

The Shakespearean Decentered Universe

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ABSTRACT

This paper, originally presented to the course *Shakespeare's Complete Works* in the graduate program in English and Comparative Literature at the State University of New York at Buffalo, discusses the theme of fragmentation in William Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. The author argues that what is contemporarily known as "decentering" and "deconstruction" finds its roots in the fragmented universe of the Renaissance depicted in Shakespearean works. An analysis is established of the way Shakespeare uses language to portray a lack of a center, and discusses how the theme of decentering recurs in his writings.

RESUMO:

Este trabalho, originalmente apresentado ao curso *As obras completas de Shakespeare* no programa de doutorado em Inglês e Literatura Comparada da State University of New at Buffalo, discute o tema da fragmentação nas peças *Rei Lear* e *Antonio e Cleópatra*, de William Shakespeare. O autor argumenta que aquilo que é conhecido contemporaneamente como "descentramento" e "desconstrução" encontra suas raízes no universo fragmentado da Renascença, mostrado nas obras de Shakespeare. Estabelece-se uma análise do modo como Shakespeare usa a linguagem para descrever uma falta de centro, e discute-se como o tema do descentramento se repete em seus escritos.

O sides, you are too tough!
Will you yet hold?
(*King Lear*, II.iv.191-2)

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world
(W.B.Yeats)

Humpty-Dumpty sat on a wall
Humpty-Dumpty had a great fall
All the King's horses
And all the King's men
Couldn't put Humpty
together again.
(Nursery Rhyme)

The modern critique of metaphysics, established by Nietzsche, led philosophers such as Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida to present a model of deconstruction of language and structures that have shaped western philosophy, decentering it from its axis. However, this new de-structured philosophy--the basis upon which modernity stands--has its roots in the advent of Modern Age brought about by the Renaissance. Its examples can be found in some of the works of William Shakespeare.

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Shakespeare's world is a world divided by two opposing forces: the Modern Age versus the Medieval tradition. The new age which was taking shape in the Renaissance shook the grounds of a structured worldview centered around supernatural forces that obeyed a divine order. This organized universe was questioned by historical factors which helped to establish a new order: the developments of art and science, the new inventions, the maritime voyages and the discovery of a new continent, the philosophical debates, the downfall of the geocentric system, the split of the Church and the new biblical hermeneutics disputing the Pope's authority, all these factors contributed to the establishment of a fragmented universe where man occupied its central position. And since man is by nature a fragmented being, the center he occupied reflected this fragmentation.

The concept of man's fragmentation dates far back to the origins of our lettered world through the body/soul dichotomy. It is depicted in Plato's works (Cf. Phaedo and The Banquet) and in The Old Testament. In the Bible, man's fragmentation is presented in his origin, from whose rib Eve was created. However, there is a possibility of man becoming whole again, not only through marriage, in which man and woman become one, but also in the notion of a Father-God who is the center and a possibility of a reunion. Religion (from Latin *religare*, "unite again or establish a link with the gods") becomes the way to this reunion of body and soul into a whole being, through the mediation of the central figure of an omnipotent Being, the Father, or through a maternal figure of the Mother Church as advocated by Catholicism. With the advent of Renaissance's anthropocentric worldview, man's place is shifted to a central position, and the idea of God as the center of the universe is questioned by Renaissance art and thought. Catholicism as the basis of a church-centralized world is criticized by Luther's and Calvin's Protestant Reformation, bringing into the scene a claim for a de-centered, non-hermeneutic interpretation of the Biblical texts.

On the one hand, if man becomes whole again in his central position in the artistic portrayals of the time, on the other hand, religion, once the way to reunion, becomes a motive of splitting and fragmentation. Baroque art and thought that appeared later resulted from an attempt of the Catholic church through Counter-Reformation to reunite what had been dismembered. The idea of the overwhelming power of the church that Catholicism sought to impose was reflected in the grandeur of the Baroque architecture of the churches, in an effort to recapture the lost sheep and make the church whole again, and to reinstall Catholicism as the center of belief and salvation. Nevertheless, what had been broken could not find its way of mending again. Its results were irrevocable and found echo in the modern critique of metaphysics, the Nietzschean declaration of the death of God in The Gay Science and Thus Spoke Zarathustra.

