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## The Autumn King: Remembering the Land in *King Lear*

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RETURNED FROM FRANCE, Cordelia reports a sighting of her father:

he was met even now,  
As mad as the racked sea, singing aloud,  
Crowned with rank fumitor and furrow-weeds,  
With burdocks, hemlock, nettles, cuckoo-flowers,  
Darnel, and all the idle weeds that grow  
In our sustaining corn.

$$(18.2-6)^1$$

Cordelia's description takes its power from its resonances with other myths, stories, and rituals of death usually followed by resurrection: Christ crowned with thorns; the Green Man or "wild man," whose yearly sacrifice ensures the fertility of the land and its people; and the Biblical Job.<sup>2</sup> But for Shakespeare and his first audiences, this power would have been amplified and inflected by knowledge of the characteristics and properties of the "idle weeds" so carefully and deliberately itemized by Cordelia, and because this image of a neglected harvest fulfills the prophecy of "dearth" made by Edmund in scene 2 of the play.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The History of King Lear*, ed. Stanley Wells (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008); all quotations from the play will be taken from this edition and cited in the text by act, scene, and line. “[B]urdocks” is a textual emendation: the 1608 quarto has “hor-docks” and the 1623 folio has “Hardokes,” neither of which are known as plant names (18.4n).

<sup>2</sup> Frankie Rubinstein, "Speculating on Mysteries: Religion and Politics in *King Lear*," *Renaissance Studies* 16 (2002): 235–62, esp. 259; Joy Kennedy, "Shakespeare's *King Lear*," *The Explicator* 60 (2002): 60–62; Philippa Berry, *Of Chastity and Power: Elizabethan Literature and the Unmarried Queen* (London: Routledge, 1989), 90–92; and Steven Marx, *Shakespeare and the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), 59–78. See also *Hamlet*, 4.7.141, 144, in *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, gen. ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005). Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from Shakespeare's works other than *King Lear* refer to this edition.

<sup>3</sup> "Dearth" is an addition made by Edmund to Gloucester's list of the possible effects of "These late eclipses" (2.101–7), completing the allusion to Rev. 6:1–8. The edition of the Geneva Bible used for this and all other Biblical citations is *The Bible and Holy Scriptures conteyned in the Olde and Newe Testament* (Geneva, 1560).

The food shortages of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries resulted in a heightened awareness among the populace of the dangers of, and their vulnerability to, failing harvests and corrupted food. *King Lear's* engagement with such themes enables us to perceive the ways in which the shift to early agrarian capitalism involved a concomitant shift in ecological relations. Using a synthesis of ecocritical and historicist methodologies, this essay argues that Shakespeare deploys images of crop contamination in this and other history plays to register and articulate enduring anxieties over relations between court and country, legitimacy and bastardy, and elite power and popular resistance. In particular, *King Lear's* emphasis on the politics of food supply, encompassing land ownership, the management of natural resources, and the relationship between the monarch and his or her land, is articulated through recurring tropes of mimicry and subversion. Insisting on the ecocritical dimension that is so often written out of historicist interpretations, we argue that the inclusion of weeds in Cordelia's description of her father opens up a political reading of *King Lear* that would have been clearly legible to Shakespeare's own audience members, many of whom were, like the playwright from Warwickshire, recent arrivals in London from surrounding grain-supplying regions.

The first part of this essay scrutinizes a tradition of textual editing and stagings that ignores the arable setting of the play's climax. The significance of that arable setting, which provides a meaningful context for the weeds in Lear's crown, is then established within a reading sensitive to the closely interwoven botanical, medical, and political debates present not just in *King Lear*, but also in other Shakespeare histories and tragedies. The image of a mad and dispossessed king wearing weeds for a crown is used to contextualize King James's fashioning, at the beginning of his reign, as a "landlord," both in terms of contemporary concerns over sustenance and food distribution, and in light of Shakespeare's own activities as a landowner and convicted grain hoarder. Shakespeare's close interest in the resonant image and conceit of crop infestation, and in the equally overdetermined concept of "pure" wheat, leads us via a wheat-laden coat of arms to reassess the significance of Gerard Legh's *Accedens of Armory* (printed in six editions between 1562 and 1612)—a neglected source for the story of *King Lear*—for what it reveals about Shakespeare's presentation of changing patterns of land ownership, inheritance, and sovereignty.

Renewed emphasis on material culture, including the domestic and wider environments, and on the intersection of literary and medical discourses in early modern studies has contributed to the emergence of recent scholarship on Shakespeare's portrayal of the production and consumption of food.<sup>4</sup> This work

<sup>4</sup> Examples of this scholarship include: Joan Fitzpatrick, *Food in Shakespeare: Early Modern Dietaries and the Plays* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007); *Renaissance Food from Rabelais to*

is an important corrective to earlier criticism, in which Shakespeare's allusions to plants were read primarily for their aesthetic and folkloric associations. It overlaps with new historicist readings of the influence of food unrest (particularly the 1607–8 Midlands Uprising) on the portrayal of themes of grain supply and civil war in plays such as *Coriolanus*, as well as with recent trends in ecocritical readings of Shakespeare.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, scholarship continues to overlook the ecological contexts that are central to the politics of Shakespeare's plays. A consideration of Cordelia's description of her father in scene 18 enables us to see how this context has been distorted, both textually and in performance.

Among the most potent misprisions of the description is Peter Brook's seminal 1962 production of *King Lear*. Filmed in 1970, Paul Scofield's abdicating monarch is situated amid stark, bare sets that suggest a postapocalyptic winter landscape. Brook's staging was typical of the post–World War II shift toward desiccated, psychologized dramatizations of *King Lear* that registered the paranoid climate and denuded mental landscapes of the Cold War. This nihilistic interpretation found critical support in Jan Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1964), which presented the play as an absurdist drama, a Shakespearean "Endgame."<sup>6</sup> Brook's influence (and through Brook, Brecht, Beckett, and Kott) continues to be felt. Indeed, his is largely the image of the world of *King Lear* inherited by modern audiences. More recent productions, including Adrian Noble's 1982 and 1993 Royal Shakespeare Company productions and Trevor Nunn's 2007 ground-zero version, which starred Ian McKellen as a ludic Lear, find the mental disintegration of the lonely king reflected in and enhanced by a barren, dead set. Today's audiences could be forgiven for thinking that in *King Lear* Shakespeare was wholly uninterested in the worked land as a meaningful context for his drama.

However, closer scrutiny reveals that the blasted vision of Lear's play world actually derives from a series of unauthorized editorial inventions. The erroneous idea of the mad and dispossessed king in scene 18 cavorting on a "blasted

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*Shakespeare: Culinary Readings and Culinary Histories*, ed. Joan Fitzpatrick (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2010); and Robert Appelbaum, *Aguecheek's Beef, Belch's Hiccup and Other Gastronomic Interjections: Literature, Culture and Food among the Early Moderns* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> An example of this earlier scholarship is Henry Nicolson Ellacombe's *The Plant-Lore and Garden-Craft of Shakespeare* (Exeter, UK: privately printed, [1878]). Recent ecocritical readings of Shakespeare include Gabriel Egan, *Green Shakespeare: From Ecopolitics to Ecocriticism* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2006); and *Early Modern Ecostudies: From the Florentine Codex to Shakespeare*, ed. Thomas Hallock, Ivo Kamps, and Karen L. Raber (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski (London: Methuen, 1964), 127–62. Peter Brook provided the preface to this English edition.

heath"—a phrase which, as Ogden notes, comes from *Macbeth*, not *Lear*<sup>7</sup>—was established by Nahum Tate in his 1681 rendering of the play, when he used "*Desert Heath*" to describe the setting for scenes in Act 3.<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Rowe picked up the term for his 1709 edition.<sup>9</sup> But as the 1608 quarto clearly states, the climax of the play and of Lear's madness takes place in a "high-grown field" full of "sustaining corn" (18.7, 6). The king's weaving of a crown that incorporates weeds, including "furrow-weeds," "rank fumitory," and "darnel," only makes sense if this is arable, worked land.<sup>10</sup> Lear's movement from the storm and hovel of the middle portion of the play to this lush and fertile landscape has a powerful dramatic function, heightening (only to frustrate) the audience's expectations of redemption in the final scenes.

The reference to a "high-grown field" encodes knowledge that, although forgotten by the twenty-first century, would have been second nature to early modern audiences.<sup>11</sup> It is vital to recover this knowledge in order to clarify textual details that otherwise seem puzzling. For instance, in modern fields of wheat or barley, mature plants stand less than a meter tall. These so-called "dwarf" cereals are a product of twentieth-century plant breeding and biotechnology.<sup>12</sup> In Shakespeare's time, you could get lost in a wheat field, among crop plants (and their weeds) two meters and more in height.<sup>13</sup> This explains why Cordelia's scout glimpses and then quickly loses sight of Lear: he can hear him singing, but

<sup>7</sup> *Macbeth*, 1.3, takes place on "this blasted heath" (1.3.77). See James Ogden, "Lear's Blasted Heath," in *Lear from Study to Stage: Essays in Criticism*, ed. James Ogden and Arthur H. Scouten (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1997), 135–45; and Henry S. Turner, "King Lear Without: The Heath," *Renaissance Drama* 28 (1997): 161–83.

