Revista Letras Raras

ISSN: 2317-2347 – v. 12, n. 2 (2023)
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Poetic possession: language and madness in King Lear / *Possessão poética: linguagem e loucura em Rei Lear*

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Received: 17 june 2023. **Approved**: 22 june 2023.

How to quote this article:

AGUIAR, Angiuli Copetti de. Poetic possession: language and madness in King Lear. *Revista Letras Raras.* Campina Grande, v. 12, n. 2, p. 271-282, aug. 2023. Doi: 10.5281/zenodo.8302715.

ABSTRACT

Language, as a problem and as an active force, is at the center of King Lear's tragedy, and it structures symbolically and concretely its drama. The problem of language is in the conflict between the flattering discourse of Regan and Goneril and the sincere discourse of Cordelia and Kent; it is in the illogicality of the Fool's feigned madness and Lear's real one. Lear trusts the ornate word and distrusts the naked one, the reason of his fall. Building on the notion of the centrality of language in the play, we intend to explore in this essay such question and to assess to what extent language is more than an instrument in King Lear and constitutes a truly autonomous dimension which interacts with the events of the play, and which Lear traverses in his madness. For this purpose we proceed in our study through three sections, in which, respectively, we analyze questions concerning language, first in the discourses of Goneril and Regan, Cordelia and Kent, then in the discourse of the Fool, and finally in the discourse of mad Lear. We concluded that the seed of the king's tragedy consists in his excessive trust in words: for him, at the beginning of the play, language and reality are confused. When this view is shaken, both become unstable for him, and Lear falls into his madness, in which, in a different way, language and reality become fused once again, not as empty appearance like before, but now as poetic reality.

KEYWORDS: King Lear; William Shakespeare; Language; Drama; English Literature.

RESUMO

A linguagem, como problema e como força ativa, está no centro da tragédia de Rei Lear, bem como estrutura simbólica e concretamente todo seu drama. O problema da linguagem está no conflito entre o discurso adulador de Regan e Goneril e o discurso sincero de Cordélia e Kent; está na ilogicidade da loucura fingida do Bobo e na loucura real de Lear. Lear confia na palavra ornada de falso decoro e desconfia da palavra nua, e nisso está o motivo de sua queda. Partindo da noção da centralidade da linguagem para a peça, desejamos neste artigo explorar tal questão e averiguar em que medida a linguagem é mais do que um instrumento em Rei Lear e constitui uma verdadeira dimensão autônoma que interage com os acontecimentos da peça e a qual Lear atravessa em sua jornada através da loucura. Para tanto, procedemos em nosso estudo através de três seções, nas quais, respectivamente, analisamos questões de linguagem, primeiro, nos discursos de Goneril e Regan, Cordélia e Kent, segundo, no discurso do Bobo e, terceiro, no discurso de Lear louco. Concluímos que o germe da tragédia do rei consiste em sua excessiva confiança nas palavras: para ele, no início da peça, linguagem e realidade se confundem. Quando essa visão é abalada, linguagem e realidade se desestruturam para ele e Lear cai em sua loucura,

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na qual, por vez e de um modo diferente, linguagem e realidade voltam a se confundir, não como aparência vazia como antes, mas agora como realidade poética.
PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Rei Lear; William Shakespeare; Linguagem; Drama; Literatura inglesa.*

1 Introduction

In the word 'foolishness', meaning both madness and bad judgement, the tragedy of *King Lear* (1608) (play and king) seems to be resumed: the tragedy of a king that through poor judgement loses his kingdom and, by losing it, falls into madness. For Lear the loss of a kingdom is the loss of his identity: self-exiled from his own kingship, he ceases to be a king in order to become 'nothing', he puts himself out of those attributes that guarantee his position of power and thus join those who are at the margin of the civilized world, the 'fools'. To be outside, however, as we may understand, can mean to be *below* as well as to be *above* the sphere of the civilized world: the natural fool, into which Lear himself turns, is below because he/she does not possess the linguistic articulation of a rational person; on the other hand, the artificial fool, the Fool himself in the play, in a certain sense, finds himself through his own artifice above the social order, not for lack of skill with words, but by managing them too well, what allows him to transit through different spheres and social roles.

