The Retro-Futurism of Cuteness

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In the past twenty years, the field of cute studies has grown extensively. Cuteness, as we conceive of it, has its origins in the nineteenth century. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *cute*, defined as “attractive, pretty, charming,” comes from “U.S. colloquial and Schoolboy slang,” with its earliest recorded usage in 1834. Despite the origins of cuteness in the nineteenth century, this chapter searches for earlier traces of cuteness — an early...
modern protocuteness—asking if earlier structures, systems, and concepts anticipate our contemporary definition of cuteness. Do Shakespeare’s works, particularly King Lear, offer insight into a seventeenth-century ancestor of cuteness? Can Shakespeare speak to our contemporary cute age? Is Shakespeare ever cute? Drawing largely from Daniel Harris’s 2000 book on aesthetics and consumerism, this chapter seeks to answer these questions by offering a critical investigation of the intersection between early modern culture and contemporary aesthetics.

For some early modern scholars, the notion of a cute King Lear might be troubling, and some critics might wonder what Shakespeare could possibly have to do with cuteness. Many critics, in fact, would quickly reject any “cute” approach to Shakespeare because his plays are tragic, fantastic, and sublime—but far from cute. As Doug Lanier observes, “King Lear is the Mount Everest of Shakespeare—often forbiddingly bleak and challenging, but for those who scale it, it offers an unparalleled vista on man’s condition and its own form of rough beauty. More than any other Shakespeare play, Lear exemplifies what Immanuel Kant labeled the ‘sublime,’ by which he meant those objects that inspire an awe that simply dwarves us rather than charms.” For many, an investigation of cuteness in the early modern period is too anachronistic. Shakespeare’s world is full of bearbaiting, brothels, and beer; surely, this is a world devoid of cute objects. Initially, cuteness seems to have neither a place nor a predecessor in the early modern age. A critical investigation of cuteness takes a leap of faith, but once we start looking for it, we find glimpses of cuteness throughout the age.

Before transitioning to the central parts of this chapter, I will briefly offer one example of how the cute aesthetic lurks beneath the surface of Shakespeare’s works. Let us consider dogs, creatures that are often contemporary cute figures. Initially, Shakespeare’s dogs seem far from cute: as an insult, Lear calls Oswald,  

2 For some contemporary cute depictions of dogs, see, for example, Chie Hayano’s 2009 Cute Dogs: Craft Your Own Pooches and J.H. Lee’s 2011 Boo: The Life of the World’s Cutest Dog.
“you whoreson dog, you slave, you cur!” (4.75–76). Lear cruelly casts Oswald as a worthless and contemptuous dog. Upon further investigation, however, we discover that dogs function beyond cruel insults, and perhaps, they demonstrate a distant link to contemporary cuteness.

One dog that offers a glimpse of cuteness is “Sweetheart.” Lear exclaims, “The little dogs and all, / Tray, Blanch, and Sweetheart — see, they bark at me” (13.56–57). Marjorie Garber explains that Troy, Blanch, Sweetheart are likely “lapdogs or toy spaniels, then very much in fashion” (189). Lapdogs, Joyce Salisbury, explains, have their origins in the medieval period, continuing through the early modern period to today:

The original medieval pets in the purest sense — as non-working animals — were small dogs, lapdogs, for noble ladies [...] . What characteristics marked these lapdogs? As we have seen, the main characteristic of all domestic animals is pedomorphosis, that is, the retention of juvenile characteristics, both in body shape and in personality characteristics, such as whining and submissiveness. The most extreme example of the retention of juvenile traits comes in toy dogs: in addition to their small size, they have disproportionately broad heads, small limbs, large eyes, and smaller noses and mouths. All these are characteristics of human infants and thus evoke what the Nobel Prize–winning ethologist Konrad Lorenz defined as the “cute response.” Thus, toy dogs are not just juvenile; they are almost neonatal in appearance. In fact, people frequently see the small dogs as substitutes for children. (116)

Beginning in the late medieval period, noblewomen began to own what we now call “lapdogs.” Continuing into the early modern age, noblewomen owned lapdogs as pets. By linking the dogs, as neonatal figures (or what we would now call cute objects), to the feminine, we find earlier strands of the femininity

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3 All quotations from Shakespeare’s *King Lear* come from the *Oxford Shakespeare*.
often associated with cuteness. The link between the neonatal and the feminine continues today with the alignment of cuteness and femininity. In Shakespeare’s play, Lear shows affection toward Sweetheart, a dog that is small and serves as an object for Lear to possess. As a lapdog with an endearing name, Lear’s Sweetheart demonstrates one historical predecessor to contemporary cuteness.

