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## King Lear and the Unreality of Countries

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# ***King Lear* and the Unreality of Countries**

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While it has become quite common among scholars today to share Benedict Anderson's definition of nations as "an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (15), traces of this same intellectual groundwork that can be observed in William Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Writing in a time of rising nationalistic fervor throughout the Western world, it is pertinent to thoroughly examine the ways in which nations are socially constructed and whether these imaginary communities are truly a worthy object of our passionate support; as Emmanuel Yewah ponders in "The Nation as a Contested Construct": "how can such a recent, false notion as nation cause so many to be willing to die?" (45) In an effort to better understand this phenomena and how it relates to Shakespeare's play, I will begin with an analysis of the scene in which Lear divides his kingdom between his daughters and consider some of the interpretations other critics have offered, with especial attention paid to the map which Lear divides. From there, I will examine the scene of Gloucester's blind journey to the supposed cliffs of Dover with Edgar along with evidence of the historical significance of the cliffs as a symbol of English national identity, which is ripe for a postmodern reading of the nation become evident in the play. I finally end with an analysis of the scene in which King Lear and Cordelia are reunited, investigating the meaning of the geographical confusion he experiences as a central and cogent indication of the play's implicit contention with the supposed fixity of the concept of nations and the subversive promise that exists in questioning the national hegemony; thus I posit that *King Lear* contains a poignant, if latent, recognition of the arbitrary social construction of nations which is widespread today in conceptions of nations.

## **Lear's Divided Map**

To begin, we look to the first scene of the play in which Lear announces his "darker purpose" (1.1.37), the division of his kingdom between his three daughters. The casual manner with which a ruler can

fundamentally change the lives and the identities of their subjects is indicative of the fact that the rule and the divisions are unnatural. “To shake all cares and business from our age” (1.1.40), Lear has the power to construct nations on a whim and for his own benefit. Any close examination of his behavior reveals that it is irrational and likely an unfortunate byproduct of his impending madness, while the logical extension of this observation would suggest that any formation of nations is likewise fallible—an unnatural construct created by the whims and for the benefits of powerful individuals with no regard to the conditions of the people they govern.

The scene implicitly portrays the inception of nations not as a reasoned exercise wherein the leader rationally acts in the best interest of the people, but one in which a privileged elite bases decisions upon emotion, and does so in a decidedly abusive manner:

*Lear.* Tell me, my daughters,—  
 Since now we will divest us, both of rule,  
 Interest of territory, cares of state,—  
 Which of you shall we say doth love us most?  
 That our largest bounty may extend  
 Where nature doth with merit challenge. (1.1.49-54)

Demanding confessions of love from one’s daughters and rewarding them with control of unaware populations based on their responses is as cogent an example as any to display how arbitrary and artificial nations are. Lear’s actions in this scene reflect Emmanuel Yewah’s description of nation-forming: “As in all dictatorships, the arbitrary finds its way into all decision-making processes as national boundaries shift and names of countries change according to the whims of dictators” (48). Goneril and her husband are rewarded richly for her acquiescence to Lear’s tyrannical demand for voiced affection:

With shadowy forest and with champains rich’d,  
 With plenteous rivers and wide-skirted meads,  
 We make thee lady: to thine and Albany’s issue  
 Be this perpetual. (1.1.65-69)

The divisions being constructed, at least in Lear’s assumption, are to last forever; territories divided in perpetuity, needlessly creating artificial differences and division between people. This division will be mirrored when Lear’s daughters war amongst themselves, and with

Edmund, who becomes the de facto tyrant assuming quasi-control over the divided kingdom. Edmund sets Regan and Goneril against one another to gain for himself the greatest power and influence possible in a manner similar to Lear forcing his daughters to compete at the play's start. He draws Cordelia into outdoing her sisters:

Now, our joy,  
 Although the last, not least...  
 What can you say to draw  
 A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak. (1.1.84-88)

Cordelia refuses to participate in her father's game; to "heave/ My heart into my mouth" (1.1.93-94) and reduce the natural and instinctual love that she feels for her father to the crass realm of fabricated and imperfect language, and so she is given nothing. While the creation and rule of nations is revealed as a construct, it is one that is the exclusive domain of the powerful and requires an adherence to other norms and social constructions so that all the conceptual bricks might form a wall by which to strengthen one another and conceal their imaginary nature.

