“LOOK WITH THINE EARS”: THE DEPRECIATION OF OCULARCENTRIC CULTURE IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE’S KING LEAR

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Abstract: In his groundbreaking research on the broad phenomenon of Western visual culture in important intellectual eras, Martin Jay touches on the abundance of ocular references in Renaissance literature and cites the example of William Shakespeare whose works are replete with visual metaphors. Notwithstanding extensive research on the role of vision in Shakespeare’s works, it seems that scant attention has been paid to the Bard’s deprecation of ocularcentric culture. Shakespeare was, admittedly, not the first writer who depicted and challenged the biased privileging of sight in Western culture, but the present study focuses on the example of King Lear to show that Shakespearean drama played a significant role in reflecting the dire consequences of ocularcentrism in society. Drawing on first-hand Renaissance accounts of vision, Martin Jay’s exhaustive research into the history of ocularcentrism in the West, and James Shapiro’s historical account of the year Shakespeare’s King Lear was first performed, this study employs a New Historicism methodology to examine how Shakespearean drama marks both a turn away from the traditional hegemony of vision and a turning point in the criticism of modern ocularcentric culture in the West. We conclude that King Lear serves, among other things, to remind us that visual subjugation transcends the boundaries of time and culture and that we could all ourselves be Lear’s or Gloucesters, deluded by the proverbial concept that “seeing is believing”.

Keywords: King Lear, Martin Jay, New Historicism, Ocularcentrism, Renaissance
Introduction

Western culture has had an enduring fascination with vision since the ancient times, and eyes, commonly believed to be the gateway to the soul, have long been cherished and favored over the other sense organs, especially in epistemological terms. Although there might be older references in history, this hierarchal privileging of vision in the West, technically referred to as ocularcentrism in Western culture, was mainly inherited from a prevalent obsession with vision in ancient Greek culture. Classical Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle extolled the virtues of and reflected a popular preference for the sense of vision. Despite his general distrust of sense perception, Plato in Timaeus hails vision as “enormously beneficial for us,” without which a philosophical account of the universe would be completely impossible and the divine cosmic order could never be realized (38). Aristotle too gives prominence to the sense of sight and argues for the general favoring of sight over the other senses. He begins The Metaphysics with his ruminations on how the human thirst for knowledge is represented by a man’s delight in the senses, especially the sense of sight, and why vision is usually held in the highest esteem among the senses. The reason for this privileging of vision, Aristotle notes, is that it is “the sense that especially produces cognition in us and reveals many distinguishing features of things” (4).

As the American historian Martin Jay asserts in his book Downcast Eyes, this classical Greek heritage of ocularcentrism continues well into the Middle Ages, especially through the writings of Roger Bacon and Thomas Aquinas. In his influential treatise on perspective, Bacon reflects that, compared to similar studies, optics is “far nobler and more pleasing, since we take especial delight in vision, and light and color have an especial beauty beyond the other things that are brought to our senses” (419). He echoes the Aristotelian theory of vision and knowledge and claims that “there must be a special utility in our knowledge through vision which is not found in the other senses” (420). In a similar vein, Aquinas maintains that “

The sense of sight, since it has no natural change of its organ or its object, is the most immaterial, the most perfect, and the most universal of the senses” (71).

Although in the Middle Ages or any other premodern period of European history there was a clear cultural preference for the sense of sight, it was the Renaissance that marked a turning point in the history of ocularcentrism in the West. To Jay, the story of ocularcentric modernity begins with the Renaissance and the scientific revolution.
Despite its critical view of the medieval obsession with images, the Renaissance, Jay notes, witnessed a rich profusion of ocular references and preferences in both humanities and sciences:

Not only did Renaissance literature abound in ocular references, not only did its science produce the first silvered glass mirror able to reproduce the world with far greater fidelity than before, not only did some of its greatest figures like Leonardo da Vinci explicitly privilege the eye over the ear, but also the Renaissance saw one of the most fateful innovations in Western culture: the theoretical and practical development of perspective in the visual arts. (Jay 44)