Thus, modernity, inaugurated by Renaissance's modern age, became what later was called a "cemetery of Gods" (Monteiro) where man assumed his loneliness and the conscience of his orphanhood. This decentered universe (reflected in the absence of the "father," the "creator") generated the feeling that Erich Heller defined as "disinherited spirit" (*apud* Merquior 47-52) or the feeling of orphanhood, as presented by Octavio Paz in Children of the Mire.

All these elements which modern philosophy deals with became the very theme of modernity, as expressed in Yeats' poem The Second Coming quoted in the epigraph, and came to be known as "decenterment" or "deconstruction." These aspects, however, had already been thematized in Shakespeare's works, where the roots of modern philosophy are found. King Lear is a reflection of this universe, since Lear and Gloucester are fathers who have been deprived of their authority. Both lost their center and became vagrant beings, like two orphans in search of

the re-establishment of their origins. Moreover, the play's structure is itself fragmentary. It presents two parallel plots which are developed almost simultaneously.

King Lear may thus be regarded as one of Shakespeare's works on the theme of decentering and fragmentation. The play starts with the division of a kingdom that loses its axis. This kingdom, like *Humpty-Dumpty*,² the famous character in a nursery rhyme, cannot be put together again. Cordelia, the emblem of the center, the mediator between two opposing forces, was cast away to France, banished from Lear's realm. Kent, the other possibility of mediation, since he was the pivotal figure who tried to intercede between Lear and Cordelia, was also banished, and we are left with a reign without a nucleus. As in most of Shakespeare's plays, the opening lines set the scene for what the play will be about. The idea of fragmentation is present in the words *division* and *moiety*:

Kent: I thought the King had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall.
Gloucester: It did always seem so to us; but now, in the division of the kingdom, it appears not which of the dukes he values most, for equalities are so weighed that curiosity in neither can make choice of either's moiety. (King Lear, I.i.1-7)

This division had already been planned. It was not just a product of Lear's apparent folly, a fancy that had occurred to him during the moment of his daughters' profession of their love for him. As Coleridge puts it,

It was not without forethought, nor is it without its due significance, that the division of Lear's kingdom is in the first six lines of the play stated as a thing already determined in all its particulars, previously to the trial of professions, as the relative rewards of which the daughters were to be made to consider their several portions....---these facts, these passions, these moral verities, on which the whole tragedy is founded, are all prepared for, and will to the retrospect be found implied in these first four or five lines of the play. They let us know that the trial is but a trick; and that the grossness of the old king's rage is in part the natural result of a silly trick suddenly and most unexpectedly baffled and disappointed. (Coleridge, 283-284)

Lear embodies the very structure of fragmentation. He is a split character who is not himself, and whose mind is commanded by the "oppression of nature" to suffer with the body:

²The Nursery Rhymes of the Anglo-Saxon tradition also depict the idea of fragmentation. *Humpty-Dumpty* may be considered one of the icons of modernity and fragmentation in its impossibility to be put together again. The wall *Humpty Dumpty* sits on may be interpreted as the Law. Thus, *Humpty-Dumpty* would stand for mankind (association already established by James Joyce in Finnegans Wake) in their attempt to transgress the Law. The wall may also be regarded as the wall that would encircle the Garden of Eden, and his attempt to sit on the wall as an attempt to reach God's knowledge, which then led to the Fall. Since most nursery rhymes have their origin in the 17th century, according to The Columbia Encyclopedia, another interpretation may lead us to consider Humpty Dumpty as standing for the Catholic church and its split after the Reformation, which "all the king's horses and men could not put together again." My association of *Humpty-Dumpty* with King Lear is due to the fact of the fragmentary characteristic of both the play and the rhyme, and also because this character is always associated with an egg, and the Fool also refers to the splitting of an egg in his "lesson" to Lear about the splitting of his crown (King Lear, I.iv.149-157).

