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# From King Lear to King James: The Problem of Ocularcentrism in Early Modern England

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### Résumé de l'article

Cette étude explore comment Le Roi Lear de William Shakespeare remet judicieusement en question la primauté de la vue parmi les sens, ce qui a des implications pour notre compréhension de la relation que cette pièce entretient à la fois avec son contexte politique immédiat et avec l'histoire de l'oculocentrisme dans l'Angleterre de la première modernité. Adoptant une approche empruntée au « New Historicism », cette étude soutient que l'écriture du Roi Lear, en plein débat sur l'Union anglo-écossaise, fut à la fois une réaction aux éventuels comportements oculocentriques du roi Jacques Ier et une véritable critique de l'oculocentrisme de l'époque. Indépendamment de son opinion sur le plan de Jacques Ier pour l'Union, Shakespeare craignait qu'il n'agisse selon sa compréhension oculaire des deux pays sous son autorité. Par conséquent, Le Roi Lear peut être lu comme un avertissement au roi Jacques Ier de se méfier des comportements superficiels centrés sur la vue afin d'éviter de subir le même sort que Lear.

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# From *King Lear* to King James: The Problem of Ocularcentrism in Early Modern England

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*The present article explores how William Shakespeare's King Lear thoughtfully challenges the primacy of sight among the senses, with implications for our understanding of the play's relationship both to its immediate political context and to the history of ocularcentrism in early modern England. Adopting a new historicist approach, this article claims that writing King Lear in the midst of heated debates on the Anglo-Scottish Union was both a reaction to any possible ocularcentric behaviour by King James and a part of active criticism against the ocularcentrism of the period. Regardless of his personal opinion on James's plan for the Union, Shakespeare was worried that the king would act according to his ocularcentric understanding of the two countries under his rule. Therefore, King Lear can be read as an advance warning to King James, who needs to be wary of superficial, sight-centred behaviours so as not to suffer the same fate as Lear.*

*Cette étude explore comment Le Roi Lear de William Shakespeare remet judicieusement en question la primauté de la vue parmi les sens, ce qui a des implications pour notre compréhension de la relation que cette pièce entretient à la fois avec son contexte politique immédiat et avec l'histoire de l'oculocentrisme dans l'Angleterre de la première modernité. Adoptant une approche empruntée au « New Historicism », cette étude soutient que l'écriture du Roi Lear, en plein débat sur l'Union anglo-écossaise, fut à la fois une réaction aux éventuels comportements oculocentriques du roi Jacques I<sup>er</sup> et une véritable critique de l'oculocentrisme de l'époque. Indépendamment de son opinion sur le plan de Jacques I<sup>er</sup> pour l'Union, Shakespeare craignait qu'il n'agisse selon sa compréhension oculaire des deux pays sous son autorité. Par conséquent, Le Roi Lear peut être lu comme un avertissement au roi Jacques I<sup>er</sup> de se méfier des comportements superficiels centrés sur la vue afin d'éviter de subir le même sort que Lear.*

## Introduction

The Renaissance provided a bountiful supply of literature on the privileged position of sight among the senses. In accordance with the long tradition of ocularcentrism in the West, a considerable number of Renaissance works helped establish or promote the primacy of sight over the other senses.<sup>1</sup> In

1. For a detailed analysis of the ocularcentrism of Western culture, see Jay, *Downcast Eyes*.

mid-sixteenth-century England, the rhetorician Thomas Wilson asserted that “[a]mong all the sences, the eye sight is most quicke, and conteineth the impression of things more assuredly, then any of the other sences doe.”<sup>2</sup> About half a century later, in 1607, Thomas Tomkis’s allegorical academic comedy *Lingua; or, the Combat of the Tongue and the Five Senses for Superiority* instantiated the classical hierarchy of the senses with the sense of sight (Visus) on top, crowned as the prime sense.<sup>3</sup> Twenty years later, John Donne, too, gave primacy to the sense of sight and argued that “[t]he sight is so much the noblest of all the senses, as that it is all the senses.”<sup>4</sup> However, the abundance of such early modern accounts of ocularcentrism does not necessarily mean that the period saw a unanimous endorsement of the supremacy of vision. There is ample evidence to claim that Renaissance England had an ambivalent attitude towards the sense of sight.

