

## Stripping Garments: A Shared Spirit of Exploring Human Mind in *King Lear* and Montaigne's "An Apology of *Raymond Sebond*"

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"If there is a single book", Jonathan Bate impressively observes, "that parallels with his journey, that brings us close to the working of the mind of Hamlet, it is Montaigne's *Essays*."<sup>1</sup> A.D. Nuttall suggests about Shakespeare's career that it seems "as if the intense religious experiences of his early years were gradually cocooned in a benign Montaignian scepticism."<sup>2</sup>

Montaigne's *Essais* was translated into English by virtue of the brilliant linguistic sense of John Florio; thereby Florio's Montaigne came to speak English in 1603. The publication year of Florio's translation considers to have been a few years later than the performance of *Hamlet*, and it is now estimated among scholars that Shakespeare might not have had a chance to see Florio's translation in time for the writing of *Hamlet*. As Bate argues, however, Shakespeare's "mind and Montaigne's worked in such similar ways that Hamlet seems like a reader of Montaigne."<sup>3</sup> It could well then be surmised that Shakespeare's way of thinking converged with Montaigne's unfolded in his *Essais*, resonated with it, and was strengthened by it in his later years.

Among the plays in his later career, *Tempest* and *King Lear* have been admitted to be under a huge influence of Montaigne's *Essais*, and for that matter Florio's translation. It is well known that Gonzalo's description about the utopian commonwealth closely follows Florio's words and phrases in "Of the Cannibals;" in *King Lear*, the traces of Florio's translation, not the least those of Florio's "An Apology of *Raymond Sebond*," have been so far identified. Nonetheless, the attention has been mainly paid to pointing to the shared phraseology between Shakespeare and Florio, without taking into account the overarching spirit of testing the self in Montaigne's *Essais*.<sup>4</sup> This paper aims to explore Shakespeare's way of testing Lear's spirit in the Montaignian manner, while simultaneously taking into account the phraseology of Florio's translation of "*Raymond Sebond*."

### No Silk, No Hide, No Wool

The most obvious phrases in *King Lear*, which Shakespeare has picked up from Florio's

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Bate, *Soul of the Age: The Life, Mind and World of William Shakespeare*, London: Viking, 2008, p. 410.

<sup>2</sup> A.D. Nuttall, *Shakespeare the Thinker*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> Bate, *Soul of the Age*, p. 410.

<sup>4</sup> The parallels between *King Lear* and Florio's translation of Montaigne's *Essais* have been meticulously examined in W.B.D. Henderson, 'Montaigne's "Apologie of Raymond Sebond" and "King Lear,"' *The Shakespeare Association Bulletin*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (October 1939), pp. 209-25 and 'Montaigne's "Apologie" and "King Lear" [Concluded], *The Shakespeare Association Bulletin*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (January 1940), pp. 40-54. Stephen Greenblatt, 'Shakespeare's Montaigne,' Introduction to *Shakespeare's Montaigne: The Florio Translation of the Essays, A Selection*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt and Peter G. Platt, New York: New York Review, 2014, pp. ix-xxxiii; Fred Parker, 'Shakespeare's Argument with Montaigne,' *The Cambridge Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (1999), 1-18. A notable exception is Jonathan Bate's illuminative account in *Soul of the Age*, pp. 382-95.

translation of “An Apology of *Raymond Sebond*,” are Lear’s borrowing in “Thou ow’st the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool” from “their [beasts’] spoiles of wooll, of hair, of feathers, of silke to shrod us.” It would be useful to see the corresponding passages in more details:

...Truely, when I consider man all naked (yea, be it in that sex, which seemeth to have and challenge the greatest share of eye-pleasing beautie) and view his defects, his natural subjection, and manifold imperfections; I finde we have had much more reason to hide and cover our nakedness, than any creature else. We may be excused for borrowing those which nature had therein favored more than us, with their beauties to adorne us, and under their spoiles of wooll, of haire, of feathers, and of silke to shroud us. (*The Essayes*, Vol. 2, The second book, Chap. XII, p. 181) <sup>5</sup>

Thou were better in a grave than to answer with thy uncovered body this extremity of the skies. Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou ow’st the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool. The cat no perfume. Ha? Here’s three on’s are sophisticated. Thou are the thing itself: unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton here. (*King Lear*, 3.4. 102-110)<sup>6</sup>