We are not ourselves
When nature, being oppressed, commands the mind
To suffer with the body (King Lear, II.iv.102-104).

Modern psychology interprets man's fragmentation as the different masks that the self puts on.³ Shakespeare, in his keen explorations of man's soul, may also be considered, among all the possible definitions he is given, as one of the first psychologists of modern times. King Lear reveals the "familiar masks," as Alfred Harbage described in his introduction to the play, worn by Edmund, Regan, and Goneril. Masks are elements used to disguise, to conceal, to dissemble, to hide the recognition of a thing's or a person's true character, nature, or presence. These masks are the elements that lead to Gloucester's and Lear's private tragedies. Edgar and Kent also wear masks by hiding their real identities, although their "masquerade" has a different purpose. According to Michael Goldman, "Lear does not realize that Kent has been masquerading as Caius. Kent makes an effort to establish the connection, but fails to produce the expected theatrical surprise" (Goldman, 104). Even Cordelia's silence may also be interpreted as a mask that she used to conceal her true love and affection, which is only revealed ("un-disguised") as the play reaches its denouement.

Both Lear and Gloucester are used to a world which places much faith and trust upon the spoken world. What they hear is what they take for granted. In the case of Gloucester, one may argue that there is a letter, a written document that leads Gloucester into the trap, but it is not the written document alone that makes him believe everything Edmund tells him. It is mainly what Edmund tells him, his oral interpretation of the reading text that makes Gloucester follow the course of action he then takes. By the same token, Lear unquestioningly believes in Regan's and Goneril's expression of their filial love for him, although that is a mere masquerade, and he disregards Cordelia's expression of her true affection ("Let it be so, thy truth then be thy dower!" [King Lear, I.i.108]) without trying to go any deeper into the hidden meanings of speech. Language, as Shakespeare depicts in his works, is a source of masks, a trap.

Thus, King Lear (as Macbeth, Othello, and Romeo and Juliet) is a tragedy of misread signs. And this is the very function of mask and disguise, to lead the interpreters into a misreading, a false interpretation of the real nature of things and people. The same can also be said of Antony and Cleopatra, since both characters wear masks for different purposes: the former to deceive Caesar, the latter to disguise her own passion, and to incite Antony's jealousy.

Masks, then, become the way to the split, both of Gloucester's and Lear's family. In the case of Lear, there is the fragmentation of a kingdom, a unity that loses its wholeness represented by the crown, the regal power which stands for both centrality and manliness. When the sovereign power is transferred to female hands, the kingdom collapses, which is a motive for the Fool's mockery of Lear's act. An analogous scenario is found in Antony and Cleopatra in the way that Cleopatra lets lust prevail over state affairs, leading to the downfall of her empire.

In King Lear's decentered world, truth comes out through the voice of the Fool (Act I.iv.90-225), in an inversion of the "natural" order. The King, formerly a symbol of wisdom and

³Psychoanalysis and psychology are modern sciences that appeared in the industrial era, bringing into focus the aspect of man as multiples of beings, no longer a cohesive and united subject, but one whose fragmented personality is multiplied into different selves. Man's split may be seen in terms of the different masks he wears. *Split* here has a double meaning: the split of the mind and also the actual split of a kingdom resulting from the use of these masks put on by the beings in the play.

wit, is transformed into a Fool, and the Fool is the one who becomes the voice of wisdom when the roles are inverted:

Lear: Dost thou call me fool, boy?

Fool: All thy other titles thou hast given away; that thou wast born with.

Kent: This is not altogether fool, my lord.⁴ (King Lear, I.iv.141-144)

The Fool also brings the theme of partition by making Lear confront the foolishness of his act: dividing his kingdom and giving it away without keeping any part for himself. In this exchange, he admits that he is not speaking as the Fool he is, and asks the King to whip any one that finds foolishness in his speech:

Fool: Nuncle, give me an egg, and I'll give thee two crowns.