A historical reading of vision in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England reveals “how ambiguously sight was regarded even in an already ocularcentric age.”<sup>5</sup> The wave of iconoclasm in the wake of the English Protestant Reformation is one example of clear distrust of vision in the early modern period. Therefore, one can assert that “[s]ight was, at the same time, the most perfect of senses and the potential entry route for evil.”<sup>6</sup> As Jackie Watson notes, “It was the means by which men and women fell in love, and the means by which they established a false appearance. It was both highly valorized and deeply distrusted.”<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, the Renaissance witnessed growing uncertainty about the reliability of vision, but on the other hand, a hierarchical privileging of vision, inherited from the ocularcentric culture of ancient Greece, had already established itself in the period. Still, despite an ambivalence about the senses, “[a] kind of ocularcentrism,” Stuart Clark argues, “was already prevalent in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European culture, in which the twin traditions stemming from the perceptual preferences of the Greeks and the religious teachings of St Augustine combined to give the eyes priority over the other senses.”<sup>8</sup>

2. Wilson, *Arte of Rhetorique*, 116.

3. See Tomkis, *Lingua* 5.19.

4. Donne, *Sermons of John Donne*, ed. Potter and Simpson, 221.

5. Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, 5.

6. Watson, “Staging Visual Clues,” 39.

7. Watson, “Staging Visual Clues,” 39.

8. Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, 9.

While the ocularcentric aspect of the period was exemplified by the writings of figures such as Donne and Wilson, there were also writers, including George Hakewill and William Shakespeare, who challenged the privileging of sight over the other senses and warned against the cultural dominance of ocularcentrism, thus providing a good example of early modern ambivalence regarding vision. Typical of his time, Shakespeare strewed his plays and poems with references to eyes, vision, and blindness, the majority of which are reflective of his concern over the ocularcentrism of his society. Possibly more than any other Renaissance writer, Shakespeare is the one whose approach to the senses in general, and the sense of sight in particular, has fascinated researchers most throughout the centuries. Notwithstanding an extensive range of research on vision in Shakespeare, it appears that scant attention has been paid to his deprecation of ocularcentric culture. This article is intended to show that Shakespeare's *King Lear* constitutes an effort to resist a pervasive ocularcentrism in early modern English culture and that Shakespeare, in his many references to vision in *King Lear*, is primarily motivated by King James's policies in his early reign in an ocularcentric England. In this regard, a detailed analysis of *King Lear* indicates that the play calls into question an epistemological reliance on sight in favour of a more nuanced pursuit of "insight" into character and motivation.

### Vision in Shakespeare in retrospect

Recent scholarship has shown a growing interest in the study of non-ocular senses in the Renaissance. Bruce Smith holds that early modern England was far more hearing-focused than later cultures,<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Harvey argues for the centrality of tactility in early modern society,<sup>10</sup> and Holly Dugan provides a comprehensive account of the importance of smelling and aroma in the English Renaissance.<sup>11</sup> The evidence of these works together suggests that the early modern attitude towards the senses was complicated. This does not, however, gainsay the fact that ocularcentrism was still present in the period. "We credit most our sight; one eye doth please / Our trust farre more than ten

9. Smith, *Acoustic World*.

10. Harvey, "Introduction."

11. Dugan, *Ephemeral History of Perfume*.

eare-witnesses,” writes Robert Herrick.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, during the past few decades, there has been an increasing amount of scholarship on vision and visuality in early modern literature and especially in Shakespeare. Two of the most recent examples are the studies by Bríd Phillips and Simon Smith, who used contextual clues to explore the use of sight in *Hamlet* and, each in their own way, argued for Shakespeare’s deep understanding of opposing views about the primacy of sight. Phillips, for example, noted that “Shakespeare inherits and reflects complex and often contradictory theories concerning the physiology of sight, some claiming the pre-eminence of this sense while others cast suspicion on its apparent trustworthiness as a guide to the truth.”<sup>13</sup> Likewise, Smith remarked that while “*Hamlet* demonstrates Shakespeare’s familiarity with a wide range of contemporary attitudes to sight, it does so without ever categorically endorsing any one of them.”<sup>14</sup> Sight in Shakespeare also proves worthy of being analyzed from different modern and postmodern theoretical approaches. The great importance of sight in Lacanian notions of identity, for example, has inspired several important studies on vision in Shakespeare, including Barbara Freedman’s *Staging the Gaze: Postmodernism, Psychoanalysis, and Shakespearean Comedy* (1991) and Philip Armstrong’s *Shakespeare’s Visual Regime: Tragedy, Psychoanalysis and the Gaze* (2000). According to Armstrong, “Psychoanalysis—certainly in that form most usually associated with the name of Jacques Lacan—shares with Shakespearean tragedy a fascination with vision, attributing to it various almost occult effects.”<sup>15</sup>