In the above-quoted passage, Montaigne claims that man, compared with animals, is so full of “defects” and “manifold imperfections” that he has to “hide and cover” himself; on top of that, he has to miserably borrow what nature has exclusively endowed animals with from animals as his clothes: that is, “their spoiles of wooll, of haire, of feathers, and of silke.” From this statement, we may sense how Montaigne mercilessly degrades man and greatly admires animals. But it is not the way of his thinking. A little earlier than this statement, Montaigne gives an example from Plato about the great virtues of man in the golden age under Saturn; “[A]mongst the chiefe advantages that man had then,” Montaigne says, [Plato] “reporteth the communication he had with beasts, of whom enquiring and taking instruction, he knew the true qualities, and differences of every one of them: by, and from whom he got an absolute understanding and perfect wisdom, whereby he led a happier life than we can doe.” (pp. 142-43) In Montaigne’s view, man used to stand on the same horizon with animals so that man and animals could understand each other to have a perfect communication. However, Montaigne then doubts if man has continued to maintain such an ability: “Can we have a better proove of man’s impudency, touching beasts?” (p. 143) Man’s arrogance and impudence has just seriously hindered him from communicating with animals. What is more, it is not the matter concerned only with the communication with animals, but also with the inner self of man. By means of the metaphor of garments, therefore, Montaigne advocates to have a humble mind by getting rid of man’s unique pride in his accumulated knowledge and wisdom: “He must be stripped into his shirt.” (p. 188) This is a minimum requirement for an attitude of inquiring the self.

<sup>5</sup> All the quotations from Florio’s translation of Montaigne are from *The Essayes of Michael Lord of Montaigne*, translated by John Florio, 3 vols., London & Toronto: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1927. Hereafter cited in the text with page number.

<sup>6</sup> All the quotations from *King Lear* are from William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, edited by Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen, London: Macmillan, 2009. Hereafter cited in the text with scene, act, and line numbers.

In *King Lear*, meanwhile, it is Poor Tom who has made Lear realize the importance of having a humble mind. He is a mad, naked Bedlam beggar. Even so, Lear sees within Poor Tom himself the true figure of man, who, once being stripped of garments to become an "unaccommodated man," can stand on the same horizon as "a poor bare, forked animal."

Before going out into the stormy weather and encountering Poor Tom under harsh conditions, Lear has been out of his hope of having a peaceful retired life with the two seemingly considerate daughters, Goneril and Regan. Of course, the two daughters go into reverse from the affectionate and filial-minded attitude full of eloquent words of love which they showed off thoroughly at the family conference of the division of kingdom and begin to treat Lear in a cruel way; they start out to cut down the number of his retainers from one hundred to fifty to twenty-five and even up to zero. Lear then exclaims in mad anger:

O, reason not the need! Our basest beggars  
Are in the poorest thing superfluous  
Allow not nature more than nature needs,  
Man's life is cheap as beast's. Thou art a lady;  
If only to go warm were gorgeous,  
Why, nature needs not what thou gorgeous wear'st,  
Which scarcely keeps thee warm. But for true need – (2.2. 478-84)

At this moment, Lear begins to realize the way how man exists in the environment of "nature," man's relation with animals ("beast"), and the unnecessary of "gorgeous" garments. This realization is succinctly expressed by his suddenly erupted outcry: "O, reason not the need!" In a sense, reasoning – a rational act of giving a judgement by making full use of language – is a mark of the wisdom of the arrogant man, which can be metaphorically compared to gorgeous garments of man; it is also what makes man think himself above animals. But this is just only a dawn of Lear's realization.

Gentleman describes about Lear who has run out into the raging storm thus: "Contending with the fretful elements: / Bids the wind blow the earth into the sea / Or swell curlèd waters 'bove the main, / That things might change or cease." (3.1. 4-7) Indeed, Lear fights against the stormy "nature," blaming it for its collusion with the two ingrateful daughters: "But yet I call you servile ministers, / That will with two pernicious daughters join / Your high-engendered battles gainst a head / So old and white as this." (3.2. 21-24) Lear still yet judges the raging nature by his reasoning and tries to control and suppress it. Lear's words, "Reason not the need!" are thus ironically meant at the moment of his utterance. It is when he encounters Poor Tom that he digests the meaning of his own words. He repeatedly refers to Poor Tom as a philosopher or its implying nickname – "this philosopher" (3.4. 154), "this same learnèd Theban" (3.4. 157), "noble philosopher" (3.4. 74), "my philosopher" (3.4. 180), and "good Athenian" (3.4. 184). Lear admires Poor Tom, who "ow'st the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool," as if to pay homage to Montaigne whose image of the true figure of man has given a voice to the character of Poor Tom. As Montaigne suggests man to be stripped into a shirt, so Lear gets rid of his garments: "Off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton here."