Lear: What two crowns shall they be?

Fool: Why, after I have cut the egg i' th' middle and eat up the meat, the two crowns of the egg. When thou clovest thy crown i' th' middle and gav'st away both parts, thou bor'st thine ass on thy back o'er the dirt. Thou hadst little wit in thy bald crown when thou gav'st thy golden one away. If I speak like myself in this, let him be whipped that first finds it so. (King Lear, I.iv.148-157)

As in Hamlet, the natural order is broken. However, in Hamlet, the cleavage of the natural order appears through the figure of the ghost that comes from the dark to haunt the night claiming revenge so that the natural order be restored. In King Lear, there are no ghosts to haunt the night. The only ghost figure we find is Lear himself, who becomes a shadow of what he was, drifting and roaming about the kingdom he lost, provoking the pity of his friends, and arousing the pathos of his tragedy in the audience or in the readers. The following passage shows Lear's split into someone who lacks recognition, who became unknown even to himself:

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

Fool: Lear's shadow. (King Lear, I.iv.216-221)

For a man who had everything and is totally destitute, he becomes the emblem of suffering, loss, and nothingness, the same nothingness that recurs throughout the play. And although it is Lear who says to Cordelia "Nothing will come out of nothing" (King Lear, I.i.90) and to the Fool "Nothing can be made out of nothing" (King Lear, I.iv.126), he is the one who has to find patience and learn to make something out of nothing. Thus, the play may be seen as a process of acquiring knowledge through an act of patience⁵ by which Lear learns to cope with the

⁴ Compare Kent's remark with this exchange in Timon of Athens:

Varro's Servant: Thou art not altogether a fool.

Fool: Not thou altogether a wise man. As much foolery as I have, so much wit thou lack'st. (Timon of Athens, II.ii.112-114).

⁵ *Patience* is an important word in the play in its various allusions. As Lear himself remarks, "I will be the pattern of all patience; I will say nothing." (King Lear, III.ii.37-38). It is through patience that both Gloucester and Lear endure

unnaturalness installed in his former kingdom, and learns to see truth through the outside masks that cover the surface of his daughters' character. And learning is already inscribed in his own name, "Lear."⁶

This learning process is also valid for Gloucester, who is only able to see the truth after he is blinded, which is in a way a reenactment of Sophocles' Oedipus Rex's tragic fate. Stanley Cavell interprets this process not as a learning one, but one of recognition (Cavell, 185-187). However, for recognition to take place, it is necessary that some previous insight occur, since one needs to learn about the state of something before s/he may recognize it. Recognition is a process that follows learning.

Bradley speaks of the fragmentation of King Lear's universe by establishing the borderlines that separate the characters into two distinct groups, one in favor, and one against Lear. In this conflict, Bradley suggests that Shakespeare regarded "Love and Hate as the two ultimate forces of the universe":

If Lear, Gloucester and Albany are set apart, the rest fall into two distinct groups, which are strongly, even violently, contrasted: Cordelia, Kent, Edgar, the Fool on one side, Goneril, Regan, Edmund, Cornwall, Oswald on the other. (Bradley, 242)

Bradley mentions Shakespeare's concern with the nature of man and its relationship to physical nature, and Shakespeare's judgment of mankind. He also mentions Lear's appeal to heavens. However comprehensive Bradley's study is, he left out an important detail in his

their plight. Patience also leads to a hope for a revenge, and for a reestablishment of a broken order. Other key words in the text are: *nature* (and its derivatives "natural", "unnatural"), *fool* (and its adjective form "foolish"), *nothing*, and the different words referring to *divide* ("division", "crack", "moiety", "half," etc.).

