

The Heavens and *King Lear*

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Abstract. Full eclipses of the moon and sun often used to date *King Lear* occurred on 17th September and 2nd October 1605. Their possible significance had been discussed in England since the 1580s. In the play characters adopt differing attitudes to what Gloucester calls ‘these late eclipses’. For Gloucester they have predicted recent discord in the realm, including two major disruptions of the parent-child relation. Edmund, meanwhile, privately scorns the claims of astrology. But Edmund is also the play’s cynical villain. The earlier version of the play has Cordelia bring Lear back to sanity partly through the force of music which, operating alongside medicines, retunes him to the order of the cosmos. But in the later version the music is dropped, giving more importance to the influence of Cordelia herself. The period’s uncertainties and oscillations of view concerning the relation between the human scene and the heavens are, in other words, replicated in the action of the play and its composition history. In banishing Cordelia Lear attempts to give his action a cosmic inevitability, identifying with the astronomers’ dragon or serpent (*draco*), the advance of whose head and tail in the celestial sphere marked the periods of eclipses’ incidence. The Lear-Cordelia action can be seen as mapping an ‘eclipses’ plot, in which they darken one another in turn. When finally seen dead and dying together they present to onlookers the image of a terrible cosmic dissolution, of a ruling sun and moon heading towards extinction.

Major eclipses of the Moon and Sun often used to date the composition of *King Lear* took place on 17 September and 2 October (that period’s reckoning) 1605.¹ They were a lunar eclipse which covered the whole of the Moon in the Earth’s umbral or penumbral shadow and, as seen from London, an eclipse covering 90% of the Sun.² Astronomers had long predicted these eclipses, and their prognostic significance as *coincidental* eclipses, a particularly unusual cosmic occurrence, had been discussed in England since the 1580s.³ We find that they are emphasised by the makers of almanacs for 1605. John Dade is representative in expressing anxiety about what they may prognosticate while declining to make specific predictions.⁴ The eclipses were, then, discussed around the time of preparatory work on *King Lear* as a matter of common knowledge and concern. Shakespeare does quite often reference eclipses across the range of his writings, as for example in Sonnets 35, 60 and 107. The idea of a double eclipse, considered as a portent of catastrophe, is put forward in

¹ See Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, *William Shakespeare: A Textual Companion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 128.

² See David H. Levy, *The Sky in Early Modern English Literature: A Study of Allusions to Celestial Events in Elizabethan and Jacobean Writing* (New York: Springer Books, 2011), p. 29. Levy reproduces, p. 23, the chart of the 1605 eclipse produced by Fred Espenak with the assistance of NASA computers.

³ See John Harvey, *A Discoursiue Problem Concerning Prophetes* (London: Iohn Iackson, for Richard Watkins, 1588) [STC 12908], p. 119.

⁴ Dade declines to speak of their ‘signification (...)’, onely beseeching God to direct vs with his holy spirit, that we may liue as true Christians, faithfully professing the Gospel of Iesus Christ: and hartily praying for the preseruacion of our most excellent & renowned Iosias, our good Queene, with his Maiesties royal offspring, and the happie estate of his most honourable priuie counsel, and the true and faithful subiects of this Land’; *A Prognostication in Which You May Behold the State of This Yeere of Our Lord God. 1605* (London: Company of Stationers, 1605) [STC 434.17], pp. B3 + 6-7. The reference to the Josias is a pointed one, in that the scriptural narrative credits him with having averted the divine punishment which threatened Judah by instituting religious reform.

Othello: the hero, having strangled Desdemona, states, 'Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse / Of sun and moon, and that th'affrighted globe / Should yawn at alteration' (5.2.98-110); the yawning here is an opening of fissures by earthquakes. *Macbeth* presents a remarkable range of cosmic disturbances, including an eclipse of the sun and an earthquake, which attend the murder of Duncan.⁵ Coincidental solar and lunar eclipses like those of 1605 are among the apocalyptic phenomena of the *Book of Revelations*: 'And I beheld when [the Lamb] had opened the sixth seal, and, lo, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood' (6.12).⁶ Coincidental eclipses are endowed with astrological significance in the *Centiloquium*, one of the influential Hermetic writings: 'In the world many evils will happen, when in one month there shall happen an eclipse of both luminaries; chiefly in those places subject to the sign in which they happen.'⁷

