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Shakespeare's Language
King Lear

Passage for Emphasis

Act Two, Scene Two, Lines 64 – 78:

Cornwall: Why art thou angry?

Kent: That such a slave as this should wear a sword
Who wears no honesty. Such smiling rogues as these
Like rats oft bite the holy cords a-twain,
Which are t' intrance t' unloose; smooth every passion
That in the natures of their lords rebel,
Being oil to fire, snow to the colder moods,
Revenge, affirm, and turn their halcyon beaks
With every gall and vary of their masters,
Knowing naught, like dogs, but following.
A plague upon your epileptic visage!
Smile you my speeches as I were a fool?
Goose, if I had you upon Sarum Plain,
I'd drive ye cackling home to Camelot.

Cornwall: What, art thou mad, old fellow?

I'm interested in this moment as one in which communication seems to break down entirely, in part because of an excess of language, not a lack of it. Kent's speech here embodies excess to a tee: it describes an excess of servitude ("oil to fire, snow to the colder moods"), there is an excessive amount of metaphor and figuration, and as a (non) answer to Cornwall's question, the speech is in itself excessive. What I find particularly skillful—and what I think has bearing on the play as a whole—is the foundation of “naught” upon which this excess is built. Not only does this 13 line speech fail to answer Cornwall's question, there is also (at least in the eyes of everyone else on stage) no apparent reason for it, and its string of metaphors builds into one involving dogs which both know “naught” and follow nothing, syntactically as well as metaphorically. I like the use of this in a play that in so many ways has “nothing” at its center but an old man's folly, sparking an excessive chain of events.

What's more, and what's particularly pertinent to this week's theme, this passage deals with multiple transformations of the human body into animal form. Is this merely a complement to "poor, bare, forked animal" that seems to me to be the center of this play—"unaccommodated man"? Or is there something more organized or developmental to this progression of curious and consistent animal metaphor? Each featured animal has a specific physical or verbal trait assigned to it (rats biting, birds with beaks, dogs following); there is an order and symmetry to the animal-metaphors in a rant that is otherwise made up of unstable outbursts. What's more, this passage suggests itself as an extreme counterpart to Edgar's more famous and more subdued speech in Act 2.3, in which he "take(s) the basest and most poorest shape / That ever penury in contempt of man / Brought near to beast." We also have another strangely symmetrical and specific animal-laden speech by the fool at 2.4.6, commenting on Kent's position in the stocks as a result of the encounter in question.

I'm not sure what to make of all of this beastly figurative transformation, except that I find it appropriate in this moment where people begin to thoroughly misunderstand each other, and particularly apt in a play in which civilization all but breaks down. The fact that Cornwall's questions develop only from "why art thou angry" to "art thou mad"—two simple lines to Kent's 13—helped me to think about the exchange that follows this speech in terms of this week's exercise, as well. I decided to think about how Kent and his interlocutors might abandon communication altogether and staged the subsequent passage as a fight.

Exercise:

King Lear, 2.2.78-88:

Cornwall: What, art thou mad, old fellow?

Gloucester: How fell you out? Say that.

Kent: No contraries hold more antipathy
Than I and such a knave.

Cornwall: Why dost thou call him knave? What is his fault?

Kent: His countenance likes me not.

Cornwall: Nor more, perchance, does mine, nor his, nor hers.

Kent: Sir, 'tis my occupation to be plain.
I have seen better faces in my time
Than stands on any shoulder that I see
Before me at this instant.

Muay Thai Boxing Choreography:

Cornwall: Exploratory distance jabs, on each heavy stress (“what,” “mad,” and “fell”).

Gloucester: Jab, Cross, Hook

Which Kent evades: Two slips and a weave

Cornwall and Kent: Simultaneous crosses (temporally collapsing the near-rhyme of “fault” and “not”)

Cornwall takes advantage of the closing distance and puts Kent into a clinch; three side knees on “mine,” “his,” and “hers.”

