

**This Contentious Storm: An Ecocritical and Performance History of King Lear**, by

Jennifer Mae Hamilton, London and New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, 227 pp., £85 (hardback), ISBN: 9781474289047

*This Contentious Storm* does beautiful work of interweaving literary ecocriticism, theatre history, contemporary ecological theory, and historical and philosophical approaches to meteorology and performance. Jennifer Mae Hamilton rereads *King Lear*'s storm scenes in a way that 'animates the storm as a literal presence in the text and material construct on stage without forsaking the plays' representation of inter-human conflict' (7). Throughout the book, she elegantly returns the reader to the urgent present of contemporary ecological precarity. Questions about what humans need biologically for survival and what we need (or don't need) for a meaningful existence are in tension with what is ethically tolerable or ecologically sustainable, and what is taken from or available for others.

The first part of the book takes an ecocritical approach to *Lear*. In Chapter 1, Hamilton undertakes a 'meteorological reading' of the play, tethering between metaphorical interpretations of the storm as symbols of Lear's inner psychological turmoil and more recent ecocritical push-back for the storm taken literally as a weather event. She demonstrates that 'while the storm is always more than a psychological metaphor, more than a heavenly index of political strife, it is also always more than just a storm' (15). Reading the play meteorologically enables her to identify history, culture, philosophy and politics in the weather. If *Lear* was first performed when the 'ideological architecture' of personal, political and social worlds was in upheaval (26), Hamilton argues, it remains a valuable play to think with now, in light of how anthropogenic climate change destabilizes our relationship with the weather like never before, extending questions of ageing, intergenerational transfer and legacy.

Chapter 2 analyses three textual ‘ambiguities’ surrounding the storm in the play (31). The first is ‘dramatic’ and concerns the tragedy of Lear’s unmet desire for an ‘unburdened death’ (1.1.40), which might have been found in ‘kind nursery’ (1.1.124) from Cordelia at the castle or, later, sheltered with friends in the hovel (39). The second ambiguity is historical and philosophical, interrogating the tensions between early modern beliefs in a geocentric cosmos and a godless modern universe and querying interpretations of the weather’s ‘final causes’: as Lear asks Poor Tom, ‘What is the cause of this thunder?’ (3.4.151). The storm’s third ambiguity is theatrical: Lear’s storm is spectacularly affective but it is also anti-theatrically spectacular, drawing attention to itself as a theatrical creation. Ecocritically, Hamilton’s analysis of each of these ambiguities is illuminating in its own right, as well as laying the groundwork for the book’s later analysis of how they are concretised through staging decisions.

Shame in *Lear* – a topic that Hamilton discloses has proven controversial at every stage of review – is unpacked via three ‘views’ in the third chapter. Cordelia, Gloucester and Kent are ashamed of Lear’s mortal body (and body politic) in the storm, as Hamilton thinks backwards from Charles Lamb’s revulsion to Lear’s exposed body (82). From Lear’s perspective, shame is potentially ‘transformational’ as he comes to recognise the mortality of his body exposed to a storm that never responds (98). In a humorous and insightful critique, Hamilton goes on to argue that the actor’s seeking immortality through a performance of Lear’s shame for an audience stultifies the possible potential for transformative shame: the more virtuosic Lear’s shame, the more glory the actor receives. Contradictorily, the actor is confirmed as exceptional just as the play exposes fantasies of human exceptionalism (107). This chapter therefore skilfully accelerates towards a compelling end to Part 1. By performing the limits of textual analysis alongside theatrical evidence in an ecocritical context, Hamilton entices us into the ‘big history’ of performance that follows.

Part 2 ‘chase[s] the storm across history’ (123), offering vivid performance analysis that spans 400 years in under 100 pages, revealing how different productions have reflected and refracted shifting attitudes towards the weather over time. Jacobean theatre featured a spectacular storm, for instance – despite the non-representational stages of this period – in such a way that the sight of Lear’s literal exposure to the elements would have elicited sympathy from an early modern audience. Subsequent chapters zoom through the Restoration, Victorian period, early and late-twentieth century, bringing us into the present with a sense of our own immediate moment as also culturally and historically contingent. Highlights of this ‘chronological romp’ (8) include a refreshing take on Nahum Tate’s cosmologically-excised happy-ending adaptation of *Lear*, which rewrites the storm to support goodness triumphing over evil, and the painter Philip James de Loutherbourg’s nature-simulator *Eidophusikon*, which was created alongside his work on David Garrick’s *Lear* and which anticipates pictorial scenography *and* the advent of cinema. Particularly provocative is Hamilton’s analysis of postmodern productions by Robert Wilson (1985-90) and Barrie Kosky (1998), where Lear’s unintelligibility during the storms decentres human performers, even if these productions are received as emphasising their directors more than reframing the storm as the nonhuman nature within which humans are entangled.

Contemporary productions see both the continuance of the storm staged as a psychological metaphor as well as the return of the storm as material. The performance history concludes with Neil Armfield’s production for the Sydney Theatre Company, in which Goneril and Reagan inherit their unsustainable desire for excess from their father. Needing-more-than-we-really-need becomes the tragedy of a world where an affluent few are addicted to stuff at their – and others’ – peril. Hamilton concludes powerfully: *Lear* for our time is, heart-breakingly, ‘a critique of excess’ (192). Throughout the book, Hamilton reveals her process where appropriate, even as she skilfully integrates rigorous research and good-

humouredly conceals the labour that makes the work such joy to read. *This Contentious Storm* is a bright exemplar of what theatre and performance can contribute to interdisciplinary environmental humanities conversations, breaching literary and performance-based approaches. It will soon be impossible to think of theatre history and ecology together without reference to this book.

Evelyn O'Malley

*University of Exeter*

*e.omalley@exeter.ac.uk*