

The manifestation of inconclusiveness in *King Lear*: revaluating dramatic perspectives through irresolution and ambiguity

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Abstract

This article approaches the sense of inconclusiveness in *King Lear* manifested in specific dramatic perspectives that engender multiple questions and unresolved conflicts throughout the narrative. Revolving around ambiguous lines and passages, those perspectives occur through an intrinsic correspondence between devices and rhythm as well as the respective confrontation of absolute notions emblemized by the play's catastrophic ending. Initially, the ambiguity that emanates from the dramatic devices contributes to a growing indeterminacy wherein motivations and questions remain elusive. Following such indeterminacy, any type of pattern is systematically broken as the similarities in the play's double plot are undermined according to the poignancy of the characters' sufferings. From another dramatic perspective, the recurrent betrayal of expectations in desolate scenarios guides the events to a point where irresolution dictates the whole pace of the narrative. As the actions are constantly delayed through aimless wanderings and unnecessary interventions, the sense of inconclusiveness is increased and becomes integral to the last scene. Aligned with this sense, the final lines uttered by Lear, Kent, and Edgar evoke a set of passages that emphasize the importance of true feelings even in view of the catastrophic events. Embedded in ambiguity, those lines, at the same time that they reveal the open-ended aspect of the play as opposed to its bleak ending, end up disallowing any foreclosed interpretations or conclusive notions.

Keywords: King Lear. Inconclusiveness. Ambiguity. Irresolution

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Introduction

What are Lear's motivations for employing the love test? Does Lear die believing that Cordelia was somewhat alive? Is there any lesson regarding the human condition as the tragic events unfold? Those questions stand for one of the most intriguing aspects of *King Lear* – its ongoing capacity to frustrate critics and readers alike concerning a definitive interpretation of the play or a clear-cut moral/ethical stance. Yet, far from constituting an insurmountable obstacle, this sense of inconclusiveness makes the play more topical and compelling than ever. Aligned with a tendency for ambiguity, the sense of inconclusiveness is manifested in dramatic devices, as Millicent Bell (2002, p. 24) discloses to us, directed to “promote the erasure of motive and destabilize character, to disconnect plot and make events inexplicable, and to deny the reliability of human impressions.” The way the play is structured provides not only the fundamental conditions for the elusiveness that emanates from *King Lear*'s ending, but it also betrays any absolute notions concerning plot and human existence. As a result, indeterminacy arises from the main events as a concept that is inherent to the play.

Centuries of Shakespearean criticism show that embracing the challenges of analyzing *King Lear* is incompatible with any attempts to draw conclusive notions, especially with regard to the ending, as it is tragically foreclosed. The uncertainty that revolves around and inheres in the play is gradually enhanced through two main devices. The first one is related to a set of dramatic aspects such as atmosphere, setting, and rhythm that defy simplistic interpretations that lead to closure. The second device rests on the process of failed expectations throughout the play, which stand for a dramatic rhythm wherein no resolution is signaled. Furthermore, those devices depend on a series of ambiguous utterances and on the way established patterns and fixed categories are consistently disrupted. We set out to discuss the extent to which those devices amplify the interrogations left suspended or unanswered in the last scene of the play to a point where many elusive lines evoke revaluation. Culminating in the last scene, inconclusiveness and ambiguity become concepts that create the conditions for another critical revaluation of *King Lear*: the confrontation between an overarching bleakness and passages that bring about the importance of feelings.

1 Dramatic devices and the sense of inconclusiveness

Obliquity is one of the dramatic devices that enhance *King Lear*'s sense of inconclusiveness from the opening act. Based on the lack of key explanatory elements, this device occurs through interrogations or grey areas concerning some of the characters'

motivations. Initially, the reasons behind Lear's choice to divide the kingdom among his three daughters inaugurate an elusiveness that becomes integral to his attitude throughout the play. Without any simplistic explanations, what happens in the love test³, according to Arthur Kirsch's assessment, "almost entirely shears away such surface motives and rationalizations for Lear's action in order to make its underlying motive of denial more stark and more compelling." (Kirsch, 1988, p. 167) At the beginning of the scene, the opening announcement – "Meantime we shall express our darker purpose, / Give me the map there" (1.1.37-38)⁴– shows that the division has already been settled. Yet, the old king decides to stage an innocuous formality as a means of doing away with the anxieties that motivated, in their vagueness, this "darker purpose". In the absence of a clear rationale, it is impossible to know whether those anxieties – concealed in denials and outbursts of anger after the failure of the love test – reflect a desire to be publicly praised or a real concern regarding filial love. For that reason, the portrayal of Lear's feelings contributes to an indeterminacy that stems from ambiguous connotations. In this respect, the inconclusiveness that revolves around Lear's rationale is emblematic of the creation of textual opacity, in which a tendency towards ambiguity ends up being foregrounded.