Along with dramatic scientific advances, a more specific focus on human beings and their this worldly life in the Renaissance revolutionized the concept of perspective in the fine arts, whose products were to be appreciated mainly for their aesthetic, imaginative or intellectual content. One of da Vinci’s most distinguishing qualities in painting was his technical mastery of perspective. In sculpture, Michelangelo’s great knowledge of perspective and anatomy was clearly evident in his accurate, more realistic representations of body. And in architecture, Filippo Brunelleschi developed the principles of architectural “linear perspective” (Kleiner 425). All these artistic developments proceeded from Renaissance man’s radically new viewpoint on worldly life, which stressed the importance of self-knowledge and experience of aesthetic pleasures, both available through the sense of sight. A compelling piece of evidence, among many, supporting this claim lies in da Vinci’s ocularcentric words. “Hearing is less noble than sight; as soon as it is born it dies, and its death is as swift as its birth,” da Vinci argues with a comparison. “This does not apply to the sense of sight,” he maintains, “because if you represent to the eye a beautiful human body composed of proportionately beautiful parts, this beauty… has great permanence and remains to be seen” (qtd. in Isaacson 262). Similarly, in Renaissance philosophy, such big names as Francis Bacon in England and René Descartes in France contributed, each in their own way, to the ocularcentrism of Western culture. Bacon, a leading advocate of the scientific revolution at the time, firmly believed that “knowledge is power” and that a man’s control of nature is possible only through his knowledge of it (Vogel & Berke 192). Considering that the truths of science, a principal means of getting knowledge, were just verified through the sense of sight, Bacon admitted “nothing but on the faith of eyes, or at least of careful and severe examination” (30). But as Martin Jay points out, “The grip of modern ocularcentrism was perhaps nowhere as evident as in France .... [And] no better evidence of its power can be offered than the stubborn
hold Cartesian philosophy had on its major thinkers for so many years” (69). Descartes characterized vision as “the noblest and most comprehensive of the senses,” and his philosophy is today usually referred to as a major source of modern ocularcentrism (152).

The great favoring of vision at the dawn of the modern era, as Jay suggested, was not exemplified only by philosophy or the visual arts, but literature, too, played an important role in establishing the ocularcentrism of the period (44). John Donne, for example, acknowledged the superiority of sight over the other senses on several occasions and claimed that “The sight is so much the noblest of all the senses, as that it is all the senses” (221). Likewise, Robert Burton, in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, observed that of all the five senses, “Sight is held to be most precious, and the best” (157). This, however, does not mean that sight’s supremacy went completely unchallenged by Renaissance literature. A historical reading of vision in the early modern period would reveal “how ambiguously sight was regarded even in an already ocularcentric age” (Clark 5). Jay himself admits that ocular domination in early modern culture “did not mean uniformity” and that “the modern era emerged with a much more complicated attitude toward vision than is often assumed” (45). In Michael Drayton’s sonnet XXIX “To the Senses” (1619) in *Idea*, for example, the sense of touch was hailed as “The king of senses, greater than the rest” whereas sight was deemed corrupted by beauty (line 10). Distrust of sight was also exemplified by the writings of the anti-theatricalist Stephen Gosson who cautioned against acting’s potential for deception. “Vice is learned with beholding, sense is tickled, desire pricked, and those impressions of mind are secretly conveyed over to the gazers, which the players do counterfeit on the stage,” Gosson remarked (108). But William Shakespeare and many of his fellow playwrights thought otherwise. For a writer like Shakespeare, drama could hold a mirror to real life, giving insights into the depth of human behavior. Not long after Gosson and his like-minded peers insisted on the falsity of theatrical representation and warned of its corruptive potential, Shakespeare staged *Hamlet*, among his many other plays, and defended the theatre “as a very effective moral medium which stimulates both eye and ear into a dialectic within the reason and conscience” (Anderson 311). Shakespeare was acutely aware of the ocularcentrism of his culture and used the very medium of theater to implicitly warn against the consequences of overtrusting sight, which can develop into the biased privileging of vision.

