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Posthuman Lear: Reading Shakespeare in the Anthropocene / Craig Dionne

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Craig Dionne. *Posthuman Lear: Reading Shakespeare in the Anthropocene*. Punctum Books, 2016. 226 pp.

Reviewed by KAREN RABER

Dotted around Japan are large flat stones bearing information about the height of past tsunami waves, markers that tell of past ecological disasters in hopes of warning future generations about the potential scope of natural events. Had the Tokyo Electric Power Company paid attention to these ancient stones, Craig Dionne hints in his first chapter, they might have built a wall around the Fukushima Daichi nuclear power plant that would have stood up to the magnitude of the wave that hit in 2011. Dionne argues in *Posthuman Lear* that Renaissance proverbs and adages can function like the tsunami stones, which attempt to communicate crucial information by inscribing it in the passive monumentality of memorized aphorisms, thereby equipping future readers (if they heed the message) through reference to the past—they attempt to speak “across millennial divides” (44). More than any other of Shakespeare’s plays, *King Lear* is filled with proverbs and adages that strive like tsunami stones to throw a tightrope across the abyss of meaning created for characters who experience the dismantling of the social and philosophical fabric that gives coherence and unity to something like a human subject. The play thus explores what we would now refer to as posthuman identity, and its mobilization of well-worn fragments of wisdom, myth and memory has implications not merely for the play-world, but perhaps for our own as well.

Dionne’s work belongs to a growing body of criticism interested in the ways early modern literature might participate in recent theoretical debates about posthumanism and the posthuman: challenging the humanist celebration and elevation of the autonomous, rational, unified human subject, posthumanist theory argues variously for an embodied, enmeshed, decentered, fragmented and indistinct “human.” A host of books on specific subsets of the posthuman, including animals, plants, soil, oceans, or machines, have recently appeared or are about to appear in print; in addition, collections like Stefen Herbrechter and Ivan Callus’s *Posthumanist Shakespeares* (Palgrave, 2012), Jean Feerick and Vin Nardizzi’s *The Indistinct Human in Renaissance Literature* (Palgrave, 2013), and Joseph Campana and Scott Maisano’s *Renaissance Posthumanism* (Oxford University Press, 2016), establish the breadth of scholarship that contributes to the growing consensus that the contours of the posthuman were already being charted well before we named it. Like many of these works, Dionne’s *Posthuman Lear* is concerned not merely with Renaissance identity, but with the patterns of thought and behavior that contribute to and might redress the specifically ecological consequences of humanism in the present.

Proverbs are instances of language turned into a kind of mechanical device that switches on when the mind in which these rhetorical objects have taken up residence is confronted with calamity. Proverbs are engraved in the matter of

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individual and collective consciousness via humanist training, which establishes a vast inventory of sayings that seem to arise from “a placeless time before” (64), yet speak profoundly in the present. In his second chapter, Dionne revisits the neglected domain of humanist educational strategies, to restore for postmodern readers the history of habits of thought that would have been evident and available to Shakespeare’s audiences. He also takes on modernist theories of art that have intervened to shape recent critical perspectives on the play, especially the assumption that Shakespeare’s works are designed around moments of estrangement that shock or awaken a reader to “reality.” While he moves beyond such modernist interpretations, Dionne refuses to jettison the “old” materialism in favor of the new, seeing continuities where some might harp on distinction. Thus, Frederic Jameson, Raymond Williams, and Jonathan Dollimore show up alongside arguments about the affective nature of proverbial speech, or the philosophical positions of Ian Bogost, Giorgio Agamben and Quentin Meillassoux.