The map which Lear divides in the scene has been the subject of scholarly examination, such as Isabel Karremann provides in "*King Lear and the Rhetoric of Amnesia*", while discussing how the scene is portrayed in different productions:

Different modern productions, which R.A. Foakes discusses in his introduction to the Arden edition of the play, have used this prop to bring out "the political and emotional tensions of the scene": the map "both symbolizes Lear's power as king and reduces it to a sheet of paper which he may easily tear up and destroy, or which . . . may be made so large that it 'papered the stage floor' and gradually ripped and shredded until it vanished in the final scenes. In particular the last use of the map illustrates how it can bring home the process of disintegration that characterizes the whole play. While the material map is not referred to any more afterwards, the play can be read as a symbolic "tearing up [the] map of the kingdom." (105)

The map is a symbol of the kingdom and its division, but what a map truly displays is the land. Regardless of labels placed upon it, lines drawn between territories to manifest division where none exists naturally, the map acts ultimately as an attempt to manifest the imagined reality of territorial divisions in an objective material medium. Karremann notes

that “maps provide a visual point of identification for nationhood” (106) and goes on to write,

In supplying the English with an image of the country, maps enabled them to “take visual and conceptual possession of the physical kingdom in which they lived”. Consequently, maps began to open a gap between a sense of communal identity based on dynastic loyalty and a sense of national and local identity based on the land. [...] Its presence on stage alone could have indicated the shift of loyalty from the body of the king to the country itself that soon will occur in the play. (106)

Additionally, Valerie Traub observes that the budding science of cartography is in the background of the play; this could help to account for the heightened awareness of what nations represent that takes place in the play’s subtext.

Helen Ting highlights the “conceptual fuzziness of the term” (453) nation and writes that “hence even within established nation-states the quality and demographic boundary of nationhood—as well as its conditions of admission and exclusion—does not remain static and continues to be subject to contentions and variations” (454), acknowledging the intrinsic difficulty with reaching a satisfactory and widely applicable understanding of how to define the social construct of nations that has a profound impact upon the lives of so many people. Instead of creating unity and harmony in the lives of citizens, Ting writes that “the many state-initiated homogenizing projects in the name of ‘nation-building’. These endeavors more often than not became the source of interethnic conflicts rather than contributing to their alleviation” (455). This is evident in *King Lear* in that the division of the kingdom is the first action that leads to conflict within the play, and most of the later conflicts can be seen as reactions or exacerbations of this inciting action. Thus, the unnatural process of nation-building also necessarily becomes a destructive one, in which the very act of the separation of territories into distinct nations implies the violence necessary to enforce the divisions.

### **Dover**

In Scene 6 of Act 4, a disguised Edgar guides his recently blinded father through the fields near Dover, while Gloucester believes he’s being brought to the peak of the cliffs of Dover. This scene creates a sense

of geographic confusion, Edgar substituting one place for another in the mind of his father and thus making it a reality for him. There is an added layer of meta-geographic confusion for an audience watching the play performed, having the stage substituted for the field, substituted for the cliff. Whether or not Gloucester is fully convinced of his location, as he does push back against Edgar on the subject, even the idea that one place can convincingly be another undermines the solidity of any place's identity—a concept further exemplified in Lear and Cordelia's reunion in the following scene. Traversing the field, Edgar uses signifiers from the imagined location at the cliffs of Dover to convince his father that the fields of Dover are the cliffs. While Gloucester does question this notion, he does not refute it outright, and seems to believe it enough that he is later convinced that he fell from the peak of an enormous cliff.

The scene implies that the experience of a location is less determined by the physical reality one is immersed in than the ideas that one has associated with it. This is paralleled in the context of nations, where one's imaginary conceptions of a collective identity are projected onto the material world enough to convince people to fight and die defending it. Just as blinded Gloucester may believe he is at the cliffs of Dover and maps this idea upon the material world he inhabits, a patriotic citizen might look at the physical world of fields, forests, rivers, and is convinced they are intrinsically a part of their country, not independent collections of matter arbitrarily claimed by one state or another.

While the scene supposedly taking place at the cliffs of Dover is actually in a field near Dover, it is pertinent to examine the idea of the cliffs themselves and what they represented to English citizens. Paul Readman undertakes this very task in "The Cliffs are not Cliffs': The Cliffs of Dover and National Identities of Britain, c.1750-c.1950". He writes, "all nation-states occupy physical territories and all nations claim homelands, the particular landscape features of which have often functioned as powerful markers of identity" (242), and that while there is an "important role played by landscape in providing a focus for national feeling; landscape, and distinctive landscapes in particular, have functioned as powerful symbols of national identity... the relationship between landscape and nation" (243) is one that has been largely ignored by historians. In this examination of the underlying arbitrariness beneath the surface of national identity, it is also helpful to consider this relationship between landscape

and nation. About the cliffs themselves, Readman writes “It was not so much the physical appearance of the cliffs of Dover — although this was certainly important — that bound them so tightly to discourses of nationhood, but the associations they triggered in the minds of the British” (245), and this could ultimately be said of any location in relation to what it means for the nation it exists in—that the ideas and associations connected to the material world are taken by the citizens of nations and projected onto an indifferent world of matter:

