

'We must become like the animals in order to become wise, and be blinded in order to be guided' (Montaigne, *Apology for Raymond Sebond*).¹ Assess the influence of Michel de Montaigne's *Essays* in Shakespeare's conception of nature in *King Lear*.

The first English translation of Michel de Montaigne's *Essays* was published in 1603 by John Florio. Ever since Capell (1767) drew attention to Shakespeare's versification in *The Tempest* of a passage from Florio's translation of Montaigne's *Of the Cannibals*, the fact of Montaigne's influence in the development of Shakespeare's plays has been generally accepted. Such studies as Taylor's *Shakespeare's debt to Montaigne*, for instance, list words in Florio's translation used by Shakespeare only during and after 1603, so that a series of apparent coincidences strengthens to the proof of direct influence. *King Lear*, for example, published in Quarto in 1608 and most likely written in 1605, in both language and philosophy clearly resembles the *Essays*.² Whilst remaining astute to possible verbal echoes between Montaigne's *Essays* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*, it is not the primary objective of this study, as with Capell and Taylor, to draw specific parallels between corresponding passages, a practice which runs the risk of making false inferences based on words and phrases of common currency in the Renaissance; rather, this is an essay about the transmission of ideas. As Montaigne observes, 'an able reader often discovers in other men's writings perfections beyond those that the author put in or perceived, and lends them richer meanings and aspects'.³ It is my contention that Shakespeare's reading of Montaigne's *Essays* led to the thematic preoccupation in *King Lear* with ideas of what constitutes 'nature' and the 'natural'; an influence which, when perceived and considered, lends to both works greater meanings and aspects.

¹ Montaigne, Michel de. *The Complete Works: Essays, Travel Journal, Letters*. Trans. Donald M. Frame. London: Everyman's Library, 2003. ii.11. p. 441.

² Bate, Jonathan and Eric Rasmussen (eds.) *William Shakespeare: Complete Works*. London: Macmillan, 2007. p. 2008.

³ Montaigne. *Various outcomes of the same plan* (i.24). p. 112.

'...whoever considers as in a painting the great picture of our mother Nature in her full majesty; whoever reads such universal and constant variety in her face; whoever finds himself there, and not merely himself, but a whole kingdom, as a dot made with a very fine brush; that man alone estimates things according to their true proportions. This great world, which some multiply further as being only a species under one genus, is the mirror in which we must look at ourselves to recognise ourselves from the proper angle. In short, I want it to be the book of my student.'⁴

The 'book' and 'mirror' of nature have endured throughout the centuries as common metaphors by which our processes of understanding the world are connected to language, methods of reading, and to sight. This metaphorical structure is evoked in *King Lear* when the audience is reminded that the play's pessimistic vision of nature is mere reproduction and 'image':

Kent: Is this the promised end?

Edgar: Or image of that horror? (5.3.271-2)⁵

Shakespeare's theatre, the Globe, by its very name consciously encouraged its audiences to see the world as a stage, and vice versa. In its design the Globe also recalled the common spatial emblem of the cosmic tetrad (the circularised square), so that the cyclical and timeless was rendered within four walls as finite and comprehensible. Moreover, on the so-called 'heavens' above the stage 'were depicted the sun and moon and other planets, whose unceasing influence was held to be responsible for all change in the sublunary world'.⁶ The imagery of the theatre therefore placed the action on stage within a cosmic setting which, whilst implicitly vast, was at the same time immediately intelligible within the temporal and spatial limits of the play,

⁴ Montaigne. *Of the education of children* (i.26). p. 141.

⁵ All quotations, unless otherwise stated, are taken from the Folio text in Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (eds.) *William Shakespeare: Complete Works*. London: Macmillan, 2007.

⁶ McAlindon, T. *Shakespeare's tragic cosmos*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. p. 3.

thereby reiterated the central importance of man within God's universal design. However, it is exactly this complacent view of human nature which *King Lear* challenges. The presence of the sun, moon and stars in the play, rather than showing that 'Shakespeare's understanding of nature was fundamentally traditional', as McAlindon believes,⁷ serve the same function as the mirror in Montaigne's study: they reveal the possibility of other worlds, of universal variety and disorder, reducing individuals and whole kingdoms to fine dots within the great picture of Nature.

