



Review of Quiring, Björn. 2014. *Shakespeare's Curse. The Aporias of Ritual Exclusion in Early Modern Royal Drama*. London / New York, NY: Routledge. 266 pages. ISBN: 978-0-415-51756-0.

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The book by Björn Quiring, *Shakespeare's Curse. The Aporias of Ritual Exclusion in Early Modern Royal Drama*, sets itself within the by-now flourishing critical production on Shakespeare and the law. It starts by trying to define and circumscribe the several meanings of 'curse', a term that basically indicates a reaction to a transgression. Dating back to the Bible, the curse indicated either an act of punishment by God or an appeal to God's justice. It implies a juridical order which has in some way been violated and which must be restored through the curse. In this perspective, the curse has a transcendental value: it is established as strictly connected to law, which it presupposes and determines at the same time.

As the avenger, the curser appears to act in God's name: he acts as God's mouthpiece to reaffirm the law but, at the same time, he becomes blemished by the utterance. The curser shows his power in the utterance but is endangered by it: power and impotence are mixed in the act of cursing because the curse follows a ritual, but it also marks a state of exception. Therefore, the curse is an ambiguous act that is an exception on the one hand, but is ritualized on the other hand, thus becoming a political act. Correctly, Quiring asserts that the curse can be set as a borderline: it is an individual act that operates onto a body politic.

I agree with Quiring's connecting the curse to Schmitt's idea of the "state of exception" (1985; see also Agamben 2008) because it stems from a disruption of the law and aims at reinstating the law itself. If equity acts as a supplement of the law, in the same way the curse represents the inside/outside of the law, because it codifies a transgression as a transgression, thus re-inscribing it into the legal system.

These remarks can be connected to the theories concerning 'revenge' that come to the forefront in Elizabethan revenge plays. The revenger acts as God's arm, as he recreates the law that has somehow been violated by a murder, so the revenger must be considered as part

of the juridical system. Microcosm and macrocosm can be reunited by the restoration of cosmic harmony through the punishment of the culprit. However, the revenger falls back into the sin of murder: he once again commits a crime, which blemishes his conscience. This is one of Hamlet's many doubts that prevent him from acting out the ghost's requests till the very last moment. This marks the liminal situation of the Elizabethan age, stressed by Quiring himself in the course of the volume. The age sets itself between two historical epochs and two juridical systems: the medieval one, which accepts private revenge, the revenge that marks the protection of one's family or clan; and the modern one, where justice is left in the hands of political authority. A patent example is *Romeo and Juliet*, where Romeo does not want to revenge Mercutio so as not to trigger a family feud, while Mercutio expects Romeo to revenge the insult to his family. The Prince in the text feels his authority baffled by this juridical 'mutiny' that is committed by his citizens, who do not respect political authority.

The curse falls into a similar paradigm: the person who curses violates the Christological commandment to pardon offences or crimes, and to leave punishment in the hands of God (the supreme authority who should punish the culprit). Hence, from a transcendental perspective, the curser is blemished; but from a worldly perspective the curser helps carry out punishment, thus contributing to worldly justice. Quiring speaks of the paradoxical nature of the curse.

What is particularly interesting is Quiring's connection of the curse to Schmitt's (1985) and Agamben's (2008) state of exception, but the curse can also be an instrument of power in the hands of authority. This is the case of the Church that can "divide and rule by objectifying the subject" (Quiring, 2014: 47): a person considered the culprit of a strong theological violation can be disempowered, thus deprived of subjectivity as a legal persona. Therefore, the curse is a speech act that can influence outer reality. If language is based on signs that indicate nothing more than signs and not the thing itself, then we can stress a tension between referring and appearing in the seventeenth century. The schism between 'word' and 'thing' that becomes evident in twentieth-century postmodernism is anticipated by Hamlet's struggle with meaning: for him, 'thing' and 'sign' are at variance, the meaning is disseminated and he is a real corruptor of words. Language becomes a game of mirrors where signs duplicate themselves. This is reflected also on the nature of the curse that becomes allegorical. The curse itself is theatrical; it performs: "[t]he ritual of execration might be seen as a dark precursor of theater itself" (Quiring, 2014: 14).

