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Shakespeare’s Gendered Chaos: Paradoxes of Embodiment in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*

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Abstract

This thesis is an epistemological, philosophical, and feminist study of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. The leading male characters are analyzed through close analysis in order to prove their profound investment in Descartes’ isolation of the mind from the body, as well as the superiority of the mind over the body. As this binaristic structure is unable to withstand the uncertainties of life, both Hamlet and Lear turn to the state of female sexuality as culpable for the chaos that has invaded their lives. However, through the plays’ use of paradox in its leading characters, the dichotomy and hierarchy of the mind/body structure is effectively deconstructed. The use of paradox in scapegoating female sexuality also shows the limits of gendering chaos as feminine. The conclusion of this thesis briefly discusses the motivations and implications of rupturing these binaries.
Introduction

Renaissance thought had a “fascination with doubleness, undecidability, and radical ambiguity,” and it is precisely this ambiguity that positions itself at the core of Shakespeare’s work (Platt 6). Furthermore, it is the reaction to this uncertainty that seems to be irreparably fused with his tragedies, for it is “those trapped in a single-minded, monomaniacal view of human experience” who tend to be “doomed in the Shakespearean Universe” (Platt 4). In spite of this “doom,” Shakespeare continuously generates a “dizzying array of perspectives on love, gender, knowledge, and truth” (Platt 1). This paper will address the multiplicities in regards to both “gender” and “knowledge,” how they are related to one another, and the techniques that the plays employ in order to accomplish nuanced perceptions regarding these topics. This thesis will focus solely on the Renaissance’s ideologies of the mind in connection with its social constructions of gender—in particular, the uncanny relationship between these two ways of knowing within King Lear and Hamlet. The further objective of this analysis is the deduction that these two plays ultimately pressure the very binaries that its leading male characters promulgate, the method of this pressure being Shakespeare’s use of paradox. Thus, what on the surface seems a mere eloquent illustration of these dichotomies is actually an insightful interrogation of their existence.

Existing scholarship on the concepts of gender and claims to knowledge within the Shakespearean world tend to invest in arguments that fall on one side or another, effectively creating binaries themselves. For example, the majority of feminist analyses customarily situate Shakespeare as either the “proto-feminist” or “patriarchal bard”—as either anticipating modern
feminism or adhering to the values of a dominant, patriarchal system (McEachern 270). Yet another “bifurcated structure” of argumentation in relation to Shakespeare is whether or not his work rejected or propagated René Descartes’ later theories of the distinction between the mind and the body (McEachern 274). This thesis will attempt to rupture these conventional, binary-centered lines of argumentation. Instead, it will propose that Shakespeare is always complicating notions of the mind and body, as well as female sexuality. My goals throughout this thesis are firstly, to explore (through close analysis) how these two areas of argumentation are wholly related to one another. I will demonstrate how assaults on female sexuality\(^1\) are reactionary to an inability to deconstruct the binary of the mind and body, a binary that creates a hierarchy with the mind situated as the superior entity—it is the unit that not only guarantees “truth,” but also harbors an inherent identity that is both stable and knowable. There is always an attempt to view the world in neatly organized terms (such as mind versus body), but when these binaries, and the hierarchies they generate, are challenged, the leading male characters seek to place the blame for this inherent disruption on female sexuality. Next, I will demonstrate how *Hamlet* and *King Lear* actually put pressure on these binaries via the medium of the paradox. Just as Shakespeare’s language refuses to be pinned down into a universal reading or experience, the plays eliminate any possible conclusive, uncomplicated construction of existence.

The very act of conflating female sexuality with chaos is a direct defense against Descartes’ categorical theories of existence. By viewing the world as a split between mind and body as Descartes does, creating a constant and isolated inner mind, one is wholly unprepared for instances of performance, deception, etc. that challenge this structure of thought. However, the paradoxical actions and language of both *Hamlet* and *King Lear* actually problematize these

\(^1\) I am using the term “female sexuality” to encompass both the physical, reproductive organs of females, as well as female sexual desire.
rigid modes of thought, for paradoxes “often accompany recognition and change in Shakespeare’s plays” (Platt 1).

Though the meta-narrative structure of Shakespeare’s plays attempt to incorporate the broad question of what it means to be human, Shakespeare actually offers up a much more nuanced and playful view of existence. In other words, though the plays comment on much larger issues of humanity, the deconstruction of dichotomous thinking promotes a much more refined conception of and engagement with the world. Both Hamlet and King Lear’s obstinate perceptions are simply incompatible with this uncertain state of the world. This is why the plays are so inherently tragic. These characters cannot adequately function within the world, because of their excessive investment in the mind/body binary as well as the hierarchical system it produces. Performance, deception, and concealment are all unavoidable traits of what it means to be a human, along with the fact that “stable identity” is merely a fiction (Butler 519). While other characters accept this and learn to navigate themselves within this way of life, Hamlet and King Lear cannot. John Keats once described a state of being “when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason,” but it is clear that Hamlet and King Lear will never exist peacefully in this condition (qtd. Platt 1).

It is the mind/body binary and its suppositions that Shakespeare resists within these plays, or rather a compartmentalized way of viewing the inner mind as always essential and trustworthy. Life is not orderly, as much as Hamlet and King Lear want it to be. Boundaries are constantly being blurred and renegotiated, and thus, the audience is consistently forced to evaluate the contradictions present throughout these plays. Just as the mind and body cannot be so efficiently defined, historically charged beliefs of female sexuality are similarly repelled throughout the plays. Though Hamlet and Lear attempt to use female sexuality as a scapegoat for
much larger epistemological issues, this process proves flawed through the myriad of paradoxes that they express both physically and linguistically.

Shakespeare demonstrates the complexities of human nature through the paradoxes of his leading male characters--characters that simply cannot navigate these intricacies. And through these paradoxes, what on the surface seems like a mere promulgation of binaries is actually a challenge of these modes of thought. By calling into question this entire dualistic epistemology and the structures it creates, Shakespeare also questions the characters’ response to this binary—that of conflating female sexuality with chaos. Yet, it is crucial to note that the plays are never conclusively feminist or anti-feminist. Similarly, Shakespeare is neither anticipating nor wholly rejecting notions of Descartes’ philosophies of the mind. What he does accomplish, however, is a complication of viewing the world in such dichotomous ways. The conclusion of this paper will briefly elucidate Shakespeare’s motivations for problematizing these very modes of thought.

**Descartes and a Brief History of Skepticism**

“All men by nature desire to know,” Aristotle states in the opening sentence of his *Metaphysics* (qtd. Kinney 1). And yet for all of his emphasis on reason, Aristotle also believed in the value of the senses: “for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves” (qtd. Kinney 1). In other words, the senses did not detract from reason, but rather enhanced one’s ability to understand, and furthermore, enjoy the world. Fellow philosopher Thomas Aquinas agreed, stating “Our senses serve us in two respects: in knowing things and in meeting the needs of life” (qtd. Kinney 4). Despite the value that these men attribute to sensory perceptions, the passing of time brought about an aura of doubt concerning the senses and the “outer” world, and
Renaissance philosophy gravitated towards a paradigm of skepticism. Shakespeare lived and wrote during this very period, a time when “the individual conscience” was situated as the “locus for endless debate” (Marra 1). Skepticism, too, was deeply interested in this inquiry. Is the conscience a force that is intermingled with the body, or is it an entity altogether isolated from and purer than all things physical? These queries are explored within Hamlet and King Lear, as “Shakespearean theater responds to a period of epistemological change” (Marra 1). This epistemological change was one that centered heavily on skepticism, and one of the “celebrated masters” of this philosophy was Michel de Montaigne “whom…Shakespeare almost certainly knew and read” (Kallay 100). Though Descartes’ Meditations On First Philosophy were not published until after Shakespeare’s death, echoes of his distinction between the mind and body are certainly present in Montaigne’s work: “Studie and contemplation doth in some sort withdraw our soule from us, and severally employ it from the body,” Montaigne writes (Montaigne 71). The notion of “withdrawing” the “soule,” which can perhaps also be thought of as a consciousness, from the “body” is indeed a precursor to Descartes’ later work on skepticism. By isolating one’s mind as the only harbinger of “truth,” the outer, physical world, and all those that inhabit it, become subject to endless questioning.

Although Montaigne is considered a major influence to the philosophical movement of skepticism, his ideas seem to be much less crippling than Descartes’ later work in the sense that he effectively embraces unknowability as an inherent aspect of life itself. When his own “personal medal” was created, Montaigne had it engraved with the French motto, “Que sais-je?” which translates to “What do I know?” (Foglia). Yet, Montaigne seemed to comprehend that doubt was simply “part of the process of the formation of judgment” (Foglia). Montaigne states that “We should not, as much as lieth in our power shelter our selves from the mischiefes and
inconveniences that threaten us, nor by consequence feare, they should surprise us” (Montaigne 54). Montaigne’s recognition of doubt as merely a part of life results in his encouragement to not “shelter” one’s self from the “mischiefes” of life. In fact, a person should not even be “surprised” by these disruptions. The words “mischiefes” and “inconveniences” are not absolutely clear in meaning, but they can be extrapolated to mean instances of uncertainty—forces that exist beyond our control or anticipation. Thus, Montaigne’s skepticism is not paralyzing in the face of a constantly shifting world. Instead, skepticism becomes a way to navigate a fluid world.

Montaigne even rejects Descartes’ later theories that the mind is somehow the only valid method through which one produces reason:

> Men do not know the natural disease of the mind; it does nothing but ferret and inquire, and is eternally wheeling, juggling, and perplexing itself like silkworms, and then suffocates itself in its work. It thinks it discovers at a great distance, I know not what glimpse of light and imaginary truth; but while running to it, so many difficulties, hindrances and new inquisitions cross it, that it loses its way, and is made drunk with the motion.