Alongside Lear's attitude in the love test, Edgar's choice to act incognito in the second act⁵ constitutes another relevant portrayal of obliquity manifested in the absence of an explicit rationale. In view of Gloucester's persecution, Edgar disguises himself as Poor Tom, based on an instinct of self-preservation: "Whiles I may 'scape, / I will preserve myself" (2.3.5-6). As the play progresses, he insists on hiding his identity by adopting different disguises that supposedly do not bring any actual threat to him, something that remains deeply elusive. Reflecting upon Edgar's attitude in those passages, Stanley Cavell (2003, p. 260) argues:

Why does Edgar delay? 'Delay' implies he is going to later. But we do not know (at this stage) that he will; we do not so much as know that he intends to. In terms of our reading of the play so far, we are alerted to the fact that what Edgar does is most directly described as avoiding recognition. That is what we want an explanation for.

Isolated from the group of wicked characters, Edgar accompanies the mad Lear and his blind father on their respective journeys of self-discovery. By consistently avoiding recognition, Edgar, despite being fundamental in assisting both characters,

³ Lear's "love test" occurs in Act 1, Scene 1, where he asks his three daughters – Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia – to declare how much they love him in exchange for portions of his kingdom. The test is framed as a way for Lear to divide his lands based on the strength of their affection, with the most flattering declarations expected to win the largest share.

⁴ The quotations of the play used in this article are taken from the following edition: Burton Raffel. *King Lear: The annotated Shakespeare* (Yale University Press, 2007). The numbers in parentheses indicate the act, the scene and the lines, respectively.

⁵ Edgar's choice to disguise himself occurs after he is falsely accused of plotting against his father, Gloucester. Edgar takes on the identity of a mad beggar, adopting the name "Poor Tom." This decision allows him to survive incognito as he strips away his noble identity, covering himself in rags and speaking in riddles and gibberish.

displays rather arbitrary actions. Most importantly, his lack of clear motive resembles Lear's ambiguous motivations in the love test. By continuing to disguise himself for no apparent reason, Edgar embodies the sense of obliquity, as emblemized by his concealed identity throughout the play.

Other than the elusive motivations of Lear and Edgar, obliquity also occurs through a set of questions that follow *King Lear*'s tragic descent into growing uncertainty. Posed by the old king on his journey of self-discovery from the third act onwards, those questions foreshadow the striking inconclusiveness characteristic of the play's ending. Initially, in the storm scenes⁶, Lear tries to convey the extremity of his sufferings through interrogations such as "Is man no more than this?" (3.4.95), in view of Poor Tom's decadent condition; and "Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" (3.6.38), regarding his daughters' harshness. Despite failing to express such extremity properly, Lear's attitude, as John Turner (1987, p. 105) maintains, "recalls and keeps alive the tragic awareness that, in a society where the reciprocities of authority and service have broken down, there are no answers to such questions." *King Lear*'s bleak atmosphere suggests that any interrogation that aims to contemplate the misery of the human condition is bound to meet no response. In this respect, the occurrence of other unanswered questions – such as "what is the cause of thunder?" (3.4.142) and "which is the justice, which is the thief?" (4.6.151) – encapsulates this tendency towards growing irresolution. When Lear is seen with the dead Cordelia in his embrace at the end of the play, Edgar's line, "image of that horror" (5.3.238), represents a paradoxical type of interrogative response to Kent's "is this the promised end?" (5.3.237); neither questions are answered nor conundrums resolved. Shaping the catastrophic ending, the lines mentioned above frustrate any attempt to convey the poignancy of human suffering wherein multiple interrogations remain problematically unanswered.

Another dramatic device, the sense of space in *King Lear*, brings about an atmosphere of uncertainty in which ambiguity finds deep resonance. Built upon numerous acts of displacement and dislocation, this sense of space emanates from the group of mistreated characters wandering outdoors through vast locations⁷. The recurrent movement from one place to another corresponds to an alternative available in the succession of catastrophic events. Reflecting upon the impact of this movement on the play's inconclusiveness, Theodore Weiss (1981, p. 68) concludes with an insightful

⁶ The storm scenes, primarily in Act 3, Scenes 1-4, serve as a powerful external representation of Lear's inner turmoil and descent into madness as he raves against the storm. The physical storm rages as Lear, having been cast out by his daughters, wanders the heath, vulnerable and exposed to the elements.