## Which is the Justice? Which is the Thief ?

What can man come to see when having a humble mind by getting rid of an impudent pride in knowledge just in the manner of stripping garments? Montaigne continues to pursue this question in the course of examining the attitudes of ancient philosophers not as his models to follow but as his touchstones to consider. According to Montaigne, philosophy is about seeking something, and all the studies of philosophy can be classified into the following three categories: those who say that they have found it in the Peripatetic, the Epicureans, the Stoics and the others; those who say that it cannot be found in the Academics; and those who say that they are still in pursuit after it in the Sceptics. Montaigne comments on these three kinds of philosophical minds in this way:

...[T]hose are infinitely deceived, who imagine they have found it, and that the second degree is over boldly vaine in affirming that mans power is altogether unable to attaine unto it...That ignorance, which knoweth judgeth and condemneth it selfe, is not an absolute ignorance; For, to be so, she must altogether be ignorant of her selfe. So that the profession of the Pyrronians is ever to waver, to doubt and to enquire; never to be assured any thing, nor to take any warrant of himself. Of the three actions or faculties of the soule, that is to say, the imaginative, the concupiscible, and the consenting, they allow and conceive the two former; the last, they hold and defend to be ambiguous, without inclination or approbation, either of one or other side,...(p. 204)

Philosophers in the former two sects are so presumptuous that they are assertive in saying that they either know or know not; On the other hand, the Pyrrhonians never assert about things by saying yes nor no. They are always wavering, doubting, and enquiring. The former is called “Dogmatists, or Doctrine-teachers” (p. 205), whereas the latter is called “Epechists.” (p. 204) As Montaigne has been said to be a forerunner of modern scepticism, it is no doubt that Montaigne favours the Pyrrhonians or Epechists.

However, in the course of Montaigne’s continuous explanation of the mental attitude of Pyrrhonism, it gradually looms large that Montaigne is not perfectly satisfied with the explanation of the philosophical standpoint even on the part of Pyrrhonians:

Their manner of speech is, I *confirme nothing*:...Theyr effects is, a pure, entire and absolute surceasing and suspence of judgement. They use their reason, to enquire and to debate; and not to stay and choose. Whosoever shall imagine a perpetuall confession of ignorance, and a judgement upright and without staggering, to what occasion soever may chance; That man conceives the true Pyrrhonisme. I expound this fantazy as plaine as I can, because many deeme it hard to be conceived: And the Authors themselves represent it somewhat obscurely and diversely. (p. 207)

Even the way of thinking of Pyrrhonians is obscure and diverse, so Montaigne takes up their attitude and tailors it to his way of mental attitude. The fruit of this process crystalizes into his famous motto, “*Que sais-je?*,” as well as the emblem of a pair of scales:

I see the Pyrrhonian Phylosophers, who can by no manner of speech expresse their

Generall conceit: for, they had need of a new language. Ours is altogether composed of affirmative propositions, which are directly against them. So that, when they say I doubt, you have them fast by the throat to make them avow, that at least you are assured and know, that they doubt. So they beene compelled to save themselves by this comparison of Physicke, without which their conceit would be inexplicable and intricate. When they pronounce, I know not, or I doubt, they say, that this proposition transportes it selfe together with rest, even as the Rewbarbe doeth, which scowred ill humours away, and therewith is carried away himselfe. This concept is more certainly conceived by an interrogation: What can I tell? As I beare it in an Imprese of a paire of ballances. (pp. 233-34)

Montaigne suggests that the Pyrrhonians also have a danger of getting dogmatic as long as they use language, since our language is made of "affirmative propositions." Montaigne points out that they have to find a new language in order to express their non-affirmative standpoint. As an alternative solution, instead, Montaigne offers a different method. It is to have an interrogative form of "*Que sais-je?*" ("What can I tell?") when standing in front of an imaginary pair of scales. In his illuminating book, *How to Read Montaigne*, Terence Cave explains about this attempt that "Montaigne's language *digests* Pyrrhonism and comes out on the other side, intensified perhaps, even more self-aware, but essentially the same instrument. The rhubarb has had its purgative effect and leaves the extended body healthy and ready for further enquiry."<sup>7</sup> While relying on the very same metaphor of "rhubarb," Montaigne with a vengeance succeeds in representing his self in a state of flux by means of avoiding the danger of inflicting judgements through the use of assertive language and enabling the possibility of further enquiry. This attitude is exactly represented by the motto "*Que sais-je?*" and the symbol of a pair of scales.