What happens in Elizabethan theatre is a negotiation between theatre and society, as Greenblatt correctly asserts in his seminal books *Shakespearean Negotiations* (1988) and *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980) Therefore, Shakespeare's texts can be studied as social and historical documents that involve the law and its transgression at the same time. The study of the curse becomes a lens through which to study theological, political and juridical implications of Shakespeare's texts.

The curse is a very central element of the play *Richard III*, where many characters use the curse as maledictory formulas that have been approved by a higher authority. This custom inserts the act of cursing within an institutionalized legitimate imprecation system. Quiring compares the curse, as well as the blessing, to the Eucharist, because they are all metonymical covenants. The Eucharist marks a blissful bounding with God as well as a condemnation when the faithful do not conform to religious rules. The Eucharist therefore appears to be a codified test of innocence.

The Eucharist establishes a new covenant and a new law. The Edenic sin has caused the necessity for punishment: the Garden of Eden is covenant and punishment of its violation at the same time. Hence, if the king's body is a temporal and a *mysticum* body, his oath is also a curse upon his own self if he does not conform to the law. The oath implies a condition of self-execration if the swearer is marked by perjury: "Christian oaths often contain cosmic catalogues of conditional curses" (Quiring, 2014: 58). Thus, the king's oath ties the king's two bodies together. Moreover, the oath is a performative act of great theatricality and descends from the curse by appointing itself to a referential system of laws. The oath produces a web of culpability even if it is never broken and God becomes its guarantor; hence, the judge is exonerated of its punishment because punishment is left only to God. The oath has a contractual aspect that is once more derived from the curse.

In *Richard III* we realize that the curse generates a chain of curses that clash with each other and fall especially back on its curser, so it has an interminable nature and ties the curser and the cursed together through degradation and deprivation. Margaret's terrible curse against Richard re-echoes Richard's father's curse against her, creating an endless chain of maledictions which forms a parody of divine justice.

We realize that curses, oaths and the Eucharist are all contractual forms that in some way call God as their final judge: they mark a covenant or a breach of covenant which establishes a boundary between friend and enemy. In the Middle Ages the contract was not a written one, but was secured by the self-execration of both parties in the case that the contract was not respected. In so doing the contract was inscribed in divine law. In the Renaissance period the market required its own laws; thus, drama reflects this changing economic situation, merging theological-political characters with new economic courses. The ceremonies of kingship fall into the domain of commodity: the term "fortune" acquires in fact many semantic connotations that link it both to destiny and good luck and to monetary assets.

Very often in Shakespeare's plays the body of the king is compared to that of Christ. In *Julius Caesar*, for instance, Caesar's mangled body is surrounded by the people who participate in his death in a re-enactment of the act of the Holy Communion. Antonio's words during his funeral oration are a sort of curse against the conspirators: in this text, in fact, the Eucharist and the curse are particularly connected. The contractual nature of Caesar's covenant with his people comes to the forefront in his will, where he leaves all his gardens to

the people. The denunciation of the violation of this covenant by the conspirators operated by Antonio stresses the deprivation and degradation brought about by the killing in a real *damnatio* of the conspirators' action.

A subtle distinction must be made between curse and prophecy; in fact, prophecies are considered to be legitimate and are part of the world's courses determined by God and are integrated into liturgical ceremonies. Curses, on the contrary, are against such order. Prophecies in the Elizabethan period fall into the hands of secular power; therefore, unwanted or unsolicited prophecies may be criminalized. This perspective is made evident also by contemporary historical novels that describe the political situation at Tudors' times, in particular by Philippa Gregory's *The King's Curse* (2014). This novel demonstrates how obsessed Henry VIII was by prophecies and omens, so much that he ordered persecution and death in many cases where visionary prophets dared express ill-fated premonitions. The whole novel is focused on a pretended curse launched against the Tudors by Margaret Beaufort; hence, all of Henry's children's deaths are brought back to such curse.