To begin with, the white cliffs were associated with the nation, or rather nations — England in particular, but also Britain (the two often being conflated). This alone did much to account for the esteem in which the cliffs were held. [...] this view was further bolstered by the spread of Enlightenment-generated ideas that nation-statehood was properly defined by natural boundaries such as seas, rivers and mountains. (248)

The ideas around the cliffs of Dover were especially poignant for the British because they denoted boundaries, and were therefore powerful symbols of nationalism needed to demarcate the country from the outside world of otherness. Readman further elaborates that “Notoriously, Britain’s geographical separateness from the continent was a matter of celebration, and in combination with increasingly secure geographical knowledge helped reinforce the longstanding idea that British nationhood was naturally (or providentially) ordained” (249). So, the cliffs of Dover function as symbols of separateness that are needed to reinforce the imagined community the nation promises to its citizens.

The cliffs had emerged as a powerful emblem of an insular national identity, one shaped less by the expanding overseas empire than by Britain’s place in Europe, particularly as affected by historic rivalries with continental powers, especially France... To a significant extent, from the nineteenth century onwards the cliffs came to stand as a synecdoche of British separateness from the continent, of Britain’s status as an island apart from the rest of Europe, functioning as a landscape of difference for the inhabitants of an island kingdom. Dover’s cliffs thus became a marker of Britishness as well as Englishness... As a unique landscape of British identity, the cliffs did important ideological work, helping to territorialize meanings of Britishness, so supporting sentiments of belonging not just to one of the component nations of the British Isles, but to the British nation-state as a whole. (250)

Having this rich background of national significance behind the cliffs of Dover and the surrounding region make the idea of Shakespeare using scenes in this location to undermine the very notion of nations that much more intriguing. The fields of Dover are thus a symbol of homecoming for the British, one of the first sights to greet citizens returning to their homeland from abroad, and fittingly the site where Cordelia returns from France and where Lear will have an instance of renewed clarity that might also be deemed a homecoming.

It is with this knowledge of the cliffs of Dover and what they represent in mind that we begin to unpack Act 4, Scene 7, when Lear reunites with Cordelia at her camp in the fields of Dover amidst her French army. When Lear wakes in a tent with Cordelia, he asks, “Where have I been? Where am I?” (4.7.52) Heather Hirschfeld wrote about this crucial scene:

King Lear’s early, imperious command over map and landscape—heard resoundingly in his order to ‘give me the map there’ and in his parceling of territory that follows—contrasts with his later uncertainty about location. [...] Lear’s concern with where he is, a concern made more poignant in comparison to his earlier geographical authority, can be seen as a fresh, even comic, installment of the madness which began with his decision to divide the kingdom and which has intensified in the wake of repeated assaults on his status and self. (588)

More than the result of madness, Lear’s geographic confusion results from a failure to recognize the arbitrary distinctions made between one location and another:

I fear I am not in my perfect mind.  
Methinks I should know you, and know this man;  
Yet I am doubtful: for I am mainly ignorant  
What place this is: and all the skill I have  
Remembers not these garments; nor I know not  
Where I did lodge last night. (4.7.63-68)

Even when all else is clear, when he recognizes Cordelia and Kent, the land remains uncertain to him:

*Lear.* Am I in France?  
*Cor.* In your own kingdom, sir.  
*Lear.* Do not abuse me. (4.7.75-78)

There could be, perhaps, no bolder assertion of the nation's socially constructed nature than for a monarch to be unable to recognize the very land he ruled over. The Lear of the play's first scene who exhibited such clear geographical authority as to divide his map and kingdom here fails to distinguish his land from that of another nation. Implicit in this scene is the suggestion that Lear cannot distinguish his own kingdom and another nation, not because he has gone mad per se, but because the land itself is not so different in his kingdom and in France that he is unable to tell the difference and to properly connect them to the appropriate imagined community. Because he's with Cordelia, who he knows left for France, and he now is hosted in a French camp, his assumption of location is quite logical—though it greatly undermines the separateness of nations and the stability of English national identity that he can be in the vicinity of a site of such national significance and believe himself in another land. Lear's logic suggests, contrary to his ideas of creating new divisions upon his map and making them manifest in reality, that the recognizable semblance of nation lies in the community he imagined himself to be in when he was surrounded by people of another nation—even upon his own land that he ruled over as king.

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