Lear: Why, no, boy: nothing can be made out of nothing. (1.4.106)

It is common within Montaigne's *Essays* for the sceptic to observe that 'In truth we are nothing'.⁸ This view was wholly concordant with Epicureanism, a metaphysics which Montaigne regarded as 'the counsel of true and natural philosophy'.⁹ Adopting the atomist theories of the Presocratic philosopher Democritus, Epicurus believed that 'everything is made up of indivisible particles of matter moving, colliding, and congregating at random in an infinite void'.¹⁰ In this model of the universe, the gods exist, but only as another particular kind of atom; unable to account for the widespread and apparently innate human need to conceive of divinity, Epicurus concludes that the gods are only present on earth as the material images that we make of them, exercising no providential government over human action. The Epicurean philosophy reckons that 'all social problems spring from nurture, not nature'; wealth, honour and religion do not adhere to rational forms of behaviour and are, as such, false assumptions which remove men from natural values.¹¹ To Epicurus, 'Supernatural interference with the course of nature seemed to him a source of terror, and immortality

⁷ McAlindon, T. *Shakespeare's tragic cosmos*. p. 4.

⁸ Montaigne. *Apology for Raymond Sebond* (ii.11). p. 447.

⁹ Montaigne. *Of solitude* (i.39). p. 222.

¹⁰ Gillespie, Stuart and Philip Hardie (eds.) *The Cambridge companion to Lucretius*. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. p. 3.

¹¹ Gillespie, Stuart and Philip Hardie (eds.) *The Cambridge companion to Lucretius*. p. 57.

fatal to the hope of release from pain'.¹² By asserting that the soul is material, is composed of atoms and perishes with the body, Epicurean philosophy hoped to show that death was not something to be feared, but was instead part of the world's natural processes. This radical and anti-teleological materialism was designed to alleviate human fear and, although not widely read, was highly interesting for a cultivated minority in the Renaissance for its contrast with Christian belief. It was through the discovery of Lucretius' poem *De rerum natura* (*On the nature of things*) that the philosophy of Epicurus was chiefly made known to readers in the Renaissance. At the very beginning of the poem, Lucretius outlines 'the first law': that no fundamental existent can come to be or pass away; using the metaphysical axiom of 'nothing is made of nothing',¹³ Lucretius reveals the invisible world of Epicurean atomism.

The word 'nothing' appears in *King Lear* a total of twenty-nine times, over twice as many, on average, than any other Shakespeare play. I believe that, within the opening exchange between Cordelia and Lear, Shakespeare is making a direct allusion to Lucretius and to Epicurean philosophy as mediated by Montaigne's *Essays*.

Cordelia: Nothing, my lord.

Lear: Nothing?

Cordelia: Nothing.

Lear: Nothing will come of nothing: speak again. (1.1.79-82)

Although one of the principal dangers in assessing Montaigne's importance for Shakespeare is that of 'ignoring the many collections of usually classical sayings (precepts, aphorisms, etc.)' which both writers used and would have allowed each to arrive independently at the same idea, 'Shakespeare's acquaintance with classical writers quoted by Montaigne (and translated by

¹² Russell, Bertrand. *History of western philosophy and its connection with political and social circumstances from the earliest times to the present day*. London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2004. p. 235.

¹³ Lucretius. *On the nature of things*. Trans. Cyril Bailey. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910. pp. 31-2.

Florio) may sometimes be a result specifically of the essayist's use of them'.¹⁴ Montaigne cites Lucretius more than seventy times in the *Apology for Raymond Sebond* alone, and a total of 147 times throughout the *Essays*. Due to this overwhelming frequency, it is reasonable to suggest that Shakespeare's use of Lucretius' aphorism in *King Lear* is a result specifically of his reading Montaigne's *Essays*, and that within the single word of 'Nothing' in the opening scene is revealed to us the natural philosophy against which the rest of the play unfolds: Lear's madness and slow 'crawl toward death' (1.1.32) explore how humankind's removal from rational forms of behaviour plunges them into fear and pain; all the troubles in *King Lear* are the products of society and nurture, such as the trappings of wealth and power, and nature is shown to be the remedy; divinations by the sun, moon and stars are shown to be superstitious, and divine providence over the sublunary world unfounded; the 'notion of events *befalling* one lies close to Epicurus' vision of the world as composed of transitory aggregates of atoms in free-fall',¹⁵ so that the open heath comes to represent the infinite void in which Lear and his kingdom fall from grace; and, just like the random and 'fortuitous'¹⁶ atomic collisions that happen within this void, *King Lear* is above all structured around ideas of chance and the wheel of Fortune.

Kent: Fortune, goodnight: smile once more, turn thy wheel! (2.2.156)

In the Renaissance, Fortune was traditionally depicted as a woman turning a wheel that raised humans up and cast them back down again. As Edmund remarks in the final scene of the play, 'The wheel is come full circle: I am here' (5.3.187). The two brothers, Edmund and Edgar, have symbolically been placed on opposing sides of Fortune's wheel. Edmund's Machiavellianism is revealed to the audience in his opening soliloquy, in which he asks 'Why brand they us / With base? With baseness? Bastardy?