Once the theoretical and historical foundations through which he reads *Lear’s* proverbs have been excavated, Dionne moves onto the heath with Lear and company, where the “proverbial reflex” is most thoroughly and problematically engaged. More than merely a tool for conveying actual data, proverbs are comforting; they can anchor human speakers and listeners during moments of radical disruption. Thus when Edgar closes *King Lear* with that most unsatisfying and apparently reductive remark, “The weight of this sad time we must obey, / Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say,” he is not so much glossing the meaning of actual events in the play as offering palliative care to his audience. In Dionne’s reading, importantly, such a moment renders the human who is speaking a kind of automaton—in this case, Edgar engages in what Dionne calls “animatronic speech” that offers an “analgesic retreat”(99) from the immediate suffering of the moment. Through such readings, Dionne puts language use at the heart of an analysis of how the play articulates the condition of the posthuman. The play establishes a flat ontology: human characters find themselves enmeshed in an indifferent, often hostile environment that rejects exceptionalism in a variety of ways. In a fascinating reading of Lear’s “Reason not the need” speech (2.4), Dionne points out that what Lear tries to assert is that the inessential (rich clothing, but also all the trappings of courtly consumption that Dionne argues “accessorize” Lear, and by extension the entire social world already registering nostalgically as past to the play’s action) is essential to human distinction, despite the fact that the play confirms that human lives are indeed “cheap as beast’s.” When Lear breaks off in that speech at the moment he is about to name “*true* need,” Dionne speculates that he might well be searching his memory for an adage or proverb that will suffice—but finds nothing but “rote circulation” (130), and a host of proverbs that recall him only to the superfluity of those things he so values. What Dionne adds to this moment is the observation that Lear’s position is remarkably like ours in the Anthropocene, convinced of the vital, definitional importance of superfluous stuff, even as our addiction to it kills us.

In the end, then, Dionne’s reading posits that *King Lear* is itself a cautionary proverb. In reflecting on the process and consequences of Lear’s

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abdication of monarchical authority and power, we are invited to reconsider the way we think about agency, full stop. As Dionne puts it, “Lear moves from subject to object” (150), and is made to realize he is one agent among many; this necessitates a thoroughgoing re-evaluation of all relationships, social and environmental. But what do proverbs contribute to such a process? “Mnemonic reflection,” Dionne asserts, “functions as a potentially empowering mode of consciousness that is responding to its environment” (151). Its very fragmentary character meets our current needs, resisting the effacements and distortions of narrative, and registering the thing-ness of both language and the past. We inherit the “moral grammar” of tragedy, but must re-purpose its fatalism, or “reaccessorize” it (154), for our ecologically fragile world. Dionne goes so far as to suggest we might even salvage false consciousness from the dustbin of theory, much as we have done with “strategic essentialism” and other discredited modes of thought, on the premise that given a new experience of the everyday that is a constant barrage of shocks and miseries, it might provide a place from which to restore and rethink.

Posthuman Lear is such a complex and rich work that it is difficult to summarize its many suggestive details and avenues of analysis here. Food studies, the EPA’s experiments with nuclear warning signs, science fiction writer Joe Haldeman, Brecht, Karl Popper, Amitav Ghosh, seventeenth-century Flemish art, Tolstoy—all have their entrances and exits in this book. Dionne engages with the traditions of literature, culture, and theory within which we must understand this play, but also with the most vexing issues raised by ecological crisis in the Anthropocene—not just that crisis’ origins, but the futures it might generate, and the ways literature can, or can fail, to equip us to confront those futures. Following the paradigm he has established for *King Lear*’s proverbs, Dionne’s *Posthuman Lear* offers us another version of a closely-written ideographic tsunami stone; deciphering its message is well worth the effort.

Karen Raber is a professor of English at the University of Mississippi. She is the author most recently of *Animal Bodies, Renaissance Culture* (2013), editor or coeditor of several collections of essays on horses, ecostudies, and gender and women writers, and numerous articles and book chapters on the same topics. She is the series editor of Routledge’s *Perspectives on the Non-Human in Literature and Culture*, and is currently working on a monograph on Shakespeare and posthumanist theory, a dictionary as well as an essay collection on Shakespeare’s animals.