In *King Lear* characters adopt differing attitudes to eclipses which have, in the narrative time of the play, recently occurred. Gloucester introduces the topic:

These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us. Though the wisdom of nature can reason thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects. Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide; in cities mutinies, in countries discord, palaces treason, the bond cracked between son and father (Quarto 1.2.97-103).⁸

Gloucester speaks as one who understands what *causes* eclipses at the level of physical determination. John of Hollywood's 13th-century scientific treatise, *Of the Sphere*, still circulating in Shakespeare's time, is particularly clear on the matter; this is something which, to Gloucester, 'the wisdom of nature' can explain. Nevertheless, in his reasoning these mechanically predictable eclipses can still yield 'sequent effects' consisting of disruptions of the natural order. They seem to have portended the recent turmoils in the kingdom – his son's (apparent) plotting against him, of which he has just been told, Lear's rejection of Cordelia, which has occurred in the preceding scene, and other departures from nature's ordinary, expected course. Edmund pretends, as part of his duping of Edgar, to take the same view: 'O, these eclipses do portend these divisions'. In the Folio version he now sings a discordant sequence of notes, 'Fa, sol, la, mi', evoking the cosmic discord ('divisions' in Edmund's statement covers both 'musical intervals', and 'divisions between people' making for conflict). Hearing what his half-brother says, Edgar is sceptical, and asks, 'How long have you been a true believer in astrology, a "sectary astronomical"?' (Quarto, 1.2.123-37). Edmund in private is entirely sceptical, and thinks that people only invoke the heavens' influences in order to evade responsibility for their own actions (see Quarto 1.2.106-120). But Edmund is also the play's cynical villain; and it would be naïve to conclude that the play straightforwardly endorses his rejection of celestial influence.

⁵ The conversation between Ross and the Old Man at 2.4 refers to a huge storm, a solar eclipse, an explosion (perhaps), an earthquake, the crying of an unknown bird, the killing of a falcon by an owl, and cannibalism in horses.

⁶ This answers to Luke 21.11 and 25: 'And great earthquakes shall be in divers places'; 'And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars.' Pliny's *Natural History* notes in quite a different perspective the coincidence of earthquakes with eclipses.

⁷ Deborah Houlding, ed., *The Centiloquium of Hermes Trismegistus*, section 53; accessed 20th July 2012, <http://www.skyscript.co.uk/centiloquium2.html>. This text circulated in Western Europe from the thirteenth century, having been translated out of Arabic.

⁸ References, which privilege the Quarto version, are to René Weis (ed.), *King Lear: A Parallel Text Edition* (London: Longman, 1993). The Folio version of the play is generally considered to be later in composition as well as later printed than the Quarto version.

A classical text which strongly influenced English Renaissance tragedy, Seneca's *Thyestes*, offers the model of an action which foregrounds characters' divergent interpretations of an eclipse and, behind this, of the human-cosmic relation, of which relations between human beings are an integral part.⁹ *King Lear* also poses these as live conceptual problems, deliberated through action. In the counter-hypothesis to Edmund's, the components of the cosmos at all levels, including that of human life, are interconnected by a sympathetic bond; this is the *sumpatheia* of ancient and classical thought, much emphasised by Stoicism in particular, adduced by Ptolemy as astrology's basis.¹⁰ In this conception celestial events bear directly on the human scene, and the functional interconnectedness, like that of a living body's components, is a given of which wise thought and action take account. And, conversely, denial of cosmic connection, the position taken by Edmund, can go in practice with the severing of linkage between human beings: we find that Edmund tries to bring about the deaths of his father and half-brother. Lear's attitude to the cosmos is more complex, and seems to be rooted in the conception that the monarch is a cosmic force, comparable in majesty of action to one of the celestial bodies. In the opening scene Lear acts to sever given, cosmically grounded interconnection with his loved daughter Cordelia. Invoking the inexorability of cosmic process, he attempts to give his judgement rendered on Cordelia the same kind of irresistible force: this is, in Lear's conception, a mighty, quasi-godlike action which exceeds the ordinary human constraints. His attitude in this scene is reminiscent of that of Seneca's Atreus as he plots an atrocious revenge on his brother. The 'eclipse dragon', the astronomers' charting of nodes in the lunar orbit which makes eclipses predictable, based in ancient notions of a prodigious creature which devours the sun, is referred to twice in *King Lear* – in Edmund's sceptical joking ('My father compounded with my mother under the Dragon's tail', Quarto 1.2.115-8, which evokes both the eclipse dragon and the constellation Draco), and in Lear's warning to Kent as Kent tries to check him: 'Come not between the dragon and his wrath' (Quarto 1.1.111). The royal dragon of British heraldry becomes in these words to Kent the cosmic dragon whose movements define the conditions of eclipse.¹¹