There are many more notable works on Shakespeare and vision, all with the common denominator of vision and visuality playing an important role in Shakespeare’s works. James A. Knapp’s *Image Ethics in Shakespeare and Spenser* (2011) argues that despite the English Reformation’s attempt to distinguish the stable, logical, and verbal realm of morality from the shaky, emotional world of visual experience, early modern literary figures, especially Shakespeare and Spenser, embraced the potential of visuality to evoke both emotional and ethical reactions.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Alison Thorne’s *Vision and Rhetoric in Shakespeare* (2000) explores “how visual and verbal modes of figuring the world, ways of seeing

12. Herrick, *Complete Poetry*, ed. Cain and Connolly, 273.

13. Phillips, “Sense of Sight,” 178.

14. Smith, “Hamlet’s Visual Stagecraft,” 116.

15. Armstrong, *Shakespeare’s Visual Regime*, 2.

16. Knapp, *Image*, 31.

and ways of talking, are brought into productive relationship in Shakespeare's work."<sup>17</sup> She argues that in order to understand Shakespeare's fascination with issues of perspective, it is necessary to consider the visual and rhetorical culture of his time. Richard Meek's *Narrating the Visual in Shakespeare* (2009) is also concerned with the way Shakespeare uses literary, theatrical, and rhetorical devices for adapting classical visual images and concepts. He examines visual representation from a textual standpoint, with a particular emphasis on how Shakespeare brings scenes to life through narrative in both his poetry and plays. Meek complains that new historicist readings of vision in Shakespeare marginalize the literary and rhetorical value of Shakespeare's texts for the sake of examining social, historical, and political contexts.

Marcus Nordlund's *The Dark Lantern* (1999), however, attaches importance to both the visual language and the historical contexts of Shakespeare's works. Nordlund's readings of literary, visual language in Shakespeare, John Webster, and Thomas Middleton "are geared to larger historical changes in the conception of sight or visual experience."<sup>18</sup> By placing Shakespeare, Webster, and Middleton in the context of early modern "disruption of traditional belief about the eye," Nordlund explores "how some of their works negotiate the transitional nature of early modern visuality."<sup>19</sup> The foregoing discussion implies that Shakespeare's treatment of vision in his works is worthy of being analyzed from different perspectives. Scholarship on sight in Shakespeare, whether aesthetic, new historicist, or otherwise, indicates that the role of Shakespeare in the early modern history of vision is as prominent as the role of vision as a recurring motif in Shakespeare.

The present study, however, employs a new historicist methodology. After all, in order to get a good grasp of vision in Shakespeare, it is important to have a clear picture of vision in the Renaissance, and vice versa. New historicism, according to Louis Montrose, is "a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history."<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, this new historicist study examines both how vision in Shakespeare's time influences vision in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and how vision in Shakespeare's *King Lear* is an active part of vision in

17. Thorne, *Vision and Rhetoric*, xii.

18. Nordlund, *Dark Lantern*, xxxiii.

19. Nordlund, *Dark Lantern*, iii.

20. Montrose, "Professing the Renaissance," 20.

Shakespeare's time. In other words, delving deeply into the position of vision in the social, cultural, and political context of England in Shakespeare's time, this study provides insights into the possible underlying motives of an anti-ocularcentric tendency in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. By the same token, we argue that although Shakespeare's treatment of vision in *King Lear* is a reaction to an ocularcentric early modern England, the play itself is part of an ambivalent attitude towards vision in the period. This is in agreement with the new historicist insistence that "works of art are themselves events, which intervene materially in history, rather than mirrors of reality."<sup>21</sup> Also, the subtleties of Shakespeare's language in *King Lear* are not overshadowed in this study by what Meek calls "the politicising and historicising tenor of Shakespeare criticism."<sup>22</sup> A close reading of references to sight in *King Lear* indicates that a new historicist analysis would only be a historical report of the period if the power of Shakespeare's language were ignored.