⁶Lear may also be associated with the Biblical name Leah, which means "languid" in Hebrew. The names in King Lear offer us an interesting material for analysis. *Cordelia* is not only related to the heart in its etymology (core, cordial), but also to "cord," "the hangman's rope," the instrument by which she is killed, as if her name contained in itself her fate. In Freud's study *The Theme of the Three Caskets on King Lear*, he associated Cordelia's silence to dumbness, which he considers to be an oneiric representation of death (517). Therefore, both her silence and her name reveal her fate. *Cordelia* also sounds like the Portuguese word *cordeiro* (lamb), from the Latin *chordarius*, derived from *chordus*, used to refer to the sheep's offspring which was the last to be born. Interpreted this way, Cordelia, the youngest daughter, the last one to be born, may be regarded as the "lamb" sacrificed to the gods to reinstall order. Her name also sounds like the Portuguese noun *cordura* (from Latin *cordus*, *cordatus*, a derivation of *cor*, *cordis* [heart]) which means "affability," "meekness," "gentleness," "mildness," "tameness." All these definitions may be applied to Cordelia's character. Her name is also related to the English adjective "cordial" (also derived from Latin *cor*, "of or relating to the heart, vital, tending to revive, cheer or invigorate, gracious," since she is this gracious being who revives and reinvigorates Lear from his state of madness. By the same token, the name Goneril reminds us of the word "gonorrhoea", "morbid loss of semen." And it may not be just a coincidence (since we know that Shakespeare was a master in punning, even in tragedies) that Lear says these words to her: "But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter; Or rather a disease that's in my flesh, Which I must needs call mine" (King Lear, II.iv.216-218). Regan, in its turn, reminds us of the words "regain" and "regal". "Regal" means "relating to or suitable for a king," "of notable excellence or magnificence: splendid." Thus, as her behavior and attitude are contrary to the definitions of "regal," her name would also contain a mask that shrouds her nature. Is it her cruelty, then, that makes Lear "regain" consciousness of his unfair judgment? Is it her filial ingratitude that makes him try to regain [recover] his wits ("I prithee, daughter, do not make me mad" [King Lear, II.iv.213]) and his kingdom (or at least, half of it, since Goneril had already deprived him of one half ["She hath abated me of half my train" (King Lear, II.iv.154))])?

analysis. Shakespeare's universe is a reflection of a world in a process of substitution of faiths and beliefs, a world in which God no longer occupied its center. Although Bradley states that Lear's appeal to heavens ("You see me here, you gods, a poor old man, / As full of grief as age; wretched in both") is immediately followed by an answer "from the heavens by the sounds of the breaking storm" (Bradley, 252), that is the only response Lear gets. This response is better understood as nature's mirroring Lear's grief than as an answer to his plea. Nature itself has become "unnatural," and since nature is out of its axis, as in Hamlet "the time is out of joint" (Hamlet, I.v.188), an appeal to the gods becomes useless, vain, just answered by a storm that instead of solving Lear's problem, only adds to his misery and suffering. The storm may be interpreted as a metaphor for chaos, an allusion for the disorder established in Lear's kingdom.⁷

Chaos, the embodiment of total disorder, also appears in its spatial configuration through the lack of a central place in the play. In Peter Brooks' film adaptation of King Lear, this fact is highlighted by the constant dislocation of the characters who spend most of the time on the road, moving from one place to another, without a central point of reference. The storm is thus one more element that adds up to the notion of a chaotic state in which the kingdom had been transformed. This lack of a center in spatial terms is the same lack portrayed in Antony and Cleopatra, where the action is divided between Rome and Egypt. The same can also be said of Coriolanus, since the action is divided between Rome and its neighborhood and Corioles and its neighborhood.

The fragmentation of Lear's kingdom leads to a series of references to a state of division. This apportionment is reflected even in the two sisters' hidden fight for Edmund's possession. Even between themselves, masks are worn to disguise their real intentions, leading Kent to comment on it to the gentleman he uses as a messenger to Cordelia:

There is division,
Although as yet the face of it is covered
With mutual cunning, 'twixt Albany and Cornwall (King Lear, III.i.19-21).