⁷ The most prominent among this group is Lear himself, who, after being betrayed and cast out by his daughters Goneril and Regan, roams the stormy heath in Act 3. Accompanying him is the Fool, whose loyalty contrasts with Lear's daughters' cruelty. Edgar, as "Poor Tom," joins them and is also forced into exile after being wrongfully accused by his illegitimate brother Edmund. Gloucester, after being blinded for aiding Lear, later stumbles upon this group as he too becomes a victim of betrayal.

analogy:

Like its words the play's world itself is a plenitude out of strict economy, vastness and immense bustle out of emptiness; a stage almost as empty as the wind-swept moon encourages a bewilderment that hardly lets us know where, when, who, and what we are.

By metaphorically alluding to a wind-swept moon, Weiss calls attention to the largeness of a world that increases the indefinite aura of *King Lear's* settings. After being dismissed by his elder daughters, Lear and his group of outcasts wander around an unlocalized heath, facing the storm and harsh deprivations. In the last two acts, the locations of the heath are replaced with even larger ones merely referred to as *near Dover*. Similarly to the tendency towards obliquity, the elusiveness that resonates through those vague locations creates the necessary conditions for the journeys of self-discovery to be prolonged according to the emergence of insights⁸ regarding the human condition.

Throughout the play, the feeling of vastness is heightened as more characters – such as Edgar assisting Gloucester and the attendants of Cordelia running after the mad king – keep roaming around wide and empty scenarios. In addition to those scenarios, the act of walking aimlessly is followed by moments wherein those characters find themselves completely perplexed by the turn of events – as examples, Gloucester's "Now, good sir, what are you?" (4.6.218), addressed to the disguised Edgar, and Lear's "Where have I been? Where am I? Fair daylight?" (4.7.51), posed to the forgiving Cordelia. Evoking the poignancy of passages that foreground unutterable emotions through unanswered questions, the movement towards unspecified destinations brings about a type of bewilderment, which reinforces the impression of sheer irresolution. Consequently, the sense of "empty", desolate space mentioned above pervades *King Lear's* tragic descent, in as much as that inconclusiveness turns out to be systematically expanded.

At the core of *King Lear's* structure, the double plot⁹ occupies a central role in intensifying the uncertainty manifested by the other dramatic devices. As previously pointed out, Lear and Edgar share an analogous obliquity in their decisions to employ a love test and to adopt a disguise, respectively. Additionally, the sense of space in the play is amplified and made more desolate, as Gloucester, guided by Edgar on the heath, re-enacts Lear's aimless wanderings and consequent dislocations in the storm scenes. Built

⁸ Triggered by Lear's immersion in madness, these insights are epitomized by the following lines and their corresponding suggested topics: "unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal" (3.4.98-99) and the baseness of human condition; "they told me I was everything. 'Tis a lie, I am not ague-proof" (4.6.103-04) and the frailty of supposed life's certainties like power and reason; "Let me wipe it first, it smells of mortality" (4.6.133) and the view of life as ephemeral; "See how yond justice rails upon yond simple thief" (4.6.149-50) and the absurdity inherent in human justice; "When we are born, we cry that we are come / To this great stage of fools" (4.6.180-181) and the view of existence as an inescapable tragic experience.

⁹ *King Lear* is structured around a double plot, featuring two parallel storylines: the tragedy of King Lear and his daughters, and the subplot involving the Earl of Gloucester and his sons, Edgar and Edmund. Both plots explore themes of betrayal, familial conflict, and the consequences of poor judgment.

upon striking parallelism, these journeys create a pattern responsible for associating passages that, seemingly disconnected, are eventually disrupted by the sequence of tragic events. Evaluating the correspondence between those events and the double plot, William Elton (1980, p. 283) contends:

King Lear is not about ideas at all but acts out rather its essential tragedy of human experience. Ultimately, then, the double plot is an instrument of complexity, the assurance of a multifaceted ambivalence which, contrary to the salvation hypothesis, probes and tests, without finally resolving, its argument of mysterious human suffering.