Ancient thought, following Pythagorean teaching, had constructed a musically organised cosmos. As Edmund's discordant singing implies, one of the perceived manifestations of functional cosmic interconnection is musical concord, while discord betokens cosmic breakdown, what Dryden brilliantly calls the untuning of the sky.¹² The

⁹ See Katharina Volk, 'Cosmic disruption in Seneca's *Thyestes*: two ways of looking at an eclipse', in K. Volk and Gareth D. Williams (ed.), *Seeing Seneca Whole: Perspectives on Philosophy, Poetry and Politics* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), pp. 183-200.

¹⁰ See *Tetrabiblos* 1.2, which describes *sumpatheia*'s medium of connection thus: 'A very few considerations would make it apparent to all that a certain power emanating from the eternal ethereal substance is dispersed through and permeates the whole region about the earth, which throughout is subject to change, since, of the primary sublunar elements, fire and air are encompassed and changed by the motions in the ether, and in turn encompass and change all else, earth and water and the plants and animals therein'; F.E. Robbins (ed. and trans.) (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1940), pp. 5 – 6.

¹¹ The eclipses dragon had been referred to in *Tamburlaine* 2: Christopher Marlowe, ed. David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen, *Doctor Faustus and Other Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 2.4.51-4, p. 91. Here Tamburlaine describes the effects of Zenocrate's illness on him as being equivalent to lunar and solar eclipses. The motif of the cosmic dragon or serpent must have been generally recognisable.

¹² See 'A Song for St. Cecilia's Day, 1687'. For the intellectual background, see Gary Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

earlier, Quarto version of the play has Cordelia bring Lear back to sanity partly through the force of music which, operating alongside other medicines, retunes him to the order of the cosmos. This is in accord with the era's astrological, *sumpatheia*-orientated conceptions of medical practice; in the Quarto a doctor is present to direct Lear's cure, reintegrating the activity of his mind with the orderly cosmic motions. But in the Folio version the music and ministering doctor are dropped, which gives more importance to the influence of Cordelia herself; in the doctor's place we more simply have a concerned 'Gentleman' who stands back to let Cordelia take charge. One wonders how the change came about. Perhaps the Folio version is one which Shakespeare's company found more viable in performance. But we can say that the period's uncertainties and oscillations of view concerning the relation between human scene and the heavens are replicated in the action of the play – for example in its setting Gloucester's alignment of celestial and terrestrial events against Edmund's scorning of the idea, and use of it to manipulate others – and also replicated in its composition history, where in the episode of Lear's revival the idea of a musically concordant cosmos, interconnected between part and whole, seems to have become relegated in dramatic importance, as the Folio text apparently shows.

