Abstract

Nuclear Shakespeare: Apocalypse and Annihilation in *King Lear* and *Hamlet*

Recent scholarship on Shakespeare's plays centres around the question of their relevance for the present day. Feminist, Marxist and post-colonial analyses speak to our globalised political context; post-structuralist methods explore the relationship between language and power; historicist methods look at the construction of modernity in Shakespeare's day; presentism considers the plays from a self-consciously present-focused perspective; and the recent eco-critical approach reads Shakespeare's plays in the light of the so-called "Anthopocene." In this thesis, I use an updated method of Derridean nuclear criticism, combined with materialist feminist critique, to examine the relevance of *King Lear* and *Hamlet* to today's heterogeneous threat of annihilation (including nuclear destruction, genocide, and ecological disaster through climate change), focusing on the implications of annihilation for artistic representation – literature, in particular. I also look at *King Lear* and *Hamlet* in their context of early modern Christian apocalypticism, taking apocalypticism as a possible precursor to today's discourses of annihilation.

I argue that the spectre of annihilation problematises traditional realist mimesis, revealing the complex and paradoxical relationship between truth, meaning, and representation. Early modern Scriptural exegetes and Reformation iconomachs were also deeply concerned with the problem of representation, one which apocalyptic ideology promises to resolve through an ultimate revelation of truth at the end of history. These concerns continue today in late modern critiques of representation as well as in millennialist secularisations of the apocalypse, which are ambivalent in their dual potential to lead to destruction and to provide a necessary hope for justice. *King Lear* and *Hamlet* both dramatise and subvert early modern apocalyptic views on eschatology and teleology, providence, revelation, mystery, prophecy, and messianic justice. Both plays reveal the contradictory nature of the Apocalypse described in the Book of Revelation, itself an "Apocalypse without apocalypse" which lacks ultimate revelation of truth and justice, presenting only annihilation of the enemies of God. However, the two plays also dramatise the paradoxical power of rhetoric, fiction, and literary and theatrical representation to both act as weapons of mass destruction and *defer* the ultimate end. The complexity of the apocalypse presented in *King Lear* and *Hamlet* thus allows the two plays to be appropriated in twentieth-century adaptations and intertextual uses to explore the relationship between representation and annihilation in the modern day and to consider the role of the artist in the nuclear age.