At first, the likeness between both corresponding plotlines outweighs any disparities that arise from the plot itself. As the play gets closer to its ending, however, these plotlines have their similarities clearly undermined. Whereas madness serves to awaken Lear's fundamental insights, Gloucester's blindness produces a deeper passivity based on an implicit renunciation of the world. Moreover, Gloucester's suicidal attempt at the Dover cliff differs completely from the old king's brave challenge to the natural elements in the storm scenes. Those contrasting passages imply that the stronger the emphasis on suffering, the more incompatible the intertwined plots become. Uttered during the encounter with Gloucester on the heath, Lear's lines, "Gloucester's bastard son / Was kinder to his father than my daughters" (4.6.113-114), bring about a reflection upon his miserable condition by means of a comparison. Such inequality allows for the emergence of irresolution as a revealing concept: if all fixed patterns are broken, it is useless to scrutinize any definitive ideas regarding *King Lear*, even when they are reinforced through parallel plotlines. In its multifaceted ambivalence, both plotlines enhance inconclusiveness not only out of actions that mirror each other in an uncanny fashion, but also when any sense of likeness is reversed by the poignancy of human misery.

2 Dramatic rhythm and the betrayal of expectations

In *King Lear*, the ambiguous connotations of lines and utterances aligned with the dramatic devices discussed in the previous section converge into a vision that points to indeterminacy as a recurrent notion. Culminating in the catastrophic ending, the play as a whole is structured to defy any ideas that lead to foreclosed conclusions. The play's dramatic rhythm also illustrates the manifestation of the striking sense of pervading inconclusiveness. As Edward W. Tayler (1990, p. 37) asserts in terms of epitomizing the sense of inconclusiveness, "the movement of plot toward the happy ending that will never come holds in suspension one set of expectations, delaying the moment when proleptic form will at long last coincide with plot to fulfill the contrary set of expectations." From the opening act, the interaction among the characters thwarts the expectations announced in

their utterances insofar as the actions to be performed are constantly delayed. As the events unfold, those expectations are betrayed to a point where even the similarities of the double plot turn out to be subverted. Other than allowing for the comprehension of such a betrayal on the part of the audience or reader, the passages triggered by the uncanny dramatic rhythm are essential to the scrutiny of the questions behind each parallel plotline. *King Lear's* inconclusiveness is conditioned to a series of expectations that are gradually enhanced and posteriorly shunned.

Resulting in a complete failure, the love test inaugurates the close correspondence between Lear's journey of disillusionment and the constant delay of actions throughout the play. Based on an unusual scheme, the division of the kingdom brings about the betrayal of the old king's expectations regarding unconditional love. Samuel Goldberg (1974, p. 16) sheds light on this state of affairs: "the very first scene, which determines so much for the rest of the play, leads us from a detached acceptance and expectancy to disappointment, dismay, indignation, and pity." After the love test crumbles, the resulting expectations are directed to Lear's perception of his misjudgment. In the first two acts, his foolish insistence on unquestioned obedience is all we have, as revealed by the encounters with Goneril, Regan, and Cornwall. Throughout those scenes, the recurrent curses and outbursts of anger lead to no resolution but to the image of filial mistreatment. To illustrate this, Lear's retort, "I'll resume the shape which thou dost think / I have cast off forever" (1.4.287-88), represents both a threat to Goneril's harshness and a promise never to be fulfilled. Stemming from the love test, those encounters also evoke the opening speech when it refers to the "unburthened crawl toward death" (1.1.42), as soon as the formalities of the division are over. Poetically alluding to the vicissitudes of old age, "crawl" becomes the word that emblemizes *King Lear's* dramatic rhythm: instead of walking towards death, the old king keeps on confronting the troubled relationship with his daughters. Transcending the boundaries of the first scene, the emphasis on filial ingratitude creates the initial obstacles for the events to proceed to a place where indeterminacy is only supposed to be resolved.

The succession of delayed actions in the storm scenes replicates the same pattern of betrayed expectations that take place in the first two acts. After being rejected by his elder daughters, Lear starts to wander with the Fool on a tempestuous heath and is soon joined by the disguised Kent, who advises him: "Gracious my lord, hard by here is a hovel [...] Repose you there" (3.2.58-60). Despite the entrance in the hovel being an obvious urgency, this destination is never reached. Calling attention to the relevance of this moment, Garber (2004, p. 597) claims that "the sudden appearance of Kent/Caius upon the heath sets the expectation that underlies everything that is to take place in this great third act, everything that makes up its dramatic pattern." In response to Kent's assistance,

Lear's "come, your hovel" (3.2.68) and "come, bring us to this hovel" (3.2.76) reflect his intent to find shelter. As the play progresses, however, the wanderings outdoors parallel the old king's immersion in madness and into the recurrent obsession with filial ingratitude. Finally, when the characters are sheltered in the last of the storm scenes, the location, rather than Kent's alluded hovel, is actually referred to as *a room in a farmhouse* where no specific arrival or destination is signaled. Deriving from a set of broken promises, the uncertainty that resonates through those desolate scenarios makes the play's dramatic rhythm more and more connected to a strong tendency towards irresolution.