Prophecies are also characterized by semantic excess, falling into the domain of irony. Irony means convergence of incompatible perspectives; hence, through the ambiguous nature of prophecies meaning is pluralized. Very often Quiring mixes the two terms "curse" and "prophecy" as if to say that they tend to be two sides of the same coin.

Richard's self-dramatization transforms him into curse incarnate, thus assuming a meta-dramatic function. His famous speech in act V, scene iii, verses 183–187 "What do I fear?" suggests Richard's progressive moving into alienation: if this schizophrenic conscience enabled him to grab the crown, at the end of the play it shows the dismemberment of his identity. The evolution of his actions that at first were aimed at the production of a dynastic legitimacy, at the end become a merely dynastic strategy, thus demonstrating a failure of his political intelligence.

In the chapter on *Richard III*, Quiring inserts an interesting re-reading of Kantorowicz's seminal critical approach, which he extends by adding that the delinquent and the king are two sides of the same coin. Moreover, as the king cannot die according to the principle of the denial of the king's mortality—which allows people in the Middle Ages to overcome peacefully the interregnum between the old king's death and his succession—the king overcomes death by representation and executions which operate therefore on the level of performance. Quiring also speaks of the idea of the *civiliter mortuus*, which is the consequence of the delinquent's condemnation. This brings to the fore the idea of the denial of legal personhood, which is the case with Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*. Capulet's threat to deprive Juliet of the family name has as a consequence her being declared an outlaw, thus *civiliter mortua*. If in the case of outlaws their properties are confiscated, in Juliet's case it is her inheritance that will be confiscated and impaired. She is symbolically turned into a dead

woman. Excommunication is compared to legal death, which is why Henry VIII was so terrified by the Pope's threat of excommunication.

The several aporias that are disclosed in the use of the curse in *Richard III* are solved by irony that multiplies the field of the representation of sovereignty.

The tragedy of King John, on the contrary, problematizes the question of legitimate succession. The play shows a loophole in royal succession because both contestants seem to have equal rights to the throne. Thus, the repetition of oaths serves the function of strengthening a vacillating throne. "These oaths constitute as well as sanctify the feudal structure and especially establish the king as God's deputy", asserts Quiring (2014: 144). The question of legitimacy is very much to the forefront in this play.

The problem of the legitimization of power is a central theme in Shakespeare's works. Over and over again Shakespeare seems to question the validity of absolute monarchy. He probes into the necessity of putting limits to the sovereign's power, the possibility (or lack thereof) for a sovereign to govern without the people's consent, the necessity on the sovereign's part of imposing his own self-representation upon the world. The society described by Shakespeare no longer accepts authority upon faith; on the contrary, the legitimacy of authority is placed under discussion (see Carpi, 2010).

The play focuses on the question of ascertaining legitimacy through a "cycle of oath-taking, oath-breaking and oath renewal" (Quiring, 2014: 143), demonstrating that sovereign power is held through the loyalty of the subjects. But what happens when oaths contradict one another?

The tragic element in *King John* is also constituted by the recession of the concepts of obedience and loyalty, undermined by the inadequacy of power. This is represented by the gap between a divine and mythic concept of authority and its application to the historical context, to the quarrel between the two sovereigns. From the opening lines the theme of the desecration of the term "majesty" is introduced:

Chatillon: [...] the borrowed majesty, of England here.

Elinor: A strange beginning: borrowed majesty! (I.i.4-5)

However, the focal point is constituted by the dialogue between Constance and Salisbury in act III, scene i. This is the moment when Constance is informed of the previous alliance between the two kings, an alliance that makes the promises of help of her brother, King Philip, useless. The "divine" social order represented by the monarchy is unveiled as human/too human, as an artificial and fictional construction (from "majesty" to "counterfeit", from "faith" to "falsehood change"), disclosing an anxiety that becomes a linguistic anxiety, making its partial and purely signifying nature evident. An extremely modern way to place us in front of and within language is thus demonstrated in order to unveil the play's ambiguous and multi-layered structure.