<sup>8</sup> *The History of King Lear Acted at the Duke's Theatre Reviv'd with Alterations by N. Tate* (London, 1681), 3.1, p. 24. Tate transforms Cordelia's list of "idle weeds" into "idle flowers": "rank Femiter and furrow Weeds, / With Berries, Burdocks, Violets, Dazies, Poppies, / And all the idle Flow'rs that grow / In our sustaining Corn" (43).

<sup>9</sup> *The Works of Mr. William Shakespear*, ed. Nicholas Rowe, 6 vols. (London, 1709). In Rowe's edition, 5.3.1 is situated on "A Heath" (2509); 3.3 on "Part of the Heath" (2513); and 4.1 on "An open Country" (2523).

<sup>10</sup> According to John Gerard's *Herball*, the varieties of fumitory "grow in corne fieldes among Barley and other graine" and darnel "grow[s] in fields among wheate and barly"; see *The Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes* (London, 1597), 929, 71.

<sup>11</sup> On Shakespeare's Warwickshire upbringing as an influence on his presentation of plants and the environment, including discussion of Cordelia's description of her father, see Jonathan Bate, *Soul of the Age: The Life, Mind and World of William Shakespeare* (London: Viking, 2008), 36–59. Even if Shakespeare had no direct experience of arable farming, he was surrounded by people who did: his paternal grandfather, Richard Shakespeare, was a farmer; his mother, Mary Arden, was the daughter of a yeoman farmer; and Anne Hathaway's father, Richard, was also a yeoman farmer.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Hedden, "The Genes of the Green Revolution," *Trends in Genetics* 19 (2003): 5–9.

<sup>13</sup> In *The Herball*, Gerard observes that the stalks of varieties of hemlock can grow to "fue or sixe feete high" (903).

all he can see of the former king is the crown of “idle weeds” as it skims across the tops of the wheat.

The image of a heath, with its accrued layers of resonance as a psychological waste land in *King Lear*, is misleading. Further, despite the fact that the description in scene 18 clearly, and in a very particular manner, describes a crown of arable weeds, we tend to think of Lear as being adorned with a crown of wild flowers—as portrayed, for example, in Trevor Nunn’s 2007 production and as found on the striking cover of the Arden2 edition, where the crown is a garland woven with daisies and clover. As with the “blasted heath,” this error of representation results from editorial distortions of the play text and through conflation with another of Shakespeare’s tragedies. Late seventeenth-century stage directions have Lear entering in Act 4 “fantastically dressed with wild flowers”—a phrase fashioned from *Hamlet*, 4.7.140–41, in which Ophelia weaves “fantastic garlands” from “crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples.”<sup>14</sup> This corruption of the play text erases memories of Cordelia’s careful list of “idle weeds” and ameliorates the deeply unsettling nature and political implications of Lear’s madness by reimagining the former king in the guise of a childlike and innocent Ophelia.

It wouldn’t have been as easy for Shakespeare’s first audiences to overlook the significance of the “high-grown field” with its “idle weeds.” Recovering this knowledge has important consequences for the way in which time, as well as space, operates in the play. That the field is “high-grown” suggests that the climax of the play takes place in high summer or early autumn, that is, mid- to late August. This time frame is confirmed by the “idle weeds” themselves: hemlock and darnel mature with the corn in mid-August and September.<sup>15</sup> The final scenes are set in harvest time—at least, it *should* be harvest time. “Ripeness is all” (23.11), Edgar states, a remark both literal and figurative and desperately ironic. At the moment when farmers and laborers should be reaping the fields and laying store for the long winter ahead, the land and its people are embroiled in civil war and foreign invasion, and the best that the former king can do is to pick poisonous weeds and leave the “sustaining corn” to rot. In a pun that plays on “weeds” as both plants and apparel, and on “crown” as a political, physical,

<sup>14</sup> In the “Field Scene” of Act 4 of Tate’s edition (1681), Lear enters, “a Coronet of Flowers on his Head. Wreaths and Garlands about him” (47). See also *The History of King Lear . . . Collated with the Oldest Copies, and Corrected; With Notes Explanatory and Critical*, by Mr. Theobald (Dublin, 1739), in which Lear is described “drest madly with Flowers” (88). On the significance of Ophelia’s “garlands” and Lear’s crown of “idle weeds,” see Frank McCombie, “Garlands in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*,” *Notes and Queries* 28 (1981): 132–34.

<sup>15</sup> Gerard, 904, 71. Fumitory flowers in late May, but remains in flower until late summer, which “is the best time to be gathered” (929). Nettles “flourish in sommer” (571).



and botanical term, Lear's head is adorned with a crown crafted *from* the land—and, notably, its “idle weeds” rather than its “sustaining corn”—when he should be wearing the crown symbolic *of* the land. Lear as described in scene 18 is a mockery of the mystical and political doctrine of the king's two bodies and the intertwining of the body politic and the body natural: in dividing the land and bringing forward his own personal autumn, Lear has thrown the country into temporal confusion and his people are doomed to produce crops that they cannot harvest. In this time of national crisis, the “sustaining corn” is just as “idle” as the “weeds” that grow among it.

But reinforcing the sense that, as in *Hamlet*, time is out of joint, the season also seems to be late spring.<sup>16</sup> Desperate to aid her father, Cordelia asks that the “blest secrets” and “unpublished virtues of the earth” might “*Spring* with my tears” (ll. 16–18, emphasis added); indeed, one of the “idle weeds” in Lear's crown suggests that her prayer to turn back the calendar will bear fruit. “Cuckoo-flowers” were known as lady's smock, a delicate flower that, according to John Gerard's *Herball* (1597), blossoms in spring: “These flower for the most part in Aprill and Maie, when the Cuckowe doth begin to sing her pleasant notes without stammering.”<sup>17</sup> Shakespeare relies on the popular association between cuckoo flowers and spring in a song from the final scene of *Love's Labor's Lost* (5.2.879–87).<sup>18</sup> Shakespeare alludes to the cuckoo's habit of laying its eggs in another's nest throughout his plays; in *King Lear*, the Fool compares Goneril to the cuckoo.<sup>19</sup> But it is the associated notion of treachery from within—as cuckoldry, illegitimacy, and familial deception—that is most pertinent to *King Lear* and that aligns this flower to the other weeds in Lear's crown. The presence of cuckoo flowers seems to promise the hope of spring and a happy ending, while reiterating the betrayals that have led—and will lead—to tragedy. The coupling of death (or sacrifice) with hope of resurrection and restoration in Cordelia's description of the “crowned” Lear is thus signaled by a temporal confusion that is encoded in the land and its plants.

<sup>16</sup> *Hamlet*, 1.5.189. Steve Sohmer argues that the play's climax takes place in late spring in “The Lunar Calendar of Shakespeare's *King Lear*,” *Early Modern Literary Studies* 5.2 (1999): 2.1–17; <http://purl.oclc.org/emls/05-2/sohmlear.htm> (accessed 20 December 2011).

<sup>17</sup> Gerard, 203.

<sup>18</sup> The significance of “cuckoo-buds” in this song is discussed by Mats Rydén in “Shakespeare's Cuckoo-Buds,” *Studia Neophilologica* 49 (1977): 25–27, and in “The Contextual Significance of Shakespeare's Plant Names,” *Studia Neophilologica* 56 (1984): 155–62.

<sup>19</sup> “The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long / That it had its head bit off by its young” (*History of King Lear*, ed. Wells, 4.207–8). See also *Antony and Cleopatra*, “the cuckoo builds not for himself” (2.6.28); and *The Rape of Lucrece*, “Why should the worm intrude the maiden bud, / Or hateful cuckoos hatch in sparrows' nests” (ll. 847–48).

The consequence of Lear's division of the kingdoms is a land in which its subjects no longer know how to feed themselves or each other. As Pascale Drouet has observed, the world of *King Lear* is one of hunger.<sup>20</sup> The fields of wheat go unharvested and are overgrown with weeds—they are, as the Fool states, “wild” (11.100) and fit only for burning. There is “no food” for “Hoppedance,” who “cries in Tom’s belly for two white herring” (13.26–27); the Captain in scene 24 “cannot . . . eat dried oats” (ll. 37–38); the “white wheat” is “mildew[ed]” (11.105–6); and Albany challenges Edmund to fight “Ere I taste bread” (24.91), deferring the moment of eating. Whether as a result of possession by “the foul fiend Flibbertigibbet” (11.103) or, more likely, the madness and desperation induced by hunger, the population is compelled to consume poisons and waste rather than nourishing food: a citizen “eats coudung for salads; swallows the old rat and the ditch-dog; [and] drinks the green mantle of the standing pool” (ll. 117–19). Even Lear is reduced to requesting “raiment, bed, and food” from his daughters (7.313), and there is evidence to suggest that contemporary audiences associated Lear’s “madness” with the deliberate consumption of food waste: in *The Ballad of King Lear*, first published in 1620, Lear eats “What scullion boys set by” and is “glad to feed on beggars’ food.”<sup>21</sup>

Whatever their motivation, Goneril and Regan’s decision to reduce their father’s entourage during a time of dearth may have been seen by contemporary audiences as judicious. According to a sermon published in 1596 (“*this time of our Dearth*”), “Kings and Princes” must share some of the blame for famine, “who though their charge bee to provide for the good of the people . . . vterly neglect them, rather impouering their subiectes . . . burthnering them with taxes and subsidies” so that the royal court can be maintained with its “horses, hounds, hauks, harlots, [and] iesters.”<sup>22</sup> The image of Lear wearing a crown of weeds amid a field of unharvested corn is symptomatic of a disastrous and seemingly irrevocable breakdown in the production, distribution, and consumption of food within the kingdom. But in order to appreciate the subtlety of this image and its action as a prism for the play’s political and familial conflicts, we need to consider the valences for an early modern audience of the most noisome and rancorous of those “idle weeds,” the toxic wheat-mimicker darnel.