The fault in which Lear incurs, his tragic excess, is to believe indiscriminately in words, especially in those of his flatterers, his daughters. He trusts their words as a faithful reflex of reality and does not possess any mastery over them (as he does not, as well, has over the agents of his downfall); as a result it is in his fall, pulled by the flux of language into a whirlpool of the fragmentary discourse of delirium. The Fool in his turn presents himself as a master of oblique discourse: he plays with words instead of being dragged by them. He is, like the tempest, a destructive agent for the consciousness of the king: his role consists in destructuring the false perceptions of the Lear about language and, thus, allow him the radical restructuring of his consciousness.

Certainly, language is one of the central elements of the play, formally as well as thematically. According to Andrew J. Mckenna, in *King Lear* "Shakespeare sets language, rather than character, center stage" (2019, p. 4) while for Sheldon P. Zitner, "language is not only the vehicle for King Lear's questions, but one of them" (1974, p. 18), and constitutes one of the main motifs of the play. Zitner identifies still as yet another important dimension of the play the contrast between "decorous speech" (1974, p. 5) and "*authentic language*" (1974, p. 11), "*false speech*" and "true seeing" (1974, p. 6), the language of the

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court (“*that glib and oily art / To speak and purpose not*[1]” [I.I.227-228]), which rather speaks what is expected than expresses real intentions, and the authentic language, which though many times reduced to rusticity, obscurity, or even silence, desires to communicate earnestly.

What becomes evident in the play, thus, as we try to argue is this precise contrast between rhetoric, elaborate language of the court and the civilized and aristocratic world, where its artificial, instrumentalizable character is emphasised, and the more natural language of the world at the margins, of the madmen and fools, where it is perhaps possible to perceive flashes of a certain autonomy of language itself, where it, free of constrictions of rhetoric and decorum, expresses more than the characters are capable of anticipating or intending. Thus, the fault in which Lear incur, we argue, consists in trusting the first and ignoring the second, and his education throughout the tragedy consists in a complete immersion in the world of natural language, a truly ‘poetic possession’, in order to, thus, gain the intelligence of the true nature of language and be able to remedy the fault incurred through his blind faith in words.

2 Language veiled and revealed

We begin our analysis by considering the first scene, in which we highlight and later analyze four modes of relation to language displayed by the characters: the rhetorical discourse, conscious of its own artificiality, of Goneril and Regan, which expresses more than it should; the insufficient discourse of Cordelia, which says less than it could; the naïve credulity of Lear, which trusts appearances and superficial meaning; and the sincere simplicity of Kent, for whom there is still a reachable reality beyond the enunciable.

In the first two cases, language, as a system of socially conventionalized signs which operate like a “[v]ehicle for the expression or exchanging of thoughts, concepts, knowledge, and information” (BUSSMANN, 1998, p. 627), is hindered from performing its original function, that is, to communicate and to reveal. For Goneril and Regan it is severed from the real feelings of the speakers and subjugated to their own interests, inflated by hyperboles that rather act upon the listener than communicate them something. On the other hand, for Cordelia language constitutes a code without value, it is incapable of matching the feelings that it must express and, therefore, can communicate nothing beyond what, for Cordelia, is already self-evident. In the other two cases, for Lear and Kent, there still persists a naïve faith in the truth of words: for Lear, what he hears tends to become something true, while what he says must

[1] “a arte untuosa e melíflua / De falar sem propósito” (SHAKESPEARE, 2020, p. 106).

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be complied with as a law; and for Kent, reason has precedence over courtly rhetoric, and is capable of unveiling its lies. For both, for better or worse, language is taken as transparent, a mirror image of reality, and from this, it seems, results a kind of fifth discourse in the play, an expressive capacity of language itself, autonomous in relation to the characters, which emerges in the, and through the, speeches of Lear and Kent in the form of ironic tragedy, anticipatory, latent in the polysemy and ambiguity of words.