Apart from theoretical differences, what distinguishes Shakespeare’s approach to sight from that of his contemporaries is the
Bard’s mirror-like depiction of vision in his early modern society, which entails exposing the Renaissance as a hugely ocularcentric culture. Possibly more than any other Renaissance writer, Shakespeare is the one whose approach to the senses in general, and the sense of sight in particular, has fascinated the researchers most throughout the centuries but, although extensive research has been carried out on the role of vision in Shakespeare’s works, it seems that scant attention has been paid to the Bard’s deprecation of ocularcentric culture. Therefore, unlike previous studies on the role of sight in Shakespeare, this study is intended to show that the Bard chose to swim against the tide of his time by holding a mirror to popular misconceptions about vision and deprecating the cultural ocularcentrism of the Renaissance. In this regard, a detailed analysis of *King Lear* would illustrate that Shakespeare, despite being surrounded with an ocularcentric culture, was among the earliest who disapproved of and warned about the limitations of the biased favoring of vision.

During the past few decades, an increasing number of critical works on Shakespeare have contributed to the field of literary criticism either by putting forward their example-based arguments concerning the Bard’s approach to the issue of (over)confidence in sight or by drawing on modern theoretical concepts of vision to analyze the representation of eyes and sight in Shakespeare. In this regard, researchers such as Brid Phillips and Simon Smith used contextual clues to explore the use of sight in *Hamlet* and, each in their own way, argued for Shakespeare’s deep understanding of opposing views about the primacy of sight. Phillips, for example, noted that “Shakespeare inherits and reflects complex and often contradictory theories concerning the physiology of sight, some claiming the pre-eminence of this sense while others cast suspicion on its apparent trustworthiness as a guide to the truth” (178). Likewise, Smith remarked that “Whilst *Hamlet* demonstrates Shakespeare’s familiarity with a wide range of contemporary attitudes to sight, it does so without ever categorically endorsing any one of them” (116). Apart from such analyses, sight in Shakespeare proves worthy of being analyzed from different modern and postmodern theoretical approaches. The great importance of sight in Lacanian notions of identity, for example, has inspired several important studies on vision in Shakespeare, including Barbara Freedman’s *Staging the Gaze: Postmodernism, Psychoanalysis, and Shakespearean Comedy* (1991) and Philip Armstrong’s *Shakespeare’s Visual Regime: Tragedy, Psychoanalysis and the Gaze* (2000). According to Armstrong, “Psychoanalysis – certainly in that form most usually associated with the name of Jacques Lacan – shares with Shakespearean tragedy a
fascination with vision, attributing to it various almost occult effects” (2).

The present study employs a New Historicist methodology. After all, in order to get a good grasp of vision in Shakespeare, it is important to have a clear picture of vision in the Renaissance, and vice versa. New Historicism, according to *A Dictionary of Literary and Thematic Terms*, “rejects the traditional distinction between the text and the context” and “views the text as a participant in a historical or political process that it ‘reconceives’” (Quinn 286). Therefore, this New Historicist study examines both how vision in Shakespeare’s times influences vision in Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and how vision in Shakespeare’s *King Lear* reflects vision in Shakespeare’s times. In other words, delving deeply into the position of vision in the social, cultural and political context of England at Shakespeare’s time, this study provides insights into the possible underlying motives of an anti-ocularcentric tendency in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. By the same token, it will be argued that the Bard’s treatment of vision in *King Lear* is both a reaction to and a reflection of an ocularcentric society in early modern England. As New Historicism emphasizes negotiation of different texts in connection with their cultural contexts, the research data in this study are collected from both primary and secondary sources, including the aforementioned first-hand accounts of vision by other Renaissance figures, Martin Jay’s extensive research into the history of ocularcentrism in the West, and the following James Shapiro’s historical account of the year Shakespeare’s *King Lear* was first performed.