<sup>20</sup> Pascale Drouet, “‘I speak this in hunger for bread’: Representing and Staging Hunger in Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and *Coriolanus*,” in *Hunger on the Stage*, ed. Elisabeth Angel-Perez and Alexandra Poulain (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 2–16.

<sup>21</sup> *The Ballad of King Lear* is printed in Wells’s edition of *King Lear*, 277–85; esp. ll. 120, 127.

<sup>22</sup> *Three Christian Sermons Made by Lodouike Lauatere, Minister of Zuricke in Heluetia, of Famine and Dearth of Victuals: And Translated into English, as Being Verie Fit for This time of Our Dearth*, trans. W[illiam] Barlow (London, 1596), sigs. C8r–v.



The appearance of darnel in a litany of plants is a classical, specifically Virgilian, convention.<sup>23</sup> In book 1 of the *Georgics*, the growth of darnel and other weeds is a sign of the end of the Golden Age: henceforth, man must plough the soil and weed his crops to keep hunger at bay. This *topos* was appropriated by Christian writers to add color and detail to accounts of the fallen world: Du Bartas, for example, tells how the “grieved Earth” turns “our seed-Wheat-kernel/ To burn-grain Thistle, and to vapourie Darnel, / Cockle, wilde Oats, rough Burs, Corn-cumbring Tares.”<sup>24</sup> This postlapsarian world, in which the creation of new life is attended with pain and uncertainty, is what Lear invokes when he calls on the “goddess” nature to curse Goneril and make her barren (4.265–80). However, it is possible that in Shakespeare’s play Cordelia’s iteration of the classical-Christian convention is inflected by a passage from the anonymous *True Chronicle History of King Leir* (1605). Accompanied by his faithful courtier Perillus (Shakespeare’s Kent), Leir reflects on the ingratitude and treachery he has suffered at the hands of his eldest daughters, Gonorill and Ragan:

LEIR            Can kindnesse spring out of ingratitude?  
                   Or loue be reapt, where hatred hath bin sowne?  
                   Can Henbane ioyne in league with Methridate?  
                   Or Sugar grow in Wormwoods bitter stalke?  
                   It cannot be, they are too opposite:  
                   And so am I to any kindnesse here.  
                   I haue throwne Wormwood on the sugred youth,  
                   And like to Henbane poysoned the Fount,  
                   Whence flowed the Methridate of a childes goodwil:  
                   I, like an enuious thorne, haue prickt the heart,  
                   And turnd sweet Grapes, to sowre vnrelisht Sloes:  
                   The causelesse ire of my respectlesse brest,  
                   Hath sowrd the sweet milk of dame Natures paps:  
                   My bitter words haue gauld her hony thoughts,  
                   And weeds of rancour chokt the flower of grace.<sup>25</sup>

Using metaphors of corruption and poison, Leir blames himself for having converted that which is wholesome and nourishing into something that spreads disease, pain, and death. He is responsible for poisoning Nature’s pure offspring.

<sup>23</sup> Virgil mentions “unfeeding darnel” in *Georgics*, 1.153; see *The Eclogues and Georgics*, trans. C. Day Lewis, intro. R. O. A. M. Lyne (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), 56. On the use of this *topos* in *King Lear* and *Henry V*, see T. J. King, “‘Darnel’ in *King Lear*,” *Notes and Queries* 15 (1968): 141; and John H. Betts, “Classical Allusions in Shakespeare’s *Henry V* with Special Reference to Virgil,” *Greece & Rome*, 2nd ser., 15 (1968): 147–63.

<sup>24</sup> Guillaume de Salluste Du Bartas, *His Deuine Weekes and Workes Translated*, trans. Josuah Sylvester (London, 1605), 258.

<sup>25</sup> *The True Chronicle History of King Leir, and His Three Daughters, Gonorill, Ragan, and Cordella* (London, 1605), sig. H1r.

Developing Leir's botanical-medical metaphor, Perillus contends that "perfit good" simples ("hony, milke, Grape, Sugar, Methridate") cannot be corrupted by the presence of the "bad" ("the thorn, / The weed, the gall, the henbane & and wormewood").<sup>26</sup> Like *King Lear's* "idle weeds," the *True Chronicle History's* "weeds of rancour" symbolize the disastrous effects of the king's "unnatural" decision to divide the land and reject his one true daughter. Both lists include "henbane." In the latter play, the weeds are balanced by a list of "perfit good simples," each one of which was credited in early modern dietaries with nourishing and healing powers (or "virtues") and was used figuratively in political treatises as a remedy for heresy, schism, and insurrection.<sup>27</sup> Mithridate, for example, was believed to be a universal antidote, with particular powers against plague. For the preacher Thomas White, however, it was a panacea "against all treasons, seditions, alterations, [and] warres"; for Francis Trigge, writing in 1604, only mithridate could heal the destruction suffered by farmers and families as a result of enclosures.<sup>28</sup> The botanical-medical world of *King Lear* is markedly more complex. The Doctor prescribes sleep: "That to provoke in him / Are many simples operative, whose power / Will close the eye of anguish" (18.14–16). But in contrast to *The True Chronicle History*, with its comparatively unsophisticated set of "good" and "bad" simples, the land in scene 18 of *King Lear* is no longer capable of nurturing the "good simples" that might counteract the effects of "idle weeds." It is for this reason that Cordelia has to call on the "blest secrets" and "unpublished virtues of the earth" to "Spring with my tears" (ll. 17–19). Such "simples," it is implied, must be grown afresh, since they no longer live in this cursed land.

The inclusion of darnel in Lear's crown adds to the Virgilian allusion a Christian framework that is otherwise strikingly absent from the play. In early modern exegesis, darnel was identified with the "tares" found among wheat in Christ's parable (Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43). On both sides of the confessional divide, the parable of the wheat and tares was used to warn of the difficulties of discriminating between true doctrine and heresy. In a chapter about cockle and darnel, Levinus Lemnius notes that in the Gospels Christ uses "the nature and qualitie of these noisome weedes" as a metaphor for "dangerous, hurtfull, pernicious, corrupt and vnsincere doctrine."<sup>29</sup> The parable, Lemnius states, reminds

<sup>26</sup> *True Chronicle History of King Leir*, sig. H1r.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Thomas Elyot, *The Castel of Helthe* (London, 1539), bk. 4, fol. 17v; and Joseph Du Chesne, *The Practise of Chymicall, and Hermeticall Physicke, for the Preseruatiō of Health*, trans. Thomas Tymme (London, 1605), sig. Aa1r.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas White, *A Sermon Preached at Pawles Crosse on Sunday the ninth of December. 1576* (London, 1578), 45; Francis Trigge, *The Humble Petition of Two Sisters; The Church and Common-Wealth. For the Restoring of Their Ancient Commons and Liberties, Which Late Inclosure with Depopulation, Incharitably Hath Taken Away* (London, 1604), sig. A7v; and William Baldwin, *The Last Part of the Mirour for Magistrates* (London, 1578), fol. 121v.

<sup>29</sup> Levinus Lemnius, *An Herbal for the Bible*, trans. Thomas Newton (London, 1587), 229.

Christians of the necessity in a well-ordered state of measured and judicious governors: "Yet for due punishment doth he [Christ] subiect and referre to the authoritie of the magistrate, all those that be factious disturbers of the peace and tranquillitie, both of the Church and Commonwealth."<sup>30</sup> For the king, then, as head of "Church and Commonwealth," to wear darnel, an emblem of the machinations of "sathan," is truly shocking. Rebellious subjects like Edmund, Goneril, and Regan can be checked only by the presence of figures of authority and discernment; Lear, despite his feeble attempt to gather weeds at harvest time,<sup>31</sup> is clearly not up to the job and moreover is associated with the very forces of insurrection he should oppose. He is part of the sickness rather than the cure.

In another way, the inclusion of darnel in the crown of "idle weeds" draws on communal memories and experiences that add texture to the portrayal of Lear's condition, as well as to the errors of political judgment that have led him to this state. When darnel infiltrated the food chain, most often in bread or beer, the results were symptoms resembling madness. Gerard, for example, notes that it causes "drunkennes" and "hurteth the eies and maketh them dim"; Thomas Cooper, using the Latin name for darnel, observes that "*lolium*," consumed in "hote bread . . . maketh the heade giddie"; and Du Bartas calls it "dizzie Darnell" (Figure 1).<sup>32</sup> As T. J. King has argued, Cordelia's mention of darnel "may serve to reinforce the themes of madness and blindness found elsewhere in the play."<sup>33</sup> The harmful effects of darnel and the other "idle weeds" in Lear's crown are acknowledged by Cordelia and the Doctor in scene 18, who diagnose "aidant and remediate" and narcotic herbs, "simples operative, whose power / Will close the eye of anguish," to counteract them (18.18, 15–16). In fashioning a crown out of darnel, Lear has selected a plant that is not simply associated with the physical, mental, and sensory confusion he (and, in different ways, the blinded Gloucester) has exhibited throughout the play, but actually causes this derangement. However, Lear's selection of plants is more subtle, more sophisticated than critics have hitherto acknowledged. Like an animal that, having eaten something detrimental to its health, instinctively ingests something that will

<sup>30</sup> Lemnius, 229.