As for Goneril and Regan, it is patent the instability of their discourses, the provisionality of their words. Goneril first opens her declaration of love to Lear with the sentence "*I love you more than words can wield the matter*" (I.I.56) and, however, continues for six more verses filling with flattering rhetoric this love which allegedly cannot be expressed, concluding still by saying that such is "*A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable*" (I.I.61), an affirmation whose ambiguity undermines its own apparent intertwining with the unsayable of love: if Goneril intends to affirm that her love is so big that it makes her words insufficient to express it, it is also possible to read in the them that it is the smallness of her love that, in truth, and therefore, makes her "breath poor" and "speech unable". Regan, the same way, resorts to hyperboles in order to mask her real feelings, affirming even that she is "*alone felicitate / In your dear highness' love*" (I.I.77-78), but without, however, refusing the marriage that is offered her (what, if we believed her words, would mean to her complete unhappiness).

For Cordelia, in turn, the word is also severed from the real, but contrary to what occurs with her sisters, her language is truly insufficient to express her love. To her, her love is "*More richer than my tongue*" (I.I. 80), and she must, thus, only "*Love, and be silent*" (I.I.63). It is, however, her sincere naivety that makes her fall out of favour in the eyes of the king; it is her lack of the intelligence of the word (mastered by Goneril and Regan and later by the Fool) that betrays her, because, when Lear asks "*what can you say to draw / A third more opulent than your sisters?*" (I.I. 87-88) Cordelia is only capable of answering literally, "*Nothing*" (I.I.89), because she can say nothing that is more grandiose that her sisters have already expressed. In the three characters, thus, we see how the word is out of step with reality, by being above it (with Goneril and Regan), and thus having primacy, or by being below it (with Cordelia), and thus being of a second order.

The opposite occurs with Kent and Lear: for them language is capable of expressing truth, that is, language is still capable of referring (or appear to refer) to a reality outside and different from itself. Kent, desiring to instil back sense into the king's judgement, revokes the due rhetoric and speaks "unmannerly" (I.I.151), for "to plainness honour's bound" (I.I.154); he intends to, in his discourse, to cleanse Lear's perception and to reveal the true feelings of his daughters, the unexpressed faithfulness of Cordelia and the hypocrisy of the words of Regan and Goneril. The king, however, also believes in

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ISSN: 2317-2347 – v. 12, n. 2 (2023)
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such ‘transparency’ of language, in the honest correspondence between word and thing, expression and feeling, and thus takes as true that which he hears (or rather, what he desires to hear). In the flattery of Goneril and Regan he believes to find their hearts reflected, without suspecting that their speech might feign more than their real value, while he takes the ‘nothing’ of Cordelia also as a direct expression of her feelings, and not as it is in fact, an assertion about the insufficiency of words.

What we intend to highlight concerning the speeches of Kent and Lear is the fact that it is in these, the speeches of characters for whom language reflects (or should reflect) a stable reality outside it, that the words reflect prophetically Lear’s future downfall. Kent urges the king to revert his condemnation of Cordelia, asking him to “*Reverse thy doom*” (I.I.155): in these words we can understand that Lear must revoke his doom so that he may, thus, avoid his own ruin, that will incur from it. Lear, in the same way, referring to his own old age and the approachment of death, uses the expression “crawl toward death”, what, in the ambiguity of ‘crawl’, foreshadows the state of childishness in which the king will find himself upon giving his power to his daughters and making them, metaphorically, his mothers. The same foreshadowing appears when Lear abjures his paternity of Cordelia, saying “*Here I disclaim all my paternal care, / Propinquity and property of bloood*” (I.I.117-118): with this declaration, Lear is, ironically, renouncing his position as patriarchy, all of his possessions and his kingship (properties of his blood, lineage). Of even greater dramatic irony still is the unconscious association that Lear makes of himself with the image of Saturn, the god that is deposed by his son, when he affirms that “*The barbarous Scythian*, / *Or he that makes his generations messes / To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom / Be as well neighbour’d*” (I.I.120-123): ‘Scythian’ is in truth the ‘scyth-ian’, ‘the one of the scyth’, that is, Saturn, the same that make of his sons (“generations”) meals (“messes”) in order to sate his appetite. With this unconscious assumption of the image of the god, Lear seals his fate as the king who will be deposed from his throne by his two daughters.