(qtd. Foglia)

Montaigne eliminates Descartes’ hierarchy of a mind that is always superior to the body. While the mind is certainly a place where reasoning occurs, it is subject to faults just as the physical senses are. Hamlet and King Lear undoubtedly promote Montaigne’s argument due to their constant deconstruction of Descartes’ binary.

As skepticism gained momentum throughout the 1600’s, Descartes emerged as the foremost proponent of the mind/body dichotomy. He writes, “So what remains true? Perhaps just the one fact that nothing is certain” (Descartes 33). An aura of disorder is always present within his philosophical queries, as he systematically challenges his readers to “withdraw their minds from the senses and from all preconceived opinions” (Descartes 13). His major publication of these ideas, Meditations On First Philosophy, was published in 1641, after Shakespeare’s death.
He begins his work with a preface to the reader, constructing an almost foreboding sense of the chaos that one will encounter in the pages to follow. Rather than doubting that the world or one’s self actually exist, Descartes argues that the point “is that in considering these arguments we come to realize that they are not as solid or as transparent as the arguments which lead us to knowledge of our own minds” (Descartes 21). One’s mind is an entity that will always exist in a more apparent and intelligible state than the outer, physical world.

The first meditation of the series, entitled “What Can Be Called Into Doubt,” is a chapter that endeavors to demonstrate the necessity of stripping one’s self of all previously held truths in what can only be illustrated as an absolutely strenuous process. Descartes himself recognizes the perilous and disillusioning nature of this task: “Once the foundations of a building are undermined, anything built on them collapses of its own accord” (Descartes 23). In a sense, Descartes argues that in order to fully understand his meditations, he must first “collapse” everything he has formerly learned or accepted about the world and the way it functions. It is only once a person rids himself of these myths that he can begin to rebuild (albeit skeptically) notions of how to perceive the world. Yet again, Descartes appreciates the sheer distress that arises in the process of re-ordering one’s entire method of thought, stating that people would deny an all-powerful God “rather than believe that everything else is uncertain” (Descartes 29).

Nevertheless, Descartes is vehement about the need for this internal realization. In fact, he states that shaking off all preconceived notions is an “arduous” task, akin to being a prisoner who enjoys an “imaginary freedom” while asleep (Descartes 31). Descartes’ dichotomy of mind/body is so disillusioning, that it causes him to doubt the very foundations of his knowledge. In a way, he has been “asleep” all of his life. He expressively pens this struggle with the concept that certainty and assurance are fictions:
He begins to suspect that he is asleep, he dreads being woken up, and goes along with the pleasant illusion as long as he can. In the same way, I happily slide back into my old opinions and dread being shaken out of them, for fear that my peaceful sleep may be followed by hard labour when I wake, and that I shall have to toil not in the light, but amid the inextricable darkness of the problems I have now raised.

(Descartes 31)

Descartes envisions a scene in which he must ineptly grope in the “darkness” that his own skepticism has generated; obscurity, doubt, and confusion are all very much consuming sensations throughout this process. In subsequent sections of this thesis, this passage will serve to briefly elucidate the catalysts for madness in Shakespeare’s characters. Descartes himself describes the process of shaking off the “pleasant illusion” of one’s former thought process as entirely discomforting. Like Descartes, Hamlet and Lear dread the “hard labour” and “inextricable darkness of problems” that come with the dissolution of reordering one’s structure of thought.

A second foremost conjecture proposed in “What Can Be Called Into Doubt” is the utter untrustworthiness of one’s senses, and subsequently, the knowledge one extrapolates from these senses: “I have found that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once” (Descartes 25). Here, Descartes proposes the foundations for the division between mind and body, arguing, “the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all external things are merely the delusions of dreams which…ensnare my judgment” (Descartes 29). Though it is tempting to use the senses to navigate and understand the outer world, Descartes’ meditations propose that these methods cannot successfully garner valid information. One’s eyes, ears, hands, nose, and tongue are all faulty entities through which one produces faulty knowledge, knowledge that Descartes strives to expel from his self: “Even if it is not in my power to know any truth, I shall at least do what is in my power, that is, resolutely
guard against assenting to any falsehoods” (Descartes 31). Again, the reader is left in disarray, as even one’s own body must be subject to the deepest of skepticism—the body is foreign, even at times malignant, as it deceives the mind into consenting to its validity.

The second meditation in this series is “The Nature of the Human Mind, and How It Is Better Known Than the Body,” the chapter in which Descartes unmistakably illustrates the hierarchy of the mind over the body. Perhaps the most clearly stated idea Descartes offers his audience is the phrase, “Thought; this alone is inseparable from me” (Descartes 37). This line of rationalization extends from the belief that external things are not actually perceived by seeing or touching (or any other senses) but by “being understood” (Descartes 47). One can touch, see, and smell for an entire lifetime, but if one cannot connect these things to the mind, they essentially mean nothing. For example, a baby can physically see a pencil, but will not grasp what a pencil actually is until it is older and connects the image of the pencil with its larger symbolic meaning—a process that takes place within the mind. Because of this, Descartes creates a hierarchy in which the mind is systematically able to produce meaning that the body or senses cannot. He states, “I know plainly that I can achieve an easier and more evident perception of my own mind than of anything else” (Descartes 47). Simply put, the mind is the only entity that cannot be split from us; it is indivisible, inseparable—a fraction that cannot be reduced any further. As such, it remains the most valid point of inquiry that a person possesses. According to Descartes, the mind remains the mechanism through which human beings practice reason and produce meaning whereas the senses are defective.

It is in this very chapter where Descartes also links his metaphysical predicament to notions of female sexuality, a practice common throughout the Renaissance as well as Shakespeare’s plays. Much of this meditation is spent denouncing the authenticity of the physical
senses: “I have no senses. Body, shape, extension, movement and place are chimeras” (Descartes 33). The word “chimera” is key to linking this philosophical theory to the conflation of female sexuality with chaos. Although “chimera” has many definitions, those definitions have become so entangled with one another, that they, for all intents and purposes, are one in the same. According to The Oxford English Dictionary, the initial definition of the word “chimera” comes from ancient Greek mythology. It was “a fire-breathing female monster with a lion’s head, a goat’s body, and a serpent’s tail” (OED). Supposed sightings of chimeras were always foreshadowers of calamity, such as storms or shipwrecks. Descartes uses the word “chimera” to mean “body, shape, extension, movement and place.” He has previously delineated these entities as completely unknowable. Descartes’ choice to describe these chaotic and unknowable entities as feminine is not a mere coincidental act, but rather a reflection of gender ideologies. These same ideologies will be discussed later in this thesis regarding Hamlet and King Lear. A chimera is also not merely a feminine being, but a feminine monster. In this way, Descartes ultimately fashions a model in which the things he deems most chaotic and monstrous are inextricably linked to a female entity.

The significance of this term’s usage can be drawn out yet further with information about how the meaning of “chimera” has changed throughout history. Subsequent definitions include: “a grotesque female monster, formed of the various parts of animals”: “an unreal creature of the imagination, a mere wild fancy”; “an unfounded conception”: “a thing that is hoped or wished for but in fact is illusory or impossible to achieve” (OED). The most modern definition of the word is “a fantastic idea or figment of the imagination” (OED). The meaning of “chimera” has undoubtedly transformed over time from its initial state as a female monster composed of various animals into a term indicative of turmoil, illusoriness, and disorderliness. Through this semantic
change it is exceedingly likely that the connotations of femininity were still very much embedded in the meaning of the word when Descartes used it. Descartes utilizes this term again when he states that, “everything relating to the nature of body could be mere dreams and chimeras” (Descartes 33). In sum, Descartes repetitively uses the term “chimera,” a word that simultaneously means “female,” “monster,” and “disorderliness” to describe the aspects of the world that he has deemed unknowable. This is where the realms of philosophy and female sexuality irrevocably intersect. Descartes, although subtly, conflates his own notions of uncertainty with a female creature. This conflation will be discussed in much fuller detail in subsequent portions of this thesis.

Skepticism was certainly a major movement in philosophy, and yet more recent philosophers began to blur the skeptic distinction between mind and body as well as turn back to Aristotle and Aquinas’ appreciation of the senses. For example, David Hume posits that the senses actually serve a vital role in the composition of reasoning. In his publication An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, he describes the classic situation of a child touching a hot flame: “If you assert, therefore, that the understanding of the child is led into conclusion by any process of argument or ratiocination, I may justly require you to produce that argument” (Hume 25). Hume maintains the value of the senses in informing our understanding of the world, for “it is not reasoning” alone that keeps the child from continually touching a hot flame, but also his past physical experience. Thus, Descartes’ notion of a mind completely severed from the senses and the world begins to crumble when Hume speculates that our mind and senses are very much working with and informing one another. Descartes’ hierarchy of the mind over the senses is also confronted, as Hume posits that one can garner very real and useful information from the senses. Philosopher Immanuel Kant raises similar issues in his 1781 publication Critique of Practical
Reason. Just like David Hume did before him, he seems to resist the outright skepticism of Descartes. He maintains that there are “boundaries” to the notion of “pure reason,” because “the sensible world” is something that cannot so easily be detached from us (Kant 102). Both Kant and Hume complicate the notion of an outer world or sensory perceptions that are completely deceptive, for “sense experience is a powerful foundation of knowledge” (Kuhn & Feyerabend 12). Rather, they argue that the mind and body are always working together--the mind is not submissively influenced by the outer world or the body’s senses. All of these forces exist in tandem, and cannot be parceled into separate divisions or placed in a hierarchical structure as Descartes does. It is this complication of dichotomies that this thesis will focus on in regards to Shakespeare’s Hamlet and King Lear.