Characters, too, are important in new historicism. Unlike traditional criticism, which contends that Shakespearean characters are free individuals transcending historical boundaries, new historicism attempts to "investigate the extent to which these characters (and the problems which they represent) are the products of social, historical values, and conventions."<sup>23</sup> In this respect, references to sight, blindness, and insight in *King Lear* are more a product of the environment Shakespeare was writing in than a representation of transhistorical concepts. According to the present study, a contextual reading of *King Lear* can provide a clue as to why Shakespeare devotes special attention to seeing and the problem of ocularcentrism in the play. Therefore, the research data in this study are collected from both primary and secondary sources, including King James's account of his people's ocularcentrism in *Basilikon Doron* and James Shapiro's contextual study of *King Lear*.

### ***King Lear*, King James, and ocularcentrism**

In his 1599 book *Basilikon Doron*, a mirror for princes and a treatise on the practice of kingship, King James twice referred to kings being constantly watched by their people. First, he acknowledged to the reader that "kings being

21. Wilson, "Introduction," 11.

22. Meek, *Narrating the Visual*, 8.

23. Pieters, *Moments of Negotiation*, 11.

public persons by reason of their office and authority, are, as it were, set (as it was said of old) upon a public stage where all the beholders' eyes are attentively bent to look and pry in the least circumstance of their secretest drifts."<sup>24</sup> Then, James addressed similar words to his son, Prince Henry, when he reminded him that "a king is as one set on a stage, whose smallest actions and gestures all the people gazingly do behold."<sup>25</sup> James VI of Scotland, who had yet to become James I of England, explained that "although a king be never so precise in the discharging of his office, the people, who seeth but the outward part, will ever judge of the substance by the circumstances."<sup>26</sup> His years of reigning over Scotland had taught James that a king ought to conduct himself impeccably as he was constantly in the public eye in an ocularcentric society.

A few years later, when James was on the English throne, he tried to practise what he had preached to his son and thought that the Union of England and Scotland would enhance his reputation in the eyes of the public, among other things. But the king's longed-for Union had been the subject of substantial debate in legal, political, and social circles. The Union was not a negative concept per se, but it would entail serious consequences for the identity of both nations. "In pressing the case for Union," James Shapiro notes, "the Scottish monarch had foisted upon his subjects an identity crisis where none had existed before."<sup>27</sup> Soon after talk of the Union had circulated around the two kingdoms, both the English and the Scots began to wonder if the differences between them went beyond their birthplace and if the common features between the two nations were sufficient to neutralize any differences. In this social and political climate, a dramatist like Shakespeare could seize the opportunity to lace his drama with allusions to the prevailing concerns of the time.

The years after King James's accession marked a turning point in Shakespeare's political dramas, with his plays of the period representing his shift in interest from English to British concerns. According to Shapiro, while the word "English" had previously appeared 132 times in Shakespeare's Elizabethan plays, especially in his nine Elizabethan English history plays, which helped to define English identity, "Shakespeare had never found an occasion to use the

24. James I, *Basilikon Doron*, ed. Fischlin and Fortier, 89.

25. James I, *Basilikon Doron*, 155.

26. James I, *Basilikon Doron*, 155.

27. Shapiro, *Year of Lear*, 41.

word 'British' before James's accession; the first time that audiences heard it in one of his plays was in *King Lear*.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, it is easy to infer that in writing *King Lear* as his first British play, Shakespeare was reacting to the Jacobean concepts of national unity and division. But his double-edged reaction has since been open to diverse interpretations. It is reasonable enough to accept Shapiro's claim that the "deck seems equally stacked by Shakespeare against both union and division," and that "[t]hose who try to identify a clear-cut position in *King Lear* are bound to be disappointed."<sup>29</sup> It appears that Shakespeare's switch from Englishness in his Elizabethan plays to Britishness in *King Lear*, when the Union was the talk of Jacobean England, implies Shakespeare's support for the idea. But on the other hand, it can be inferred from the parallels<sup>30</sup> between Lear and James that the play is more particularly addressed to the ambitious King James, whose knowledge of his nation's ocularcentrism might lead him to conform to prevailing opinion and engage in similar ocularcentric behaviours.