With this analysis we propose the reading that something of the order of an autonomous element (be it ‘fate’, ‘nature’, or ‘language’) makes itself present (and sometimes erupts) in the speech of the characters that believe in words, so that the polysemies latent in their discourse seem to anticipate future developments of the story, reading possibilities retroactively appear to be signs of things to come, as the initial “nothing” of Cordelia (I.I.89), which will haunt the rest of the play from then on, constantly reappearing in the speech of other characters, to the point that its presence is almost felt as a character in itself. This autonomous element presents itself in the play through various facets, all of them interlinked and point to the same transpersonal dimension. It is the Nature that punishes the Lear’s foolishness, it is the cosmic order wants its reinstatement, it is the perennial wisdom that shows through the wit and jokes

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of the Fool. Beside these, it is the poetic language, the chaotic language of the madmen and the elementary language of the poets. It is this language which refracts in Lear's bouts of rage, presages to his madness, first showing up in Lear's imprecations against Cordelia, when the majestic plural of civilized formality is for the first time abandoned and the ancient pagan imaginary is evoked, and the play passes from the political register to the cosmic, apocalyptic and grotesque, in which "*The vines of France and milk of Burgundy*" (I.I.86) give place to Saturn's anthropophagic feast. The same occurs a second time, when Lear, cursing Goneril for dismissing his retinue, evokes Nature as a goddess in order she may make his daughter sterile. Here imprecation becomes conjuration, magical evocation made of bodily synecdoches ("*womb*", "*brow*", "*cheeks*" [I.IV.275, 281, 282]), animalistic similes ("*sharper than a serpent's tooth*" [I. 285]), and diction of the order of the grotesque ("*derogate body*", "*child of spleen*" [I.IV.277, 279]). Later, while being vexed by his last daughter, Regan, Lear's speech begins to fail and he does not find word to express his feelings: "*I will have such revenges on you both, / That all the world shall – I will do such thing,– / What they are, yet I know not: but they shall be / The terrors of the earth*" (II.IV.306-308). In this passage we perceive how, at the brink of madness, Lear's thought and syntax begins to fracture and how, from between their fissures, the fury of the elements emerge and threaten to usurp the king's mind. And here there is as well a last play on words, before the next appearance of Lear: refusing to cry, the king declares that "*this heart / Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws, / Or ere I'll weep*" (II.IV.311-312). The ambiguity is found on the word 'flaw', which in the present context means "an outburst of strong feeling" (FLAW, 2011), but implying also "a quick, intense burst, especially of wind, rain, or snow" (FLAW, 2014), it foreshadows the fateful scene of the tempest in the next act.

3 The language of the fool

The language that the fool employs, in its turn, is distinct from that of the other characters. His discourse is disjunctive, oblique, borrowed. He makes use of proverbs, sayings, songs and jokes; he avails himself of the metaphorical unfolding latent in the speech of his interlocutors in order to unveil some wisdom, as is shown in the first scene that he appears, when Lear threatens him with the whip because he has implied that the king behaved like a fool and answers him that truth itself is like a dog that must be dealt with a whip (I.IV.). The Fool's discourse is pregnant with ambiguities, but, different from the polysemy of Lear and Kent, his are of a deliberate use, are not prophetic, but present; and his is not a dramatic irony, but a witty one. The Fool approaches the cunning characters in his capacity for linguistic manipulation, but the great difference lies in the use that he makes of it, that is, not to veil "dark

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purposes", but to reveal truth. When Lear warns him that he is talking more that he is allowed to ("*Take heed, sirrah- the whip*" [I.IV.104]), the Fool takes the word "whip" and with it constructs a simile which, in its proverbial form, speaks a wisdom that Lear must hear: "*Truth's a dog must to kennel; he must be whipp'd out, when / Lady the brach may stand by the fire and stink*" (I.IV.105-106). But while Kent resorts to the transparent word of the sincere discourse and thus risks banishment, the Fool veils his truth under the opacity of the metaphor, which transmits truth surreptitiously, saving him from incurring directly the fury of the king. The Fool operates with ingenuity: Lear threatens to whip him; from this the Fool develops the simile of the truthful speech (his own) as a dog that must be whipped and expelled to a kennel, what refers back both to the king's threat as well as to Kent's banishment; making use of the association between truthful discourse and the canine image, he then compares Lear's daughter to female dogs ("brach") implying by the insult (and "stink") that they represent a corrupted, false discourse. Thus, the Fool turns the language (and the world) of the others upside down in order to show the hidden truth.