<sup>31</sup> According to the parable, the wheat and the tares are allowed to grow together until harvest time, when the landowner instructs his "reapers," "Gather ye first the tares, and binde them in sheaues to burne them: but gather the wheat into my barne" (*Geneva Bible*, sig. BB4r). In scene 11, the Fool seems to anticipate the burning: "Now a little fire in a wild field were like an old lecher's heart—a small spark, all the rest on's body cold. Look, here comes a walking fire" (ll. 100–102).

<sup>32</sup> Gerard, 72; Thomas Cooper, *Thesaurus Linguae Romanae & Britannicae* (London, 1565), n.pag.; and Du Bartas, 630.

<sup>33</sup> King, 141; see also F. G. Butler, "Lear's Crown of Weeds," *English Studies* 70 (1989): 395–406.

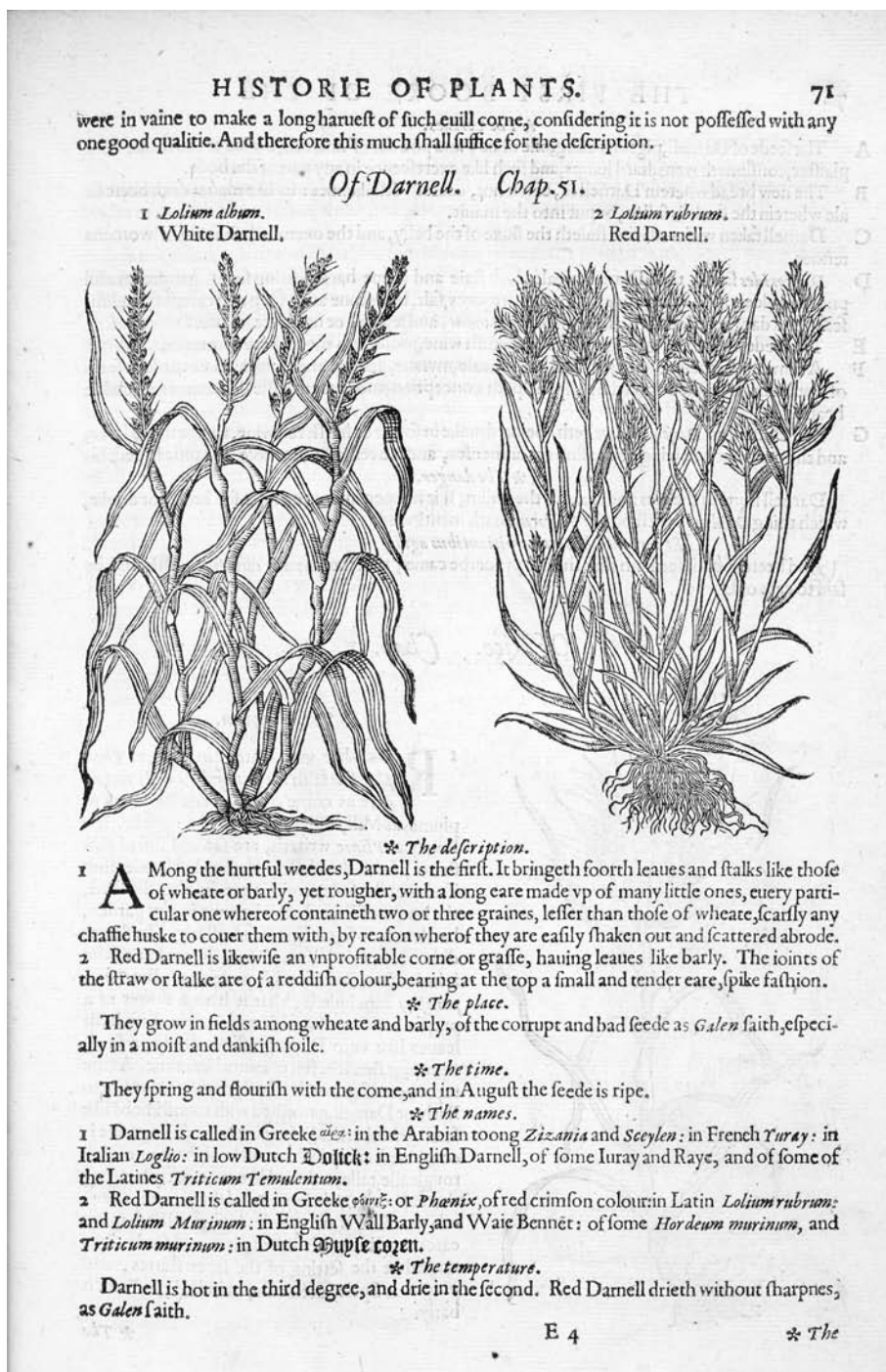


Figure 1: Red and white darnell, from John Gerard, *The Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes* (London, 1597), 71. General Reference Collection 449.k.4. © British Library Board. All rights reserved.



cause vomiting, Lear has plucked weeds that both catalyze his disease and point toward its remedy. Recalling the Paracelsian principle of using known poisons to counteract disease, the crown of “idle weeds” contains plants that expel toxins from the body: fumitory was used as a diuretic to cleanse the skin, liver, and spleen; hemlock and darnel were taken as purgatives and for their narcotic powers—precisely the properties prescribed by Cordelia and the Doctor.<sup>34</sup> In *King Lear*, a Virgilian literary convention is refracted through contemporary debates in botany, husbandry, politics, religion, and medicine.

The special significance of references to weeds in the literature of ages more attuned to the fragility of food supply than our own is now understandable. The presence of crop contaminants in the food chain was at best undesirable, at worst disastrous. It would not have escaped the attention of the audience for whom *King Lear* was written that a play about identity, corruption, and betrayal from within employs an allusion to darnel, a toxic interloper indistinguishable from the wheat it infests until it is too late. Although the contemporary languages of botany and genetics can help explain why and how this happens, early moderns had their own subtle terminology. Gerard, for example, distinguishes three types of relationship between field plants: “fools,” “kin” (or “kinde”), and “bastardes.” “Fools” denote plants that are often mistaken for one another; “kin” indicates plants that are closely related; and “bastardes” describes plants that imitate, but are inferior to, and which exploit—to its detriment—another plant. The terminology is particularly suggestive in the context of *King Lear*. We have proper wheat, and we have fool’s wheat: darnel. We have an Edgar, and we have a fool’s Edgar: Edmund, who is referred to as “*Bastard*” from the opening stage direction of the 1608 quarto and who plays and puns at length on that word.<sup>35</sup> And so in this brief description of Lear’s crown of “idle weeds” and in the king’s choice of “darnel” in place of “wheat,” Shakespeare distils the personal and political issues at the heart of his tragedy: a father’s privileging of a subversive “bastard” child, Edmund, over a loyal and legitimate son, Edgar; the potential for subversion to arise from within; and the devastating effects on the living landscape and its people when a king abdicates his responsibilities in the autumn of his life.

<sup>34</sup> Gerard, 930. Where darnel is given as an ingredient in early modern medicines, it is most often used as a binding agent (Pierre de La Primaudaye, *The French Academie* [London, 1618], 807) or as a purgative (*The Thyrd and Last Parte of the Secretes* [London, 1562], fol. 50v; Thomas Hill, *The Gardeners Labyrinth* [London, 1577], 10; and Pliny the Elder, *The Historie of the World* [London, 1634], 139). George Baker’s translation of Conrad Gesner’s *The Newe Jewell of Health* includes darnel in recipes for three waters “vnto the prouoking of sleepe” (London, 1576), fols. 83v–84r.

<sup>35</sup> In Shakespeare, *True Chronicle Historie of the Life and Death of King Lear* (London, 1608), the opening stage direction reads “*Enter Kent, Gloster, and Bastard*” (sig. B1r).

The “high-grown field” of scene 18 invites us to perceive Lear’s Britain as simultaneously mythic and historical, symbolic and actual. Indeed, as Richard Dutton has argued, the play’s tendency to “ignore the laws of time” and its “quasi-miraculous shifts from myth to history” alert the audience to the here and now and ask them to draw contemporary parallels.<sup>36</sup> The contemporaneity of *King Lear*, Dutton asserts, resides in its movement between history—specifically, those foundation myths that embody “cherished truths about the origins of the island’s political culture”—and elements of romance and fantasy. The motifs of mimicry and subversion from within and the crisis of sustenance we have identified in *King Lear* resonate throughout Shakespeare’s history plays of the 1590s, which trace the emergence of the Tudor dynasty, and the tragedies of the early 1600s, specifically, *Hamlet* (1600–1601) and *Macbeth* (1606), which in different ways scrutinize the legitimacy of the Stuart dynasty.