Discourse On Shakespeare and Skepticism

Skepticism is a theme that absolutely pervades Shakespearean scholarship, especially since the publication of Stanley Cavell’s Disowning Knowledge In Seven Plays of Shakespeare in 1987. “My intuition is that the advent of skepticism as manifested in Descartes’ Meditations is already in full existence in Shakespeare” (Cavell 100). But more than this, Cavell states that “skepticism already bears its own marks of a tragic structure” (Cavell 101). In other words, tragedy is “obedient to a skeptical structure” (Kallay 101). While Cavell’s work is extremely vital to any argument concerning Shakespeare and skepticism, this thesis will take a different approach in postulating that, while notions of skepticism are certainly present in Shakespeare’s work, the plays themselves are not simply mirrors of Descartes’ theories. Instead, while the characters of Hamlet and King Lear certainly struggle with the mind/body dichotomy and hierarchy, the plays are actually deconstructing this binary. As Hamlet and Lear fail to break the
dichotomy of mind/body and embrace the fluidity that plagues their lives, they embrace female sexuality as the source of this uncertainty. However, this reaction is itself deconstructed through the multiple paradoxes associated with this scapegoating.

In recent years, scholarship has begun to embrace an opinion of complication throughout Shakespeare’s work, illuminating a worldview that distinguishes and appreciates a complexity that cannot be contained within a binaristic structure. Shakespeare is “vitally interested in characterizing a reality that is immanent or interpenetrating” rather than one that is “boxed up in some special type of container—for example, a mind pinched off from the world” (Witmore 2). Essentially, an argument that merely claims the rigid presence of the mind/body binary within Shakespeare is one that fails to encompass the nuance of Shakespeare’s work. On the other hand, there is also scholarship that argues characters’ embracement of uncertainty, or rather, the assertion that the characters have already broken the mind/body dualism within the plays. This claim is particularly maintained in relation to Hamlet. “Hamlet’s attitude to ambiguity throughout the play is to sustain it, to intensify it, to make it even more complicated” (Kallay 111). Though Hamlet does “intensify” ambiguity through his feigned madness and multiplicity of language, this complication exists within a much larger paradox of Hamlet’s utter contempt of ambiguity as a whole. He may “sustain” ambiguity, but it is also crucial to note that he simultaneously despises it. Therefore, it is wholly necessary to analyze his character within a larger context of how paradoxes function rhetorically within the play.

Because this thesis declares that female sexuality is essentially a scapegoat for the previously discussed epistemological dilemmas, it is necessary to include scholarship that defines what exactly “scapegoating” is. This concept focuses on the idea of “using” people in order to fulfill a wish for “consolidation” (Johnson 49). The idea of consolidation is something
that is repeatedly at issue throughout Shakespeare’s work, as both Hamlet and Lear desire other people to reproduce their own, rigid constructions of reality. “Consolidation” can be thought of as a reproduction of what Hamlet and Lear believe the world should behave like. And because their worldviews are essentially fictions, they must “use” others (i.e. female characters and their sexualities) to maintain this fiction. This process of “consolidation,” however, comes at the expense of other people. Essentially, people “use other people in the service of their own narcissistic consolidation” (Johnson 49). This idea of “consolidation” relates entirely to the mind/body binary that plagues Hamlet and King Lear, because both characters desire authentication of their fractured realities: “The expected control over the narcissistically cathected object… is closer to the concept which a grownup has of himself and of the control which he expects over his own body and mind than to the grownup’s experience of other and of his control over them” (qtd. Johnson 49). It is through “using” other people (which in this case is the females that surround them) that the characters hope to find some sense of cohesion in their lives. What all of this amounts to is a growing area of Shakespearean discourse that places emphasis on “dynamic interrelations” (Witmore 2). This area is precisely where this thesis aims to situate itself in regards to discussing Shakespeare’s work. Both Hamlet and King Lear place emphasis on an uncomplicated vision of how the world works, but these views are presented as antithetical to a world that is riddled with performance and ambiguity. These interpretations of Shakespeare’s work actually complicate Cavell’s focus on Descartes, as the plays themselves seem to promote Montaigne’s beliefs about a more moderate sense of skepticism.
The Feminist Context

The sizeable portion of feminist readings and critiques that exist regarding Shakespeare prove just how crucial female characters are within the realm of Shakespearean discourse. These feminist works constantly seek to unearth how females and femininity are portrayed and what this means in the context of larger gender roles in society. Feminism began to “invade Shakespeare studies during the early 1980’s” as a response to the rapidly expanding Feminist movement (Kelly 22). The question has always been: what is the role of the female within the world of Shakespeare? Ever since the advent of feminist-centered discourse, the arguments have largely fallen onto one side of an unsolvable query: “Until recently, feminist criticism of Shakespeare divided itself—and Shakespeare—into two seemingly incompatible ideological camps” (McEachern 279). The debate has always been conducted with the further goal of situating Shakespeare as either the “proto-feminist,” a man whose work was an incipient anticipation of feminism, or the “patriarchal Bard,” a man who simply mirrored existing Renaissance ideologies (McEachern 270). Those who insist upon Shakespeare’s “ahistorical transcendent genius” maintain that Shakespeare has “an apparent commitment to the portrayal of liberated female characters, strong in voice and action” (McEachern 269). On the other hand, writers who reject the “naïve idealization of Shakespeare” are more concerned with “exposing the patriarchal assumptions and structures that govern his drama and marginalize or contain its female energies” (McEachern 270). It is precisely this traditional dichotomous structure of argumentation that this thesis will attempt to rupture. Though Hamlet and King Lear certainly complicate ideologies related to the female gender, this thesis is not interested in categorizing the
plays, or even Shakespeare for that matter, as pro or anti-feminist. The later conclusion will briefly discuss the motivations for these complications in regards to Shakespeare.

More recent research has attempted to problematize this method of debate, Claire McEachern’s work included. Her article “Fathering Herself: A Source Study of Shakespeare’s Feminism” is a captivating inquiry into the complex relationship between fathers and daughters within Shakespeare’s work, focusing mainly on King Lear. Unlike many of her predecessors, McEachern does not attempt to place Shakespeare into one category or another, but rather investigates the ever-shifting components of his plays. She states, “it would appear that the woman’s part, and the man’s, are hardly essential and stable categories of identity but contestable and changeable constructs” (McEachern 271). Not only in life is identity (both male and female) something that is not “essential,” but also within the realm of Shakespeare’s plays. This notion relates back to the hierarchical system generated by Descartes’ split between mind and body. McEachern challenges this system by maintaining that the mind or inner self is never a “stable category of identity,” and thus, conceptions of the world must not situate the mind as an isolated entity of truth.

Though a vast majority of scholarship critiques Shakespeare for his depiction of females within his plays, the very methods of argumentation within the feminist discourse are themselves profoundly rooted in binary. The idea of binary-centered arguments is echoed yet again within the subcategory of those who reject Shakespeare as proto-feminist, as these writers consistently invest in the subject/object dichotomy—men within Shakespeare’s plays are always the subjects whereas the women are the passive objects. Females are always things that are being acted upon. For example, Sandra Fischer states that the “function” of Ophelia is to “reinforce the centrality of Hamlet” (Fischer 1). She also argues that Ophelia is “the passive object of Hamlet’s actions”
So many of these articles attempt to critique Shakespeare’s depiction of females as objects, and yet the writers themselves end up reinforcing the existence of the binary. In the process of demonstrating that females within Shakespeare’s world have little to no agency, the language of these articles only serves to maintain this lack of power. Fischer’s use of the word “function” only concretizes Ophelia’s status as an object rather than complicates the existing system. Ellen Donkin similarly argues that “the history of women’s performance is the history of a struggle for a subject, rather than an object” (Donkin 276). By investing in the subject/object binary, these authors leave little room for play and limit a proper interrogation of gender constructs by investing in the very binary they argue against.

Conventionally, scholarship has interpreted the characters of Ophelia, Cordelia, Regan, and Goneril as characters that emphasize Shakespeare’s utter loyalty to a patriarchal system. While Ophelia and Cordelia are repeatedly demarcated as “passive,” Regan and Goneril have been traditionally marked as negative, ideologically driven female characters (Fischer 1). In regards to Ophelia and Cordelia, it is often noted that it is difficult to “re-appropriate” them (Gates 229). However, this thesis maintains that it is not inherently necessary to “re-appropriate” these female characters. It is futile to merely pin Ophelia and Cordelia as passive victims, but it is also impossible to read their characters as overtly empowered or “feminist.” Therefore, a nuanced approach to how females and female sexuality are treated in the play offers more insight to how gender dynamics are continuously at play and constantly complicated in Shakespeare’s work. This viewpoint holds true for the characters of Regan and Goneril as well. And though it is not within the scope of this thesis to investigate real life productions of these plays, it is worth mentioning that “given the very nature of performance—that it is gestural, physical, depending on context for realization and interpretation—to attempt to pin down Shakespeare’s view on
women…is also to reduce the theatrical experience of the play itself” (Kelly 24). Not only are Shakespeare’s words unable to be “pinned” down, but also the act of performing, the textual embodiment of those elusive words, is something that resists compartmentalization.