The only thing that can be stated with certainty about Shakespeare's reaction in *King Lear* to the Anglo-Scottish Union is his indirect recommendation for avoiding ocularcentrism, which impairs political foresight and effects metaphorical blindness. In other words, *King Lear* is more critical of ocularcentric behaviours than of any plans for national unity or division. Like the real-life people James describes to his son in *Basilikon Doron*, the eponymous king and many other characters in *King Lear* are too dependent on their eyes, searching for meaning only in appearances. Therefore, in writing *King Lear*, Shakespeare makes an implicit connection between Lear's Britain and James's England, giving the historical account of ocularcentrism in Jacobean England a closely linked literary counterpart in the period. Shakespeare's tragedy posits that any plan or action on the basis of ocularcentrism—whether for unity or division—is bound to have serious ramifications.

### ***King Lear* and the story of seeing**

In the very first scene of *King Lear*, Goneril unwittingly hints at the ocularcentrism of her society as one of the flattering comparisons she makes in her

28. Shapiro, *Year of Lear*, 41.

29. Shapiro, *Year of Lear*, 45.

30. For a specific analysis of the parallels between Lear and James, see, for example, Halpern, *Poetics of Primitive Accumulation*, 222–34.

insincere profession of love for Lear, who is described as “Dearer than eyesight” (1.1.55)<sup>31</sup>—as opposed to dearer than hearing or the sense of touch, for example. There is nothing strange about eyes and seeing being naturally dear to any human being, but in Goneril’s case, eyesight is interestingly mentioned in the same breath as basic human values, the implication being that it is generally held in high regard by the society in which she lives:

Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter,  
 Dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty,  
 Beyond what can be valued rich or rare;  
 No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honour. (1.1.54–57)

The irony of Goneril’s reference to eyesight is that Lear, to whom these sycophantic words are addressed, is actually blind to his daughters’ motivations. Later on in the same scene, when the Earl of Kent’s intervention to change Lear’s impetuous decision about disowning Cordelia results in Lear getting enraged, Shakespeare again uses “eyes” and “seeing” to stress the theme of metaphorical blindness arising from superficiality and ocularcentrism in society.

After Lear orders Kent out of his sight, Kent’s blunt reply is, “See better, Lear, and let me still remain / The true blank of thine eye” (1.1.156–57). Ironically enough, Kent’s advice that Lear abandon ocularcentrism in favour of a better insight into the character of his daughters is intrinsically ocularcentric. Why would Kent ask Lear to “see better” when there was nothing to “see” and Lear’s love test for Cordelia and his other two daughters involved only auditory and speech perception? As Charis Charalampous notes, “Kent implores Lear to see rather than listen, directing both Lear’s and the audience’s attention to Cordelia as a visual object.”<sup>32</sup> Cordelia, a victim of her father’s ocularcentrism, was at first no less influenced by the ocularcentric society in which she lived than were her family and friends. “The jewels of our father, with washed eyes / Cordelia leaves you,” says the banished Cordelia to her sisters as she bids farewell to them (1.1.267–68). The adjective Shakespeare uses to describe Cordelia’s eyes is “washed” rather than “weeping,” “tearful,” or anything else, thus conveying a double meaning: “bathed in tears” and “cleansed, because

31. Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. Weis. All in-text citations from the play are from this edition.

32. Charalampous, *Rethinking the Mind-Body Relationship*, 116.

Cordelia can see through to her sisters' true natures."<sup>33</sup> The second meaning implies that Cordelia's perception of things used to be limited to what she saw with her unwashed eyes, the same ocularcentric attitude her society had adopted. Cordelia, however, departs from ocularcentrism long before her father does. Apparently disgusted by her sisters' artificial flattery, Cordelia believes "Time shall unfold what plighted cunning hides; / Who covers faults at last with shame derides" (1.1.279–80).