Division is present in the word *crack* in Lear's summoning the storms. In his appeal to the winds to flatten the rotundity of the world, Lear reveals a desire for a return to a time when there was a center governing and structuring that world.⁸ What Lear wishes is a re-establishment of an order that had been disrupted, a return to a time in which filial love and gratitude were still prevalent.

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks....Strike flat the thick rotundity o' th' world,
Crack Nature's moulds, all germain's spill at once,

⁷In Peter Brooks' film adaptation, this chaos is shown through the upturning of the tables by Lear, after he learns of Goneril's ingratitude towards him. His act is immediately followed by his soldiers, creating an atmosphere of total disorder in Goneril's "house."

⁸It is important to keep in mind that the medieval conception of the world as being flat was parallel to a geocentric notion in which God occupied its center. Geocentrism had been demolished in the Renaissance by Nicholas Copernicus' heliocentric theory presented in his *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*, published in 1543. Shakespeare must have had these ideas in mind when he used the adjective *flat* (the old medieval concept of how the Earth was shaped) to contrast it with the noun *rotundity* (the new concept of a round body introduced in the Renaissance).

That makes ingrateful man. (King Lear, III.ii.1-9)

However, we must not forget that Lear does not invoke God, but the gods in the plural. As Bradley remarked, the gods are mentioned many times in King Lear, but God only in V.iii.16 (Bradley 253). This also shows the classical Greek worldview which was part of the Renaissance thought. Yet, the Greek world was also a centered one. Although governed by different divinities, Zeus was its controlling center, the chief of the Olympian gods. Lear summons the gods to restore an order, and this restoration is paradoxically invoked through an entreaty to fragmentation, to shake to pieces that disorder so that the old injunction might prevail over the new chaos. Therefore, he envisions the re-establishment of an order through his appeals to fracture and disorder to do away with the present turmoil, so as to end it. Notice the use he makes of the verb “rive” (split) to bring out the hidden guilts, the concealing continents that work as a mask:

Let the great gods
That keep this dreadful pudder o’er our heads
Find out their enemies now....Thou perjured, and thou simular of virtue
That art incestuous. Caitiff, to pieces shake,
That under covert and convenient seeming
Has practiced on man’s life. Close pent-up guilts,
Rive your concealing continents and cry
These dreadful summoners grace. I am a man
More sinned against than sinning. (King Lear, III.ii.49-59)

King Lear is filled with a vocabulary of crumbling structures. It is present in the word *dismantle*, used by the King of France in his admonition of Lear’s act of depriving Cordelia of her dowry. This word is circumscribed by other words that refer to estrangement, monstrosity, and unnaturalness, which imply the wreckage of a natural order:

This is most strange,
That she whom even but now was your best object,
The argument of your praise, balm of your age,
The best, the dearest, should in this trice of time
Commit a thing so monstrous to dismantle
So many folds of favor. Sure her offense
Must be of such unnatural degree
That monsters it, or your fore-vouched affection
Fall’n into taint; (King Lear, I.i.213-221).

The disruption of nature is also found in Gloucester’s references to the eclipses in the sun and moon, associating them with the chaotic structure installed on Earth, in their split universe. By “portending no good,” these celestial signs lead to the divide, the subsequent consequence of “nature’s scourging” revealed in mutinies, discord, treason, breakage. Hence, the macrocosm reflects itself in the microcosm, and vice-versa:

These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us. Though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects. Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide. In cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked 'twixt son and father. This villain of mine comes under the prediction, there's son against father; the King falls from bias of nature, there's father against child. We have seen the best of our time. Machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves. Find out this villain, Edmund, it shall lose thee nothing; do it carefully. And the noble and true-hearted Kent banished; his offense, honesty. 'Tis strange. (King Lear, I.ii.100-115)