The play upon contrasting words (“form/formless”, “order/orderless”), used as a counterpoint to the rapid changing of alliances within the text, is a frequent rhetorical device employed by Shakespeare, and it underlines the semantic multi-valences of words and of actions in a context of political ambiguity.

The movement is from social consensus (adherence to the ‘policy’ dictates and to the sovereign’s decisions) to epistemological menace (the redundancy of the sovereign’s orders through dialectic/rhetorical subversion). The use of irony becomes an exemplar practice to unveil the epistemological/ethical multi-valence of meaning. The two opposing struggles for royalty lead to a vacancy in power and to a suspension of loyalty and adherence. As soon as the sacred concept of royalty is annihilated by the conflict between the two opposing kinds of legality, a subverting element, here mainly expressed as linguistic subversion, insinuates itself into the gap in power. A “Holy day” is transformed into a “wicked day, day of shame”, “war” is mutated into “peace” and vice versa, and “little valiant” into “great villainy”: everything is “painted” and a “counterfeit” so that at the end we have a total coalescence of opposites—“odoriferous stench” and “sound rottenness” (*King John*, III.i.85–135 passim). In such diametrical oppositions, signification lingers in a linguistic void of the absence of the referent, of a methodical menace that is a denunciation of the frailty of meaning and of the relation between signifier and signified.

In practice, we are dealing with a crisis of authority that becomes absence and obsession with the divine sign of royalty, mutating into a problematic sign, a desperate symbol of the end of theological optimism that does not express the universe any longer but rather shows it as separated and insecure. In this way the subjects fill the gap in power and claim the right to argue about the principle of loyalty, and to discuss and to theorize on the formation of regal power.

Citizen: He that proves the king,
To him will we prove loyal. Till that time
Have we rammed up our gates against the world. (II.i.270–273)

The loyalty of citizens is put on auction and offered to the best bidder: “One must prove greatest: while they weigh so even, / We hold our town for neither; yet for both” (II.i.332–333) (see Carpi, 1993).

This is a declaration of the decline of a universe based on the oral (or implied) transmission of principles and the emergence of the written code; bear in mind how the generational betrayal of the concept of monarchy by divine right changes into the necessity of written pacts, even to sell one’s own soul as in *Doctor Faustus*. The word, becoming mad, affirming and negating itself, mirrors the collapse of the medieval principles of loyalty and honor, causing a new bourgeois and mercantile mentality to emerge, where everything is traded—even loyalty.

To what I consider a crisis in sovereign power Quiring adds the concept of the ordeal, which acts like the oath but it accelerates fate. The ordeal “relieves judicial authority of responsibility and directly activates fate” (Quiring, 2014: 143). Quiring insists on the concept of the ordeal at the basis of the citizens’ behavior before the gates of Angiers, while my perspective is that of commodification of authority which becomes an ‘object’ to be put on auction.

Therefore, the point where the citizens themselves suggest/decreed the canon of the behavior of kings is reached, offering them the possibility of a “friendly treaty”: the youths of both families are united in marriage, thus returning to a unitary regal concept. The principles of loyalty and of the sacredness of royalty are submerged by the flow of words of the Citizen, who with his logorrhea decrees the finiteness of a theological meaning, relegated to mere historicity:

Here’s a large mouth indeed,
That spits forth death and mountains, rocks and seas [...]
What cannoneer begot this lusty blood?
He speaks plain cannon fire, and smoke and bounce,
He gives the bastinado with his tongue.
Our ears are cudgelled – not a word of his
But buffets better that a fist of France:
Zounds I was never so bethumped with words [...] (II.i.458–468)

In my opinion, we can speak of logorrhea, which sounds even more paradoxical by being pronounced precisely by the Bastard, who is not characterized by linguistic economy either. In fact, the Bastard, like Constance, is also a real “corruptor of words” who, thanks to his “abundance of superfluous breath”, causes the “break[ing] off of your conference” (II.i. 147–150); that is, the dialogue between Austria, King Philip and King John. In this case, once again, the flow of words makes the dignity of authority redundant.