¹⁴ Gillespie, Stuart. *Shakespeare's Books: a dictionary of Shakespeare sources*. London: Athlone, 2001. p. 345.

¹⁵ Hoffman, George. 'The investigation of nature'. Ullrich Langer (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Montaigne*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. p. 173.

¹⁶ Montaigne. *Apology for Raymond Sebond* (ii.11). p. 495.

Base, base?' (1.2.9-10). He concludes with the resolution that 'Edmund the base / Shall to th'legitimate. I grow, I prosper' (1.2.20-1). Edmund implores 'Briefness and fortune, work!' (2.1.16) so that, with rapid swiftness, his forged letter allows him to 'grow' in his father's estimation, just as his brother is turned into an 'Unnatural, detested, brutish villain' (1.2.65) and is forced to go on the run, adopting the persona of Poor Tom.

Edgar: ... Whiles I may scape,
 I will preserve myself, and am bethought
 To take the basest and most poorest shape
 That ever penury in contempt of man
 Brought near to beast. (2.2.161-8)

Edmund's obsessive analysis at the beginning of the play of the word 'base', with which he is branded as the illegitimate son of Gloucester, makes a return now in Edgar's self-analysis, that he must 'take the basest and most poorest shape' possible in order to survive. His conclusion, that 'Edgar I nothing am' (2.2.177), makes the visual imagery of the wheel even clearer: as Edmund rises in estimation, is made legitimate and given the title 'Earl of Gloucester' (3.5.13), Edgar falls to 'nothing' and to baseness, being made a 'most poor man, made tame to fortune's blows' (4.5.225).

Fortune is also important in that it reveals themes of causality. As George Hoffman has noted, 'Montaigne's interest in the Epicurean critique of causality may be partially obscured by the use of the old term, "fortune"'.¹⁷ In this critique, Montaigne was a 'naturalist'¹⁸ in the sense that he searched for secondary causes, without recourse to primary, divine causation. In a world of constant flux and motion,

¹⁷ Hoffman, George. 'The investigation of nature'. p. 171.

¹⁸ Montaigne. *Of fear* (i.18). p. 62.

*There is nothing certain but uncertainty, and nothing more miserable and arrogant than man – Pliny*¹⁹

As ‘there is no existence that is constant, either of our being or of that of objects’, and ‘all mortal things go on flowing and rolling unceasingly’, ‘nothing certain can be established about one thing by another, both the judging and the judged being in continual change and motion.’²⁰ Unlike Lucretius, who defends the Epicurean principle of direct realism, in which our senses do provide an accurate representation of the external world, Montaigne believes that our senses are fundamentally flawed and that they are ‘the greatest foundation and proof of our ignorance’.²¹ In this, Montaigne draws significant inspiration from the philosophy of the Pyrrhonists: ‘There is no reason that does not have its opposite’.²²

‘In natural things, the effects only half reflect the causes: What about this cause? It is above the order of nature; its condition is too lofty, too distant, and too much in authority to suffer our conclusions to tie and bind it.’²³

Similarly, the use of opposition and contraries in *King Lear*, such as that between Edmund and Edgar or Cornwall and Albany, allows Shakespeare to show how ‘Fortune is better advised than we’.²⁴ In addition, any attempt in *King Lear* to divine primary causation is shown to be the product of ignorance and, more importantly, blindness.

In Florio’s translation of the essay *Of judging of the death of others*, Montaigne observes that it is the ‘common foppery’ of ‘the world’ that it ‘suffers it selfe to be so easily conicatcht, deeming that our owne interests

¹⁹ Montaigne. *How our mind hinders itself* (ii.14). p. 563. This was one of the sentences inscribed on the ceiling of Montaigne’s library.

²⁰ Montaigne. *Apology for Raymond Sebond* (ii.11). p. 553.

²¹ Montaigne. *Apology for Raymond Sebond* (ii.11). p. 539.

²² Montaigne. *That our desire is increased by difficulty* (ii.15). p. 563.

²³ Montaigne. *Apology for Raymond Sebond* (ii.11). p. 481.