Shakespeare’s Sweetheart is one example in which cuteness is not initially obvious and only becomes more evident after a close reading. However, the rest of this chapter considers the way that cuteness — or at least early modern protocuteness — plays out within the relationship between Lear and his daughters. Lear’s desire to control his daughters correlates with what later, in the twentieth century, becomes the desire to control the cute object. From a cute perspective, then, Lear’s desire to control his daughters — and consequently project cuteness onto them — stems from his own fears about his old age and his potential to become, himself, a cute object. This chapter identifies and traces two particular types of cuteness: one associated with infantilization and one associated with senility.

Cuteness and Controlling Children

Because cuteness deals primarily with the childlike and the feminine, this chapter focuses most of its attention on Lear’s treatment and conception of his daughters. Describing cuteness in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Lori Merish argues, “Cuteness stages a problematic of identification that centers on the child’s body. This problematic involved anxieties

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4 I do not want to exaggerate the relationship between cuteness and early modern dogs. Certainly, lapdogs with their neonatal qualities and their relation to noblewomen speak to the contemporary alignment between dogs and cuteness, as well as cuteness and femininity. Yet, most dogs did not fare so well. Early modern authorities slaughtered dogs during plague outbreaks. See Mark S.R. Jenner.

5 Many have warned me that there is nothing cute about Shakespeare and especially not Lear. I thank my colleague Aaron Hatrick for pointing out that Shakespeare has a “Sweetheart” among his curs and mongrels.
about the cultural ‘ownership’ of the child […] cuteness represents lines of interpersonal, intergenerational identification, promoting affective bonds of social affiliation and cohesion” (187–88). In her discussion about cuteness, cultural anxiety, and control over children’s bodies, Merish explores mass immigration to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to Merish, the cute aesthetic provides an avenue through which white Anglo-Americans come to understand and integrate the “Other” into their society: “Specifically, cuteness engenders an affective dynamic through which the Other is domesticated and (re)contextualized within the human ‘family’” (188). Cuteness allows for and encourages the assimilation of the Other by integrating the child, as both cute object and possessed object, into the social and familial system. We cannot carry over these precise concerns and anxieties — about mass immigration — to our reading of protocuteness in Lear because of early modern England’s very different circumstances and concerns, but we can still use Merish’s observation about cute aesthetics and children’s bodies to inform the following discussion about intergenerational control and stability.

Even beyond Merish’s specific context, the cute aesthetic is concerned with the control of children. While Lear’s daughters are not the age that children are when they are most often associated with cuteness, Shakespeare’s Lear still deals with “lines of interpersonal, intergenerational identification” as well as “bonds of social affiliation and cohesion” (Merish 187). The majority of Lear’s speeches look forward to the future of the kingdom, through his daughters’ marriages and inheritance of the divided land. Lear recognizes the future marriage of Cordelia to one of the “two great princes, France and Burgundy — / Great rivals in [Cordelia’s] love” (1.41–42). The intergenerational focus even exceeds Lear’s immediate children; he looks forward to a continuing family legacy. Lear gives land not only to Gonoril6 but also to her descendants:

6 Following the Oxford Shakespeare edition of King Lear, I adopt the spelling “Gonoril.” Some whom I quote use “Goneril”; I have retained their spelling.
Of all these bounds even from this line to this,  
With shady forests and wide-skirted meads,  
We make thee lady. To thine and Albany’s issue  
Be this perpetual. (1.57–60)

The land becomes synonymous with Lear’s legacy and the future descendants who will eventually, in Lear’s vision, rule over the land. His gift of the land is a “perpetual” gift that will continue his family line. An interest in familial lineage is not necessarily part of the cute aesthetic, but it is this same concern about controlling children out of which the cute aesthetic later emerges.