*King Lear in Context*

The story of the legendary ancient British King Lear and his three daughters was already familiar to many British people before Shakespeare wrote and staged his tragic version in the early seventeenth century. During the Elizabethan period alone, several works of literature had each in their own way related the story of King Lear, among them a 1574 edition of *The Mirror for Magistrates*, Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles* (1587), Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1589), and an anonymous play, *King Leir*, which had been performed in 1594 as the first dramatization of the story and was published in 1605, about one year before the first known performance of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. In the years leading up to the writing of *King Lear*, England was a hotbed of social and political upheaval. Among the momentous events English people witnessed in the early seventeenth century were King James VI of Scotland’s accession to the English throne after the death of the unmarried and childless Queen Elizabeth I in 1603, a severe
outbreak of plague during the same year, and the uncovering of the
Gunpowder Plot in late 1605, which resulted in heightened religious
tensions in society. Meanwhile, the new king’s longed-for Union of
Scotland and England had been the subject of substantial debate in
legal, political, and social circles. After all, James himself was the
embodiment of such a union. But as James Shapiro noted, “In pressing
the case for Union, the Scottish monarch had foisted upon his subjects
an identity crisis where none had existed before” (41). Soon after the
talk of the Union circulated around the two kingdoms, both the English
and the Scots began to wonder if the difference between them goes
beyond their birthplace and if the common features between the two
nations were sufficient to neutralize any difference. In this social and
political climate, a dramatist like Shakespeare would seize the
opportunity to lace his drama with allusions to the prevailing concerns
of the time. To put it in Shapiro’s words, “What was proving unsettling
for the culture at large proved to be a gift to a dramatist who had made
a career out of exploring identity crises—be they political, familial,
marital, or religious” (41). Consequently, the years after the King James’s
accession marked a turning point in Shakespeare’s political drama as the
Bard’s plays during the period represented his shift in interest from
English to British concerns.

According to Shapiro, while the word “English” had appeared 132
times in Shakespeare’s Elizabethan plays, especially in his nine
Elizabethan English history plays which helped to define English identity,
the Bard “had never found an occasion to use the word ‘British’ before
James’s accession; [and] the first time that audiences heard it in one of
his plays was in King Lear” (41). Therefore, it is easy to infer that in
writing King Lear as his first British play, Shakespeare was reacting to the
Jacobean concepts of national unity and division. But his double-
edged reaction has since been open to diverse interpretations. It is reasonable
enough to accept Shapiro’s claim that “The deck seems equally stacked
by Shakespeare against both union and division”, and that “Those who
try to identify a clear-cut position in King Lear are bound to be
disappointed” (45). The only thing that can be stated with certainty
about Shakespeare’s reaction is his metaphorical recommendation for
seeing beyond mere appearances, the lack of which, Shakespeare
warned in King Lear, may have serious repercussions not only for the
kings and the nobility but also for the general public. In other words, his
King Lear was more critical of a superficial society than of any plans for
national unity or division. To Shakespeare, a society which is more
concerned with appearances and which takes everything at face value is
doomed to decline. The present study claims that this superficiality in
early modern period had its roots in Western ocularcentrism and that Shakespeare was perceptive enough to understand the detrimental effects of equating seeing with believing on people’s individual and social lives. While there is ample research on interesting parallels between the real case of King James and the legend of King Lear, studies on cultural similarities between Lear’s society and the Jacobean community are scarce. This paper emphasizes that by dropping ingenious hints throughout King Lear about the ocularcentrism of Lear and his people, Shakespeare actually mirrored the ocularcentric culture of early modern English society, particularly evident in political and social affairs of the time.

In his 1599 book Basilikon Doron, a mirror for princes and a treatise on the practice of kingship, King James reminded his son Prince Henry that “a king is as one set on a stage, whose smallest actions and gestures all the people gazingly do behold” (603). James VI of Scotland, who had yet to become James I of England, also explained that “although a king be never so precise in the discharging of his office, the people, who seeth but the outward part, will ever judge of the substance by the circumstances” (603). His years of reigning over Scotland had taught James that a king ought to conduct himself impeccably as he was constantly in the public eye in an ocularcentric society whose people went by appearances. A few years later, when James was on the English throne, he tried to practice what he had preached to his son and thought that the Union of England and Scotland would enhance his reputation in the eyes of the public, among other things. Like the real-life people James described to his son, the eponymous king and many other characters in Shakespeare’s King Lear are too dependent on their eyes, searching for meaning only in appearances.