In other words, a hierarchical universe in defection receives the *coup de grâce* of rhetoric, which causes a parallel universe made of words to emerge, words that are independent from the socio-political referent. What was a dynastic struggle is transformed into a war of paradoxical “wit”, thus underlining a purely logocentric dimension. We are thrown into an upside-down world, in a “plagued bedlam” of the inflated word. In my opinion, this is another focal point of the play: the dilation of linguistic meaning.

Royalty is transformed into “performance”, “scenes” and “acts”, and the citizens become spectators to this performance: it is up to the king to convince his subjects of his legitimacy, in this way stressing the passage from a concept of unconditioned loyalty to a concept of loyalty to be won:

By heaven, these scroyles of Angiers flout
 You kings
 And stand securely on their battlements,
 As in a theatre, whence they gape and point
 At your industrious scenes and acts of death (II.i.373–377)

The meta-theatrical opening, which characterizes almost all of Shakespeare's works, here underlines the critical and detached, scornful and derisory, attitude with which authority is observed. This underlines the decline of total adherence to authority and the emergence of mutiny. Authority is degraded to a mere term that has to fight for its own referent.

Such a fragmentation is brought about by the choice between two different monarchs. The citizens themselves are offered this choice, which frees them from the necessity of loyalty. The imbalance of the preference ends up subverting a system of objective relations, a relational configuration that thus becomes a methodological decision, giving rise to a critical and disenchanting reading of the ontological aims of royalty itself and to a reflection on the concept of authority as a theoretical norm. The citizens are transformed into readers of a text, of a "play" or "script" of war action that is written "with purple hands / Dyed in the dying slaughter of their foes" (II.i.322–323).

Quiring speaks of loopholes in the rule of primogeniture and of the ambiguity of the ordeal (2014: 142). He observes that problems of legitimacy in *King John* are solved *de facto*, in practice, and that alliances are formed through the personal advantages. He also speaks of commodity and of commodification of the idea of sovereignty. Quiring too observes a crisis in representation and mentions rules of commodity transaction.

Therefore, the acts of the kings are converted into narration, fictionalization, theatrical action, *reductio ad absurdum* and phono-logocentrism devoid of morphological correlation. The intrinsic harmony, founded upon the social hierarchical structure of Tillyardean memory, paradoxically turns out to be an artificial construction that at the time starts lacking consensus: as in all forms of narration, if the listener, or the consenting spectator, is missing, the word falls into a void and cannot convey its message.

In *King John* the concept of royalty is put into question precisely because of continuous verbal dilations and because the subjects do not passively listen to the tale of authority any longer. They rather wake up from such an almost hypnotic form of adherence to power and question its auraticity.

"Monarchy" is degraded into an assumption to be demonstrated: it causes the founding skeleton of its own structure to emerge, and becomes an object of investigation and interrogation. The split between the signified (the sacred meaning of the term) and the signifier (the personae of the two kings) leaves a power vacuum the common man penetrates: thus, the Bastard governs the kings who clearly demonstrate a decision-making inability.

Your royal presences be ruled by me (II.i.378)

O prudent discipline! From north to south!
Austria and France shoot each other's mouth.
I'll stir them to it (II.i.413–415)

Quiring correctly asserts that commodity is a central concept in the play and that through oaths it is material interest that is pursued: “money is the convention that replaces the sacral speech acts and rituals—above all those of curses and blessings” (Quiring, 2014: 157). Another interesting remark of Quiring's is that if in *Richard III* Richard makes plans, in *King John* what is left is to seize opportunities: only by repeating the old rites can sovereignty affirm itself. The re-enactment of the coronation throws into an ambiguous light also the first coronation. Quiring, as I do, speaks of an exchange of transactions, thus stressing the degradation of the transcendental aspect of sovereignty.