Alongside the failed displacements towards the hovel, the Fool's speeches in the storm scenes contribute to the violation of expectations that perfectly encapsulates *King Lear's* inconclusiveness. During the third act, the proliferation of absurd utterances – for instance, a meaningless song about a "little tiny wit" (3.2.73) – is used to slow down even more the pace of the events. The immediate impact is that whenever, as Gary Taylor (1985, p. 201) propounds, "we expect the solution, the Fool produces nonsense and anticlimax." Among those utterances, the one that most notoriously reflects the play's uncanny dramatic rhythm is the following prophecy:

When priests are more in word than matter, / When brewers mar their malt with water, / When nobles are their tailors' tutors, / No heretics burned, but wenches' suitors, / When every case in law is right, / No squire in debt, nor no poor knight, / When slanders do not live in tongues, / Nor cutpurses come not to throngs, / When usurers tell their gold i' the field, / And bawds and whores do churches build, / Then shall the realm of Albion / Come to great confusion. / Then comes the time, who lives to see't, / That going shall be used with feet. (3.2.78-91)

By delaying the conclusion of the scene, this unorthodox prophecy participates in the systematic frustration of Lear's movement towards the hovel. The superfluous repetitions dictate a pace towards irresolution instead of simply predicting future events. Stephen Booth (1983, p. 42) avows that "the prophecy duplicates the general pattern of the play by failing to come to a conclusion when it signals one." First, the repetitions of "when" hinder the Fool from advancing to the "then" clause, in which his announced prediction was supposed to be made. Second, when such a clause finally comes, it does not convey any comprehensive insight but the reference to a "great confusion". Third, corroborating the sense of bewilderment, the use of a second "then", at the same time that it continues to interrupt the pace of the narrative, indicates the lack of a final, logical conclusion in this absurd speech. Fourth, the word "feet" and its meaningless implication in the closing line add to other nonsensical descriptions – such as nobles being tailor's tutors and whores building churches. By and large, the structure of the prophecy leads to the betrayal of expectations up to a point where indeterminacy becomes integral to the play's language.

After the third act, the parallel journeys of Lear and Gloucester culminate in the failed expectations that pave the way towards the play's ending. Halfway through the fourth act, such a failure is triggered by key advances in the plot – Edgar guiding the blind Gloucester and Cordelia searching for Lear. Concomitantly, those advances point to a sort of resolution systematically avoided in the previous acts. Yet, the succession of poignant images keeps delaying the action and, consequently, frustrating any promise of an eventual reconciliation between the miserable fathers and their wronged children. In this regard, Gamini Salgado (1987, p. 41) advances:

The frustration of our hopes at every turn is not merely a dramatic device to wring as much suspense out of the action as possible. It is profoundly true to the tragic insight which informs the play: namely, that human cruelty and the vagaries of chance can exceed our worst forebodings.

As the encounter between Lear and Cordelia is delayed up to the last scene in the fourth act, the desolation that resonates through *King Lear* grows stronger. Among the characters wandering aimlessly on the heath, Edgar becomes the one who most remarkably embodies the tragic insight mentioned by Salgado. Inspired by Gloucester's restored faith after the Dover cliff scene, Edgar's "Bear free and patient thoughts" (4.6.80) is soon reversed by the image of the mad Lear adorned with wildflowers, as manifested in his "O thou side-piercing sight" (4.6.85). That is one example out of many in which the hope for an optimistic outcome is promptly confronted by the appalling turn of events. Even when the old king finally reconciles with Cordelia and the resolution seems closer, the thwarting of expectations is repeated once again. To illustrate this, Edgar's lines directed to his father, "If ever I return to you again, / I'll bring you comfort" (5.2.3-4), are placed right before the lost battle against Edmund's forces, which sets in motion the subsequent tragic events. However redemptive a scene may actually be, the reversal of expectations consistently defies any notions that could imply closure. As a consequence, a widespread feeling of uncertainty continues to permeate the narrative up to its final moments.