Another common characteristic of feminist approaches is that an inordinate amount of them (on either side of the customary argument) have been “chiefly psychosexual,” often calling upon Oedipal and pre-Oedipal structures of analysis (McEachern 270). Valerie Traub’s essay “Jewels, Statues, and Corpses: Containment of Female Erotic Power in Shakespeare’s Plays” follows such an approach. Although her article is over thirty years old, it does show signs of the lacking complexity apparent in other feminist articles. Though she uses a psychosexual approach to analysis, Traub attempts to obscure the binary of subject/object within her article. Traub maintains that women are never “wholly victims of patriarchal relations” nor are they “the cause of male sexual anxieties” (Traub 216). She argues that Hamlet, Othello, and Leontes “metaphorically displace their desire for stasis onto the women with whom they are most intimate” (Traub 216). The word “stasis” is key, as it can be directly juxtaposed with the notion of chaos. In fact, she notes that the men within Shakespeare invest in an “absolute dichotomy between chaos and stasis” (Traub 224). Despite these striking insights, Traub adheres to the traditional psychosexual model, claiming that the “anxiety” that threatens “stasis” resides with “the sexual act itself” (Traub 218). Yet, the “anxiety” that plagues Shakespeare’s males seems to be much larger than the “sexual act.” Traub inadvertently proves this in her commentary on Ophelia’s “fetishized” body. She claims that Ophelia’s eternal chastity “embodies…a masculine fantasy of a ‘female essence’ wonderfully devoid of that which makes women so problematic: change, movement, inconstancy, unpredictability—in short, life” (Traub 220). Though Traub’s article continues its psychoanalytic/psychosexual analysis, her words “life” and “essence” are
key here. The word “life” means that this argument of “unpredictability” in female sexuality can be extrapolated much further to encompass the unpredictability of life itself. Therefore, it is not merely the apprehension of the “sexual act” that garners a desire for the stasis of the female, but rather the much larger anxieties associated with the fluidity of all life--with the breakdown of binaries. The word “essence” brings the argument back to Descartes’ split and hierarchy of mind/body. Hamlet and Lear invest in the inner mind and self as stable entities of certainty, and are thus wholly unprepared when other characters do not behave according to this “essence.”

While this thesis does address notions of female sexuality in regards to Shakespeare’s female characters, this discussion will take a chiefly epistemological approach with the hope of further widening the discourse on feminism. This approach is necessary, as gender itself is something that is learned rather than inherent. It is “an historical situation rather than a natural fact” (Butler 520). Gender is a way of knowing, just as epistemologies are. Therefore, approaching gender via an epistemological point of inquiry is imperative in order to understand how gender itself is comprehended, and in Hamlet and Lear’s case, altogether abused.

**On The Nature of Paradox**

Because this thesis aims to widen the feminine discourse of Shakespeare’s work, it will not focus on the customary psychosexual analysis, or even the scrutiny of power dynamics between males and females. Instead, this paper will utilize an epistemological methodology. Epistemology is “the area of study that is concerned with the investigation of the nature and sources of knowledge and whether claims to knowledge are justified” (Kuhn & Feyerabend 11). In fact, those who “neglect” the study of epistemology “risk falling prey to fallacious arguments,
deceptive rhetoric, and obscurantism” (Kuhn & Feyerabend 11). The most important aspect of epistemology, and one that this thesis will explore within Shakespeare’s work, is how “epistemology requires accountability by forcing us to expose and evaluate the sources or foundations of what we claim to know” (Kuhn & Feyerabend 12). As such, it is necessary to pinpoint the source of Hamlet and Lear’s faulty knowledge about the world, the damaging consequences of this epistemology, and how the plays actually complicate Hamlet and Lear’s beliefs. There are real limits to their “ways of knowing.” The force that accomplishes this interrogation of flawed bases of knowledge is the presence of paradox within Hamlet and Lear’s actions and rhetoric.

The word paradox comes from the Greek root “paradoxon,” with “para” meaning “beyond” and “doxon” meaning “opinion” (Platt 2). Paradoxes are entities that cannot be resolved or “explained away”—they are what philosopher W.V Quine calls “antinomies,” an altogether “paradigm shaking encounter” (qtd. Platt 8). The concept of paradox as a “paradigm shaking encounter” is essential, as Shakespeare’s use of paradox is unmistakably the method that muddles the binary of mind/body, as well as pressures the conflation of chaos with female sexuality. Descartes’ binary of mind/body sets up a paradigm where one’s mind is the provider of certainties, while the body and the external world are fraught with ambiguity. Thus, the mind is axiomatically superior to all other entities—it is the mind that guarantees existence, according to Descartes. However, the paradoxes that exist within these plays effectively confront this structure of thought.

It is crucial to note, nonetheless, that the purpose of deconstructing binaries is to “look at distinctions without the hope of regaining unity at a higher (or later) level” (Luhmann 766). In other words, one cannot break binaries in order to create a newer, better “whole,” but rather
accept the ever-complicated and nuanced realities of the world and everyone in it. “It seems like there is only ‘différence’,” Derrida states, or rather, it seems like there exists an infinite number of ways in which commonly held conceptions can be complicated and multiplied (qtd. Luhmann 766). Shakespeare seems to continually prove this through his work, as the majority of his characters and language resist being pinned down into neatly observable entities. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Foucault even “warns” against “an ideal, continuous, smooth text that runs beneath the multiplicity of contradictions” (qtd. Platt 7). Derrida similarly states that one must simultaneously acknowledge the paradox and resist “reaching” for a “solution” (Platt 5). It is more imperative to view the world, not in terms of unyielding boundaries, but as an amalgamation of performance and shifting identities. The reasons for this approach to viewing the world, again, will be discussed in further detail in the conclusion of this paper.

Perhaps the most important aspect of paradox, however, is its power in destabilizing normative social structures. The fact that it cannot be resolved marks it as an “agent of change,” a force that has the ability to “expand, challenge, or even dismantle personal and social belief systems” (Platt 4). It is precisely this “dismantling” that exists within Shakespeare’s plays. As the binary of mind/body and its hierarchy breaks down for Hamlet and King Lear, their previous conceptions of the world crumble as well. It is in these decisive moments where both Hamlet and Lear fail to navigate the shiftiness of reality. As such, both male characters attempt to resolve the paradox through their active gendering of uncertainty, but they ultimately become “ineffectually—perilously—lost in doubt” (Platt 12). Hamlet and King Lear are unable to accept the shattering of their previously held contentions about the world and themselves.

According to some scholars, the use of paradox as a rhetorical device creates a system that allows the writer to “sit on the fence” (Platt 12). The writer can expose conventions in
society, and yet does not completely rupture those conventions. Although these suppositions may hold value in other works, this thesis will prove that Shakespeare’s utilization of paradox “helps to reconfigure…single-minded rigidity” (Platt 13). This is not to say that Shakespeare’s plays promote one viewpoint or another, but rather the very existence of paradox within his work consistently complicates “single-mindedness.” Shakespeare’s use of paradox is “not a device for creating shock or disjuncture, but the opening gesture of an emotionally engaged metaphysical analysis” (Witmore 9). The utilization of paradox is not a technique that further widens the gap between binaries, but is instead a method that sparks necessary examination of how Hamlet and Lear construct their world through binaries, how this worldview is not conducive, and what the repercussions of these viewpoints are. This analysis must be “emotionally engaged,” because emotion is inherently embedded within Hamlet and Lear’s expectations of the world. For Lear, it is the love of his daughters, and for Hamlet, it is his and Gertrude’s love for Hamlet senior. These emotions dictate how Hamlet and Lear assume the world operates, and thus, an interrogation of epistemology is also simultaneously an examination of profoundly harbored emotions.

**Hamlet, The Actor**

*Hamlet* begins with the words, “Who’s there?” immediately propelling its audience into a state of uncertainty. Such is the nature of Hamlet’s challenge to navigate the world in which he exists, a world in which every character’s “true” disposition and intentions are continuously muddled by their manifestations of language and action. Less than twenty lines later, the same sentiment is repeated: “Stand! Who’s there?” (I.i.11). These lines evoke the palpable uncertainty
and unreserved skepticism of the world throughout the play. This is precisely the ambiguity that serves as the catalyst for Hamlet’s subsequent assaults on female sexuality. To exist in the world “is to participate in a world of revenge, of mutual victimization, of shifting and substitution (Cavell 101). Indeed, Hamlet seems to suffer in regards to the notion of “aporia,” or “an irreducible coexistence” of all things—an intermingling that exists everywhere and that Hamlet cannot accept (Marra 154). Yet, *Hamlet* does not simply portray one man’s labor to manage the dichotomy and hierarchy between his mind and body, and the consequences of his failure to do so. It is a play that very much forces its audience to doubt and remold the very binaries that its leading character struggles to break. Shakespeare accomplishes this through the cognitive dilemmas that Hamlet ceaselessly endures throughout the play, but more importantly, the paradoxical language and actions he puts forth. These paradoxes exist in Hamlet’s investment in language, the nature of the ghost, Hamlet’s beliefs on acting, and even in the way he attacks Gertrude and Ophelia’s sexuality. What all of these paradoxes amount to is the utilization of paradox as a rhetorical trope, one that disturbs the binary and hierarchy of mind and body as well as complicates Hamlet’s ideological beliefs about female sexuality. In this way, the play succeeds in generating a space beyond Hamlet’s conception of dualisms, for paradoxes “challenge conventions and commonly held opinion, often reshaping thought in the process” (Platt 8). Hamlet himself is very much invested in Descartes’ dualistic worldview, and as such, promulgates existing Renaissance habits of conflating female sexuality with chaos. However, Shakespeare purposely and artfully depicts Hamlet’s struggle to exist within society, of his tragic inability to, in a sense, *play* with traditional structures of thought. This portrayal, coupled with minor characters’ abilities to embrace the malleability of human nature, reveals a text that actually promotes a deconstruction of obdurate binaries.
Hamlet speaks his first lines in scene two of the first act, immediately setting the rigid tone of his forthright perceptions about the world. When Gertrude questions her son about his prolonged state of melancholy, Hamlet responds, “Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not ‘seems’…I have that within which passeth show” (I.ii.76-85). From the beginning of the play, two exceedingly crucial traits of Hamlet’s personality are established. First, that Hamlet very much expresses the superiority of the inner self versus the body, much like Descartes—that which is “within” him, his unyielding tremors of grief at his father’s passing and mother’s marriage to Claudius, are real. These feelings are true no matter what “shows” in his outer demeanor. And yet, Hamlet believes that everyone should already know this. Secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, Hamlet deems that everyone should view the world as he does. In fact, his reaction to the word “seems” is rather hostile; he does not seem distressed, he is. Within Hamlet’s first fifty lines, Shakespeare situates his character as a man altogether reproachful of those who do not share his value of inner emotions as superior to one’s outer disposition—a man very much unable to reject binaries. From the moment Hamlet is introduced into the play, it is palpable that he is not interested in breaking out of his dualistic mindset. In his ideal world, Hamlet believes that it is only his mind that can truly denote that which is within him, and thus perpetually fails to engage in a world where others are constantly playing with physical concepts of performance and concealment.