²⁴ Montaigne. *Fortune is often met in the path of reason* (i.34). p. 199.

disturbe heaven, and his infinitie is moved at our least actions'.²⁵ Shakespeare echoes this language and sentiment when he gives Edmund the words 'This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune – often the surfeits of our own behaviour – we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon and stars, as if we were villains of necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion' (1.2.93-6). This similarity has not only confirmed to some minds the direct influence of Montaigne in Shakespeare's intellectual development,²⁶ but is, moreover, important for the reason that it reveals a similar structure of concern between the two writers. The Renaissance practice of 'divination by the stars, by spirits, bodily traits, dreams and the like' are to Montaigne 'a notable example of the frenzied curiosity of our nature', in which we are removed from the present by always having our gaze set on future concerns.²⁷ Again, it is perception and sight as reflected in the mirror of nature, of looking at 'ourselves from the proper angle' and estimating 'things according to their true proportions', which is important here:

'We must be content with the light that it pleases the sun to communicate to us by its rays; and if anyone raises his eyes to gain a greater light from its very body, let him not find it strange if as a penalty for his presumption he loses his sight'.²⁸

So, without consulting the evidence of his immediate surroundings to corroborate Edmund's claims about Edgar's disloyalty, Gloucester falls prey to his son's machinations by superstitiously divining that 'These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us' (1.2.83). Gloucester is punished for this presumption in one of Shakespeare's most brutally literal renderings of metaphor: by the gorging out of Gloucester's eyes. Gloucester's reaction to his blindness is to say 'I have no way and therefore want no eyes: / I

²⁵ Montaigne. *The Essayes of Michael Lord of Montaigne: The Second Booke*. Trans. John Florio (1603). London: 1893. p. 334-5.

²⁶ Robertson, J.M. *Montaigne and Shakespeare: and other essays on cognate questions*. New York: Haskell House, 1968. p. 107.

²⁷ Montaigne. *Of prognostications* (i.11). p. 32.

²⁸ Montaigne. *We should meddle soberly with judging divine ordinances* (i.32). p. 196.

stumbled when I saw' (4.1.20-1). After his supposed fall off Dover Cliff, Gloucester says 'henceforth I'll bear / Affliction till it do cry out itself / 'Enough, enough' and die' (4.5.88-90). Gloucester realises that to assume the world is determinable, as Montaigne writes, 'is to assume the advantage of knowing the bounds and limits of God's will and of the power of our mother Nature; and that there is no more notable folly in the world than to reduce these things to the measure of our capacity and competence'.²⁹

Gloucester: When shall I come to th'top of that same hill?

Edgar: You do climb up it now: look how we labour.

Gloucester: Methinks the ground is even.

Edgar: Horrible steep.

Hark, do you hear the sea?

Gloucester: No, truly.

Edgar: Why, then, your other senses grow imperfect
By your eyes' anguish. (4.5.1-8)

Just as Montaigne's argument in the *Apology for Raymond Sebond* illustrates how the senses are inadequate in order to show that man has no certain knowledge and, thus, is nothing without God, this supposed ascent of Dover Cliff in *King Lear* affirms the weakness of human sense perception. On the 'flat non-scenic Shakespearean stage, characters' descriptions of their surroundings are the audience's only clues to what they are supposed to imagine'.³⁰ As such, Edgar's description of the laborious climb up the steep hill is as much a deception of us, the audience, as it is of Gloucester. This scene intends to make the audience violently aware of the limitations of our sense perceptions, of our ignorance and weakness.

Kent: See better, Lear. (1.1.155)

²⁹ Montaigne. *It is folly to measure the true and false by our own capacity* (i.27). pp. 160-2.

³⁰ Egan, Gabriel. *Green Shakespeare: from ecopolitics to ecocriticism*. Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2006. p. 139.

If, as is commonly believed, the story of Gloucester parallels the story of Lear, then Lear's blindness is one created by custom. Lear's story dramatises Montaigne's primitivist arguments, which are most clearly echoed when Shakespeare has Lear say 'Nature's above art' (4.5.98). Montaigne's argument is that 'Nature has put us into the world free and unfettered; we imprison ourselves in certain narrow districts'.³¹ These narrow districts not only include opinion and art, but also the barrier of clothing, the creation of artificial laws, and the weaknesses and defects of our speech.

Lear: And thou, all-shaking thunder,
 Strike flat the thick rotundity o'th'world!
 Crack nature's moulds, all germens spill at once
 That makes ingrateful man! (3.2.6-9)

As Clark Cumberland has noted about Act 3 Scene 2 of *King Lear*, 'Nowhere does Shakespeare so powerfully connect human tragedy with the scowling front of Nature'.³² Yet, equally, nowhere does Shakespeare so powerfully connect human tragedy with human presumption. As the Gentleman in the scene prior to this tells us, Lear is 'Contending with the fretful elements' in an attempt to make events 'change or cease' (3.1.4-7).