Kent: Breaks the clinch on “tis,” re-gains control (his own clinch) on “faces.” Throws a teep (front kick) to re-establish distance on “stands,” immediate roundhouse on “shoulder.”

There are a lot of obvious reasons to render as violent a play as this one in terms of a boxing match. I chose Muay Thai primarily because it is a martial art that deals in breath-coordinated movement and a bodily flow that is, above all, responsive to one’s opponent’s own “flow” (which makes it a fitting medium into which to translate a dialogue). I attempted to make blows correspond with stresses, for the most part—in Muay Thai it is not only normal, but encouraged, to exhale or yell on a

blow, and the force of the blow often corresponds to the force of respiration (though for the sake of technique I should make it clear that correlation does not imply causation here: the force almost always comes from the body's movement and weight changes). This allows stresses of different weights to be represented physically.

In addition, Muay Thai engagement usually occurs at the level of three different "distances," and so one can modulate exchange between interlocutors, and vary the distance between them, as well as the weight of individual stresses. Given the excess of figuration, instability, and seeming madness in Kent's speech throughout this scene, and the ways he tends to avoid direct verbal engagement in favor of direct physical engagement, I imagine him as a fighter whose strongest moves are distant strikes—moves that allow a fighter to deliver a blow without compromising his autonomy and control. For the sake of exaggerating the underlying aggression in this exchange, I am imagining this dialogue as a kind of "Kent vs. all" situation, in which Gloucester and Cornwall are represented by one kick boxer, whose strengths lie in more direct and overtly aggressive engagement.

I rendered Cornwall's first line, however, as a few light jabs—the kind a fighter makes at the opening of a match, to gauge distance and wingspan, and to size up his opponent—an appropriate correspondent to "What, art thou mad, old fellow?" After Kent's strange speech, I imagine a Cornwall who wants to appraise the situation before making his move. The next sequence is a classic in any kind of boxing (the 1-2-3 combination), and I turned Kent's lines into defensive moves (a slip and a weave are both ways to avoid a blow), because he does not answer Gloucester's questions—again, I imagine him as a defensive fighter overall. Next, I choreographed two simultaneous crosses between Gloucester and Kent, as a way of expressing the complementary nature of the near-rhyme that seems to link them, at least for a

moment (“fault” and “not”). But the effect of a simultaneous blow is that Cornwall/Gloucester can take advantage of it to gain control. This near-rhyme is also the moment in which Kent most nearly answers a direct question—which, given his usual defensive mode of avoidance, seems to me like a moment in which he would lose ground.

To represent Cornwall’s vaguely threatening rejoinder at line 84, then, I took advantage of distance modulation again. One of the effects, I think, of repetition such as “nor mine, nor his, nor hers,” is that it stalls a dialogue—it generates a pause and holds its interlocutor at bay in order to make space for rhetoric. The best way I could think to render this is as a clinch, which is a move used in close distances in Muay Thai in order to limit your opponent’s movements by grabbing his (or her) neck and pulling their head towards yours. This move is a perfect set up for a series of knees, which I had Cornwall deliver on “mine,” “his,” and “hers” in order to represent the (in this case detrimental) effect of repetition’s holding power. This can be one of the more violent and difficult moves to watch in Muay Thai—but then Cornwall’s actions are some of the most difficult to watch in this play.

I cut off the dialogue on Kent’s lines, mainly in order to let him have the last word. As far as I know, one breaks a clinch by essentially establishing one’s own, and so I decided to have Kent gain control of the short distance at the start of his final speech—on “faces,” specifically, since a clinch is a strangely intimate maneuver in which both involved are distinctly aware of the position of their own face as well as their opponent’s. Finally, Kent re-gains the distance he’s more comfortable with by throwing a teep, which usually sends one’s opponent several feet backwards—an advantage which is best utilized by immediately following with a roundhouse and can end in a knock-out if properly landed. As a move which can be executed at the

utmost distance from one's opponent, it seemed an appropriate move with which Kent might finish the sequence.