving him of his full potential through meaningless customs; for him there is no Chain of Being, only what a man can achieve with his brain and his two hands. Through the interplay of these “two societies” Danby sees Shakespeare as bringing to the stage a war between two modes of thought: “traditional morality” and “the morality of the New Man” (120). With this in mind, Cordelia’s tragic death and the self-destruction of Edmund, Goneril, and Regan’s amoral perspectives constitute Shakespeare’s interpretation of the cultural shift he was living through in Early Modern England.

Both Danby’s societies are shaped by how they participate in and with “nature.” This war over the definition of “nature” informs my allegorical reading of Lear: the contest between “Nature” and “human nature” (Johnson 9). I saw Cordelia as explicitly affiliated with “Nature” (Johnson 9), as in “the phenomena of the physical world; especially plants, animals, and other features as opposed to humans and other human creations” (“nature” 8a). Particularly, I note the characterization of her emotions upon hearing the news of her father’s insanity as “more beautiful than ‘sunshine and rain at once’ (4.3.18)” (Johnson 9). Additionally, the characterization of her tears as “holy water” (4.3.30) combines “the angelic with the natural” (Johnson 9). In these passages, Cordelia becomes symbolic of Nature’s baptismal quality, and her death signifies the death of Nature’s purest, vestal figure at the hands of corrupt humans who have divorced themselves from Nature. The implications of this divorce are elucidated by Albany when speaking to Goneril:

You are not worth the dust which the rude wind
Blows in your face. I fear your disposition;
That nature which contemns it origin
Cannot be bordered certain in itself.
She that herself will sliver and disbranch
From her material sap, perforce must wither,
And come to deadly use. (4.2.30-36)

In this passage Shakespeare uses human nature as his subject, and Nature as his metaphor. “Disposition” is another word for a person’s inherent personality vis-à-vis human nature, and “that nature which” condemns its “origins” will lose its “sap” or lifeblood. Disregarding the origins of one’s nature causes morality to “wither,” and ultimately causes a person’s ambitions to “come to deadly use.” I interpret Shakespeare as asserting “human nature dies when separated from Nature, losing all boundaries of acceptability” (Johnson 9). Goneril, Regan, and Edmund
all operated based on human nature, and therefore “were consumed by human vices”: lust, envy, and ambition respectively (Johnson 11). Throughout the play their adherence to human-formed concepts like “politics and war” cause them to excel within the bounds of a society driven by power and commodity (Johnson 11). However, as portrayed by the infamous storm scenes, Nature is a powerful determiner of fate, and those who subscribe to humanity’s supposed virtues are also subject to humanity’s vices.

No matter the terminology used to describe Lear’s allegorical tendencies, the two opposing sides are assigned positive and negative denotations; Bradley, Danby and I all see Cordelia and company as forces for good and Edmund and company as forces for evil. Now, obviously these terms are reductionistic, and I believe Shakespeare recognized this, for at play’s end good does not triumph over evil; instead, evil’s malignancy destroys itself and the surrounding good characters. Because of this, I align my interpretation of Lear with “Lear’s Queer Cosmos,” a queer reading written in 2011 by Laurie Shannon. Shannon sees Lear as a queer text because it does not adhere to what society deems “natural” according to human “perceptual and cognitive capabilities” (173). There is no right and wrong in Lear’s universe because right and wrong are inherently human terms created to describe natural phenomena, both of Nature and human nature. Because of this, the allegorical dualities that pervade Lear are, in a way, circular; they become a never-ending attempt to explain reason-defying events within human perceptions. Trying to force humanity’s “cultural fictions” on an allegorical world that transcends human logic is futile (Shannon 177).

Interpreting Lear linearly with traditional narrative structures in mind is not feasible. Shakespeare’s inventive use of language immediately signals to the reader that Lear is not the average morality play, and this is confirmed by the unbelievable tragedy that concludes and pervades it. For this reason, normative interpretive modes are ineffectual; a critical analyst must concentrate on the obvious dichotomies that inhabit the characters, and move forward through the plot with these dualities always in mind. Doing this opens Lear to many allegorical interpretations that distill one of Shakespeare’s most expansive and complex plays into some useful thematic heuristics. Perhaps the labels attached to the allegory do not matter; attempting to pinpoint one explication of Lear is a fool’s errand. What grows in importance is recognizing that Lear consciously works against human explanations of dramatic phenomena, calling into question their viability in a world that so often opposes logical elucidation of events. As shown in Lear, a world governed by human explanations and perceptions ultimately has tragic consequences, and when humanity relies on its own conventions and morals, it fundamentally preys on “itself / like monsters of the deep” (4.2.49-50).
Works Cited

Bradley, A. C. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. Muir 31-54.