'...those surpass all madness who, adding impiety to folly, turn their blame against God himself, or against Fortune, as if she had ears susceptible to our assault; like the Thracians who, when there is thunder or lightening, start shooting at the heavens with a Titan's vengeance, to bring God to reason by arrow shots.'³³

Lear's madness springs from such an attempt to change events, to bring Fortune and the heavens to reason by shouting at the 'all-shaking thunder'.

³¹ (903-4)

³² Clark, Cumberland. *Shakespeare and Science*. Birmingham: Cornish Brothers Ltd, 1929. p. 177.

³³ Montaigne. *How the soul discharges its passions on false objects when the true are wanting* (i.4). p. 18.

However, just as Gloucester is made to see by the gorging out of his eyes, by exposing himself to the 'scowling front of Nature' Lear realises the redemptive power of nature, 'Crowned with rank fumiter and furrow weeds, / With burdocks, hemlock, nettles, cuckoo-flowers' (4.3.3-4).

'Why in judging a man do you judge him all wrapped up in a package?...You must judge him by himself, not by his finery.'³⁴

Kent calls Goneril 'vanity the puppet' (2.2.26-7), imaging her as the personification of Vanity in all her dressed-up finery; he also condemns Oswald as a 'cowardly rascal' whom 'nature disclaims', for 'a tailor made thee' (2.2.41-2). Kent sees through the superficial worth of fancy coverings to the true worth of virtue: 'That such a slave as this should wear a sword, / Who wears no honesty' (2.2.55-6). The theme of divestment has been established from the very first scene, when Lear says 'Since now we will divest us both of rule' (1.1.40). However, even when divesting himself of his kingdom, Lear still expects to retain the power of a king: 'Made you my guardians, my depositaries, / But kept a reservation to be followed' (2.2.438-9).

'As long as he thinks he has some resources and power by himself, never will man recognise what he owes to his master...He must be stripped to his shirt.'³⁵

Lear's speech to the 'scowling front of Nature' is a command to bring divine retribution for human sin. Yet this power is most evidently beyond the capacity and resources of one man. As such, the theme of divestment becomes important; in being stripped to his shirt, Lear is made aware of the weaknesses of man's artful resources in combating the assaults of Fortune and the elements.

³⁴ Montaigne. *Of the inequality that is between us* (i.42). p. 230.

³⁵ Montaigne. *Apology for Raymond Sebond* (ii.11). p. 438.

'Thus I hold that, just as plants, trees, animals, all things that live, are naturally equipped with sufficient covering to defend themselves against the injury of the weather, so are we; but like those who by artificial light extinguish the light of day, we have extinguished our own means by borrowed means.'³⁶

Montaigne writes that clothing is 'a barrier of custom'.³⁷ Shakespeare has Lear echo the above sentiments with the words 'Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou ow'st the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha? Here's three on's are sophisticated. Thou art the thing itself: unaccomodated man is no more but such a poor bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton here' (3.4.85-90). Poor Tom, as 'unaccomodated man' and 'the thing itself', becomes Lear's 'philosopher' (3.4.128), teaching him 'how little Nature needs to be content, how little she has left us to desire'.³⁸

'...our practice is so blind that we make little or no account of it; whereas if we consider a peasant and a king, a nobleman and a plebeian, a magistrate and a private citizen, a rich man and a pauper, there immediately appears to our eyes an extreme disparity between them, though they are different, so to speak, only in their breeches.'³⁹

Yet again using the trope of blindness to illustrate his point, Montaigne distinguishes 'natural from artificial laws', in which 'there can be nothing counterfeit' in 'the general order of the world'.⁴⁰ When Lear meets Poor Tom on the heath, Shakespeare similarly places the king and the 'Bedlam beggar' (2.2.170) in direct juxtaposition, creating an extreme disparity which dissolves as Lear divests himself of his clothes.

³⁶ Montaigne. *Of the custom of wearing clothes* (i.36). pp. 201-2.

³⁷ Montaigne. *Of the custom of wearing clothes* (i.36). p. 201.

³⁸ Montaigne. *Apology for Raymond Sebond* (ii.11). p. 420.

³⁹ Montaigne. *Of the inequality that is between us* (i.42). p. 231.

⁴⁰ Montaigne. *Of the custom of wearing clothes* (i.36). p. 202.

Then with bare head

He met the frenzy of the storm, the falling sky.