Another way that Lear’s opening speeches reinforce the emphasis on social cohesion is through his insistence that his daughters declare their love for him. In one sense, as we shall see, the need for his daughters’ declarations of love is ridiculous, unnecessary, and unwise. Yet in another sense, such declarations of love serve to establish and reinforce the bonds between fathers and daughters, creating stability for the family and arguably even the nation. Lear demands order, and he specifically wants his daughters to submit to his commands and explicitly express their loyalty to him. Lear declares, “Tell me, my daughters, / Which of you shall say we doth love us most, / That we our largest bounty may extend / Where merit doth most challenge it?” (1.44–47). Later, Lear casts familial loyalty as an ethical duty: “Thou better know’st / The offices of nature, bond of childhood, / Effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude” (7.334–36). Lear’s daughters must profess their love for their father and submit to his commands. Lear’s concerns about ownership and control over his daughters are different than the nineteenth- and twentieth-century social and racial concerns about owning and integrating immigrant bodies; even so, Lear’s interest in controlling his daughters parallels the later impulse to control migrant children because, in both occurrences, conceiving of children as submissive and passive ensures familial stability and, consequently, social or national stability. Thus, relationships between Lear and his daughters serve as a starting point for this cute reading because, ultimately, the family is the unit that deploys
the cute aesthetic as a means of controlling and continuing the familial lineage.

Along with cuteness’s interest in intergenerational and social bonds, a central force behind constructing cuteness is the desire for control and the construction of the ridiculous. Daniel Harris writes, “The process of conveying cuteness to the viewer disempowers its objects, forcing them into ridiculous situations and making them appear more ignorant and vulnerable than they really are” (6). Often, the person in power subjects the cute object to a ridiculous situation, heightening the cute object’s disempowered state. Harris offers the comical situation of Winnie the Pooh struggling to reach honey and getting stuck in a honey pot. While this modern situation is foreign to Shakespeare’s world, the power relation between the subject and the cute object is not. At no point in the play does Lear get his head stuck in a honey pot, but his actions, such as his cruel treatment of his daughters, stand outside of rational behavior. Lear’s actions are not ridiculous or ignorant in the same way as Pooh’s, but as Lear acts cruelly and alienates those around him, his actions demonstrate his ignorance and, ultimately, his loss of power.

Even as Lear acts as the ridiculous, Pooh-like character, he forces others into disempowered situations. For example, Lear’s demand that his daughters quantify their love for him demonstrates the tendency of individuals to force cute objects into ridiculous situations — though not into “honey pot” situations. Lear’s love-test is unwise and unnecessary. G. Wilson Knight critiques Lear’s demands: “The incident is profoundly comic and profoundly pathetic. […] Lear is selfish, self-centered. The images he creates of his three daughters’ love are quite false, sentimentalized: he understands the nature of none of his children, and demand[s] an impossible love from all three” (117). Similarly, Noel Hess recognizes the scene’s ridiculousness: “Regan, Goneril and Cordelia are subjected to a ritual public humiliation whereby, in order to gain their inheritance, they must openly compete with each other for their father’s love and state that their devotion to him is unlimited and unequalled” (210). Whether we adopt Knight’s description of “profoundly pathetic”
or Hess’s description of “public humiliation,” the ritual is, at its core, ridiculous.

**Anti-Cute Daughters**

Lear wants to be able to control his daughters and have them submit to his authority. Yet he finds that they exist beyond his control. For Lear, his daughters move from the realm of control, or what we might now call the realm of the cute, to what Harris terms the anti-cute, an aesthetic closely tied to the perverse and monstrous. This perverse cuteness represents the child as the “vehicle of diabolical powers from the Great Beyond, which have appropriated the tiny, disobedient bodies of our elfish changelings as instruments for their assaults on the stability of family life” (Harris 17). Similarly, Maja Brzozowska-Brywczyńska describes the fragility of the boundary between cute and anti-cute: “The fascinating metamorphosis of cute into anti-cute reflects the above-mentioned circularity of the cute concept — for when cute acquires wicked features it in fact goes to the excess of cuteness, exploiting and parodying the sweetness to its very limits, poisoning itself while retaining the artificially lovable texture. Cute becomes grotesque” (219–20). In this manner, the cute is gentle, inviting the viewer’s sympathy, but the cute object’s gentleness easily transforms into the monstrous, threatening the viewer.