Such is, according to Doug Herman (2008), the function of the Fool in the play: "*The Fool* […] *comes from outside society in order to break it down. His tool for doing so is language, manipulated in the uncommon manner of folly*" (HERMAN, 2008, p. 113). When he speaks with discontinuous syntax, of apparent illogicity, cutting his discourse with songs and charades that come 'out of nothing' and lead to 'nothing' (as in the jarring discontinuity of this speech to Lear: "*And ladies too, they will not let me have all the fool to myself; they'll be snatching. Give me an egg, nuncle, and I'll give thee two crowns*" [I.IV.146-147]), the Fool deconstructs the artificial stability of language in order to the reveal its authentic instability and fluidity, its chaotic nature. His insubordination, as well, has the same purpose, because, scorning formality, he addresses Lear as "sirrah" and Kent as "fool", at the same time that he turns upside down the hierarchical order of society and mirror the treatment that receives, showing that words are not fixed. Throughout all of these games, Herman proposes,

> The Fool is intentionally beginning to deconstruct language as Lear knows it, and the king's realization of this marks the beginning of his descent into madness. He finds himself in a frightening world where not only has his imperious language ceased to have the desired effect, but his constant companion speaks incessantly in this deranged language of folly (HERMAN, 2008, p. 112).

We see, then, that the Fool has a didactic role in the play, that his unpredictable discourse has for its purpose (as a caustic agent) to destructure the old, erroneous conceptions of Lear concerning the nature of language. In this perspective, the Fool appears less as a human character and more as a natural force, a genius whose element is air, the airy discourse of irony and the disorientation of the

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windstorm. In this aspect, the Fool anticipates, for Lear, in the social world (of discourse), what the tempest will mean in the natural world (of physicality): the attack that he causes upon logic and social conventions anticipate the assault of the elements over the king's body.

Such visions justifies itself in the web of symbolic associations established throughout the play. Etymologically, 'fool' is relate to 'air' (coming from the Latin '*follis*', 'bellows, windbag'[2]); through a play on words, it opposes 'foul' (as in the "foul disease" [I.I. 174] of Lear's madness), the miasmal odour of lie that the Fool identifies in Goneril and Regan, which, like "Lady brach", "stand by the fire and stink" (I.IV.106), and which for Lear is a "pestilent gall" (I.IV.107). For this reason the Fool insists many times during the play on the importance of the nose, which, according to his, serves "*to keep one's eyes of either side's nose; that what a man cannot smell out, he may spy into*" (I.V.21-21). And the nose also, to the Fool, allows for a knowledge more profound than the eyes allow, because "*All that follow their noses are led by their eyes but blind men; and there's not a nose among twenty but can smell him that's stinking*" (II.IV.74-77), that is, the eyes can deceive, but the nose can smell the truth without being misled. The nose, thus, is associated with a natural wisdom, instinctive, animal, that the civilized characters of the court have forgotten. This motive will come back near the end of the play, when Lear, mad, but having still reason in his madness, come to understand, after his ordeals, the nature of his error, and the duplicity of his flatterers. He declares that "*When the rain came to wet me once, and the wind to make me chatter, when the thunder would not peace at my bidding—there I found 'em, there I smelt 'em out*"(IV.VI.114-117). Within the symbolic context of the play, the expression that Lear uses to communicate his epiphany becomes pertinent: he "smellt" the lies. When we put this expression in perspective along other instances of the same motif, we can see take shape an species of parallel symbolic narrative, an interweaving of symbols, ideas and connotations which take place across the speeches in the play: the Fool and the tempest represent the same destructive force, the chaotic wind that disperses the 'bad smell' of falsehood and the artificial language, and that allows the blind king to understand the world through a more natural vision, more elementary and true.

4 The language of madness

[2] https://www.etymonline.com/word/fool (Acesso 30 junho 2018).