Silius Italicus⁴¹

By exposing himself to the 'hurricanoes', 'thought-executing fires' and 'all shaking thunder' (3.2.2-6), Lear submits himself to the same form of natural law as Edgar when he took a shape 'near to beast' and 'with presented nakedness outface(d) / The winds and persecutions of the sky' (2.2.165-8). As such, Lear's prayer is to 'Poor naked wretches' who 'bide the pelting of this pitiless storm'; he concludes that we must 'Take physic, pomp' and 'Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel, / That thou mayst shake the superflux to them / And show the heavens more just' (3.4.31-9). This speech crescendos to this word: 'just'. Stripped of the trappings of wealth, power and ceremony, Lear perceives how the beggar has less than is necessary, and connects this injustice directly to the 'pomp' of the rich and powerful. The sentiment is communitarian and anti-individualistic, and represents a transformation of character in Lear which further shows how Shakespeare divides *King Lear* morally along lines of opposition and contraries.

Natural law is identified by R.S. White as 'humanitarian, communitarian, and is driven by compassion, reason, and conscience'; positive law, in contrast, 'is fundamentally individualistic, corrupt, and self-seeking'.⁴² Stripped to the shirt or deprived of sight, both Lear and Gloucester switch from positive to natural law; from the darker side of the division, which includes such characters as Cornwall, Edmund, Goneril and Regan, to the side of Cordelia, Kent, Albany, the King of France, Edgar, and the Fool, as well as a host of kindly servants and gentleman. Shakespeare reveals the importance of these distinctions of 'law' and 'justice' when, in the Quarto version of *King Lear*, he includes a scene of parody; in his madness, within a hovel standing against the wind and the rain of the open heath, Lear

⁴¹ Montaigne. *Of the custom of wearing clothes* (i.36). p. 203.

⁴² White, R.S. *Natural Law in English Renaissance Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. p. 185.

orchestrates a mock trial of Goneril and Regan. Lear arrives at the conclusion 'Then let them anatomize Regan; see what breeds about her heart. Is there any cause in nature that makes this hardness?' (13.70-3).⁴³ In the Folio the last phrase is 'these hard hearts' (3.6.32). In this scene Lear clearly questions the human capacity for compassion, symbolically dissecting one of the individualistic, positivist characters. This opposition is reaffirmed in the next scene when Cornwall and Regan perform their own version of justice in a corrupted display of raw, naked power:

Cornwall: Though well we may not pass upon his life
 Without the form of justice, yet our power
 Shall do a court'sy to our wrath, which men
 May blame but not control. (3.7.22-5)

After being tortured and blinded by this exercise of self-sanctioned absolute power, Gloucester implores his son, Edmund, to 'enkindle all the sparks of nature / To quit this horrid act' (3.7.91-2). It is at this moment that Regan reveals to Gloucester how he was metaphorically blind before being grinded into physical blindness: 'Thou call'st on him that hates thee: it was he / That made the overture to thy treasons to us' (3.7.94-5). In imploring 'all the sparks of nature' to be enkindled in his defence, Gloucester reiterates Lear's distinction between the inherent goodness of natural law and the diseased heart of unbridled power. The only 'poetic justice' in this scene comes when a servant of Cornwall's chooses to uphold the natural moral order rather than the corrupted political order, saying 'better service have I never done you / Than now to bid you hold' (3.7.78-9) and mortally wounding his master. Yet, even now, this servant, the momentary embodiment of natural law, is literally stabbed in the back by Regan. Just as the audience is denied the possibility of Lear and Cordelia surviving the play's action to reign over the kingdom in harmony, because of the brutal pervasiveness of self-serving positivist law,

⁴³ Wells, Stanley (ed). *William Shakespeare: The History of King Lear*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. p. 202.

Shakespeare does not give any indication that we may foresee the imminent implementation in the political and legal process of natural law within human society.

Edgar: The weight of this sad time we must obey:

Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say. (5.3.344-5)

The division of a kingdom for both Montaigne and Shakespeare would have been particularly resonant in their own time: Shakespeare's Britain is one trying to resolve religious and regional differences under the reign of James I through a United Kingdom; Montaigne's France is one in the midst of religious persecution, of 'great disorders when there was neither law, nor justice'.⁴⁴ In such contexts, as Montaigne writes, 'it is more honourable, and closer to divinity, to be guided and obliged to act lawfully by a natural and inevitable condition, than to act lawfully by accidental and fortuitous liberty; and safer to leave the reins of our conduct to nature than to ourselves'.⁴⁵ Lear's decisions to divest himself of kingship and to found his rules and laws on personal flattery dissolve a divinely sanctioned position and divide the kingdom for apparently arbitrary, self-serving reasons; these are acts against God and unity. By encouraging his daughters to try and best each other in their assertions of love, Lear encourages each to be guided by their ability to persuade that 'I am alone felicitate / In your dear highness' love' (1.1.66-7). The basis of this division, therefore, is rhetoric and eloquence, reins of conduct in which we say 'what we ought to say' rather than 'what we feel'. This scene, clearly, does not progress under a 'natural and inevitable condition', and reflects Montaigne's belief that rhetoric is an 'instrument invented to manipulate and agitate', 'employed only in sick states, like medicine'.⁴⁶

The imagery of disease is important here because Lear's language brings 'Vengeance, plague, death, confusion!' (2.2.268) to his 'state' (2.2.285).