Unlike her youngest daughter, Lear persists in trusting his eyes until the bitter truth dawns on him. When Goneril criticizes Lear and his retinue for rowdy and insolent behaviour in her castle, Lear's reaction is one of shock and disbelief. "Does any here know me? This is not Lear. / Does Lear walk thus? Speak thus? Where are his eyes?" asks Lear incredulously (1.4.199–200). Francis Casey holds that "[i]n demanding 'Where are his eyes?' Lear simply wonders whether he can believe what he sees happening before him; more poignantly his question links with the image pattern in which failing to see physically betokens a lack of moral insight."<sup>34</sup> Considering Casey's words, one can infer that the sense of sight holds such a high position to Lear that its absence is regarded as ruinous to insight. Later on, upon learning that Goneril has shrunk his entourage to half its size, Lear curses his eldest daughter and apostrophizes his eyes by threatening to pluck them out for weeping:

Old fond eyes,  
Beweepe this cause again I'll pluck ye out,  
And cast you with the waters that you loose,  
To temper clay. (1.4.271–74)

Not only would tears betray Lear's heartbreak and sorrow at his daughter's behaviour, but they would also reveal that both his royal and masculine pride are wounded. At first glance, Lear rebukes his eyes for shedding tears and giving Goneril an undeserved sense of importance, but the underlying point here is that Lear perceives tears as undermining the supremacy of eyesight. "The outbreak of tears," as Emily Sun asserts, "compromises the integrity of the body's boundaries and the primacy of vision among the senses."<sup>35</sup> Lear's words

33. Weis, *King Lear*, 100n184.

34. Casey, *King Lear*, 16.

35. Sun, *Succeeding*, 50.

also foreshadow the blinding of the Earl of Gloucester, whose eyes are brutally torn out by the Duke of Cornwall and Goneril as punishment for helping Lear.

Gloucester's subplot has as much to say about ocularcentrism as the main plot of *Lear* and his daughters. Eyesight plays a pivotal role in the second scene of the play, for instance. In furtherance of his secret plans, Edmund slyly arouses his father Gloucester's curiosity by pretending to conceal an incriminating letter purportedly from his half-brother Edgar. When his father asks about the letter, Edmund pretends to evade the question by replying that it is "nothing." A recurring word in the play, this "nothing" harks back to Cordelia's "nothing" in Lear's love test and to Lear's response that "Nothing will come of nothing" in the very first scene of the play (1.1.88–89). As Nick Buchanan points out, "Gloucester's tragedy begins with the word 'nothing' just as Lear's did in the previous act."<sup>36</sup> But what provokes both "nothing" responses is both Lear and Gloucester paying too much attention to appearances. Neither Lear nor Gloucester received what their eyes had demanded. Lear's eyes saw no outward show of affection from Cordelia, and Gloucester's eyes were at first deprived of the letter they had noticed. But had they built their perceptions on insight rather than eyesight, Lear and Gloucester would not have met their tragic fates.

As regards the Gloucester subplot, it is this very ocularcentrism of Gloucester that encourages his credulity and makes Edmund more confident about the success of his own cunning plan. Thus, Gloucester takes the bait and insists that he should see the letter himself: "Let's see. Come, if it be nothing I / shall not need spectacles" (1.2.34–35). Shakespeare's anachronistic reference to spectacles is especially notable since it shows the irony of Gloucester's hope that his eyeglasses, as compensation for his poor eyesight, will "help him to see beyond the 'quality of nothing,' to distinguish between seeming and being,"<sup>37</sup> a quality Gloucester will paradoxically attain by physical blindness. It is only after the horrifying experience of having his eyes plucked out that Gloucester is made aware of his foolishness in trusting Edmund over Edgar. At first glance, Gloucester's punishment seems far too extreme to be justified by the surface events, particularly on the grounds of Gloucester committing treason and helping Lear escape to Dover, but closer scrutiny reveals the significant role of eyes and history in Gloucester's tragic blindness.

36. Buchanan, *What Happens*, 96.

37. Aronson, "Ocular Proof," 426.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, a number of critics such as Norman Holland, Bridget Gellert Lyons, and Jay Halio interpreted Gloucester's blinding as a symbolic castration in punishment for the sin of adultery he had committed in the past. Gloucester's words on Edmund's illegitimacy in the opening scene of the play sound utterly unrepentant: "there was / Good sport at his making, and the whoreson must be / acknowledged" (1.1.21–23). Hence, it can be inferred that Gloucester is a victim of his own lecherous eyes, a fact that does not escape Edgar's notice either. "The dark and vicious place where thee he got / Cost him his eyes," Edgar says to his dying half-brother (5.3.163–64). Lyons argues that blinding and castrating were two punishments for rape in the Middle Ages and supports her claim by citing a relevant sentence from Henry de Bracton's thirteenth-century treatise on English law: "Let him thus lose his eyes which gave him sight of the maiden's beauty."<sup>38</sup>

Similarly, in early modern Europe, eyesight was sometimes regarded as a powerful means of corruption, much more powerful than other senses.<sup>39</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that blindness was deemed more of a gain than a loss. The conversation between Sorrow and Reason in Petrarch's *Remedies for Fortune Fair and Foul* typifies this attitude:

SORROW: I have lost my vision.