Following *1 Henry VI* (1592) and *Henry V* (1598–99), *King Lear* (1605–6) is the third and final of Shakespeare’s plays to include an allusion to darnel. The first two plays, from the first and second tetralogies, use darnel and related imagery to underline the correspondences between good husbandry and good government, and to interrogate contemporary issues of food supply and national security. In *1 Henry VI*, the vilified Joan of Arc (La Pucelle) is associated with the treacherous qualities of darnel. She taunts the English at Rouen:

- |          |                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|----------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| PUCELLE  | Good morrow gallants. Want ye corn for bread?<br>I think the Duke of Burgundy will fast<br>Before he’ll buy again at such a rate.<br>’Twas full of darnel. Do you like the taste? |
| BURGUNDY | Scoff on, vile fiend and shameless courtesan.<br>I trust ere long to choke thee with thine own,<br>And make thee curse the harvest of that corn.                                  |
| CHARLES  | Your grace may starve, perhaps, before that time.                                                                                                                                 |
| BEDFORD  | O let no words, but deeds, revenge this treason.                                                                                                                                  |
- (3.5.1–9)

Here, the taste of darnel is a metaphor for the bitter flavor of defeat—significantly, a defeat wrought by deception. A French war party has infiltrated the city by pretending to be a group of corn merchants and defeated the garrison, neatly mimicking the mimicry by which darnel insinuates itself into the food chain. The capture of Rouen is one of the few points where Shakespeare deviates

<sup>36</sup> Richard Dutton, “Shakespeare, Holinshed and “The Matter of Britain,”” in *The Oxford Handbook to Holinshed’s Chronicles*, ed. Paulina Kewes, Susan Doran, and Ian Archer (Oxford: Oxford UP, forthcoming). The authors are grateful to Professor Dutton for allowing them to read his essay prior to publication.



from his sources in this play,<sup>37</sup> perhaps because it chimes with public anxieties in the 1590s over the price and purity of corn, especially imported corn. These anxieties are likely to have been exacerbated by reports that Parisians, besieged by Henri IV's forces between May and August 1590, resorted to eating bread made from "pease, tares, oates and acorns," sawdust, and eventually the ground-up bones of the dead.<sup>38</sup> The failed harvests of that decade heightened concerns about the nation's ability to feed itself and its reliance on imported supplies that were often contaminated and sold at inflated prices (hence, La Pucelle's reference to "buy[ing] at such a rate").<sup>39</sup> As R. B. Outhwaite points out, "dearth" had two meanings: lack of food and its costliness, specifically "sharp elevation in the prices of . . . bread and beer—and the grainstuff from which they derived."<sup>40</sup> In a series of proclamations, Queen Elizabeth attempted to control the price, purity, and distribution of corn and to limit foreign imports.<sup>41</sup> For Francis Trigge, addressing the incoming King James, fewer people meant fewer soldiers, rendering the nation vulnerable to foreign invasion: "[Camden] writes, that England *for corne was the onely storehouse of all the west Empire*. . . . In those daies England was able to relieue other countries with corne: but sometime now she is glad to buie corne of other countries her selfe . . . tillage of the earth surpasseth all, and . . . euen the King thereby is maintained: by the foode that it ministreth, to strengthen his people; and by the multitude of valiant souliders it affordeth for his warres."<sup>42</sup> Whether the reason was war or failed harvests, cities were

<sup>37</sup> See Edward Hall, *The Vnion of the Two Noble and Illustre Famelies of Lancastre [and] Yorke* (London, 1548), fol. 152v, which describes an attempt on the Castle of Cornyll. The introduction to this story could also have been suggested by the popular belief that witches adulterated food and ruined crops. See Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (London, 1584), bk. 2, ch. 9, 32–33; and bk. 12, ch. 7, 227.

<sup>38</sup> *The Coppie of a Letter sent into England by a Gentleman, from the towne of Saint Denis in France* (London, 1590), 18, 20.

<sup>39</sup> On the agrarian crisis of the 1590s and its impact on health, social order, and literature (including drama), see William C. Carroll, *Fat King, Lean Beggar: Representations of Poverty in the Age of Shakespeare* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1996); Andrew McRae, *God Speed the Plough: The Representation of Agrarian England, 1550–1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 51–90; and John Walter, "The Social Economy of Dearth in Early Modern England," in *Famine, Disease and the Social Order in Early Modern Society*, ed. John Walter and Richard Schofield (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), 75–128.

<sup>40</sup> R. B. Outhwaite, *Dearth, Public Policy and Social Disturbance in England, 1550–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), 3.

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, John Powel, *The Assise of Bread, Newly Corrected and Enlarged, from Twelue Pence the Quarter of Wheat, vnto Three Pound and Sixe Pence the Quarter* . . . (London, 1600); and Diane Purkiss, "Crammed with Distressful Bread: Bakers and the Poor in Early Modern England," in *Renaissance Food*, ed. Fitzpatrick, 11–24. Enclosures, which had the effect of privileging pastoral at the expense of arable farming, were blamed for exacerbating dearth and depopulation. This tension between pasture and cornfield is perhaps shadowed in Edgar's "Thy sheep be in the corn" (13.38).

<sup>42</sup> Trigge (see n. 28 above), sigs. B4v–B5r.

especially vulnerable to interruptions to their food supplies, and citizens were at the mercy of millers and purveyors who were often less than scrupulous in the measures and purity of the grain they sold.<sup>43</sup> In *1 Henry VI*, the Rouen compromised by “corrupted” imported corn resonates with England in the 1590s, an island made vulnerable by hunger. So too Lear’s Britain, unable to feed itself or be governed peacefully, requires foreign forces to restore order.

This insistence on national security through good husbandry is reiterated in the Duke of Burgundy’s speech in Shakespeare’s *Henry V* (5.2.33–62). “Fertile France,” he laments, has gone to ruin during the recent warfare, and weeds grow unchecked in its cornfields. His imagery anticipates the language of *Hamlet*, in which the Danish prince complains of the world: “’tis an unweeded garden / That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely” (1.2.135–37). It echoes the language of the garden scene in *Richard II* (3.4) and John of Gaunt’s speech in the same play (2.1.31–68), substituting “this best garden of the world” for “this blessed garden” and “Dear nurse of arts, plenties, and joyful births” for “This nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings.”<sup>44</sup> But in *Henry V*, as in *King Lear*, the weeds are associated not simply with the garden as a metaphor for the state but with “fallow leas” and arable land. Sustained conflict means that the “sciences” (5.2.58) by which the land can be made to feed its people have been forgotten:

Alas, she hath from France too long been chased,  
And all her husbandry doth lie on heaps,  
Corrupting in its own fertility.  
Her vine, the merry cheerer of the heart,  
Unpruned dies; her hedges even-plashed  
Like prisoners wildly overgrown with hair  
Put forth disordered twigs; her fallow leas  
The darnel, hemlock, and rank fumitory  
Doth root upon, while that the coulter rusts  
That should deracinate such savagery.  
The even mead—that erst brought sweetly forth  
The freckled cowslip, burnet, and green clover—  
Wanting the scythe, all uncorrected, rank,  
Conceives by idleness, and nothing teems

<sup>43</sup> On riots and disorder in London in protest against the price and provision of foodstuffs including grain, see Aaron Landau, “Rouse up a brave mind’: *The Merchant of Venice* and Social Uprising in the 1590s,” in *Renaissance Papers* 2003, ed. Christopher Cobb and M. Thomas Hester (New York: Camden House, 2004), 119–47; and Joan Thirsk, “Enclosing and Engrossing,” in *The Agrarian History of England and Wales 1500–1640*, ed. Joan Thirsk (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1967), 200–255, esp. 228.

<sup>44</sup> On *Richard II* in the context of the debate over enclosures, see William O. Scott, “Landholding, Leasing, and Inheritance in *Richard II*,” *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 4 (2002): 275–92.

But hateful docks, rough thistles, kecksies, burs,  
Losing both beauty and utility.

(5.2.38–53)

“[D]arnel, hemlock, and rank fumitory” resurface in Cordelia’s description of her father in scene 18 of *King Lear*; the “docks,” “burs,” and “idleness” in Burgundy’s speech anticipate Cordelia’s “burdocks” and “idle weeds.” This is not just Shakespeare repeating himself or recycling material from earlier works. It is a careful echoing that conjures memories and invites comparisons between the plays in the light of ongoing experiences of the decline in arable farming and dearth in England. John of Gaunt’s England, which “Is now leased out . . . / Like to a tenement or pelting farm” (2.1.59, 60), is also Burgundy’s France, and both lands are mapped onto Lear’s Britain. For the latter world, for all its pagan antiquity, is a surprisingly ordinary place of “low farms, / Poor pelting villages, sheep-cotes and mills” (7.182–83), peopled by “tenant” farmers such as the “Old Man” who meets Gloucester and Edgar on the way to Dover (15.10)—in other words, a world very familiar to Shakespeare’s first audiences.

This botanical-political discourse, indicating sophisticated knowledge of arable plants on the part of Shakespeare’s audiences, echoes throughout the plays that in different ways examine the succession of James VI and I, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. Such a discourse insists that we reinterpret these plays in light of one another. Like darnel, cockle was a weed that grew in corn fields, its name derived from the Anglo-Saxon *ceocan*, meaning “choke,” so called because it chokes the life from the corn.<sup>45</sup> Levinus Lemnius notes, “Vnder the name of Cockle and Darnell is comprehended all vicious, noisome and vnprofitable graine, encombring & hindring good Corne; which, being heerby choaked and despoiled of conuenient moisture . . . prospereth not as it should.”<sup>46</sup> Traditions of biblical translation, scriptural exegesis, husbandry manuals, and literature in the Georgic tradition<sup>47</sup> meant that cockle and darnel came to symbolize revolt, civil discord, and political corruption. Thus, Coriolanus argues that by distributing corn to plebeians, as well as patricians, the ruling class has “nourish[ed] ’gainst our Senate / The cockle of rebellion, insolence, sedition, / Which we

<sup>45</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), 2nd ed., J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, prep., 20 vols. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989), s.v. “choke, v. 7. To kill (or injuriously affect) a plant, by depriving it of air and light.” Cf. John of Gaunt’s speech in *Richard II*, “eager feeding food doth choke the feeder” (2.1.37), and Burgundy in *1 Henry VI*, “choke thee with thine own,” discussed above. Berowne (Biron), in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, cries, “Sowed cockle reaped no corn” (4.3.359).