⁴⁴ Montaigne. *Of vanity* (iii.9). p. 877.

⁴⁵ Montaigne. *Apology for Raymond Second* (ii.11). pp. 408-9.

⁴⁶ Montaigne. *Of the vanity of words* (i.51). p. 269.

On each daughter, Lear heaps 'curses on her!' (2.2.319). For, as Montaigne writes, the power of the imagination is such that, when vehemently stirred, it 'launches darts that can injure an external object'.⁴⁷ As such, Lear's words to Goneril and Regan are 'Th'untented woundings of a father's curse' (1.4.249). Lear curses that Goneril's womb may be dried to 'sterility', or her child made 'a thwart disnatured torment to her' (1.4.223-37); he calls his daughters a 'disease that's in my flesh', a 'boil', 'plague-sore, or embossed carbuncle, / In my corrupted blood' (2.2.405-9). Montaigne observes that 'We call contrary to nature what happens contrary to custom; nothing is anything but according to nature, whatever it may be.'⁴⁸ As such, Goneril and Regan are made disnatured and monstrous by the festering disease of language, by the patriarchal laws of corruption and custom which consume them. So, as Lear divests himself of clothes in his awakening to natural law, he also strips himself of language, to a 'Howl, howl, howl!' (5.3.264).

Only Cordelia, as Kent observes, 'justly think'st, and hast most rightly said' (1.1.182). Cordelia's asides throughout this first scene reveal to the audience her refusal to participate in this pretence of love: 'What shall Cordelia speak? Love and be silent' (1.1.53). When she is forced to speak, Cordelia says 'I love your majesty / According to my bond, no more nor less' (1.1.84-5). Although much has been made of the word 'bond' in this scene, as Robert Speaight has noted, 'Shakespeare had too much in him of the passing order, the reciprocal rhythm of rights and duties, to think of Cordelia's *bond* as anything but a service which is perfect freedom. It would never have struck him as constrained; never, still less, as unnatural. He would have seen it, as she did, as part of the right ordering of things'.⁴⁹ With a name which incorporates the word 'heart' (*cor*), Cordelia is one who is unable to 'heave / My heart into my mouth' (1.1.83-4). Furthermore, Cordelia's reasoned analysis of the love each of her married sisters owes to their husband makes her character wholly concordant with both the classical conception of natural law, as 'located in the purity of human reason', and the Christian conception

⁴⁷ Montaigne. *Of the power of the imagination* (i.21). p. 90.

⁴⁸ Montaigne. *Of a monstrous child* (ii.30). p. 654.

⁴⁹ Speaight, Robert. *Nature in Shakespearian tragedy*. London: Hollis & Carter, 1955. p. 94.

of natural law, as 'a form of knowledge which spurs us to follow virtue and shun vice'.⁵⁰ In *King Lear*, virtue is mapped against the verity of feeling, whereas vice is revealed in the pretence and seeming of speech. As those around her lie and divide, Cordelia's courage represents the force of individual integrity and natural order, of conscience against reckless power and feeling against disingenuous flattery; of unity, truth, virtue and stability.

'We owe subjection and obedience equally to all kings, for that concerns their office; but we do not owe esteem, any more than affection, except to their virtue'.⁵¹

The curses of Lear show that he is not particularly worthy of esteem or affection, and by dividing his kingdom along these sentimental lines he is asking each daughter to profess an obedience which neither belongs to virtue nor 'a natural and inevitable condition'. Within Cordelia's response of 'Nothing, my lord' is contained the downfall of Lear, for it leads him to recall Lucretius' aphorism, the fundamental corollary of which is that whatever comes into existence does so because something else dies:

'...students of natural law hold that the birth, nourishment, and growth of each thing is the alteration or corruption of another:

*Whenever anything is changed and leaves its bounds,
Instantly this brings death to that which was before.*

Lucretius'⁵²

With the command to 'Speak' (1.1.78), Lear ushers Cordelia into the realm of politics, power and discourse. This subject-constitution and self-realisation, however, is nourished in implicit accordance with the simultaneous disintegration of Lear's own selfhood. When 'the subsequent age and

⁵⁰ White, R.S. *Natural Law in English Renaissance Literature*. xi.

⁵¹ Montaigne. *Our feelings reach out beyond us* (i.3). p. 10.