The gap in power is manifested through a linguistic subversion that is both a cause and an effect of a free fall into the abyss of non-significance. What emerges is an inversion of political and verbal strength: now the subjects apply ‘policy’ and express authority.

In a total subversion of roles, the subjects themselves administer demiurgic linguistic power. The authority principle has become a metaphorical play, a deferral between sender and receiver in a confusion of models that relativizes meaning. The ‘word’ is still powerful but it is the tale’ of a social and organic structure that has fallen into a crisis.

The power of the word is set against the power of authority and the Bastard's statements (“Here's a large mouth indeed”) describe precisely the image of authority/legitimacy besieged and attacked by the word. Language here represents a physical element and a means of aggression: subversion has its origin in the ‘cannonade’ of the word. The double register, legal and linguistic, clashes against the dramatic *agon* in a process of affirmation/negation of legitimacy/authority, in a disrupting disquisition on the right to power.

An already unstable universe of royalty (as it results from the first part of the text, where the decision-making ability is seen as falling upon the subjects) collapses under the accusation of “perjury”. The king's betrayal of the word is transformed into “original sin” which infringes the edenic world of legality and transforms it into “counterfeit”, “painted peace”, “forsworn”: “All things begun come to ill end” (III.i.94). The sacred oath is then transformed into perjury.

So, I agree with Quiring when he stresses the theological-juridical dilemmas in *King John*. I add that these dilemmas take place in words. The tear in the fabric of authority is transformed into the collapse of a whole linguistic universe that becomes its own opposite: from reality to “falsehood”, from “majesty” to “counterfeit”, from “peace” to “war”. In this way, the linguistic subversion mirrors the hierarchical chaos into which society has fallen

through the sin of “perjury” committed by the king. The missing word explodes the canon and creates an abyss of non-significance, which makes the pact between monarch and subjects redundant. Here, Constance’s verbal violence gives voice precisely to this dissent that seems particularly subversive because it is the woman that voices it, the Other *par excellence*. If the woman and the ‘fool’ normally share a peripheral and marginal position within Elizabethan texts and are allowed unusual verbal freedom, in this text they are the spokesmen of an uneasiness that is recalled and amplified also by the other characters.

I therefore agree with Quiring when he speaks of “module of confounded royalty” (*King John*, V.vii.58). Such a rupture in authority, however, has an ominous influence on social harmony: “Whoever wins, on that side shall I lose” (III.i.335). The wavering of authority requires continuous confirmations and here King John’s second coronation demonstrates the uncertainty of the sovereign: the whole text of *King John* is permeated precisely by the problem of “guard[ing] a title” (IV.ii.10). Authority needs the allegiance of the subjects since the concept exists only as long as there is a concordance of meaning: the convergence of meaning between ‘*destinateur*’ and ‘*destinataire*’ creates a harmonious circle where the hierarchy is located. The interruption in the convergence provokes a language without support, the articulation of a syntax of reason opposed to a syntax of authority: such an interruption provokes the questioning of a metaphysical principle that is foundational of society. The interweaving of given and withdrawn words creates a tangle of oaths and perjuries, annulling the concept of loyalty.

“The absence of a transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely” (Derrida, 1997: 280). We are dealing with a decentering that leads to a rethinking of the structurality of power itself. A metaphysic founded upon principles of interpretation and sign substitutes a previous metaphysic based upon Being and Truth. Royalty is reduced to a ‘sign’.

When dealing with *King Lear*, Quiring in his turn stresses the failure of signs: “signs are no longer at the service of power and representation accordingly founders” (2014: 167). The critic distinguishes between natural and legal law, dating back this distinction to Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics*. He compares equity to natural law, because they are both called into question once the justice of civil law is put into doubt. Natural law is centred on universal principles, such as self-preservation, procreation, social life and the recognition of God; worldly law imitates natural law and aims at the creation of positive laws to apply. Sovereignty is the merging of a state of nature law and of culture that is of natural law and social order. Quiring correctly marks a difference in the passage from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance for what concerns loyalty to the monarch: if in the Middle Ages the subject is tied to the monarch by moral and legal obligations, in the Renaissance the bond between subjects and monarch is love. This is why Elizabeth I claims the affection of her subjects and in her discourses stresses the relationship as an almost erotic one. The element of love, of a loving relationship between daughters and father, is what marks the daughters’ declarations

in *King Lear*. Cordelia's fault, which Hartman calls "curse" (2004: 280), is that of separating affect and law, thus undermining the divine/paternal blessing.