The humans-heavens relation is both exposed and tested in what transpires throughout the play between Lear and Cordelia. Their initial gigantic quarrel precipitates a catastrophic sequence of events working through at every human level. When Lear pronounces banishment on Cordelia to punish what he interprets as her betrayal of him, his warning to Kent invokes, as has been said, the astronomers' eclipse-determining dragon. Prior to this Lear has, in pronouncing judgement on Cordelia, pledged himself to what he states 'By all the operation of the orbs / From who we do exist and cease to be' (Quarto 1.101-2). Lear speaks, until broken by events, as one who has the grand motions of the cosmos as his personal point of reference. It is not fanciful to see the Lear-Cordelia action as shadowing an 'eclipses' plot.¹³ Brian Rotman's account of the play brings out the significance which its action confers on mathematical zero, an object of frequent reflection in Shakespeare's writing. A central feature of the zero in Shakespeare's evocation of it is that it does not articulate with the Roman system of numeration, which during this period is still in predominant practical use and, to most people, more readily comprehensible. The zero is in the early seventeenth-century cultural setting a considerably more paradoxical thing than any of the Roman numerals: it multiplies value, but also stands for its absence, and lacks the Roman numerals' simple integrality.¹⁴ We should at this point recall the era's classification, following well-established traditions, of the moon as feminine and the sun as masculine. Cordelia's very powerful and disruptive 'Nothing', as uttered in the first scene, is to be projected visually as a zero, a blank circle. Its utterance immediately *darkens* the soler Lear, after the manner of an eclipse, on which he bids to eclipse *her* as 'moon' by removing her importance and lustre: to the astonishment of all present he declares her to be a thing without value and significance. Cordelia's departure and Lear's ensuing dependence on her sisters diminishes *him*, in due course producing his madness. In other words, one of our templates for conceptualisation of the play's action is what occurs in one of those astronomical periods, like that of 1605, when eclipses happen in sequence, hard on one another's heels. Whatever one thinks about the terrestrial-celestial relation as such, the play's human action, which seems to be conceptualised partly by means of the celestial alterations of an eclipse period, certainly has the character of a huge, widening disaster. The word 'disaster' is, we may recall,

¹³ See further, Nick Davis, *Stories of Chaos: Reason and its Displacement in Early Modern English Writing* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), pp. 141-5.

¹⁴ See *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987), and my discussion in *Stories of Chaos* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), pp. 143 – 48.

of cosmological origin,¹⁵ and seems to be especially applicable here. *King Lear* was only performed in an ameliorated or 'lightened' version where Cordelia does not die from the later seventeenth to the early nineteenth century. The horror which the play inspires in its original version has to do in some measure with the suggestion that, in these appalling conflicts and mutual damagings of human beings, the world itself is reeling towards destruction.

In the final scene of the play Lear enters with body of Cordelia in his arms, addressing onlookers thus:

Howl, howl, howl, howl! O you are men of stones
 Had I your tongues and eyes, I would use them so
 That heaven's vault should crack. She's gone for ever.
 I know when one is dead and when one lives.
 She's dead as earth. Lend me a looking-glass;
 If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,
 Why, then she lives.

The three highest-ranking figures present now respond as choric witnesses:

Kent Is this the promised end?

Edgar Or image of that horror?

Albany Fall and cease (Quarto 5.3.250 - 57).

Contextualised by the action's continuous probing of the human-to-cosmos relationship, the scene's apocalyptic symbolism is powerful. It finds a way of bringing onstage, though a use of human avatars, the kind of eclipse action which happens offstage in Seneca's *Thyestes*. The moon, as has been said, was usually gendered as female, and the sun as male. Here we have a dying sun, howling in torment, holding in his arms an already dead moon – in the language of Sonnet 107 a 'mortal moon' who has not 'endured' eclipse – and on the verge of dying through the effects of the grief which this loss produces. As Lear, bearing Cordelia's body, advances across the stage the pair are, to the loyal Kent, enacting full cosmic dissolution, in the characters of a ruling sun and moon heading towards extinction. Kent asks 'Is this the promised end?' In *Thyestes*, similarly, the Chorus take the play's eclipse to be a sign of the world's ending. Their lengthy speech, pitched between terror and reflection, concludes thus:

Out of so many people, is it judged that we
 deserve to be crushed
 by the overthrow of the axis of heaven?
 Has the final age come upon us?
 O, we were born with a heavy fate,
 whether we lost the sun through misfortune
 or drove him away!
 But let laments go, let fear depart:
 a glutton for life is one that is loath
 to die when the whole world perishes with him.¹⁶

Kent in *King Lear*'s final scene has a sense of witnessing the world's destruction, and is prepared to die: 'I have a journey (...) shortly to go; / My master calls, and I must not say no' (Quarto 5.3.313-4). Edgar on the other hand, opting for a mentality of survival, advises more cautious interpretation of what we have before us: this humanly enacted double eclipse is an

¹⁵ It is, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, in its primary sense 'an unfavourable aspect of a star or planet (Greek *aster*)'.

¹⁶ Seneca, John G. Fitch (ed. and trans.), *Tragedies II* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), *Thyestes*, ll. 875 – 84.

'image of that horror', the world's end; not the end itself, but a representation of the terrible thing which it will be.

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