**King Lear and the Story of Seeing**

In the very first scene of the play, Goneril unwittingly hints at the ocularcentrism of her society as one of the flattering comparisons she makes in her insincere profession of love for Lear is “Dearer than eyesight,” rather than hearing or the sense of touch, for example (1.1.55). There is nothing strange about eyes and seeing being naturally dear to any human being, but in Goneril’s case, eyesight is interestingly mentioned in the same breath as basic human values, the implication being that it is generally held in high regard by the society she lives in:

Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter,
Dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty,
Beyond what can be valued rich or rare;
No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honour. (1.1.54-57)
The irony of Goneril’s reference to eyesight is that Lear, to whom these sycophantic words are addressed, is actually blind to his daughters’ motivations. Later on in the same scene, when the Earl of Kent’s intervention to change Lear’s impetuous decision about disowning Cordelia results in Lear getting enraged, Shakespeare again touches on “eyes” and “seeing” to stress the theme of metaphorical blindness arising from superficiality and ocularcentrism in society. After Lear orders Kent out of his sight, Kent’s blunt reply is, “See better, Lear, and let me still remain / The true blank of thine eye” (1.1.156-1557). According to Harold C. Goddard, “From this moment on, the story of King Lear is the story of the slow acquirement of that better vision” (144). However, the present study will indicate that in spite of their ideological transformations, neither Lear nor Gloucester managed to understand how to “see better”.

Ironically enough, Kent’s advice that Lear abandon ocularcentrism in favor of a better insight into the character of his daughters is intrinsically ocularcentric. Why would Kent ask Lear to “see better” when there was nothing to “see” and Lear’s love test for Cordelia and his other two daughters involved auditory and speech perception? As Charis Charalampous notes,

“Kent implores Lear to see rather than listen, directing both Lear’s and the audience’s attention to Cordelia as a visual object” (116).

Cordelia, herself a victim of ocularcentrism, was no less influenced by her superficial society than her family and friends, although she later realizes the unreliability of appearances.

“The jewels of our father, with washed eyes / Cordelia leaves you,” says the banished Cordelia to her sisters as she bids farewell to them (1.1.267-268).

The adjective Shakespeare uses to describe Cordelia’s eyes is “washed” rather than “weeping”, “tearful” or anything else, thus conveying a double meaning: “bathed in tears” and “cleansed, because Cordelia can see through to her sisters’ true natures” (Weis 100). The second meaning implies that Cordelia’s perception of things used to be limited to what she saw with her unwashed eyes, the same ocularcentric attitude her society had adopted. Cordelia, however, departs from ocularcentrism long before her father does. Apparently disgusted by her sisters’ artificial flattery, Cordelia believes “Time shall unfold what plighted cunning hides; / Who covers faults at last with shame derides” (1.1.279-280). Unlike her youngest daughter, Lear persists in trusting his eyes and taking everything at face value until the bitter truth dawns on
him. When Goneril criticizes Lear and his retinue for rowdy and insolent behavior in her castle, Lear’s reaction is one of shock and disbelief. “Does any here know me? This is not Lear. / Does Lear walk thus? Speak thus? Where are his eyes?” asks Lear incredulously (1.4.199-200). Francis Casey holds that “In demanding ‘Where are his eyes?’ Lear simply wonders whether he can believe what he sees happening before him; more poignantly his question links with the image pattern in which failing to see physically betokens lack of moral insight” (16). Later on, upon learning that Goneril has shrunk his entourage to half its size, Lear curses his eldest daughter and apostrophizes his eyes by threatening to pluck them out for weeping:

Old fond eyes,
Beweep this cause again I’ll pluck ye out,
And cast you with the waters that you loose,
To temper clay. (1.4.271-274)

Not only would tears betray Lear’s heartbreak and sorrow at his daughter’s behavior, but they would also reveal that both his royal and masculine pride are wounded. At first glance, Lear rebukes his eyes for shedding tears and giving Goneril an undeserved sense of importance, but the underlying point here is that Lear, an unconscious follower of ocularcentrism, perceives tears as undermining the supremacy of eyesight. “The outbreak of tears,” as Emily Sun asserts, “compromises the integrity of the body’s boundaries and the primacy of vision among the senses” (50). Lear’s words also foreshadow the blinding of the Earl of Gloucester whose eyes are brutally torn out by the Duke of Cornwall and Goneril as punishment for helping Lear. Gloucester’s subplot has as much to say about ocularcentrism as the main plot of Lear and his daughters.