Leading the uncanny dramatic rhythm to its peak, *King Lear*'s last scene brings about passages that, placed between the triumph of Edmund's army and Lear's final entrance, leave the possibility of a bleak ending in suspension. When the executions of Lear and Cordelia are ordered, anxieties regarding the outcome are diverted by the duel between Gloucester's sons. On this point, Edmund's "the wheel has come full circle" (5.3.168), after being fatally wounded, expresses a recognition concerning the arrival of a long-awaited resolution. Nevertheless, what happens is another sequence of interruptions. From that moment up to Cordelia's death, Emrys Jones (1985, p. 155) concurs that "we seem to move from episode to episode without much sense of what the final destination is

to be [...] there is always an element of unpredictability in what comes next and the form in which it comes.” One instance of such unpredictability is Edgar’s brief tale of his past journey as Poor Tom, which is followed by the account of Kent’s plotline.¹⁰ The correspondence between both plotlines gives the impression that they are finally over. Yet, as soon as Edgar is done with his reports, two passages are put in sequence: the entrance of a desperate attendant and Kent looking for his master. Other than proving that his plotline has not finished, Kent’s appearance evokes the actuality that Lear and Cordelia’s fates are still unresolved. Directly confronting the supposed and sought-after resolutions, those unforeseen interventions reflect the process of failed expectations that, rather than being left aside to be taken up in the last scene of the play, are consistently prolonged.

Guided by the same unpredictability, the announcement of Cordelia’s death intensifies the play’s bleakness in a way that the final movement towards closure finds its most emblematic refutation. Repeating once again the recurrent betrayal of expectations, Edmund’s “some good I mean to do” (5.3.219) and Albany’s “the gods defend her” (5.3.231) are immediately emptied out by Lear’s entrance carrying his dead daughter. In addition to breaking with a prolonged suspense, the poignancy of this entrance prevents the characters from contemplating anything but Lear’s fate. Unexpectedly, the aftermath of this tragic moment is delayed by a sequence of other interventions – namely, a nameless captain confirming the overwhelming news and Kent revealing his identity as Caius – that are rather misplaced. When Lear finally dies of a broken heart, James E. Robinson (1939, p. 35) affirms that “the ending is indecisive, and the question of damnation or salvation is diverted, or dissolved under the pressure of a more primal question, whether there is anything at all beyond the edge.” After the report of Edmund’s death by the captain, the first step towards resolution is taken up by Albany in his speech addressed to restore the old order. Nevertheless, this speech is interrupted by Lear’s dying utterance and never fulfills its purpose. Later, Albany makes a new request, he wants to take charge of the throne, which is also ineffective: other than Kent’s refusal, the closing lines of the play – Edgar’s “we that are young / Shall never see so much, nor live so long” (5.3.300-01) – manifest an ambiguous reflection upon the future instead of a resolute acceptance of the present. Thwarting all hopes for restoration, the resulting desolate scenario resists any attempts to draw definitive conclusions. Thus, the existential and all too human interrogations that pervade the play remain unresolved and open-ended even when the plot draws to a close.

¹⁰ Exclusive to the Quarto, this plotline refers to Kent’s appearance after Gloucester’s death. Despite Albany’s request to spare him more tragic news, Edgar reports how Kent comforted him and “told the most precious story of Lear and him that ever ear received” (5.3.210-211). Other than contributing to delay even more the pace of the plot of the play, such a passage shows through its opening lines – “This would have seemed a period / To such as love not sorrow” (5.3.200-201) with regard to the previous account of Gloucester’s plotline – that irresolution is recurrently aligned with the betrayal of expectations.

3 Final irresolution and the emphasis on feeling

Enhanced by the uncanny dramatic rhythm, the sense of indeterminacy in *King Lear* is increased by the constant subversion of expectations. As the action is consistently delayed and no destination is foreseeable, irresolution dictates the pace of the tragic events. Yet, it is not until the ending that ambiguity and inconclusiveness find their most intrinsically textual correspondence. Such textual correspondence stems, as Kiernan Ryan (2003, p. 386) estimates, from “*King Lear* culminat[ing] notoriously in a stammer of false endings and dashed hopes, which peter out in ambiguity, leaving us uncertain whether Lear dies under the delusion that Cordelia lives and unsure of who will take his place as ruler.” As previously discussed, Edgar’s last lines and his attitude towards Albany’s proposed restoration establish an atmosphere of uncertainty systematically announced in the play. This atmosphere is further heightened by a set of elusive lines placed right after the failure of Albany’s closing speech. The immediate impact of all this is that the emphasis on love implicitly manifested in those lines counterbalances the overall bleakness of the play.