Though Hamlet sincerely believes in a binaristic mode of thought, the force of paradox is flagrant throughout the play. The first of these paradoxes is Hamlet’s devotion to expressing himself through language. Hamlet is not only the character with by far the most lines of speech in the play itself, but also the character with the most lines out of any of Shakespeare’s plays. This is intriguing, as language itself “is the choice of a system that leaves something unsaid”
Hamlet is a character that, even by Shakespeare’s standards, seems entwined with the use of language. And yet, “there is no permanent equivalence between the particular sentence we close, and its true meaning” (qtd. Luhmann 760). In other words, language is a system that is always riddled with uncertainty. Therefore, Hamlet’s superfluous use of speech seems itself a paradox. How can a man who desires certainty be so invested in a system of expression that is always obscure? Apart from the very system of language existing as a paradox, Hamlet continuously employs puns and multiple meanings within his speech. “How is it that the clouds still hang on you?” Claudius asks (I.ii.66). Hamlet replies, “Not so, my lord, I am too much i’th’ sun” (I.ii.67). The word “sun” is of course a pun on “son”—Hamlet’s sentence simultaneously denotes that even his grief is not enough, as well as the fact that, in the present circumstances, he is “too much” Claudius’ son. For a man who grows antagonistic at the word “seems,” Hamlet does not appear to be averse to playing with language. He spurns Gertrude’s uncertainty about his grief, yet certainly generates ambiguity through his own language. Therefore, the first instance of blurring Hamlet’s binary centered beliefs presents itself through his manipulation of language, an action carried out numerous times throughout the play.

Hamlet’s encounter with his father’s ghost is yet another instance that evokes this sense of paradox. In fact, Hamlet cannot quite pin down what the ghost actually is: “The ghost is a positive spirit on the one hand, but also a ‘guilty thing,’ ‘a spirit of health, or goblin damn’d’” (Marra 155). This polar view of the ghost is something that is never quite resolved, especially because the ghost effectively forces Hamlet into a trajectory of revenge, yet another space that complicates binaries. Essentially, the revenge that Hamlet is forced into is itself a paradox. Obviously, revenge relies on a paradigm that has a clear sense of “right” and “wrong.” That being said, the notion of “what is right (a natural reaction)” and “what is unjust (a criminal
act)...find themselves paradoxically brought together” (Marra 157). Murdering by all accounts is “unjust,” and yet Hamlet must carry out this “unjust” act in order to do what is “right.” This situation elucidates, at least partially, why Hamlet’s character is so prone to inaction. Inflexible, dualistic perceptions of the world result in paradoxes, and paradoxes, at least for Hamlet, produce a crippling paralysis. “If one splits the world into two marked and unmarked parts to be able to observe something, its unity becomes unobservable. The paradox is the visible indicator of invisibility” (Luhmann 770). The paradox itself not only hinders one’s ability to “observe” the world, but also harbors within it the means of its own destruction; it is always crumbling from the beginning, showing the utter limits of a dualistic system.

After encountering the ghost of his father and learning of Claudius’ crimes, Hamlet immediately struggles to reconcile his uncle’s present demeanor with the murder he has previously committed. “My tables/ My tables,” Hamlet exclaims, “meet it is I set it down/ That one may smile and smile and be a villain” (I.v.107-109). These very lines are followed with the stage directions “he writes.” It is noteworthy that Hamlet says “it is I set it down,” as if he is the first person in the world to have recognized the extraordinary capability of human performance. It is not simply that Claudius’ inner “mind” does not match his outer “actions,” but rather his ability to smudge the boundary between these two spaces. Where does the “smile” end and the “villain” begin? It would be simplistic to conclude that Claudius has a “true” inner villain and a “false” outer smile—humans are simply more complicated than this, and the inner mind or self cannot be viewed as always truthful. Hamlet has to literally write this information down in order to comprehend it, further building upon his utter resistance to break out of his straightforward approach of viewing the world.
Hamlet at once spurns the idea that one can “smile and be a villain,” and also exploits this method of navigating the world, revealing yet another presence of paradox. Thus, the play begins its pressure of the mind/body dualism and hierarchy. Hamlet’s own worldview is very much invested in the binary of the mind and the body as well as the superiority of the mind. Yet in order to get what he wants, he must engage in the collapsing of this mode of thought. Hamlet must engage in acts such as physical performance and deception in order to carry out his revenge. Though Hamlet despises this ability to blur binaries via performance, he himself agrees to “put an antic disposition on” in order to further his plans of revenge (I.v.173). Hamlet simultaneously despises the act of performing, of masking “that within,” and yet proves all too adept at assuming the nature of a madman (I.ii.85). In other words, he utilizes the very deceptions he condemns in his incessant quest for revenge. These paradoxical notions are what define the play as a complication of binaristic modes of cognition. One example of this disintegration of neatly compartmentalized thought is Hamlet’s reaction to the player’s speech of Priam’s murder in the Trojan Wars, and his wife Hecuba’s response. Hamlet is utterly moved by this portrayal of Hecuba’s grief, and yet is absolutely haunted by the actor’s ability to manifest this sorrow through the act of performing: “Is it not monstrous that this player here/But in a fiction, in a dream of passion/Could force his soul so to his whole conceit” (II.ii.528-530). The way that the player can “force his soul so to his whole conceit,” the way he can generate a mourning so profound from a mere “fiction” is, to Hamlet, “monstrous.” He is irrevocably disturbed by the truth that one can play with notions of inner temperament and outer, physical actions, and that neither disposition is superior to the other. If this actor can execute a scene so convincing from a mere “dream of passion,” how are others constantly using this notion of performance in real life? How can the inner mind guarantee “truth,” when the body can perform
“truth” as well? But again, the play interweaves Hamlet’s distress with his problematic actions. Rather than confront Claudius directly about his father’s murder, Hamlet utilizes the very actors that trouble his construction of reality in order to “perform” the murder of his father for Claudius. Hamlet’s neatly composed narrative of the world is here disputed at its very core—he is transparently hostile towards ideas of performance, and yet it is the principle manner through which he is able to understand his own circumstances. Thus, Hamlet himself inadvertently places value on physical, bodily performances rather than situating the mind as the only way to produce reason and meaning.

Yet another contradiction exists in how Hamlet commends the actor who is able to summon up a grief for Hecuba, as opposed to the way he wishes his own play to be performed. Hamlet is moved by the player’s excessive show of emotion for Hecuba, but in the play that will be performed for Claudius, he instructs the actors not to “o’erstep the modesty of nature” (III.i.17). He wants “temperance” so that the play may be believable, commanding the players to “suit the action to the word, the word to the action” (III.i.16). Is it drama that conveys true emotion or “modesty”? And while Hamlet is reproachful of performance, he is simultaneously “ever sensitive to the difference between reality and appearance” (Marra 163). This conjecture holds especially true with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. “Call me what instrument you will,” Hamlet tells his friends, “though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me” (III.ii.340-341). It is contradictory that Hamlet resists acting so vehemently, and yet is exceedingly perceptive of this performance in regards to others. This relates back to Johnson’s issue of “narcissistic consolidation” and how Hamlet exploits others in his quest to make sense of the world (Johnson 49). Hamlet has no qualms about “using” others in order to guarantee his own perceptions about the world, but spurns the idea of being used himself.
As Hamlet’s worldview is utterly shaken and he is forced to muddle the boundaries he has previously invested in, he begins to verbally attack Gertrude and Ophelia, focusing almost entirely on their sexuality as the central cause of the chaos that has invaded his life. This reaction is wholly related to Traub’s previously mentioned argument, but Traub fails to elucidate how this anger is utterly paradoxical. Though Claudius is the one who murdered Hamlet’s father, “it is certainly in the maternal figure that ambiguity is initially made manifest and will never be resolved” (Marra 155). In Hamlet’s first soliloquy of the play, he focuses the vast majority of his despair and resentment towards his mother, whom he believes to be emotionally and sexually weak. His famous line, “frailty, thy name is woman” is directed towards his mother, and this “frailty” seems to apply to Gertrude’s inability to contain her sexual desire (I.ii.145). Towards the end of his speech, Hamlet declares, “O most wicked speed, to post/ With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!” (I.i.156-157). Hamlet ultimately insinuates that his mother’s swift union with Claudius was caused by her own sexuality—a fulfillment of desires that she could not repress. He compares his mother’s sexuality to an “unweeded garden,” something that is, essentially, out of control (I.ii.135). These feelings that Hamlet harbors are confirmed by the play he asks to be performed in front of his mother and Claudius. During the play, the player queen states, “A second time I kill my husband dead/ When second husband kisses me in bed” (III.ii.166-167). He is obsessed by the fact that his mother cannot control her sexual needs and believes that every time she sleeps with Claudius, she “kills” Hamlet’s father once more. Rather than entertain the possibility of a different narrative, that Gertrude may not have loved Hamlet’s father as much as he believes, or that her sexuality is not insatiable, Hamlet instead condemns her sexuality. She is the embodiment of a chaos that, like a rampant weed, consumes everything around it.
Hamlet continues his assault on female sexuality when he visits his mother in her room, telling her that she lives “in the rank sweat of an enseamed bed/ Stewed in corruption” (III.iv.83-84). Gertrude’s bed, a place where she expresses the desires of her sexuality, is a place of “corruption”—something not only chaotic, but shameful. His description of her bed as “corrupt” accurately denotes his response to the troubling matters of his life that he cannot control. Rather than simply accept the fact that concealment, deception, and performance are inherent to how humans live, rather than pressure the binary of mind and body, he seeks to place the blame on female sexuality. This scapegoating is evident yet again in his words to Gertrude before leaving her chamber:

O, throw away the worser part of it,  
And live the purer with the other half!  
Good night—but go not to mine uncle’s bed.  
Assume virtue if you have it not.  

(III.iv.148-151)

Of all of the problems to focus on, Hamlet repeatedly urges his mother to refrain from sleeping with Claudius, as if Gertrude’s simple repression of her sexual wishes will somehow alleviate his problems—as if his chaotic world will somehow regain a sense of structure if only her sexuality is controlled. It is notable that Hamlet spends such little time directing any anger towards Claudius for his sexual appetite; this only adds to the construction of a feminine chaos as a whole throughout the play. His own father’s ghost describes Claudius as “that incestuous, that adulterate beast,” situating male sexuality as the force that is uncontrollable (I.iv.42). He even tells Hamlet to refrain from chastising Gertrude, stating “leave her to Heaven” (I.iv.86). But Hamlet’s direction of anger and desired control is towards his mother. While both men and women have sexual desires in this play, Hamlet decidedly fixates on that of the women in his life, constructing a sense of reality where female sexuality is the root cause for all calamities,
again an echo of Traub’s argument. It is women who harbor “unweeded gardens”—it is women who “breed sinners.” In this same scene, Hamlet also shows his mother one picture of his father and one of his uncle, “underlining the unacceptable fact of Gertrude’s inability to discriminate between opposite values” (Marra 155). In other words, Hamlet faults his own mother for not harboring the same binary-driven thinking as he does. As such, he “projects onto her his epistemological inability to resolve human… contradictions” (Marra 156).

Hamlet’s assault on female sexuality does not end with his mother; it is also quite evident in his relationship with Ophelia. When he encounters Ophelia within the castle he callously lashes out at her, unburdening all of his rage concerning women and their need for sexuality at all. He tells Ophelia, “if thou/ wilt needs marry, marry a fool: for wise men know well enough/ what monsters you make of them” (III.i.137-139). The term “monster” most obviously refers to cuckoldling, and the idea of men growing horns when their wives committed adultery. But “monster” also denotes a state of uncontrollability that men, in Hamlet’s eyes, must exist in due to the repercussions of female sexuality. It also echoes Hamlet’s earlier remark of the player’s performance as “monstrous.” Thus, female sexuality is at once conflated with performance, monstrosity, and disorderliness. Hamlet continues his attack, stating “God/ Hath given you one face and you make yourselves another…It hath made me mad” (III.i.142-146). Again, Hamlet’s resentment of performance is evident. The fact that women can wholly alter their outward appearances, that they can “make” themselves another “face,” is a notion that drives him “mad.” Yet the audience is aware of Hamlet’s own “performance” of a mad man throughout almost the entirety of the play. This paradoxical, conflicting mindset is precisely the apparatus that Shakespeare employs to smudge the boundary between the mind/body binary and the idea that the body is somehow lesser than the mind.
In his encounter with Ophelia, Hamlet even begins to demonstrate problematic attitudes towards her sexuality, unsure of how he can categorize her within the larger enclosure of his neatly framed worldview. “Get thee to a nunnery,” he shouts (III.i.122). Yet, Elizabethan slang denotes that the word “nunnery” can also mean “brothel.” Does Hamlet wish for Ophelia to cast off her sexuality completely and become the chaste nun? Or does he advise her to go to a brothel and freely express her sexual desires? It is not clear that Hamlet himself knows. Hamlet cannot come to a conclusive opinion about Ophelia, because his very structure of thought prohibits him from doing so. And though he still assaults her sexuality, his own rigid beliefs begin to crack through the multiplicities of his language, for paradoxes create an “ontologically unqualifiable world” (Luhmann 770). Paradoxes generate a sense of being in the world that simply cannot be understood. Hamlet cannot begin to comprehend nor participate in the world, because his very use of paradox strips him of this power. It is almost as if the paradox is a Freudian “slip”—though Hamlet continues to cling to his dichotomous sense of cognition, attacking Gertrude and Ophelia for the uncertainty they have introduced into his life, the cracks in this system are manifested via his many paradoxes. He inadvertently reveals a mode of thought that cannot hold true.

Polonius also curiously puts pressure on Hamlet’s conflation of female sexuality with uncontrollability, hinting at Shakespeare’s continuous juxtaposition of absolute viewpoints. In advising Ophelia against Hamlet’s advancements, he states, “When the blood burns how prodigal the soul/ Lends the tongue vows” (I.iii.116-117). His usage of the word “burns” insinuates that it is male sexuality that is the force that cannot be contained, just as Hamlet’s father echoed in his accusations against Claudius.
Hamlet is the central character of this play and a man who is exceedingly invested in a straightforward vision of world. Yet, the audience does not envy him. In fact, we chastise him for his inaction and are often baffled by the way he constructs reality. At times, it seems that he is a man wholly consumed by paradoxes. Encountering paradoxes is unavoidable in life, yet one must avoid “paralysis” in the face of these experiences (Platt 6)—Hamlet cannot seem to accomplish this feat, and this failure is why his character is so motionless throughout the play. The truth is that rupturing the structure of binaries is a process that is wholly disillusioning; it muddies and complicates the world in every way imaginable. The characters in the play are constantly renegotiating the terms of these binaries and embracing the uncertainty that is human existence, and as Hamlet learns this truth about the complexity of human nature, he seeks to find a reason for this chaos. “What a piece of work is a man!” he laments, yet the chaos that plagues his life is decidedly rendered feminine (II.ii.294). Hamlet cannot help but view his brain as a “book” and a “volume,” something that might be read and deciphered (I.v.103). This belief of an almost categorical, clear-cut structure of the self extends to Hamlet’s expectations for all other human beings. The audience witnesses his struggle to rupture the binary of mind and body as well as other characters’ embracement of this deconstruction. In the end, Hamlet dies not because of an ill-executed revenge, but because he simply cannot exist in a world so intricately convoluted. Thus, his inability to allow for the diversities of human nature, as well as his investment in a compartmentalized existence, are effectively challenged throughout the play. And by pressuring Hamlet’s dualistic mindset, Shakespeare also calls into question his conflation of female sexuality with chaos.
King Lear’s Monstrous Reality

*King Lear* is a play that is driven by notions of the mind and body, a binary that is innately and tragically embedded within King Lear himself. Lear’s investment in this dichotomous mode of thought generates a gaping disconnect between how he believes the world operates and how the world actually functions. Indeed, Lear’s “desire for order” is “endlessly challenged by individual will” (Marra 1). These “wills,” the endlessly shifting desires of other characters, are anything but static. Throughout the play, these characters are constantly plotting against one another, forging secret notes and relationships, and disguising themselves so that they may pass as others. Lear’s belief in the binary of mind and body and the supremacy of the mind leaves him altogether ill equipped for these aforementioned instances of ambiguity—instances that ultimately evoke a world plagued with fluidity, concealment, and above all, performance. As such, King Lear draws on ideological notions of conflating female sexuality with chaos in order to make sense of his world. Rather than engage in the play of the binary, accepting that the mind is not necessarily the purest form of “truth,” Lear instead situates female sexuality as the root of all the calamities he endures. Yet, his ensuing paradoxes in language illuminate the fractures in his way of thinking—in a sense, a duality that was always crumbling from the beginning. Therefore, throughout *King Lear*, the binary of mind and body is constantly being complicated and renegotiated, emphasizing a world built on “dynamic interrelations” (Witmore 2). And by challenging Lear’s binaristic way of thinking, the play also pressures his ideologically driven portrayals of female sexuality.

The play begins with the infamous “love test,” a scene in which Lear endeavors to create an assurance of his daughters’ affections for him—in other words, a scene that immediately
delineates Lear’s investment in the binary, and a need to reproduce what he believes in his own mind to be true. “Which of you shall we say doth love us most?” Lear asks (I.i.49). His acknowledgement of his daughters is based entirely on his own conception of how they respond to this unanswerable question. And yet, Lear expects everything they say to be a confirmation of what is already in his mind. Goneril, Lear’s eldest daughter, swears that she loves him “Dearer than eye-sight, space and liberty/ Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare” (I.i.53-54). This artificial response does not go unnoticed by Cordelia, the youngest of Lear’s three daughters. She claims (in an aside) “What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent” (I.i.60). The phrase “love, and be silent” insinuates that one can love best by remaining silent, or that the only true way to express love is to not attempt to formulate it in words, especially the synthetic speech that Goneril has exploited. Rather, it is physical actions, the way in which one conducts oneself, which truly denote affection as complicated as love. Cordelia immediately rejects Lear’s simplistic conviction that what is in her mind is inherently superior to any physical embodiments of love that she has carried out during her life. Lear needs Cordelia to formulate that which is in her mind through speech, rather than view her conduct towards him in general. “I am sure, my love’s/ More ponderous than my tongue” she says (I.i.75-76). Unlike her father, Cordelia recognizes the inadequacies of linguistically expressing an emotion that exists within her mind, instead stating that her love is more “ponderous.” For her, love is demonstrated by how she has physically conducted herself towards her father.