<sup>46</sup> Lemnius, 227.

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, Edmund Bonner’s *A Profitable and Necessary Doctrine with Certaine Admonished Therunto* (London, 1555), 10; George Gascoigne, *The Whole Woorkes* (London, 1587), sig. C3r; and Edmund Spenser, “December Eclogue,” in *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579), in *The Shorter Poems*, ed. Richard McCabe (London: Penguin, 1999), 152.

ourselves have ploughed for, sowed, and scattered.”<sup>48</sup> In this Roman play, which dates from 1608, problems with food purity and the state’s distribution of grain are used literally as a cause of suffering and civil unrest and metaphorically, with bastardized grain symbolizing the mixing of “pure” with “impure” Romans. Likewise, as a consequence of Lear’s mismanagement of the land and his error in judging the love test, “idle weeds” have been left to choke the life from “sustaining corn,” treacherous subjects like Goneril, Regan, and Edmund have gained ascendancy, and “true” subjects such as Cordelia and the Fool will be choked to death by hanging.

Like “choke,” “blast,” which similarly implies death by tainted breath or breathlessness, is an infectious disease of cereal crops. But where “choke” is used by Shakespeare to indicate rebellion from within, “blast” points to the wide-reaching effects of such actions. Although, as we have seen, *King Lear* does not feature a “blasted heath,” *Macbeth* does (1.3.77), and Lear, when cursing Goneril, wishes on his eldest daughter “worst blasts and fogs” (4.290). “Blast,” denoting a disease of arable plants, was in use by at least 1577; in Barnabe Googe’s translation of Conrad Heresbach’s *Four Bookes of Husbandry*, the farmer is advised to sow his corn “in hollowe Furrowes, because it is very subiect to blasting, thinking thereby to preserue it both from blast and mildewe.”<sup>49</sup> The phrase “blasted heath” could also describe a blighted landscape as one subject to the depredations of the weather. Such infection is a symbol of the effects on the land of political corruption from within the inner circles of the court and its consequent effects upon the natural order, including, of course, the cycles of nature.<sup>50</sup> Googe couples “blast” with “mildew.”<sup>51</sup> While the “mil” (or, in early modern orthography, “mel”) of “mildew” was thought to derive from honey (because of its supposed sweetness), the fungus, like “blast,” was also associated with cereal crops (with

<sup>48</sup> *The Tragedy of Coriolanus*, 3.1.69–72. As Hibbard notes, the source of this passage appears to be Thomas North’s translation of Plutarch, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes* (London, 1579), 245–46. See G. R. Hibbard, ed., *Coriolanus* (New York: Penguin Books, 1967), xiii.

<sup>49</sup> Conrad Heresbach, *Four Bookes of Husbandry*, trans. Barnabe Googe (London, 1577), fol. 29v. See also Thomas Naogeorg, *The Popish Kingdome, or Reigne of Antichrist*, trans. Barnabe Googe (London, 1570), fol. 39r: “Iudocus doth defende the corne, from myldeawes and from blast.”

<sup>50</sup> OED, s.v., “blast,” “6. A sudden infection destructive to vegetable or animal life (formerly attributed to the blowing or breath of some malignant power, foul air, etc.)” Blast spread in part as a consequence of the susceptibility of cereal weeds such as darnel and its close relative rye. See N. J. Talbot, “On the Trail of a Cereal Killer: Exploring the Biology of *Magnaporthe grisea*,” *Annual Review of Microbiology* 57 (2003): 177–202; and L. E. Trevathan, M. A. Moss, and D. Blasingame, “Ryegrass Blast,” *Plant Disease* 78 (1994): 113–17.

<sup>51</sup> See OED, s.v. “blast,” “1. Honey-dew,” and “2. a . . . a growth (typically a whitish and fluffy coating) of fungal mycelium and fructifications on the surface of a plant.”

"mil" meaning "meal"). And so Edgar, as Poor Tom in *King Lear*, imagines that the fiends who persecute him have "mildew[ed] the white wheat" (11.105–6).<sup>52</sup>

Suggestive for *King Lear* and, as we will see, *Hamlet*, is John Lyly's use in 1578 of meal or mil "deaw" and "blast" in a passage that uses the relationship between darnel and wheat as a metaphor for the difference between two male twins. Nature produces pairs of opposites: "As the breath of the Lyon engendreth as well the Serpent as the Ant, and as the selfe same deaw forceth the earth to yeeld both the Darnell and Wheate: or as the Easterly winde maketh the blossomes to blast, and the buddes to blowe, so one wombe nourisheth contrary wits, and one milke diuers manners, which argueth somthing in Nature I knowe not what, to be meruailous, I dare not say monstrous."<sup>53</sup> While in *King Lear* the bond between wheat and darnel is a metaphor for the relationship between a legitimate child and his "bastard" brother, in Lyly it describes twins born with opposing natures. In *Hamlet*, the difference between the two brothers, Hamlet Senior and Claudius, is figured as "wholesome" wheat contaminated by its "mildewed" sibling. Berating his mother for allowing Claudius to replace (or mimic) Hamlet Senior, Hamlet cries, "Here is your husband, like a mildewed ear / Blasting his wholesome brother" (3.4.63–64). The combination of mildew and blast in this couplet suggests that "blast" signifies the cereal crop disease, thereby echoing the metaphors of plague and corruption that rebound in the play.<sup>54</sup> Hamlet's description of his father as a "mildewed ear" of wheat carried echoes of Hamlet Senior's account of his poisoning: "With juice of cursèd hebenon in a vial, / And in the porches of my ears did pour / The leperous distilment" (1.5.62–64).<sup>55</sup>

This is the only mention of "hebenon" by Shakespeare, and critics remain uncertain what this name means.<sup>56</sup> Given the precision we have identified in

<sup>52</sup> Mario L. D'Avanzo argues that "mildew" alludes not simply to ruined crops, but also to the poisonous effects of ergot, which caused "insanity, gangrene, convulsions, and death"; see "'He Mildews the White Wheat': *King Lear*, III.iv.120–24," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 28 (1977): 88–89, esp. 88. The earliest use of "ergot" in the OED is dated 1683.

<sup>53</sup> John Lyly, *Euphues and His England* (London, 1580), fol. 6v.

<sup>54</sup> On the relation of "blasted" to "mildewed," see John S. Kenyon, "Correspondence: *Hamlet*, III, IV, 64," *Modern Language Notes* 35 (1920): 50–52. For examples of imagery of plague and corruption, see *Hamlet*, 3.1.135 and 4.7.13. No evidence exists to suggest that many people died as a direct result of starvation in early modern England, but long-term hunger and malnutrition increased the likelihood of death from plague or other infectious diseases, leading to the close and potent association of hunger and plague in the early modern imagination. See Harry A. Miskimin, *The Economy of Early Renaissance Europe, 1300–1460* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1975), 27.

<sup>55</sup> The description of "hebenon" ("hebona" in Q1 and Q2) as "cursed" reminds us of the early modern belief that weeds grew not from a parent plant, but spontaneously from the earth as a consequence of original sin and the Fall. See Susan Drury, "Plants and Pest Control in England circa 1400–1700: A Preliminary Study," *Folklore* 103 (1992): 103–6. Weeds are to wholesome plants as Cain is to Abel, the original pair of opposed brothers.

<sup>56</sup> In Pliny's *Natural History*, the oil of "hebenon" seed is a poison that when "dropped into the eares, is ynough to trouble the braine," something which may remind us of the toxic effects



Shakespeare's treatment of the properties of poisonous plants elsewhere, the imprecision of the name "hebenon" is likely to be deliberate. Because of the parallels between the deaths of Hamlet Senior and James VI / I's father, it is possible that the obscurity of the poison signals a diplomatic uncertainty on Shakespeare's part as to the identity of Darnley's murderer.<sup>57</sup> But the parallels between darnel and "hebenon" invite a reading of *King Lear* in Scene 18 that encodes complex contemporary political messages for and about the new King James I, who, as Dan Brayton points out, styled himself as a "landlord."<sup>58</sup> For if James's father, Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley, is shadowed in Hamlet Senior, his name is also whispered in Lear's darnel.<sup>59</sup> The House of Stuart was, properly, the House of Darnley and Stuart; although standardized in modern orthography, Darnley and Darnel(l) were variant early modern spellings, with "ley" another version of "lea," or a field ("lea") of darnel. In John Stow's *Chronicles* (1580), his name is spelt "Darnley" and "Darneley"; and in the second volume of Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1586), it is spelt "Darneleie."<sup>60</sup> In *King Lear*, which interrogates the Union of the Crowns and, like *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, the rise of the House of Stuart as it eclipses the House of Tudor, the image of the former king in the high-grown field wearing a crown of weeds, among which "Darnel"—with a capital "D" from its placement, with full emphasis and accent, at the beginning of the line—is prominent. That image invites James to consider his own problematic inheritance and his present and future role in managing the land and its resources. Like the selection of the white and red roses in the Temple Garden in *1 Henry VI*, 2.4, this moment provides England's royal House of Stuart with a very ambivalent emblem. Darnel, like wheat, was thought to have two main varieties: red and white.<sup>61</sup> The red and white roses of the Tudors, forged in civil war, have become the red and white darnel of Lear's crown. Depopulation, dearth, religious and social divisions, a depleted treasury—James's inheritance could not be more poisonous.