In response to Cordelia’s death, Lear’s dying speech carries a set of ambiguous lines that stress the importance of emotional passages to the play. Foregrounding the old king’s journey of self-discovery, the first of those lines – “and my poor fool is hanged” (5.3.280) – alludes to the Fool’s disappearance in the last of the storm scenes. It is impossible to verify whether the reference to the “poor fool” represents an explanation for that disappearance or a reaction to Cordelia’s murder. In view of such ambiguity, Harold Bloom (2010, p. 05) makes the bold suggestion that “Lear’s Fool vanishes, but the displaced wisdom of his folly lingers in the king’s final return to a sublime madness.” Initially, this paradoxical notion of wise folly is what allows the fundamental insights into paternal misjudgment to evolve into those regarding the misery of the human condition. Most importantly, the word “fool” evokes the relevance of a character that is absent for no apparent reason. Other than anticipating this displaced wisdom embodied by Lear, the Fool’s unquestioned obedience integrates the meaningful gestures at the core of *King Lear*. To illustrate this, he accompanies his master even when the old king becomes “an O without a figure” (1.4.174) and is protected by him in the most frightening moments during the storm scenes. Lear’s ambiguous allusion to “poor fool” reflects the emotional bonds between both characters and the emphasis on feelings wherein manifestations of unconditional loyalty contribute to outweigh the play’s overarching bleakness.

Other than the elusive use of “fool”, the last lines uttered by Lear and Kent in the play ambiguously evoke passages where the emphasis on unconditional love is implicit. First, the ending of Lear’s dying speech – “Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips, /

Look there, look there” (5.3.285-286) – does not specify what is really contemplated when he “looks” at his inert daughter. Derek Peat (1981, p. 44) argues in this respect that “there are two distinct possibilities: either Lear dies believing Cordelia lives, or his heart breaks as he realizes the shattering reality of her death. The possibilities open up a variety of interpretations.” The impact of these overwhelming emotions on the old king reflects the recognition of Cordelia’s value, as shown in the reconciliation scene. Additionally, the idea of Lear being motivated by ambivalent feelings resembles the account of Gloucester’s death – torn between “two extremes of passion, joy and grief, burst smilingly” (5.3.192) after Edgar reveals his identity. As for Kent, a few lines after the old king dies, he reveals his choice for an ambiguous destination: “my master calls me, I must not say no” (5.3.297). At this moment, his heartfelt intent is concealed: the word “master” contains either a desire to meet Lear through suicide or the start of a spiritual journey. Either way, such a demonstration of unquestioned loyalty is foregrounded so that other analogous passages – especially, the ones where Kent and Edgar accompany Lear and Gloucester through vast locations – end up being recalled. Once again, *King Lear*’s desolate atmosphere is heightened by the ambiguity of lines that point to the centrality of the manifestation of feeling.

Edgar’s final speech closes the play with an analogous emphasis on the manifestation of feeling. As previously discussed, Albany’s attempt to divide the kingdom between the surviving characters suggests, in the best-case scenario, a reluctant acceptance on Edgar’s part. In comparison to Lear’s and Kent’s utterances, that is, the importance given to feeling, this time, it is more explicit than ever. In this respect, Edgar’s “The weight of this sad time we must obey; / Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say” (5.3.298-99) shows that he seems to be stricken by Lear’s death instead of directly responding to Albany’s request. Far from carrying a mere concern about the future, this affliction shows that Edgar’s last lines are connected to the emotional moments of Lear’s journey. Evaluating the impact of those moments on the conclusion of the play, Robert Lanier Reid (2010, p. 131) asseverates:

The ending of *King Lear* suggests that the wheel of Lear’s destiny, not just the resolitional cycle of acts four and five but the drama as a whole, is moved by love. It is a force much larger than Lear himself, as shown by the many who extend it so assiduously on his behalf (Cordelia, Kent, Albany, Gloucester, Edgar, the King of France, gentlemen, servants) and by Lear’s persistent failure to receive and reciprocate it with grace.