When it is Cordelia’s turn to profess “concrete” proof of her love, her response not only profoundly offends Lear, but also constructs the tone for how he responds to moments of uncertainty throughout the rest of the play:

Lear: What can you say to draw/ A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.”
Cordelia: Nothing, my lord.
Lear: Nothing?
Cordelia: Nothing.
Lear: Nothing will come of nothing, speak again.
Cordelia: Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave my heart into my mouth.

(I.i.84-91)

Cordelia’s response of “nothing” inevitably sets up the epistemological dilemma of Lear’s utter investment in the mind/body dichotomy, an issue that is reiterated throughout the entire play. She does not want to speak about how much she loves her father, because a true answer cannot be given; she cannot “heave” her heart into her mouth, but rather feels that, through the history of her physical demeanor, she has already proven her love for her father. However, in Cordelia’s statement that she cannot encapsulate and truly convey her feelings through language, Lear becomes incensed. In his world, his daughters love him more than anything, and he desires complete authentication of this sense of the world through language. Cordelia refuses to reproduce Lear’s understanding of his daughters’ genuine feelings, because she understands the world in a way that her father does not. The world is simply more complicated than Lear is prepared to accept, and she refuses to indulge in her father’s binaristic beliefs. In this sense, Cordelia’s response of “nothing” is all the more devastating to Lear. It not only appears as if his own daughter does not love him, but it also shakes his very understanding of how the world operates. “Better thou/ hadst not been born than not to have pleased me better,” Lear seethes at his daughter (I.i.234-235). These lines denote how incapable Lear really is at coming to terms with the fluidity of the world. If Cordelia had never been born, she never would have upset the foundations upon which he comprehends his existence.

Shortly after banishing Cordelia and dividing his kingdom between Regan and Goneril, Lear has an encounter with his Fool, a character who ventures to teach Lear about the nature of
what the world is really like, and in doing so, complicates the binary of mind and body yet further. The Fool states:

- Have more than thou showest,
- Speak less than thou knowest,
- Lend less than thou owest
- Bide more than thou goest
- Learn more than thou trowest,
- Set less than thou throwest

(II.iv.101-106)

On the surface, this passage seems like advice for Lear, but The Fool’s words can also be read as a sort of guide for attempting to navigate the world. People often “have” more than they “show,” “speak” less than they “know,” etc. Indeed, The Fool’s rhyme seems simple and redundant, but Lear still cannot grasp and accept notions of variability and performance. “This is nothing, fool,” Lear retorts. “Can you make no use of nothing?” (II.iv.113) The Fool asks. Lear merely states, “Nothing can be made out of nothing” (II.iv.114). His refusal to embrace the Fool’s song and to participate in a play and multiplicity of language truly delineates Lear’s rigid composition of existence. Also, Lear’s phrase “Nothing can be made out of nothing” is itself a paradox, as the creation story in the book of Genesis states that God created the world out of “nothing.” In a sense, God created *everything* out of nothing. Lear’s language therefore establishes the limits of a fully straightforward vision of the world.

It is not long before Regan and Goneril begin to treat their father poorly, and rather than complicate his own knowledge about how the world operates, Lear immediately turns to the notion of female sexuality as the culprit for the disarray that has erupted. The “female bodies of Goneril and Regan serve as the repositories of the demonic” throughout the play, a “demonic” that is not only monstrous, but also chaotic (van Dijkhuizen 83). After a particularly aggressive
argument with Goneril, Lear curses her reproductive organs rather than her actions or her intentions:

Hear, Nature, hear! Dear goddess, hear!
Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful!
Into her womb convey sterility!
Dry up in her the organs of increase

(I.iv.252-256)

The way Goneril has acted towards Lear is not conducive to his personal understanding of the way the world functions: “The female body should reflect suitably feminine virtues, and this makes the… evil inscribed on Goneril’s body all the more horrifying” (Van Dijkhuizen 83). When Lear’s daughters do not behave as he expects them to, he immediately turns to the state of female sexuality as the reason for his misfortunes. He curses Goneril’s “womb” and her “organs of increase” because he would rather believe that her reproductive system is the reason for her actions than reorder his ways of thinking.

This idea of the body only producing uncertainties is something that relentlessly concerns Lear, yet this apprehension is one that spurns a multitude of paradoxes. “See thyself, devil:/ Proper deformity shows not in the fiend/ So horrid as in woman,” he states (IV.ii.60-62). It is confusing for Lear that his daughters can outwardly look a certain way and act in radical discordance to their physical states. Regan and Goneril should look like “devils,” because this would make sense in accordance to the way they have treated him. It is also contradictory, however, that Lear uses the phrase “so horrid as in woman” to describe this deformity. Multiple layers of paradoxes exist in these few lines. First, Lear expresses a desire for his daughters to look like “devils,” because this is “proper deformity”—in Lear’s mind, it makes sense for a person’s body to match his or her actions or inner disposition. Yet, the idea of this deformity is “horrid” if it occurs in “woman,” because as previously stated, female bodies should “reflect
suitably feminine values,” and the idea of “devil” seems to be opposed to those “feminine values,” at least in Lear’s mind (Van Dijkhuizen 83). The paradox is taken a step further when read in tandem with Lear’s later accusations of female sexuality as monstrous. The idea of Regan and Goneril as physically perceptible as “devils” is simultaneously cognitively necessary in order to produce a reality that makes sense, “horrid” because it opposes “feminine” dispositions, and also the “natural” state of woman. All of these embedded contradictions reveal the utter limits to a binaristic way of thinking. Lear’s language leaps over the artificial boundaries that attempt to compartmentalize the world and further denounce his rigid mindset. This passage is crucial to understanding the constraints of Lear’s convictions and how the play is presenting this worldview to the audience. A paradox is “an agent of action and change,” and the play seems vastly interested in using the vehicle of paradox in order to promote the idea of eradicating the stark line between mind and body, the value of mind over body, as well as complicate notions of female sexuality (Platt 4).

Because of Lear’s investment in the mind/body binary, he cannot reconcile the fluidity of human beings and he begins a descent into madness. This state of being only increases his use of the paradox in attempting to make sense of the world: “O, how this mother swells up toward my heart!/ Hysterica passio, down, thou climbing sorrow/ Thy element’s below!” (II.iv.54-56). This passage, an allusion to “Edward Jorden’s Briefe Discourse of a Disease Called the Suffocation of the Mother, written in 1603” is inherent to understanding Lear’s use of female sexuality as a coping mechanism for the disaster that has ensued (van Dijkhuizen 85). Renaissance theory maintained that hysteria in women was caused by the female’s uterus wandering throughout the body, thus creating an epistemological paradigm that conflated notions of chaos and disorder with female sexuality. This is why Lear describes his moment of extreme turmoil as a “mother”
that is moving throughout his body, and pleads with it to travel back “down” to where it should naturally rest. The internalization of this idea that female sexuality is somehow equivalent with chaos elucidates, at least partially, why Lear is so quick to turn to the female body as somehow responsible for the tragic events that arise throughout the play. Nonetheless, this conflation is problematic as Lear recognizes a wandering uterus in himself. The coalescence of a female reproductive organ with chaos is Lear’s defense against uncertainty, but the fact that he recognizes this female organ in his own, male body is certainly conflicting. Lear’s paradox is even further emphasized with more concrete knowledge from Edward Jorden’s book. Jorden’s work maintained that the wandering of the “mother” is “partly an expression of pent-up sexual desire” (Jorden). Not only does Lear distinguish a wandering uterus within his own body, but also, this uterus is symbolic of repressed “sexual desire.” Therefore, it is Lear who is associated with chaos and uncontrollable sexuality, not just his daughters. In this sense, the play rejects Lear’s ideologies by continuously complicating them through paradox. As soon as Lear attempts to put forth a rigid viewpoint about female sexuality, it is immediately thrust back at his own character. This repercussion allows the audience to acknowledge that his ideas simply cannot hold up as truthful.

Lear reiterates this ideological attack on female sexuality after Goneril and Regan banish him to survive a ghastly storm outside. This scene advances yet more conflations of female sexuality and chaos, and the contradictions that accompany these beliefs:

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!...
Singe my white head! And though, all-shaking thunder,
Smite flat the thick rotundity o’ the world!
Crack Nature’s molds, all germens spill at once,
That make ingrateful man! 