The above quotation is contradicted by Edmund who refuses to "make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and stars" (King Lear, I.ii.117-118) so as to justify his villainy and evil. However, he, himself, makes use of this argument when he sees Edgar ("O, these eclipses do portend these divisions..." [King Lear, I.ii.132-145]). Although this is done in jest, his final words reconfirm what Edgar says about the unnaturalness of the way he was begotten, and he also acknowledges the power of the wheel of fortune. Yet, this is a world without a center, ruled by several gods, instead of one central power:

Edgar: The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
Make instruments to plague us.
The dark and vicious place where thee he got
Cost him his eyes.
Edmund: Th' hast spoken right; 'tis true.
The wheel has come full circle; I am here. (King Lear, V.iii.171-176)

And again, following Edmund's rendition, we encounter the word *split* in Albany's exchange "Let sorrow split my heart if ever I did hate thee or thy father" (*ibid.* 176-178).

The vocabulary of decentering and fragmentation also abounds in Antony and Cleopatra.⁹ This idea is present in the verb *burst*, used by Philo in the opening scene. Like Albany in King Lear, Philo associates the image of a heart with a split when he speaks of Antony's heart which "in the scuffles of great fights hath burst the buckles on his breast," and lost all its temper to lust (Antony and Cleopatra, I.i.6-8). Cleopatra refers to a lack of center, speaking of a borderless state, when she says that she will "set a bourn how far to be loved." Antony replies: "Then must thou needs find out new Heaven, new earth" (I.i.16-17), which shows that a new structure has to be found for their love, and it must be found elsewhere, in another universe. This lack of structure had already appeared in Philo's initial image of Antony's dotage that "o'erflows the measure" (Antony and Cleopatra, I.i.1-2) an image that is embodied by Cleopatra herself, the

⁹The vocabulary of fragmentation relating it to unnaturalness also appears in Coriolanus, as can be seen in the following passages:

"This last old man, whom with a cracked heart I have sent to Rome" (Coriolanus, V.iii.8-10)

"All bond and privilege of nature break!...I melt and am not of stronger earth than others." (Coriolanus, V.iii.25-29)

"Tell me not where I seem unnatural" (Coriolanus, V.iii.83-84)

"Making the mother, and the father, tearing his country's bowels out" (Coriolanus, V.iii.102-103)

"O mother, mother! What have you done? Behold, the heavens do ope, the gods look down, and this unnatural scene they laugh at." (Coriolanus, V.iii.183-185).

embodiment of a river that overflows and brings fertility in its uncontrollable lust, but who is also the representation of a poisonous serpent that brings death with its mortal “kiss.”

Fragmentation is also shown in the power structure upon which the Roman empire is founded, a power divided into a triumvirate, a structure doomed to collapse, as Antony himself predicts: “Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch of the ranged empire fall. Here is my space. Kingdoms are clay. Our dungy earth alike feeds beast as man” (Antony and Cleopatra, I.i.33-36). The image of division is again evoked by Antony in Act II, sc. iii, this time when he is talking to Octavia: “The world and my great office will sometimes divide me from your bosom.”

In Act III, sc. iv, it is Octavia the one to bring up the theme of a possible division in which she would have to stand between her brother and Antony:

A more unhappy lady, if this division chance, ne'er stood between, praying for both parts. The good gods will mock me presently when I shall pray, 'Oh, bless my lord and husband!' undo that prayer, by crying out as loud, 'Oh, bless my brother!' Husband win, win brother, prays, and destroy the prayer--no midway 'twixt these extremes at all. (Antony and Cleopatra, I.12-20)

Octavia, who represents the possibility of a center that would unite the two contrasting forces of Antony and Caesar, is aware of her impossibility to serve as a midway between these extremes. She knows she will not be able to interfere in state affairs due to her weakness (by being a woman?). She is aware she is not strong enough to mend a split world, a world bound to be cleft: “The Jove of power make me most weak, most weak, / Your reconciler! Wars 'twixt you twain would be / As if the world should cleave, and that slain men should solder up the rift” (Antony and Cleopatra, III.vi.28-32). This impossibility of union is confirmed by Enobarbus. The image of a formerly united world (“a pair of chaps”) now appears fragmented, as the two former friends who will “grind” each other in the division of enmity:

Then, world, thou hast a pair of chaps, no more,
And throw between them all the food thou hast,
They'll grind the one the other (Antony and Cleopatra, III.v.13-15).