Unable to control his daughters, Lear constructs them as anti-cute offspring who threaten stability and order. The cute easily gives way to the perverse and monstrous. The first to upset Lear is Cordelia, and Lear casts her away and disinherits her because he sees her actions as, in the words of the King of France, “so monstrous” (1.207). Later in the play, Lear casts Gonoril as a “marble-hearted fiend, / More hideous when thou show’st thee in in a child / Than the sea-monster — detested kite, thou liest” (4.251–53). Not only does Lear consider Gonoril a “sea-monster,” he exclaims that she is “serpent-like,” aligning her with the devil and, more broadly, evil (7.317).

Additionally, the anti-cute body is one that rejects normative reproduction. In her queer reading of Chucky, a contemporary
anti-cute figure, Judith Halberstam writes that the Child’s Play movie series that features him “offers a critique of the human, exposes the relations between human and normative gendering and reproduction, and offers an alternative formulation of embodiment, desire, and identity” (147). Expanding on Halberstam’s analysis of Chucky, I suggest that the anti-cute rejects normative modes of reproduction, even “altering” reproduction into something that is unrecognizable as reproduction. For example, in Shakespeare’s play, Lear envisions a normative reproductive line, one in which his daughters marry, inherit his land, and eventually give that land to their children. Yet Lear’s normative vision quickly dissolves after he discovers that he does not have power and control over his daughters. Instead, in Lear’s view, his daughters have a dangerous and monstrous procreative power. Criticizing Goneril, he announces:

Thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter —  
Or rather a disease that lies within my flesh,  
Which I must needs call mine. Thou art a boil,  
A plague-sore, an embossed carbuncle  
In my corrupted blood. (7.378–82)

Gonoril is no longer Lear’s daughter but a disease or infection in his “corrupted blood.” As Julia Reinhard Lupton and Kenneth Reinhard argue, “Goneril is figured not as Lear’s offspring but his ‘inspring’: like a disease, the bad daughter is presented as flesh that has mutinied from within. She is both one with the subject (‘And yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter’) and an invasive foreign body (‘Or rather a disease that’s in my flesh’)” (159). Gonoril, as the anti-cute object, becomes a diseased body, potentially infecting Lear, corrupting rather than continuing his bloodline. The anti-cute dissolves the procreative line, transforming it into a disease.

What is significant about the shift in Lear’s daughters from loving to monstrous is that the sudden change reinforces the flexible boundary between the contemporary cute and anti-cute. The body that seems cute might actually harbor the mon-
The contemporary cute body, with its often big eyes and stubby limbs, also carries the threat of breaking into the anti-cute. Many of the insults directed toward the daughters disrupt any stable boundaries that separate cute and anti-cute, loving and hateful, and feminine and monstrous. For example, Albany critiques and condemns Gonoril’s false appearance: “See thyself, devil. / Proper deformity shows not in the fiend / So horrid as in woman” (16.57–59). He continues, “Thou changed and self-covered thing, for shame / Bemonster not thy feature” and “Thou art a fiend, / A woman’s shape doth shield thee” (16.61–62, 16.65–66). On the surface, Gonoril has “a woman’s shape,” but Albany accuses her of being a “self-covered thing,” who hides a sinister, even demonic, interiority. Similarly, Lear sees his daughters as “women all above” but “down from the waist / […] centaurs” (20.119–20). In the same way that the boundary between the cute and anti-cute is fragile and shifting, the boundary between “women” and “centaurs” is ambiguous.

With the fluid and fragile boundary between cute and anti-cute, it is not surprising that, in the opening scene, Lear sees Cordelia as monstrous but, in the final scene, wants to remain with Cordelia and “laugh / At gilded butterflies” (24.13). Throughout the play, Cordelia asserts her own authority, acting outside of Lear’s control; she is arguably far from cute. Yet in comparison to her sisters, Cordelia is a better representation of a cute figure. In fact, in his 1888 artistic representation of Cordelia, William Frederick Yeames seems to pick up on Cordelia’s charm. Yeames presents Cordelia with rounded features and big eyes, a rendering that, while not as extreme, almost anticipates contemporary cute objects whose eyes seem to overrun their faces.