REASON: And the view of women's faces. Hence rejoice! Closed are the windows through which death entered, and the way is barred to many vices; greed, gluttony, lust, and other pests have lost their helpmeets and accomplices. As much as these friends took away from your soul, that much, you should understand, have you now regained.<sup>40</sup>

Although it was apparently for a different reason, Gloucester's blinding marked the end of his ocularcentrism and provided him with an opportunity to gain insight into the true nature of the people around him. Shakespeare was not as hostile to eyes as many medieval and early modern didactic moralists, but he showed by implication that giving excessive credibility to eyesight with its

38. Quoted in Lyons, "Subplot," 28.

39. Anti-theatricalists, for example, believed that "[v]ice is learned with beholding, sense is tickled, desire pricked, and those impressions of mind are secretly conveyed over to the gazers, which the players do counterfeit on the stage." Gosson, "Plays Confuted," 108.

40. Petrarca, *Petrarch's Remedies*, trans. Rawski, 235–36.

so-called hierarchical superiority can have serious consequences and that, once internalized, this ocularcentrism can only be disposed of by loss and suffering. As Stanley Wells asserts, “Gloucester’s loss of the ability literally to see parallels Lear’s loss of his reasoning power, but both men gain by their loss.”<sup>41</sup>

Gloucester’s change of attitude following his blindness is immediately noticeable in the opening scene of act 4, when an old man of his acquaintance, concerned about Gloucester’s inability to see, insists on accompanying him on his way through the heath, but Gloucester denies the need for eyesight, claiming that his eyes did him more harm than good in the past:

I have no way, and therefore want no eyes.  
 I stumbled when I saw. Full ’oft tis seen  
 Our means secure us, and our mere defects  
 Prove our commodities. (4.1.18–21)

As someone whose lifelong confidence in the sense of sight, the most cherished sense in his society, has been shattered, Gloucester now regards his physical blindness as a blessing in disguise, which reminds him how metaphorical blindness brought about his and Lear’s downfalls. Physical blindness was paradoxically an eye-opener, before which “people and events in Gloucester’s life had swum around him in complicated patterns that he had at best dimly perceived through murky water.”<sup>42</sup>

In order to draw a sharp contrast between ocularcentrism and the harmony of the senses together, Shakespeare highlights the role of the other senses in comparison with eyesight. For example, just before the blinded and guilt-ridden Gloucester meets the disguised Edgar on the heath, he wishes he could see his loyal son again, but assigns the role of seeing to the sense of touch: “Might I but live to see thee in my touch, / I’d say I had eyes again” (4.1.23–24). This notion of haptic seeing is repeated a few scenes later when, in response to Lear’s “you see how this world / goes,” Gloucester claims, “I see it feelingly” (4.6.141–43). Likewise, “[m]ost of the references to noses and smelling,” Leon H. Craig points out, “are in immediate conjunction with eyes and sight, and directly invite reflection on these two so very different senses and the kind of

41. Wells, *Shakespeare on Page*, 75.

42. Kornstein, *Kill All the Lawyers*, 214.

perceptual access to the truth about the world they each provide.”<sup>43</sup> Craig cites several juxtapositions of sight and smell in the play, including the riddle the Fool asks Lear: “why one’s nose stands i’t’h middle on’s face?” (1.5.17) to which he himself replies wittingly: “Why, to keep one’s eyes of either side’s nose, that what / A man cannot smell out, he may spy into” (1.5.19–20).