Lear puts into question the concept of sovereignty by placing that very concept under revision. The hence emerging state of exception is represented by a sovereign who is no longer one; his sovereignty is replaced by a division of power, which requires new normative rules in order to function. In the state of exception "the state suspends the laws" (Schmitt, 1972: 39): Lear, in as much as he incarnates the absolute state, loses every right and places himself at the mercy of a new juridical order determined by his daughters: he will be hosted only with a reduced number of followers. Order must first be restored from the ensuing chaos (the new norms decided by the new ruler) before a new juridical order is reached (the daughters will establish their own norms of governing, which, in this case, will be directed to the elimination of the old government—the government of the deposed Lear).

The fact that power is also based on the 'performance' of the king and on regal pomp is quite visible in various parts of *King Lear*, first of all when he divides the kingdom and assigns it to this and to that daughter:

I do invest you jointly with my power,
Pre-eminence, and all the large effects
That troop with majesty...
Only we shall retain
The name and th' addition of a king: the sway,
Revenue, execution of the rest,
Beloved sons, be yours. (I.i.130–136)

Thus, after Lear gives his power up, that power is reduced to an empty show:

Gloucester: And the king gone tonight? Prescribed his power?
Confined to exhibition? (I.ii.22–23)

It is not possible to separate the power of the king from his 'performance'. In the same moment, when the king cedes his own regal power, even the pomp connected with it dissolves. Let us consider how Goneril and Regan refuse to accept into their homes Lear's retinue, the true and actual manifestation of the king's authority. Goneril affirms

[...] Idle old man
That still would manage those authorities
That he has given away. (*King Lear*, I.iv.17–19)

thus underlying Lear's inconsequence: he does not realize he no longer has any right to the representation of his regality (Carpi, 2010). Quiring speaks of dissolution of signs, which correspond to the dissolution of his sovereignty.

Quiring dedicates the central part of his chapter to Lear's curse. Lear's first action after his expulsion from his daughter's house is that of launching a curse, also involving the stormy heath: "contending with the fretful elements" (III.i.3). In his curse Lear demonstrates the gradual collapse of his mind because on the one hand he declares himself the slave to the power of natural elements, but on the other hand he wants to command them. This attitude re-echoes his attitude to monarchy: he renounces and stresses his kingly power at the same time. What he advocates is Apocalypse, where the law is not restored, because he believes in the punishment of sinners, but does not envisage any reward for the righteous. So, we get the idea that for Lear nature is either indifferent or unjust. Thus, juridical order cannot be restored through natural order: "[...] the nature by which the law justifies itself [earlier on Quiring had asserted that social law copies natural law] is always the law's own metaphoric construction" (Quiring, 2014: 197). Lear loses all coherence: what emerges from his disconnected thoughts is a metaphysical certainty of nature as primordial violence.

However, if this is Lear's conception of nature, Edmund opposes 'nature' to 'convention'. For Edmund, nature exists beyond custom and institutions, while Lear includes them in his cosmic structure. The question of legitimacy, which is much impaired in *King Lear* by Lear's decision to divide his kingdom—sacred and whole by divine right—in the text appears to be a grotesque quarrel on natural rights. The whole play appears to be a sovereign's traumatic decomposition. We see no restoration of a God-given monarchy; on the contrary, the quest for divine order results in a failure of divine judgment.

To conclude, Quiring's beautiful new book really adds new perspectives to criticism on the Elizabethan stage, even if the chapters are not always consistent with the chosen topic, but tend to be interspersed with a pyrotechnics of ideas that take us far from the main point. This, however, does not diminish the 'jouissance du texte'.

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