The de-structuring of that universe reappears in the end through the image of a fallen star. When Antony stabs himself, one of his guards says “The star is fallen” (Antony and Cleopatra, IV.xv.106). When Cleopatra sees Antony deadly wounded, like Lear, she summons the skies to bring chaos to restore order through its own disorder by invoking the sun to burn itself and deliver darkness upon the face of the earth.: “O sun, burn the great spheres thou movest in! Darkling stand the varying shore o' the world” (Antony and Cleopatra, IV.xv.9-11). And again, when Antony dies, Cleopatra resorts to the image of a crown being melted to refer to a state of total disorder, which is analogous to the way the Fool in King Lear relates an egg to a crown being divided. This time, the image of a royal crown is blended with that of the crown of the earth, creating a double image in which nature mirrors man's dealings. In this melting state, structures lose their differences, and everything becomes equal, leveled, when man is faced with his mortal condition. This passage may be compared to Albany's insistent appeal to Kent and Edgar, “Oh, see, see!” (King Lear V.iii.304), and also to Lear's enigmatic request for people to look at Cordelia's lips right before his death:

Oh, see, my women,
The crown o' the earth doth melt. My lord!
Oh, withered is the garland of the war,
The soldier's pole is fall'n. Young boys and girls
Are level now with men. The odds is gone,
And there is nothing left remarkable
Beneath the visiting moon. (Antony and Cleopatra IV.xv.60-68)

Caesar reconfirms the state of fragmentation in which the empire had been transformed when he learns of Antony's death. In this passage, through the voice of Caesar, there is an intertextual reference to the omens which accompanied the end of Julius Caesar:

The breaking of so great a thing should make
A greater crack. The round world
Should have shook lions into civil streets,
And citizens to their dens. The death of Antony
Is not a single doom. In the name lay
A moiety of the world. (Antony and Cleopatra, V.i.12-19)

"A moiety of the world" summarizes the structure of Shakespeare's fractured universe, a universe that refuses to be whole again. A universe of splintered parts which appear as a disease, metaphorized in the actual fragmentation of Antony's body in Caesar's rendition, in his final attempt to bring together, through words, that which could not come together, that which he knew was impossible to be whole:

O Antony! I have followed thee to this. But we do lance
Diseases in our bodies. I must perforce
Have shown to thee such a declining day,
Or look on thine. We could not stall together
In the whole world. But yet let me lament,
With tears as sovereign as the blood of hearts,
That thou, my brother, my competitor
In top of all design, my mate in empire,
Friend and companion in the front of war,
The arm of mine own body and the heart
Where mine his thoughts did kindle, that our stars
Unreconcilable should divide
Our equalness to this. (Antony and Cleopatra, V.i.35-47)

In this fragmented universe, order can only be achieved through the tragic death of the heroes, as shown in Caesar's final lines: "Come, Dolabella, see / High order in this great solemnity." Life and order cannot come together, since they neither fit nor overcome the gap of (or because they reveal) the paradox and dialectics of human existence.

Therefore, King Lear and Antony and Cleopatra are the epitomes of the modern being's predicament, metaphors of our present condition, since we all are doomed to a state of fragmentation which has no possibility of return. The abyss presented in these two plays do not solely refer to the gap in human relationships. It is a metaphor for both social and family relations, and also for the split between the being and the Other, the impossibility of reuniting the shattered pieces of our beings scattered throughout the roads of existence. Both plays show us our preposterousness, our absurdity, and our inability to be whole again. In our orphanhood, like Lear and Gloucester, we grope in the dark, roaming about in quest of a center left behind, searching for a meaning which has been lost in the caves of time.

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