By referring to Lear’s wheel of destiny, Reid rightly focuses on the importance of love to outweigh the play’s tragic choices through passages that at the same time integrate and transcend the old king’s journey. Throughout those passages, the eloquence of empty speeches is replaced by meaningful gestures consistently repeated in the play – namely,

the taking of hands and the need for touch. Initially, acts of companionship come as a relief in the growing sense of bewilderment engendered in the storm scenes: as examples, the attendant's "give me your hand" (3.1.29) to Kent as they start to look for Lear and Kent's "give me thy hand" (3.4.39) to the frightened Fool as he comes across Poor Tom. Later, the number of references to "hand" increases as Edgar strives to guide his blind father on the heath. Finally, when the reconciliation scene takes place, it is not a coincidence that this word is used as the starting point: Cordelia's "hold your hands in benediction o'er me" (4.7.52) conveys an affectionate approach responsible for her father's recuperation. Encompassing distinct moments of Lear's journey, the need for contact and its related gestures join other unrequested demonstrations of love – for instance, Cornwall's servant's attempt to prevent Gloucester from being blinded. All that forms a cluster of ideas evocative of the importance of feelings in that they make up for the lack of grace. For that reason, Edgar's urge to speak what one feels not only brings back to mind all those past events built upon love, but also becomes an emblem of humanity, a kind of humanity that resists the appalling atmosphere characteristic of the catastrophic ending.

As soon as the play ends, the emergence of questions about Edgar's final speech contributes to the intensification of irresolution in *King Lear*. Insofar as the last ambiguous lines uttered by Lear and Kent, no specific directions are given in response to Albany's request regarding succession. Actually, the necessity to speak what one feels elicits interrogations about the possibility of feelings overcoming the final sense of desolation. On the one hand, the emotional passages point to a lesson, as phrased by Jonathan Bate (2009, p. 13), in which "to be human is to see feelingly, not to fall back on easy moralizing, the *ought to say* that characterizes people like Albany." In this respect, the occurrence of catastrophic events is believed to strengthen one's capacity to endure and to triumph over any adversity. On the other hand, the vision of love as a redemptive force is far from being absolute. For instance, Edgar saves the blind Gloucester from despair on the heath, but he also in some sense breaks his father's heart when he reveals his identity. Similarly, Cordelia's attempt to save Lear leads simultaneously to the awaited reconciliation and the death of both characters. Culminating in disastrous consequences, those examples show that even manifestations of love add to the ambiguous significance of the play. Guided by such ambiguity, discussions about the existence of a single lesson or meaning behind the deaths of Lear and his beloved daughter lead to an urgent question: what is left of the human condition in the last scene? Marjorie Garber (2004, p. 613) recognizes that "the play poses this question, but will not answer it: the question remains open; it is not foreclosed, even in the direction of nihilism." From redemptive to tragic readings, the evocation of those passages allows for multiple interpretations, but never a definitive one. Thus, inconclusiveness becomes the notion that epitomizes not only the dramatic devices

of *King Lear*, but also the unresolved confrontation between bleakness and redemption by love or the extent to which feelings (of love) compensate for received and unreciprocated grace. Longanimity seems to glide over Shakespeare's *King Lear* and to be rather beyond the reach of humanity after all.

A manifestação da inconclusividade em *Rei Lear*: reavaliando perspectivas dramáticas através da irresolução e ambiguidade

Resumo

Este artigo aborda o senso de inconclusividade em Rei Lear manifestado por meio de perspectivas dramáticas específicas que engendram inúmeras perguntas e conflitos não resolvidos ao longo da narrativa. Girando em torno de falas e passagens ambíguas, essas perspectivas ocorrem através de uma correspondência intrínseca entre dispositivos e ritmo, bem como o respectivo confronto de noções absolutas simbolizadas pelo final catastrófico da peça. Inicialmente, a ambiguidade que emana dos dispositivos dramáticos contribui para uma crescente indeterminação em que motivações e perguntas permanecem elusivas. Seguindo tal indeterminação, qualquer tipo de padronização é sistematicamente rompido à medida que as semelhanças no enredo duplo da peça são minadas conforme a pungência dos sofrimentos dos personagens. Sob outra perspectiva dramática, a recorrente traição de expectativas em cenários desolados guia os eventos a um ponto em que a irresolução dita todo o ritmo da narrativa. À medida que as ações são constantemente adiadas por andanças sem destino e intervenções desnecessárias, o senso de inconclusividade é aumentado e se torna parte integrante da última cena. Alinhados a este senso, as falas finais proferidas por Lear, Kent e Edgar evocam um conjunto de passagens que enfatizam a importância de sentimentos verdadeiros, mesmo diante dos eventos catastróficos. Incorporadas à ambiguidade, essas falas, ao mesmo tempo em que revelam o aspecto amplo da peça apostado a seu final sombrio, acabam por desvalidar quaisquer interpretações limitantes ou noções conclusivas.

Palavras-chave: Rei Lear. Inconclusividade. Ambiguidade. Irresolução

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