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attributed to darnel and hemlock. See Pliny, *The Historie of the World Commonly Called, The Naturall Historie of C. Plinius Secundus*, trans. Philemon Holland (London, 1601), bk. 25, chapter 4, 215. [Note other edition cited above]

<sup>57</sup> On similarities between the deaths of Lord Darnley and Hamlet's father, see Andrew Hatfield, *Shakespeare and Renaissance Politics* (London: Thomson Learning, 2004), 87–88.

<sup>58</sup> Dan Brayton, "Angling in the Lake of Darkness: Possession, Dispossession, and the Politics of Discovery in *King Lear*," *English Literary History* 70 (2003): 399–426.

<sup>59</sup> From 1565 until his death in 1567, Henry Stuart was also Duke of Albany of the fourth creation. See Elaine Finnie Greig, "Stewart, Henry, duke of Albany [Lord Darnley] (1545/6–1567)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004; online edition, January 2008), <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/26473> (accessed 12 November 2012).

<sup>60</sup> John Stow, *The Chronicles of England* (London, 1580), 1131; and Raphael Holinshed et al., *The Second Volume of Chronicles* (n.pl.: n.p., 1586), 381. See also Harry Clyde Smith and Avlyn Dodd Conley, *The Darnall, Darnell Family* (n. pl.: American Offset Printers, 1954).

<sup>61</sup> On red and white darnel, see, for example, Gerard, 71–72. On red and white wheat, see, for example, Heresbach, fol. 29v.



Work on *King Lear* probably began in or around 1604, during King James's protracted journey to London for his coronation and the commencement of the long-anticipated negotiations that would eventually result in the Union of the Crowns. In 1604, Shakespeare was forty, and he seems to have started making provision for his eventual retirement.<sup>62</sup> But what should have promised peace and prosperity delivered a period of sustained civil and social unrest fueled by a series of bad harvests, death by starvation and malnutrition, and land enclosures. The riots which broke out in the Midlands in 1607–8 have been identified as a contemporary context for *Coriolanus*.<sup>63</sup> However, as we have seen, concerns about the harvest and the purity and price of grain supplies were ongoing throughout the latter half of the sixteenth century and provide an important context not simply for the Roman play, but also for Shakespeare's plays of the 1590s and early 1600s. One of the complicating factors in such periods of food shortage was the illegal hoarding of grain. Shakespeare himself was guilty of this activity. Although living in London, he retained substantial properties in and around Stratford,<sup>64</sup> where during the late 1590s and the first few years of the seventeenth century, he stockpiled grain for sale at inflated prices to the local brewing trade<sup>65</sup> and in July 1605 paid a large sum, £440, for a half interest in a lease of "tithes of corn, grain, blade, and hay."<sup>66</sup>

At approximately the same time, Shakespeare was making a different kind of attempt to secure his legacy that may have contributed to the world of *King Lear*. On 20 October 1596, the College of Arms approved his application for a coat of arms.<sup>67</sup> It is likely that Shakespeare consulted the most popular guide to

<sup>62</sup> Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (London: Pimlico, 2005), 356–90.

<sup>63</sup> On the situation in Stratford-upon-Avon, see Germaine Greer, *Shakespeare's Wife* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007), 222–36. On the Uprising as an influence on *Coriolanus*, see Andrew Gurr, "Coriolanus and the Body Politic," *Shakespeare Survey* 28 (1975): 63–69; and Nate Eastman, "The Rumbling Belly Politic: Metaphorical Location and Metaphorical Government in *Coriolanus*," *Early Modern Literary Studies* 13.1 (May 2007): 2.1–39, <http://purl.oclc.org/emls/13-1/eastcori.htm>, (accessed 20 December 2011).

<sup>64</sup> National Archives, Kew, Court of Common Pleas, Feet of Fines, CP 25.2.237 (Michaelmas 1602); and Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Records Office (SBTRO) MS ER 27/1 (1 May 1602); MS ER 28/1 (28 July 1602). See also SBTRO MS ER 27/3 (28 October 1614), in which Shakespeare seeks legal protection on behalf of himself and his heirs "for all such losse detriment & hinderance" with respect to the annual value of his tithes, "by reason of anie Inclosure or decaye of Tyllage." Thomas Green's diary entry for 17 November 1614 has details of the problems Shakespeare experienced as a result of enclosures (SBTRO Corporation Records, Misc. Doc. XIII, 26a, 27–29).

<sup>65</sup> SBTRO MS ER 27/5. In 1604, Shakespeare sold twenty bushels of malt to a neighbor, apothecary Philip Rogers, who had a sideline in brewing ale. We know about this transaction because Shakespeare prosecuted Rogers for nonpayment. See Greenblatt, *Will in the World*, 362–64; and Greer, *Shakespeare's Wife*, 228–29.

<sup>66</sup> SBTRO MS ER 27/2; Misc. Doc. II, 3 (24 July 1605). The lease yielded £60 per annum.

<sup>67</sup> Two rough drafts of a grant of a coat of arms to "Shakespere" is College of Arms, London, MS Vincent 157, articles 23 and 24.

heraldry of the day, Gerard Legh's *The Accedens of Armory*.<sup>68</sup> It is possible that Shakespeare referred to *The Accedens of Armory* because it contains an account of the Inner Temple revels of 1561–62, which accompanied Norton and Sackville's *Gorboduc* (1561–62), the latter a source for *King Lear* and a potential inspiration for its images of corruption and pollution.<sup>69</sup> What scholars have failed to notice, however, is that Legh's treatise is also a source for the story of *King Lear*.<sup>70</sup> Legh's rendering predates Holinshed, and is therefore likely to have informed Shakespeare's play through that intermediary source. Certainly, Legh's account is quite close to the version that appears in book 2 of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*.<sup>71</sup> However, what makes Legh's version pertinent to an ecocritical reading of Shakespeare's play, and to an analysis of *King Lear*'s engagement with the politics of food supply, is that Legh uses the story of "leyr" and his "daughter and heire" Cordeilla to justify the right of women to rule, a right that he associates with the fertility of the land. The coat of arms Legh identifies for Cordeilla and other landowning women features a wheat sheaf.<sup>72</sup> This coat of arms, called a "Garbe," shows a golden "sheafe of wheate" on a "field Azure" (Figure 2).<sup>73</sup> As an exemplary female sovereign who inherits through her father, Cordeilla justifies the legitimacy of Queen Elizabeth, whose lineage is traced in the same volume.<sup>74</sup> The right of royal women such as Cordeilla and Elizabeth to represent and, in a mystical sense, become the land is symbolized through their association with a coat of arms linking them to Ceres, the goddess of agriculture and fertility who was associated with wheat. The "Garbe" coat of arms needs no further "commendacion," Legh declares, "for all people prayse it, that cannot liue without it."<sup>75</sup> The woman bearing this coat of arms is as essential to

<sup>68</sup> Katherine Duncan-Jones, in a discussion of Shakespeare's application for a coat of arms, suggests that he consulted Gerard Legh's *Accedens of Armory*. However, Duncan-Jones does not mention this text's inclusion of either the account of the Inner Temple revels of 1561–62 or a version of the story of *King Lear*. See *Ungentle Shakespeare: Scenes from His Life* (London: Thomson Learning, 2001), 93.

<sup>69</sup> On *Gorboduc* as an influence on *King Lear*, see, for example, O. B. Hardison, "Myth and History in *King Lear*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 26 (1975): 227–42, esp. 227; and Barbara Heliodora Carneiro de Mendonça, "The Influence of *Gorboduc* on *King Lear*," *Shakespeare Survey* 13 (1966): 41–48.

<sup>70</sup> See Dorothy F. Atkinson, "King Lear—Another Contemporary Account," *English Literary History* 3 (1936): 63–66.

<sup>71</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of England*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1973).

<sup>72</sup> Gerard Legh, *The Accedens of Armory* (London, 1562), fols. 164v–166r, 168r.

<sup>73</sup> Legh, fol. 168r.

<sup>74</sup> Legh, fols. 200v–201r.

<sup>75</sup> Legh, fol. 168r. For Ceres as an ancient goddess of Britannia, see William Camden, *Britannia, or A Chorographical Description of the Most Flourishing Kingdomes, England, Scotland, and Ireland, and the Ilands Adioyning*, trans. Philemon Holland (London, [1610]), 3.