Eyesight plays a pivotal role in the second scene of the play where Edmund, in furtherance of his secret plans, slyly arouses his father Gloucester’s curiosity by pretending to conceal an incriminating letter purportedly from his half-brother Edgar and then, when asked about the letter, feigns resistance by replying that it is “nothing”. A recurring word in the play, this “nothing” harks back to Cordelia’s “Nothing” in Lear’s love test and to Lear’s response that “Nothing will come of nothing” in the very first scene of the play (1.1.88-89). As Nick Buchanan points out, “Gloucester’s tragedy begins with the word ‘nothing’ just as Lear’s did in the previous act” (96). But what provokes both “nothing” responses is Lear’s and Gloucester’s too much attention to appearances. Had they built their perceptions on insight rather than eyesight, Lear and Gloucester would not have met their tragic fates. As regards the
Gloucester subplot, it is this very ocularcentrism of Gloucester which encourages his credulity and makes Edmund more confident about the success of his own cunning plan. Thus, Gloucester takes the bait and insists that he should see the letter himself: “Let’s see. Come, if it be nothing I / shall not need spectacles” (1.2.34-35). Shakespeare’s anachronistic reference to spectacles is especially notable since it shows the irony of Gloucester’s hope that his eyeglasses, as compensation for his poor eyesight, will “help him to see beyond the ‘quality of nothing’, to distinguish between seeming and being,” a quality Gloucester will paradoxically attain by physical blindness (Aronson 426).

It is only after the horrifying experience of having his eyes plucked out that Gloucester is made aware of his foolishness in trusting Edmund over Edgar. At first glance, Gloucester’s punishment seems far too extreme to be justified by the surface events, particularly on the grounds of Gloucester committing treason and helping Lear escape to Dover, but closer scrutiny reveals the significant role of eyes and history in Gloucester’s tragic blindness. In the latter half of the twentieth century, a number of critics such as Norman Holland, Bridget Gellert Lyons, and Jay Halio interpreted Gloucester’s blinding as a symbolic castration in punishment for the sin of adultery he committed in the past. Gloucester’s words on Edmund’s illegitimacy in the opening scene of the play sounds utterly unrepentant: “there was / good sport at his making, and the whoreson must be / acknowledged” (1.1.21-23). Hence, it can be inferred that Gloucester is a victim of his own lecherous eyes, a fact that does not escape Edgar’s notice either. “The dark and vicious place where thee he got / Cost him his eyes,” Edgar addresses his dying half-brother (5.3.163-164). Lyons argues that blinding and castrating were two punishments for rape in the Middle Ages and supports her claim by citing a relevant sentence from Henry de Bracton’s thirteenth-century treatise on English law: “Let him thus lose his eyes which gave him sight of the maiden’s beauty” (qtd. in Lyons 28). Similarly, in the early modern Europe, eyesight was sometimes regarded as a powerful means of corruption, much more powerful than other senses. It is not surprising, therefore, that blindness was deemed more of a gain than a loss. The conversation between Sorrow and Reason in Petrarch’s Remedies for Fortune Fair and Foul typifies this attitude:

Sorrow: I have lost my vision.
Reason: And the view of women’s faces. Hence rejoice! Closed are the windows through which death entered, and the way is barred to many vices; greed, gluttony, lust, and other pests have lost their helpmeets and accomplices. As much as these friends took away
from your soul, that much, you should understand, have you now regained. (235-236)

Although it was apparently for a different reason, Gloucester’s blinding marked the end of his ocularcentrism and provided him with an opportunity to gain an insight into the true nature of the people around him. Shakespeare was not as hostile to eyes as many medieval and early modern didactic moralists, but showed by implication that giving excessive credibility to eyesight with its so-called hierarchal superiority can have serious consequences and that, once internalized, this ocularcentrism can only be disposed of by loss and suffering. As Stanley Wells asserts, “Gloucester’s loss of the ability literally to see parallels Lear’s loss of his reasoning power, but both men gain by their loss” (75).