Another example would be Regan’s callous reaction after Gloucester is viciously blinded: “Go thrust him out at gates, and let him smell / His way to Dover” (3.7.90–91). The way Shakespeare juxtaposes seeing with smelling is also indicative of his whole attitude to ocularcentrism in *King Lear*: that eyes are just as fallible as other sensory organs, if not more so. By these particular examples, Shakespeare implies “that while sight is the most useful of the senses, we don’t know what we see without considerable learning; whereas, smell seems to be the most ‘instinctive’ sense, at least of the three that disclose objects at a distance.”<sup>44</sup> Seeing is also juxtaposed with hearing when, for example, the mad Lear advises the blinded Gloucester that “A man may see how this world goes / with no eyes. Look with thine ears” (4.6.144–45). This synesthetic substitution of ears for eyes or vice versa is a recurring image in Shakespeare’s oeuvre. For instance, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Bottom describes his bizarre dream by misquoting a passage from the Bible: “The eye of man / hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen” (4.1.207–8).<sup>45</sup> In Lear’s case, however, this crossing of the senses is not a result of confusion. It is, rather, an attempt by Lear and Gloucester to find a substitute for their ocularcentrism.

Their great disappointment with eyesight leads both Lear and Gloucester to seek an alternative for the sense they deemed superior to all others. Therefore, Gloucester chooses to see the world feelingly, and Lear suggests that he should see with his ears, neither realizing that substituting an equally biased touch-centrism or auralcentrism for ocularcentrism is repeating the mistakes of the past rather than learning from them. Their ocularcentric attitudes notwithstanding, Lear and Gloucester had also attached too much importance to their sense of hearing and paid the heavy price. Lear in his love test for his daughters and Gloucester in his experience with Edgar’s forged letter were no less influenced by their ears than by their eyes as they credulously believed everything they heard. Although Lear and Gloucester finally realized that seeing is not always

43. Craig, *Of Philosophers and Kings*, 347–48.

44. Craig, *Of Philosophers and Kings*, 348.

45. Shakespeare, *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, ed. Holland.

believing, they never managed to strike a balance between the senses. In the so-called Dover Cliff scene, the sightless Gloucester is fooled by the lack of balance between his other senses. When Edgar pretends that he can hear the sound of the sea as they are climbing up a steep hill, the blind Gloucester, who normally does not feel or hear the same, gets confused and agrees with Edgar that his “other senses grow imperfect / By [his] eyes’ anguish” (4.5.5–6). Similarly disillusioned with his eyes, Lear himself sets out to explore his other senses but fails to find a balance between them, hence his desperate reversion to eyesight before his death, which helps him fool himself into believing that Cordelia is not dead: “Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips, / Look there, look there” (5.3.284–85).

Finally, the old king dies a miserable death. While Lear had predicted that dividing his kingdom would bring him peace and happiness, it ended up costing him everything he had. Like his fictional counterpart, King James was also optimistic about his plan. He hoped that his Anglo-Scottish Union would turn his two kingdoms into one stronger Great Britain. But the Scottish king needed to be more careful, as his two countries had centuries of tension and conflict behind them. No matter how much Shakespeare agreed or disagreed with the Union, he was worried that King James would act according to his ocularcentric understanding of the two countries under his rule, without paying much attention to the significant differences between them. Therefore, writing *King Lear* in the midst of heated debates on the Anglo-Scottish Union was both a reaction to any possible ocularcentric behaviour by King James and also a part of active criticism against the ocularcentrism of the period.

## Conclusion

Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, like many of his other works, is peppered with examples of high regard for the sense of sight. Nevertheless, in accordance with the period’s ambivalent attitude towards vision, eyes in Shakespeare are also portrayed as unreliable, or even at times as misleading and deceptive. Shakespeare was, admittedly, not the first writer who depicted and challenged the biased privileging of sight in Western culture, but his dramatic works, especially *King Lear*, played a significant role in exposing and challenging the popular myth of ocular superiority to his Jacobean audience. More particularly, his *King Lear* was an advance warning to King James, whose plan of Anglo-Scottish Union at the time was by no means immune from the ocularcentrism of early modern

England. Shakespeare's critique of a shallow focus on visual appearances in *King Lear* was motivated both by ocularcentric behaviours in his society and by James's idea of unifying England and Scotland under one Great Britain. Given that James was cognizant of his people's ocularcentrism, his obsession with the idea of ruling over a unified Britain, despite a long history of animosity between the English and the Scots, proved alarming to Shakespeare. He seemed to have noticed the potential danger of King James falling into the trap of the very ocularcentrism the Scottish king himself had warned about in his *Basilikon Doron*. Therefore, regardless of his personal opinion on James's plan for the Union, Shakespeare implies that the Scottish king—and the people of his time—need to be wary of superficial, sight-centred behaviours so as not to suffer the same fate as Lear and his people.

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