⁵² Montaigne. *One man's profit is another man's harm* (i.22). p. 93.

generation is always undoing and destroying the preceding one',⁵³ Cordelia's response initiates Lear into processes of material and mental dissolution. This is entirely in accordance with Montaigne's understanding of kingship:

'Their royal status stifles and consumes their other real and essential qualities; these are sunk in royalty; and it leaves them nothing to recommend themselves by but those actions that directly concern and serve it, the duties of their office. It takes so much to be a king that he exists only as such.'⁵⁴

This is why Lear is plunged into madness by the removal of his knights and why most critics identify Lear's divesting of responsibility as, effectively, a form of death: 'Lear could not, without disaster, separate himself from a lawfully inherited crown, and in this indulgence of caprice there is a sort of suicide'.⁵⁵

Edmund: 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 (1.2.1-4)

It is often said of *King Lear* that, by having the Machiavellian villain express 'disbelief in stellar control'⁵⁶ and declaring himself 'bound' to natural law as the enemy to 'custom' and 'curiosity', Shakespeare was being highly critical of Montaigne's philosophy. However, Montaigne's purpose in writing the *Essays* was to assess the ways in which 'man is a marvellously vain, diverse, and undulating object'⁵⁷ and he does not intend to 'deprive deceit of its proper place; that would be misunderstanding the world'.⁵⁸ Furthermore,

⁵³ Montaigne. *Apology for Raymond Second* (ii.11). p. 554.

⁵⁴ Montaigne. *Of the disadvantage of greatness* (iii.7). p. 853.

⁵⁵ Speaight, Robert. *Nature in Shakespearian tragedy*. p. 93.

⁵⁶ Robertson, J.M. *Montaigne and Shakespeare: and other essays on cognate questions*. p. 199.

⁵⁷ Montaigne. *By diverse means men arrive at the same end* (i.1). p. 5.

⁵⁸ Montaigne. *Of the useful and the honourable* (iii.1). p. 732.

the goddess of nature which Edmund implores demonstrates how 'The powers of the gods are detailed according to our need'.⁵⁹ Such gods are 'not only false, but also impious and harmful', being 'fabricated' by man's 'own invention'.⁶⁰ As such, Edmund actually adheres to 'custom' by seeking through 'invention' (1.2.20) to become 'legitimate' (1.2.18): 'Well then, / Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land' (1.2.15-16). Edmund is bound to natural law only in so far as it serves him, embodying the nascent capitalism of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. This deceitful individualism is not unnatural, for 'to every creature there is nothing dearer and more estimable than its own being'.⁶¹ However, it does force us to ask the same difficult questions as Montaigne's *Essays* pose:

'...what are valour, temperance, and justice; what the difference is between ambition and avarice, servitude and submission, license and liberty; by what signs we may recognise true and solid contentment; how much we should fear death, pain, and shame'.⁶²

By opposing natural law and positive law, *King Lear* demonstrates how the individualist becomes the hardened heart; it is within fellow feeling and the communal that we recognise virtue, temperance, and true and solid contentment. This opposition fundamentally questions the difference between ambition and avarice, servitude and submission, license and liberty; it asks how much obedience we owe to authority where there is no virtue, and how much liberty we have within the bounds of custom and superstition. By employing the natural philosophy of Epicureanism, Shakespeare also attempts to account meaningfully for variety and chance among human behaviour and to assess how much we should fear death and pain.

Lear: Does any here know me? This is not Lear.

⁵⁹ Montaigne. *Apology for Raymond Sebond* (ii.11). p. 483.

⁶⁰ Montaigne. *Apology for Raymond Sebond* (ii.11). p. 462.

⁶¹ Montaigne. *Apology for Raymond Sebond* (ii.11). p. 482.

⁶² Montaigne. *Of the education of children* (i.26). p. 142.

Does Lear walk thus? Speak thus? Where are his eyes?
Either his notion weakens, his discernings
Are lethargied – Ha! Waking? 'Tis not so?
Who is it that can tell me who I am? (1.4.174-8)

Montaigne provides a typically Epicurean analysis of death in the *Essays*: 'in the last scene, between death and ourselves, there is no more pretending...The mask is snatched away, reality is left'.⁶³ In the last scene of *King Lear*, the mask of custom created by speech, sight and reasoning is snatched away to reveal Lear in his entirety, in his essence. It is a scene which intends to show that 'The last step does not cause the fatigue, but reveals it. All days travel toward death, the last one reaches it. Such are the good counsels of our mother Nature'.⁶⁴

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⁶³ Montaigne. *That our happiness must not be judged until after our death* (i.19). p. 66.

⁶⁴ Montaigne. *That to philosophise is to learn to die* (i.20). p. 81.

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