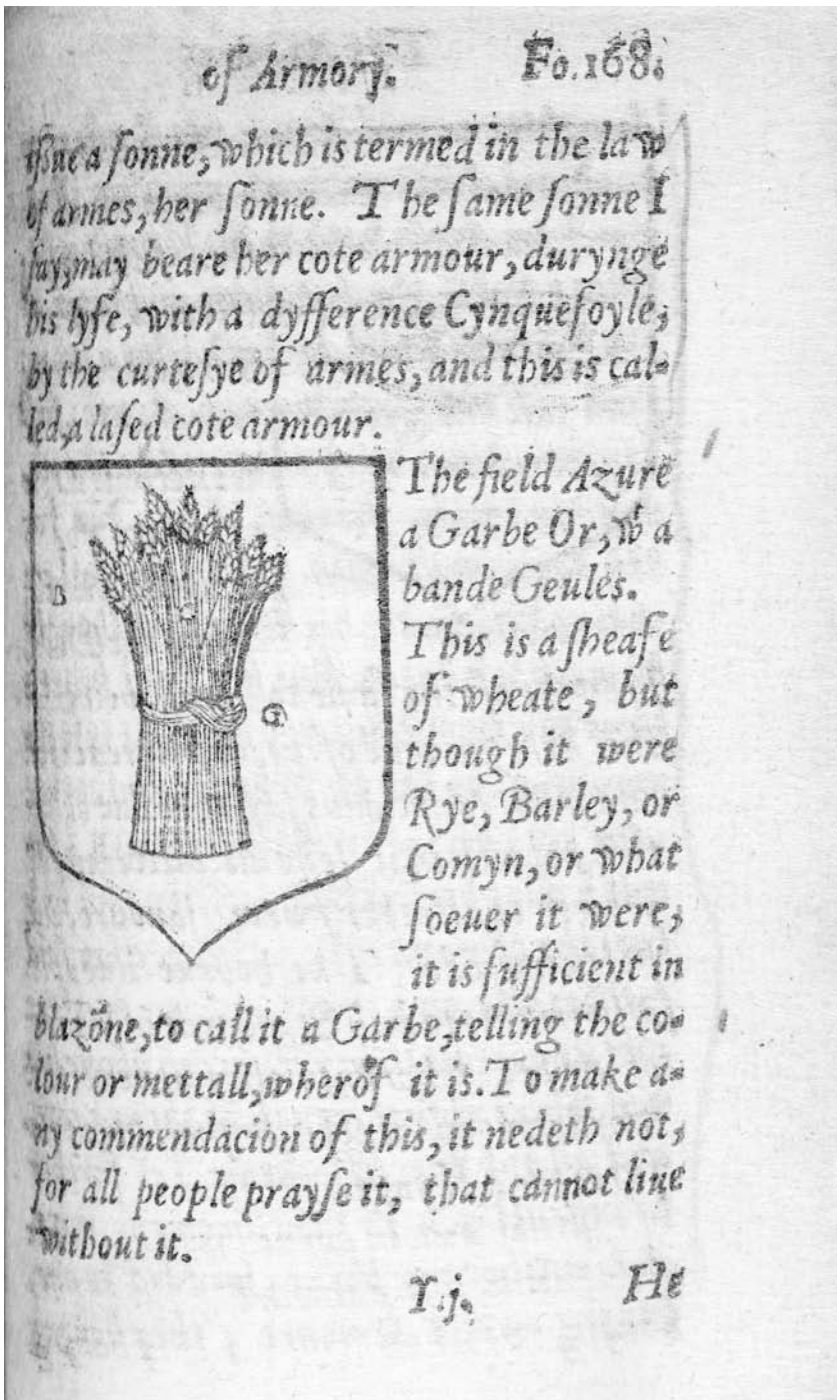


Figure 2: A coat of arms appropriate to gentlewomen, from Gerard Legh, *The Accedens of Armory* (London, 1562), fol. 168r. General Reference Collection 605.b.1. © British Library Board. All rights reserved.

the lives of the people as their daily bread and beer, and her continuing presence ensures the land's fruitfulness.

Reading *King Lear* in light of Legh's *Accedens of Armory* confirms that Shakespeare's play is a chorographical text, which is to say, it concerns man's embeddedness in the land and the importance of land in the inscription and dissemination of shared memory and knowledge. The importance of the land in Shakespeare's play is announced by the presence of the map of Britain at 1.37. One of the few props mentioned in this play or in any play by Shakespeare, Lear's map might have looked something like the frontispiece to William Camden's *Britannia* (Figure 3). With Neptune representing the sea on the left and Ceres presenting the land on the right, the map reminds us of the symbolic and political meanings of the "high-grown field" in scene 18 of *King Lear*. As in the frontispiece to Michael Drayton's 1612 *Poly-Olbion*, the land, Britannia, is represented by Ceres. Ceres was associated with Virgo-Astraea, goddess of the Golden Age and representative of justice, and her emblem was wheat; Spica, the brightest star in the constellation Virgo, is Latin for "the ear of wheat."<sup>76</sup> In the early modern imagination, corn and wheat represented the life force and identity of the nation, and harvest time (late August, as the Sun enters Virgo) was crucial in determining her future. This tradition would have been familiar to Shakespeare, not only from *The Accedens of Armory*, but also from Spenser's *Mutability Cantos*, in which the month of August is accompanied by Virgo-Astraea, wearing "eares of corne":

That was the righteous Virgin, which of old  
Liv'd here on earth, and plenty made abound;  
But, after Wrong was lov'd and Iustice solde,  
She left th'vnrighteous world and was to heauen extold.<sup>77</sup>

The death of Queen Elizabeth, who was so often identified with the goddess of justice Virgo-Astraea,<sup>78</sup> signifies for Spenser and Shakespeare the end of the Golden Age, and, with it—as we have seen in Virgil's *Georgics*—the emergence of darnel and other "idle weeds" that threaten the harvest.<sup>79</sup> The autumn of *King*

<sup>76</sup> Gerard notes that "Red Darnell" bears, at its top, "a small and tender eare, spike fashion" (71).

<sup>77</sup> Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, . . . (London, 1609), *Mutabilitie*, canto 7, stanza 37, page 361.

<sup>78</sup> See Frances A. Yates, *Astraea: The Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1975), 30–31.

<sup>79</sup> On Cordelia as a "figure of archetypal virgo goodness," see Catherine S. Cox, "An Excellent Thing in Woman": Virgo and Viragos in *King Lear*, *Modern Philology* 96 (1998): 143–57, esp. 143. On Cordelia as Ceres/Demeter, see Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, "Hamlet" to "The Tempest"* (London: Routledge, 1992), 306–7n45. Adelman posits Ovid's story of Ceres' revenge on Sicily (*Metamorphoses*, 5.485) as a source for Shakespeare's use of "Darnel" in scene 18.





Figure 3: Frontispiece to William Camden, *Britannia*, trans. Philemon Holland (London, [1610]). General Reference Collection 456.e.16. © British Library Board. All rights reserved.

*Lear's* scene 18 is a crucial moment, for in its botanical-political field of imagery, it brings together the departure of Queen Elizabeth (as goddess of wheat) with the very ambivalent presence of King James I (as king of darnel). For James, witnessing this scene, the question is clear: will he manage the nation's resources in a way that is just, responsible, and above all sustainable?

In scene 1 of *King Lear*, a father asks his three daughters to declare their love for him. The winner will win "our largest bounty" (l. 46). In the context of dividing land, the meaning of "bounty" suggests natural resources and, specifically, food. Goneril, receiving Scotland, and Regan, receiving Wales and the West Country, are assigned very similar lands, by Lear's estimation, "shady forests and wide-skirted meads" (l. 58).<sup>80</sup> Forests and pasture do not produce corn. For Cordelia, Lear has reserved the corn-rich lands of central and southern England. Although British soil is, as William Harrison remarked, more "inclined to the feeding and grasing of the cattell, then profitable for tillage, & bearing of corn," England is more "fruitfull" than Wales and both are more "bountifull" than Scotland.<sup>81</sup> When Goneril and Regan are compared to serpents and wolves, as they are throughout the play, it is for a very good reason: they do not own lands that produce arable crops.

Food unrest and botanical-political discourse open up new ways of reading *King Lear*. The struggle for Cordelia's portion involves a battle for corn and, with it, sustenance, security, and legitimacy. There is an inevitable logic to the fact that Goneril and Regan, in their struggle for land, harness the energies of Edmund, whose mimicry, bastardy, and treachery are the play's personifications of darnel and other "idle weeds" that threaten to blind and choke those who are "legitimate." Restoring ecocritical concerns to historicist methods of interpretation sheds new light on the importance of the politics of food supply not simply in *King Lear*, but in Shakespeare's history plays and tragedies more generally. The properties and behavior of plants and plant disease provide a complex web of metaphors through which Shakespeare, across his plays of the 1590s and early 1600s, interrogates questions of political legitimacy, treachery, treason, and the relationship between the (gendered) body of the monarch and his or her land. That these metaphors can be traced not simply in plays, but also in husbandry manuals, prose fiction, heraldry books, religious treatises, and works of natural philosophy, as well as in the symbolism of the Houses of Tudor and Stuart, shows that food insecurity and botanical-political tropes are deeply embedded in the discourses of early modern Britain. This discursive emphasis is intimately

<sup>80</sup> Regan is awarded land "No less in space, validity, and pleasure" (l. 75).

<sup>81</sup> William Harrison, *An Historicall Description of the Islande of Britayne*, in Raphael Holinshed et al., *The Firste volume of the Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Irelande* (London, 1577), 1:37.



related to the fact that the succession crisis of the 1590s and early 1600s came at a time of heightened food insecurity and unrest. Shakespeare's plays, the profits from which he used to help secure himself and his family from the consequences of failing harvests and dearth, respond to these twin crises by interrogating the problems of ensuring the equitable and sustainable management of natural resources together with a reliable, affordable, and uncorrupted supply of food. In Shakespeare's history plays and tragedies, as for us in the second decade of the twenty-first century, food security is inseparable from national security.