Let us return to *King Lear*. After encountering Poor Tom in the night of a raging storm, Lear, whose mentality has been on the verge of collapse, finally goes mad. As Edgar disguised as Poor Tom describes in an aside that "O, matter and impertinency mixed! Reason in madness!" (4.5. 187), Lear, although in madness, sees through human mind with an admirable acumen. And such an attitude of Lear chimes with the Montaignian way of exploring human mind: "*Que sais-je?*" facing an imaginary pair of scales.

Lear says to the blind Gloucester at one scene thus:

...see how yond justice rails upon yond simple thief. Hark, in thine ear: change places, and handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief? Thou hast seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar? (4.5. 164-68)

And the creature run from the cur? There thou mightst behold the great image of authority: a dog's obeyed in office.

Thou rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand!

Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thy own back:

Thou hotly lusts to use her in that kind

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<sup>7</sup> Terence Cave, *How to Read Montaigne*, London: Granta, 2007, p. 41.

For which thou whip'st her. The usurer hangs the cozener.  
Through tattered clothes great vices do appear:  
Robes and furred gowns hide all. Place sins with gold,  
And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks:  
Arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw does pierce it.  
None does offend, none, I say, none:  
. . . . .  
Pull off my boots, harder, harder: so. (4.5. 170-86)

Lear suggests to play the game of “handy-dandy;” close eyes, change places, and say “which is the justice, which is the thief?” This game actually makes us to start being confused; we cannot reach an absolute answer, permanently being in a state of suspension of judgement. Lear puts on a pair of scales of justice various counterparts such as “the justice” and “the thief,” “a farmer’s dog and “a beggar,” “the creature” and “the cur,” a “rascal beadle” and a “whore,” an “usurer” and a “cozener,” and a justice and a sinner. The pair of scales never tips on either side, implying that animals are equal to men and judges are to sinners. If it tips on one side in the name of justice, it is merely thanks to the trappings of authority like “robes” and “furred gowns.” So, strip our garments and we will realize that we are all equally sinners. But such a recognition should be suspended and starts afresh to put it in another pair of scales. Lear thus utters, “None does offend, none, I say, none.” Lear’s exploration into human mind never comes to an end, so he needs to strip garments: “Pull off my boots, harder, harder.”

It seems that Lear’s exploration into human mind has to come to a halt in the face of death. Death is an absolute and final judgement. Lear gives out desperate cries with the dead Cordelia in his arms:

Howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones:  
Had I your tongues and eyes, I’d use them so  
That heaven’s vault should crack. She’s gone for ever!  
I know when one is dead and when one lives:  
She’s dead as earth. Lend me a looking-glass:  
If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,  
Why, then she lives. (5.3. 266-72)

This feather stirs: she lives! If it be so,  
It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows  
That ever I have felt. (5.3. 276-78)

Lear regards the death of Cordelia as the final stop: “She’s gone for ever!” However, Lear thinks of trying a looking-glass and feathers to see if she lives. Lear once again puts on an imaginary pair of scales such counterparts as life and death, hope and despair, and anything and nothing.

And my poor fool is hanged! No, no, no, life?  
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,

And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,  
Never, never, never, never, never!  
Pray you undo this button: thank you sir.  
Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips,  
Look there, look there! (5.3. 324-330)

The sense of the indisputable truth about the death of Cordelia has been emphasized by Lear's anguished cries in despair: "Never, never, never, never, never!" Lear's desperate mind is so gashed that his reference to animals like a dog, a horse, a rat appears to be a representation of Lear's patronizing attitude; are such trivial creatures as dogs, horses, and rats worthy of having lives, when my beloved Cordelia is dead?

But how about imagining Lear's another attempt to try a virtual pair of scales weighing animals and Cordelia? In facing his own death, what is more, Lear still has some hope for life in Cordelia: "Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips, / Look there, look there!" Lear cannot ascertain whether Cordelia is dead or lives: nothing or anything. Lear finally asks, "Pray you undo this button." This is one of the speeches with the metaphor of garments, which Lear speaks every time he tries to search into the depth of human nature. With such evocative words of request, Lear's light of life goes out.