Perhaps our perception of Cordelia as the cute daughter stems from the play’s tragedy. The cute object is one that is controlled and contained, and by the play’s ending, Cordelia is contained and “controlled” by death. Even Lear’s lamentation about Cordelia’s death constructs her as a cute object as he relies on a conception of the feminine as gentle, quiet, and passive. As Cordelia dies, her father reflects, “Her voice was ever soft, / Gentle, and
low, an excellent thing in women” (24.268–69). Although Lear’s lamentation predates the emergence of a cultural concept of the cute, the feminine ideals of softness and gentleness point to later cute aesthetics’ celebration of docility and gentleness, features that I will later discuss when examining Lear’s old age.

The Cuteness of Old Age

Lear conceives of his daughters as cute objects primarily because he attempts to contain them, but control is not the only motive. Generally, children are the targets of cuteness, but the elderly, too, have become cute objects. Lear’s projection of cuteness, then, stems from anxieties about old age. Before turning to the relation between Lear’s old age and our reading of him as a cute object, we should briefly examine how critics and the play itself conceive of Lear’s old age. One such critic is Hess, who, in his 1987 study, reads Lear — and contemporary elderly people — as having anxiety regarding helplessness and abandonment:

Through the character of King Lear, therefore, Shakespeare has allowed us valuable insight into some of the crucial unconscious processes of ageing: not only that ageing is experienced as a narcissistic injury but that it contains the threat of helplessness, dependency, and loneliness, which is often defended against by a tyrannical control of the elderly person’s world and his objects. (211)

Hess argues that Lear accurately depicts the emotional difficulties of aging in which elderly patients act tyrannically in an attempt to maintain power and control. More recently, in his 2012 book on old age in the early modern period, Christopher Martin argues that Lear navigates fears about dependency and the public “performance” of old age. According to Martin, “Lear’s fateful resignation of power marks neither the old king’s self-destructive vanity nor his senile dotage, but a radical (though abortive) effort to synthesize constitutional self-perception with the generationally conditioned designs of youth” (27). In this
view, the younger generation expects Lear to perform his old age through his resignation, ensuring the legitimate transfer of power to that generation. As I will show, Hess’s claim about power and anxiety about ageing and Martin’s claim about the performance of old age inform a “cute” reading of Lear because cuteness is both performed and projected as a means for control over the cute object.

Critics are not the only ones who point to the play’s emphasis on Lear’s age; within the play, several characters draw attention to Lear’s aging mind and body. Gonoril and Regan often discuss Lear’s age and the problems that have emerged as a result of it. For example, Gonoril announces, “You see how full of changes his age is [...] with what poor judgment he hath now cast her [Cordelia] off appears too gross” (1.278, 1.280–81). Regan responds, “Tis the infirmity of his age” and expects frequent “unconstant starts” (1.283, 1.289). Lear’s old age becomes a central cause of his actions and a key feature of the identity he and others create.

From a cute perspective, Lear’s anxiety about old age, and his performance of it, anticipates the contemporary construction of the elderly as cute. Lear’s projection of cuteness onto others is the result of fear about his own potential to be regarded as a cute object — and perhaps, his fear speaks to a reality in which his daughters infantilize him, similar to the contemporary construction of the elderly as cute objects. In her recent analysis of elderly care, Karen Hitchcock reflects,

At every morning handover in every hospital in Australia, a registrar will report admitting an elderly patient — perhaps a 92-year-old who fell taking out the garbage — and say, “He’s so cute” or “She’s so adorable.” As if the patient were a baby or a kitten. This doesn’t seem so terrible. It is not meant to be cruel or disparaging. But what does it tell us about the way we view the elderly?

If you are old and in the hospital, you can be one of three things: cute, difficult, or mute. If you want people to be nice to you, I’d recommend cute. It’s easy to be cute: just say some-
thing any normal human might say. Because you are ancient, it will be interpreted as cute.

Throughout the play, Lear is the “difficult” elderly person, one who is emotionally unstable and even mad at times, but toward the play’s closing he becomes Hitchcock’s “cute” figure. Like Hitchcock’s ninety-two-year-old patient who is cute and childlike when he or she falls, Lear is described as if he were a baby. Cordelia laments that her father is now “child-changed” (21.14). Earlier in the play, Gonoril voices the proverb, “Old fool are babes again” (4.19). Vincent F. Petronella observes a similar inverse relationship between old age and infantile behavior. According to Petronella, Lear, the ideal image of an aged monarch is one who maintains a stable and secure family, but Lear’s infantile actions cause him to fall short of this ideal. Lear loses political, social, and familial power by regressing to “childhood games (bo-peep and handy-dandy), and [...] Jack the Giant Killer, invoked in Poor Tom’s ‘Child Rowland to the dark tower came’ (3.4.182). Lear returns to the nursery, so to speak” (44). Shakespeare, without access to the contemporary concept of cuteness, infantilizes Lear as a result of his old age.