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The tempest against which Lear rants (Act III, Scene II) is, to use T. S. Eliot's phrase, the objective correlative[3] of his madness, because the fury of the elements symbolize the chaotic state of his mind. Lear himself recognizes this relation, as when he declares that "*When the mind's free, / The body's delicate. The tempest in my mind / Doth from my senses take all feeling*" (III.IV.14-16). However, inside the frame of the symbolic logic of the text, this scene appears as more than a poetic artifice. It is already foreshadowed in Act II, Scene IV, when Lear, refusing Regan offer of shelter, declares that "*No, rather I abjure all roofs, and choose / To wage war against the enmity o' the air*" (II.IV.228-229). Here, as in the passages analyzed previously, the language seems to acquire a certain expressive autonomy and a prophetic power, anticipatory, independent of the consciousness of intention of the speaker: the king unconsciously anticipate in his words the future event, when in the open field, under no roof, he will wage war against the winds. As a sort of prophetic polysemy, that is, as a reading possibility that anticipates future events of elements of the play, we can also read the "roof" that Lear abjure as the "roof" of his head, the 'civilizational lid' of cohesive discourse that keeps his personality inside the enclosed space of his mind. Once this roof is abjured, the spirit of Lear will spread out and mingle with nature in the tempest scene. The description that a nobleman does in the previous scene of Lear's madness corroborates this reading. In his words, *unbonneted he runs*" (III.I.14) and the king "*tear*[s] *his white hair, / Which impetuous blasts, with eyeless rage, / Catch in their fury, and make nothing of;*" (III.I.7-9): Lear, with a bare head, without "roof", tears his hair (symbol, we may read, of his thoughts) that are scattered by the tempest. Kent also, upon finding the king, emphasises this point, exclaiming "*Alack, bare-headed*" (III.II.61-62), and the Fool, in his wisdom, advises that "*He that has a house to put's head on has a good head-piece*" (III.II.25).

But the image still unfolds further. Back in Act II, Scene IV, the scene that, as we have seen, prophesies the king's madness, we find his strange case of hysteria. This, we may understand, is not a clinical case, but a poetic one. Lear, overtaken by fantastical symptoms, exclaims "*O, how this mother swells up toward my heart! / Hysterica passio, down, thou climbing sorrow, / Thy element's bellow!*" (II.IV.61-63). The hysteria that will erupt in the tempest is felt to rise from the depths of the earth, from its bowels and Lear's. It is a maternal force, feminie, and as such, its elements is, symbolically, below: it is "the terrors of the earth" (II.IV.309) that Lear promises to launch against his daughters. It seeks to erupt through the king, and this is what will take place soon after: amid the tempest, the feminine force of hysteria will burst through Lear, without "roof" in his head to hold down the effusion of elemental force

[3] "*a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that* particular *emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked*" (ELIOT, T. S., 1932, p. 145).

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that dominates him, and will scatter his personality amidst nature. Lear is, in fact, like Edgar, possessed by the chthonic spirit of poetic language – natural, feminine, hysterical, mad. Lear, nature and poetry, then are one; he, in this moment, is no longer the Briton king and becomes instead the fantastic king of nature. His words of command are no longer directed toward his civil subjects, over which he has no longer power, but now turns toward the elements: : "*Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow! / You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout*" (III.II.1-2).

From then on, for Lear, language rises above reality. When he meets Edgar, pretending to be mad Poor Tom, the king sees in him a reflex of himself, inquiring of him "*Hast thou given all to thy two daughters?*" (III.IV.49), even before trying to know his identity, and little later "*Couldst thou save nothing? Didst thou give them all?*" (III.IV.66), as if addressing his own consciousness, because for Lear, he seems to affirm, all madness must surely come from the betrayal of daughters, a fact that unites all lunatics under the same, or similar, identity. Soon after, the crowning of his frenzy will take place with the fantastic trial of Regan and Goneril (Act III, Scene VI), in which Lear projects his imagination over reality, seeing before him his daughters, and managing a delirious processes with the help of Edgar and the Fool, who corroborate with his chimera. In this moment each character, in his own way, responds Lear's fantasy and elaborates it further in turn: the Fool pretends to address the Goneril that Lear sees, at the same time that he mocks the situation, apologizing for having confused her with the stool that the vision actually is, inverting, thus, fantasy and reality ("*Cry you mercy, I took you for a joint-stool*" [III.VI.53]); Edgar, in turn, runs with the comparison that Lear makes of the daughters to bitches, literalizing the metaphor inside his own feigned madness ("*For, with throwing thus my head / Dogs leap the hatch, and all are fled*" [III.VI.75-76]). Thus, each character in turn takes part in the creation of a linguistic-imaginary reality that establishes itself (for everyone besides Lear) as a theatrical game, an invisible play within the play.