Gloucester’s change of attitude following his blindness is immediately noticeable in the opening scene of Act 4, when an old man of his acquaintance, concerned about Gloucester’s inability to see, insists on accompanying him on his way through the heath, but Gloucester denies the need for eyesight, claiming that his eyes did him more harm than good in the past:

I have no way, and therefore want no eyes.
I stumbled when I saw. Full ’oft tis seen
Our means secure us, and our mere defects
Prove our commodities. (4.1.18-21)

As someone whose lifelong confidence in the sense of sight, the most cherished sense in his society, has been shattered, Gloucester now regards his physical blindness as a blessing in disguise, which reminds him how metaphorical blindness brought about his and Lear’s downfall. Physical blindness was paradoxically an eye-opener before which “people and events in Gloucester’s life had swum around him in complicated patterns that he had at best dimly perceived through murky water” (Kornstein 214).

In order to draw a sharp contrast between ocularcentrism and the harmony of senses together, Shakespeare highlights the role of other senses in comparison with eyesight. For example, just before the blinded and guilt-ridden Gloucester meets the disguised Edgar on the heath, he wishes he could see his loyal son again, but assigns the role of seeing to the sense of touch: “Might I but live to see thee in my touch, / I’d say I had eyes again” (4.1.23-24). This notion of haptic seeing is repeated a few scenes later when, in response to Lear’s “you see how this world / goes”, Gloucester claims, “I see it feelingly” (4.6.141-143). Similarly, “Most of the references to noses and smelling,” Leon H. Craig
points out, “are in immediate conjunction with eyes and sight, and directly invite reflection on these two so very different senses and the kind of perceptual access to the truth about the world they each provide” (347-348). Craig cites several juxtapositions of sight and smell in the play, including the riddle the Fool asks Lear: “why one’s nose stands i’th’middle on’s face?” to which he himself replies wittingly: “Why, to keep one’s eyes of either side’s nose, that what a man cannot smell out, he may spy into” (1.5.17, 19-20). Another example would be Regan’s callous reaction after Gloucester is viciously blinded: “Go thrust him out at gates, and let him smell / His way to Dover” (3.7.90-91). The way Shakespeare juxtaposes seeing with smelling is also indicative of his whole attitude to ocularcentrism in King Lear: that eyes are just as fallible as other sensory organs, if not more so. By these particular examples, Shakespeare implies “that while sight is the most useful of the senses, we don’t know what we see without considerable learning; whereas, smell seems to be the most ‘instinctive’ sense, at least of the three that disclose objects at a distance” (Craig 348). Seeing is also juxtaposed with hearing when, for example, the mad Lear advises the blinded Gloucester that “A man may see how this world goes / with no eyes. Look with thine ears” (4.6.144-145). This synesthetic substitution of ears for eyes or vice versa is a recurring image in Shakespeare’s oeuvre. For instance, in A Midsummer Night’s Dream (1600), Bottom describes his bizarre dream by misquoting a passage from the Bible: “The eye of man / hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen” (4.1.207-208). Likewise, in the final couplet of Sonnet 23, the speaker concludes by saying, “O, learn to read what silent love hath writ: / To hear with eyes belongs to love’s fine wit” (lines 13-14). In Lear’s case, however, this crossing of the senses is neither a result of confusion like Bottom’s experience of his dream nor a means of communicating love as expressed in Sonnet 23. It is rather an attempt by Lear and Gloucester to find a substitute for their ocularcentrism.

Their great disappointment with eyesight leads both Lear and Gloucester to seek an alternative for the sense they deemed superior to the other senses. Therefore, Gloucester chooses to see the world feelingly and Lear suggests that he should see with his ears, not realizing that substituting an equally biased touch-centrism or auralcentrism for ocularcentrism is repeating the mistakes of the past rather than learning from them. Their ocularcentric attitude notwithstanding, Lear and Gloucester had also attached too much importance to their sense of hearing and paid the heavy price. Lear in his love test for his daughters and Gloucester in his experience with Edgar’s forged letter were no less influenced by their ears than by their eyes as they credulously believed
everything they heard. Although Lear and Gloucester finally realized that seeing is not always believing, they never learned that the only way to “see better” is to strike a balance between the senses rather than allow a particular sense to gain ascendancy over the other senses. In the so-called Dover Cliff scene, the sightless Gloucester is fooled by the lack of balance between his other senses. When Edgar pretends that he can hear the sound of the sea as they are climbing up a steep hill, the blind Gloucester, who normally does not feel or hear the same, gets confused and agrees with Edgar that his “other senses grow imperfect / By [his] eyes’ anguish” (4.5.5-6). Similarly disillusioned with his eyes, Lear himself sets out to explore his other senses but fails to find a balance between them, hence his desperate reversion to eyesight before his death, which helps him fool himself into believing that Cordelia is not dead: “Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips, Look there, look there” (5.3.284-285).