What we might now read as Lear’s fear of being constructed as a cute object is rooted in an anxiety about power, specifically his fear of losing control and power. While his actions and speeches often demonstrate cruelty, his fears about control stem from a legitimate concern. Throughout the play, Lear’s daughters, the Fool, and others connect Lear’s old age to his declining stability. As I previously mentioned, in the first scene, Regan reflects, “’Tis the infirmity of his old age; yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself” (1.282–83). Gonoril responds that Lear had been rash before old age, and she predicts that his elderly state will worsen his rashness: “The best and soundest of his time hath been but rash; then we must look to receive from his age but alone the imperfection of long-engrafted condition, but therewithal unruly waywardness that infirm and choleric years bring with them” (1.284–88). In his daughters’ view Lear had already been mentally instable, both
“rash” and “wayward,” and his old age will only hasten his condition.

Not only do characters comment on Lear’s old age and his declining mental and emotional stability, they also reflect on Lear’s potential and actual loss of power. Regan declares,

O sir, you are old
Nature in you stands on the very verge
Of her confine. You should be ruled and led
By some discretion that discerns your state
Better than you yourself. (7.303–7)

At this point, Regan has little patience for Lear and his rowdy army. According to Regan, Lear’s old age suggests his inability to make sound and smart political decisions; he needs someone else to take care of and decide what is best for him.

Similarly, the Fool often comments on Lear’s increasing lack of actual power. Responding to Lear’s question about the Fool’s sudden singing, the Fool comments, “I have used it, nuncle, ever since thou madest thy daughters thy mother; for when thou gavest them the rod and puttest down thine own breeches” (4.163–65). Scott F. Crider describes the reversal of power in terms of sin and redemption, but his observation still illuminates a cute reading of Lear: “Goneril and Regan treat their father like a child, then even like an animal. The violated bond in the family leads to psychological and political tyranny, which itself leads to self-consuming savagery” (139). In both their speeches and their actions, Lear’s daughters and the Fool reinforce Lear’s new position as one who should be controlled and led rather than one who should rule and command. In public perception and arguably in reality, Lear, as elderly and thus potential cute object, shifts from a position of power and control to one of powerlessness in which he becomes “like a child” or “even […] an animal.”

Toward the end of the play, Lear’s docile state reinforces his potential as a cute object. Harris argues that “cuteness is […] the aesthetic of sleep[…] the pose we find cutest of all is not that of a rambunctious infant screaming at the top of his lungs but that of
the docile sleepyhead [...]. The world of cute things is transfixed by the spell of the sandman, full of napping lotus eaters whose chief attraction lies in their dormant and languorous postures, their defenseless immobility” (7). We find children especially cute when they are sleeping rather than running around. Similarly, in the play, Lear’s docile state of sleep corresponds with his general powerlessness. Before falling asleep in the storm, Lear predicts the loss of power that coincides with his sleeping state, questioning his self-identity and power. He wonders,

Doth any here know me? Why, this is not Lear.
Doth Lear walk thus, speak thus? Where are his eyes?
Either his notion weakens, or his discernings
Are lethargied. Sleeping or waking, ha?
Sure, 'tis not so.
Who is it that can tell me who I am? (4.217–22).

Lear’s confusion regarding his state of “sleeping or waking” foreshadows the later moment when he falls asleep during the storm. Even these six lines demonstrate how power and knowledge are connected to each other. In his lethargic state, anticipating his later sleep, Lear loses the power to discern between reality and illusion. He is unable to determine whether he is sleeping or awake, whether he is known by others or unknown, whether he is Lear or not Lear. He lacks the power to fulfill his role as king because he is not even certain that he is King Lear. The image of the docile and confused Lear reinforces our conception of him as a monarch who lacks control and power.