After the trial, we find Lear again in Act IV, Scene VI. When he reappears, his speech is changed, he has in his utterance the madness of Edger, his disjointed syntax and incoherent logic, together with the witty and vulgar wisdom of the Fool; and more: he comes as the herald of Nature, fantastically dressed with flowers, and through him Nature will reveal its own wisdom (previously expressed by the Fool): *Let copulation thrive*" (IV.VI.128), says Lear, "*To't, luxury, pell-mell!*" (IV.VI.131), proclaiming now the creative side of the primordial chaos, in contrast to the destructive element symbolized by the tempest. After his dissolution in madness, Lear now knows the human imperfection and its animal nature, he recognizes the hypocrisy of the accuser ("*Thou hotly lust'st to use her in that kind for which thou whipp'st her. The usurer hangs the cozener*" [IV.VI.178-179]) and, with this new impression, professes Nature's justice: "*None does offend—none, I say, non*e" (IV.VI.184). But the learning that he receives is still more profound

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and personal. At the apex of his madness, Lear becomes for the first time lucid, and with clarity understands that the cause of his downfall lied in the blind trust that he had on the lies of his flatterers:

> *They flattered me like a dog and told me I had white hairs in my beard ere the black ones were there. To say "Ay" and "No" to everything that I said "Ay" and "No" to was no good divinity. When the rain came to wet me once, and the wind to make me chatter, when the thunder would not peace at my bidding—there I found 'em, there I smelt 'em out. Go to, they are not men o' their words. They told me I was everything. 'Tis a lie, I am not ague-proof* (IV.VI. 110-119).

The renewed consciousness of the king now shows through in the form of an understanding of the difference between language and reality. Perceiving that his command has no effect over the elements, he understands that between the word and the deed there is a split: what one says and what one is are different worlds. Lear had to return to the womb of nature and become a child again in order to learn that people lie.

5 Closing remarks

Lear begins the play as someone that conceives language as something undistinguished from reality, a faithful mirror of nature: such is, we argue, his real fault, the hubris that brings him to his fall. When language fails him, when at last he sees that the word is unstable and untrustworthy, that it is malleable on the lips of flatterer according to their design, the whole world, to Lear, collapses along with his faith: the collapse of the word becomes for him that of reality, which, to the naïve king, is undistinguishable. From mirror of the order of the civilized world, language reverts to substance, poetic prime matter of Nature, and Lear, through the art of the Fool and the action of the elements, is dragged by its chaotic current into a world where truly and ironically language is not distinguished from reality (like the word of a magician, the word of the lunatic and of the poet rearrange the world).

With our analysis, this, we tried to highlight that the transformation suffered by Lear along the play passes necessarily, and perhaps primarily, through the linguistic dimension: language is the first question that puts in motion the tragedy, it is the root of Lear's mistake and Cordelia's fault, the instrument that Goneril, Regan, and Edmund operate for their dark purposes; but also, we notice, language itself sometimes seems to become something of a veritable agent within the play, rather using the character than being used by them, as it shows the most in the moments in which ruptures in the rationality of Lear's discourse let shine through an expressive fore or potentiality distinct from its intention or control. If Lear's initial fault derives form his inadequacy and superficial perception of language, his tragic arch

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naturally goes through the comprehension of its pluridimensionality, its multiple facets and depths. WHan at last the fabric of the rational and adequate discourse unravels completely with the king's madness, then, undone the illusoriness weaved by the rhetoric art, there takes free course through Lear's consciousness (and body) language in its 'raw state', formless, given more to association than cohesion, the poetic word, in short, that possesses him in order to rectify his excess.

CRediT
Acknowledgement: Not applicable.
Financing: Not applicable.
Conflicts of interest: The authors certify that they have no commercial or associative interest that represents a conflict of interest in relation to the manuscript.
Ethical Approval: Not applicable.
Contributor Roles: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AGUIAR, Angiuli Copetti de.

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