(III.ii.1-9)
Here, Lear takes his delusion even further by imagining the world itself as a pregnant woman. He wishes to flatten the world’s “thick rotundity,” because as a female, the world births “ingrateful man.” It is also notable that Lear is essentially longing for an apocalypse—because his daughters’ cruelty constantly challenges his simple binary of mind and body, Lear yearns for the end of the world. He would rather welcome the apocalypse than come to terms with the uncertainty that exists in regards to all people. And although Lear imagines the world and curses its utterly feminine form, Lear would not be able to exist without it. Women make “ungrateful man,” yet man would not exist at all if it were not for women. Again, this paradox is palpable in Lear’s language as a breakdown of his absolutist beliefs. In act four, he states:

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Down from the waist they are Centaurs,
Though women all above:
But to the girdle do the gods inherit,
Beneath is all the fiends';
There's hell, there's darkness, there's the sulphurous pit,
Burning, scalding, stench, consumption
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(IV.vi.138-144)

This passage is essential, because Lear specifically singles out female sexuality as the locus for uncertainty or “darkness” and uncontrollability. His use of the word “centaur” is notable, because “in Renaissance poetry and iconography, equine imagery often serves to address issues of illicit sexuality, or uncontrolled erotic desire” (van Dijkhuizen 83). Yet, the centaur’s “duplex natura” (in Ovid’s Metamorphoses) was considered the perfect image for humankind’s double nature as both “beast” and “rational creature” (Bate 84). Are females sexually out of control, or are they the “perfect image” of humankind? Lear’s language spawns both interpretations at the same time. This paradox is multiplied when we see that Hylonome, “the only female centaur in Ovid,” is “presented as a paragon of loving self-sacrifice” (Bate 84). In fact, “the sexually aggressive centaurs in the Metamorphoses are invariably male” (Bate 84). This passage “points
to a blurring of gender divisions,” one that refuses to pin down females, or even males for that matter, as the sex that cannot control its sexual desires. Though Lear’s descriptions of women are exceedingly ideological, his own linguistic multiplicities actually rupture the very thoughts he puts forth.

As the play progresses, Lear’s value of the inner mind over the body reaches its pinnacle, demonstrating the crippling effects of his binaristic structures of thought: “Then let them anatomize Regan; see what breeds about/ her heart. Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard/ hearts?” (III.vi.70-72). Here, Lear speaks about physically dissecting his own daughter so that he may see what “breeds about her heart”—so that he can view and know her inner “self” and thus, what causes her to treat him so callously. Lear cannot comprehend that the world is inevitably much more complex than a mere split between mind and body, and a hierarchical structure of mind over body. Contrary to Lear’s thought, identities “have to be constructed” (Luhmann 765). There is no “innate” self for Lear to find within his daughter, no mind that harbors “truth,” yet Lear still believes in the superiority of this inner mind. By examining this inner “self,” Lear believes that he can find the “cause” of his daughters’ cruelty, but he does not understand that there is no “self” to find in the first place. Lear’s act of clinging resolutely to his faulty beliefs is a detrimental side effect of his own epistemology: “Humans have the notorious proclivity to maintain their convictions in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, to foist their wishes and desires upon the universe, to create fantasies, to believe that their beliefs are true” (Kuhn, Feyerabend 12). Lear’s incessant fixation on the mind as the superior half of the binary is something that he cannot let go of, and his investment in this “fantasy” is what fuels his insanity and results in his numerous paradoxes.
Towards the end of the play, Lear temporarily comes out of his madness, and it is evident that he finally begins to recognize the complexity of human nature—yet recognition and acceptance are two entirely separate acts. Lear is finally reunited with Cordelia, and while this is an exultant moment, it is also a moment that confirms his former ignorance.

You do me wrong to take me out o’ the grave.
Thou art a soul in bliss; but I am bound
Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears
Do scald like molten lead.

(IV.vii.45-48)

The “grave” that Lear describes here is the kind of reverie or “bliss” that a simplistic view of the world afforded him. For Lear, dissolving this binary is as unnatural as someone taking him from a “grave.” And though Lear has finally recognized his inherent ignorance about human nature, it is at once clear that he will not be able to function in this state: “I know not what to say/ I will not swear these are my hands/ Would I were assured of my condition!” (IV.vii.54-57). The disillusionment that this recognition has caused Lear is so overwhelming, that he cannot even be sure of his own hands, let alone his “condition.” The play is certainly critiquing the binary of mind/body in this passage; Lear cannot even be sure that his hands are indeed his own hands, because his investment in the mind/body dichotomy has taught him to be unreservedly skeptical about anything that is not his own mind. Thus, this passage almost necessitates the need for deconstruction in order to successfully navigate and understand the world. Lear’s use of the phrase “bound upon a wheel” could also be a reference to Fortuna\(^2\), yet another instance of the female as embodying uncertainty.

\(^2\) In Greek mythology, Fortuna was the goddess who controlled fate. Most illustrations depict her amidst a wheel, hence the term “wheel of fortune.” Lear is perhaps using this reference, because the idea of a female, and thus chaotic, force controlling his life is deeply unsettling.
From the very start of Shakespeare’s play, Lear attempts to reproduce the image of the world that exists in his own mind. His credence in the binary of mind and body generates an all too appealing fiction about the nature of humans—a fiction that negates a nuanced acceptance and analysis of obscurity and performance. When Lear’s beliefs are challenged, he seeks to blame the state of female sexuality for the atrocious events that occur. However, this coping mechanism, along with the mind/body binary, crumbles when Lear himself admits the reverie he has been awakened from. The dissolving of the mind/body dualism tragically mirrors Lear’s own mental dissipation. Nevertheless by placing crucial pressure on this binary, the play also illuminates the absurdity of Lear’s scapegoating, effectively confronting long-held ideologies of a chaos that is gendered “feminine.”

**Conclusion**

Author Géza Kallay states that it is the extremeness of Descartes’ uncertainty that leaves him with “only himself as company,” demonstrating the “infamous loneliness of the philosopher” (Kallay 109). Just as Descartes’ investment in the dichotomy of the mind as superior to the body leaves him altogether isolated, Hamlet and King Lear are similarly unable to effectively live in the world and interact productively with others. What an epistemological analysis of these plays validates is an acceptance of the fluidity that is intrinsically interwoven with what it means to be a human: “While we cannot really be sure that we are not in the midst of a grand illusion, not with absolute certainty, neither can we reasonably doubt that there is a real…world out there of people, cultures, objects, things, processes, forces, and so forth” (Kuhn, Feyerabend 19). Thus, the deconstructions of Descartes’ suppositions demand a value to be
placed on the physical body as a valid and meaningful element of existence. It also promotes a skepticism that, while certainly present, is not utterly debilitating.

Though a deconstruction of Descartes’ theories is essential, *Hamlet* and *King Lear* certainly do not propose a complete rejection of skepticism itself. On the contrary, the motifs of concealment and performance demand an investigative, analytical worldview. That being said, this worldview must also be nuanced and open to readjustment. Shakespeare employs the paradox as a “criticism” of “absolute judgment or absolute convention” (qtd. Platt 5). And because this paradox is applied to the mind/body dualism as well as ideological notions of female sexuality, both of these “absolute conventions” are dissolved, illuminating a flawed epistemology harbored by both Hamlet and King Lear.

The question remains, however, as to why Shakespeare seems so interested in complicating binaries throughout his plays. In order to answer this query, it is necessary to recall the fact that Shakespeare’s plays are, in fact, plays. While it was within the scope of this thesis to focus solely on the paradox as a rupture of binaries, further analysis in this realm would aim to encompass how physical, performative factors accomplish this same feat. Philippa Kelly’s article “See What Breeds About Her Heart: King Lear, Feminism, and Performance” wonderfully analyzes real life productions of *King Lear*, focusing not only on the actors’ and directors’ creative decisions, but how these choices ultimately complicate binaristic notions as well. It is my belief that Shakespeare was not only attune to this variance via performance, but also appreciative of it. Ellen Donkin argues that “the text of a play is not privileged as ‘truer’ than the actions of actors on stage” (Donkin 278). Donkin also concedes that actors and actresses are constantly renegotiating, in a sense *rewriting*, the text itself through their physical actions on stage. As a man who wrote so many plays and was a shareholder in The Globe Theater,
Shakespeare could not have been ignorant of this importance of physicality and performance. This is why he is, ostensibly, so interested in dethroning the mind as the producer of truth and the body as a secondary, deceptive entity. “In our dominant philosophical tradition body is only in opposition to the mind” (Forte 249). Shakespeare’s plays, as well as this thesis, aims to prove that the dichotomy between mind and body is not so neat or apparent as Descartes, Hamlet, and Lear would like to believe, nor is the body subordinate or always in “opposition” to the mind. In actuality, the body is utterly meaningful in that it (as Kant and Hume argue) help us reason, as well as allow people to conduct performances of identities.

It is also worth mentioning Shakespeare’s famous line in *As You Like It*: “All the world’s a stage/ And all the men and women merely players/ They have their exits and their entrances/ And one man in his time plays many parts” (II.vii). The phrase “all the world’s a stage” indicates that, at least to some degree, Shakespeare very much envisions the world itself as performance, a performance that takes place through mental and physical means. He also states that “one man in his time plays many parts,” demonstrating his investment in a non-essentialist view of identity. Because of these convictions, his plays doom those characters that are not able to accept this view of life. Descartes’ theories teach us to be skeptical of all that lies outside of our minds, but Montaigne, Shakespeare, Hume, and Kant reject this simple, hierarchical structure. Our physical senses and the physical world, while they must be actively navigated, should not be a source of complete skepticism, but rather viewed as a component of what it means to live in this world and live with other humans.

Binaries are always central to how humans construct a view of the world: good/bad, right/wrong, man/woman… These all serve to help us make sense of our world, but they do so in a problematic manner. It is Shakespeare, as well as this thesis’, goal to get in between these
dualisms—to show, through paradox, how these obdurate structures have finite limits. Their boundaries are always more complicated than they seem, and it is through the texts of *Hamlet* and *King Lear* that these ruptures are made visible.


Jorden, Edward. “A Briefe Discourse of a Disease Called The Suffocation of the Mother.” <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.10096814066;view=1up;seq=10>


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