Conclusion

Shakespeare’s King Lear, just like his other works, is peppered with examples of high regard for vision, but on the other hand, eyes are usually portrayed as unreliable, or even at times as misleading and deceptive, which in turn make for different types of metaphorical blindness. “This extensive network of ocular images,” as Russ McDonald asserts, “conveys Shakespeare’s anxiety over the forms of non-literal blindness common to humans: the inability to penetrate obvious deception, the inescapable tendency to see what one wants to see, the consequences of self-delusion, willfulness, and insensitivity” (76). Shakespeare was, admittedly, not the first writer who depicted and challenged the biased privileging of sight in Western culture, but his highly admired works of drama, and particularly King Lear, played a significant role in exposing the popular myth of ocular superiority, especially to his Jacobean audience who needed to know that the unity of senses takes precedence over the unity of kingdoms. This study attempted to make a contribution to research on the history of anti-ocularcentrism in Western culture by demonstrating how Shakespeare’s King Lear marks both a turn away from the traditional hegemony of vision and a turning point in criticism of modern ocularcentric culture in the West. As ocularcentrism is still relevant today in a postmodern age of appearance, image, and illusion, King Lear serves, among other things, to remind us that visual subjugation transcends the boundaries of time and culture and that we could be Lears or Gloucesters deluded by the proverbial concept of seeing is believing.
Works Cited


"با گوشهایت بنگر: نکوهش فرهنگ بصریت محور در نمایشنامه ی شاه لیر اثر ویلیام شکسپیر مارتین جی در پژوهش نوآورانه ی خود در خصوص بی‌پدیدی ی فرهنگ بصری غرب در دوران مهم روشنفکری اشاده ای گذرانی دارد به فراوانی ارجاعات بصری در ادبیات رنسانس و به معنی ویلیام شکسپیر استند میکنند که آثارش سرشار از استعارات بصری است. علاوه بر پژوهش گستردگی در خصوص نقش بنیانی در آثار شکسپیر به نظر می‌رسد به موضوع نکوهش فرهنگ بصریت محور در آثار شکسپیر توجه کافی صورت نگرفته است. مسئاً، شکسپیر اولین نویسنده است که ارجحیتی در این مورد را به صورت انگیزه‌ای به‌درستی نسبت به بیشتری در فرهنگ غرب را به تصویر و جالش کشیده، اما مطالعهٔ حاضر با تأکید بر مثال شاه لیر نشان می‌دهد که آثار نمایشی شکسپیر نقش چشمگیری در انگیزه‌های بصری چند جدی بصریت محوری در جامعه داشته است. با استناد به روایت های رنسانسی دست اول از پیوستهٔ پژوهش
جامع مارتین چی درخصوص تاریخچه ی بصریت محوری در غرب و نیز روایت تاریخی جیمز شایرو از سالی که شاه لیر شکسپیر نخستین بار به اجرا درآمد، مطالعه ی حاضر روش تاریخ گرایی نوین را اتخاذ میکند تا بررسی کند آثار نمایشی شکسپیر چگونه در آن واحدهای هیپنوتیکی از هژمونی سنتی بناپی و هم نقطه ی عطش در تقد فرهنگ بصریت محور مدرن در غرب میباشد. ما نتیجه میگیریم که شاه لیر در کنار مطالب دیگر این نکته را خاطرنشان میکند که انتقاد بصری از مرزهای زمان و فرهنگ رفتار مبود و ما در عصر حاضر هر یک میتوانیم لیر با گلاسترسی باشیم که فریب خورده ی مفهوم مشهوری میشود که میگوید دیبن موری است با بارا کردن.

واژگان کلیدی: شاه لیر، مارتین چی، تاریخ گرایی نوین، بصریت محوری، رنسانس