Lear’s confused and docile state echoes the inversion of power that the Fool describes earlier. Asleep, Lear has become a child: Lear is “child-changed” (21.14). No longer a powerful father figure, Lear becomes a child dependent on the help of others. Lear, asleep, is carried offstage to Dover. Shortly after this moment, the first gentleman explains, “In the heaviness of his sleep / We put fresh garments on him” (21.19–20). Lear becomes like a child who is dependent on others for “fresh garments.”
Foppery, too, is a likely predecessor of cuteness. Today, cute humans and animals are often those that stumble or move in a way that demonstrates a lack of bodily control or balance. We might think of the clumsy Bambi, stumbling on ice. The central difference between stumbling babies or Bambi and the foolish Lear is one of bodily action versus mental state. Lear’s problem is not necessarily balance or bodily control but a foolish intellectual life. Yet stumbling actions and foolish thoughts both suggest a lack of control — whether bodily or mental — that is common to children. In addition to Lear’s loss of bodily control, he demonstrates a loss of mental control as he falls asleep and becomes childlike. He cries, “Pray do not mock. I am a very foolish, fond old man” (21.57–58). Shortly after, Lear asks Cordelia to “forget and forgive” because, he says, “I am old / And foolish” (21.82–83). Lear’s foolishness draws attention to his lack of “sense or judgement” (“Fool,” def. 1). By his own admission, Lear is like the contemporary cute object who is a bodily being with a lack of intellectual life.

Moreover, Lear’s self-recognition as a “foolish, fond old man” establishes himself as one who is to be pitied. As a “foolish, fond old man,” Lear recognizes and asserts his own insignificance as someone in a powerless position. Additionally, Cordelia refers to Lear as “poor,” whether as a “poor perdut” or a “poor father” (21.33, 21.36). “Poor” literally describes Lear’s loss of control — his state of near-complete destitution and dependence on others — but “poor” also describes “that [which] provokes sympathy, or compassion; that [which] is to be pitied; unfortunate, wretched, hapless.” (“Fool,” def. 5). Thus, Lear becomes the cute object he had feared as he comes to recognize his own foolishness and insignificance by the end of the play.

From a cute perspective, the play’s closing is the moment at which Cordelia’s cuteness and Lear’s cuteness collide: death ultimately marks both the young, feminine Cordelia and the old, masculine Lear as docile or contained. As mentioned previously, docility and containment are central to the cute aesthetic; death, then, is the ultimate instantiation of the features common to the cute aesthetic. As the play ends, Cordelia and Lear are docile,
contained and controlled by death. Part of King Lear’s tragedy is that no matter how we construct others or ourselves, death will contain and consume us all.

Cute Conclusions and Contemporary Cute King Lear

What does a cute reading of King Lear mean for the future of early modern studies? My intention throughout this chapter has been clear: to consider the early modern structures and relationships that speak to our contemporary understanding of cuteness, but not to force cuteness onto King Lear. I want to reiterate that cuteness as we know it did not exist in the early modern period, and thus Shakespeare’s works are, in a strict sense, far from cute. Yet early modern literature offers us structures, systems, and moments that speak to the contemporary cute aesthetic. Exploring the intersection of cuteness and early modern studies can mean searching for ancestors of contemporary cuteness in early modern studies or examining the similarities between early modern concepts and structures and contemporary cuteness.

Thinking through Shakespeare’s play from a cute lens draws attention to the politics of containment at play throughout the tragedy. Lear constantly attempts to control and contain his daughters, even as they burst outside of his constructions of them. Additionally, a cute reading notices how Lear desperately attempts to control others in response to his own loss of power. Finally, the tragedy of King Lear, that of Cordelia and Lear dying, offers a new way for us to conceive of death. As we attempt to contain and control others — through cute aesthetics or other political and cultural means — death stands as a constant threat because it will ultimately contain us. The cute aesthetic is one of many ways in which we fleetingly grasp and maintain power.

A cute approach to King Lear speaks to contemporary performances of the play as well. As has been stated throughout this chapter, early modern audiences did not walk away from King Lear thinking about how cute the characters were, how some characters resisted cuteness, or how some became cute while desperately projecting cuteness on others. But more recent
performances have been fairly cute. For example, in 2015, the Courtyard Theatre in London performed *King Lear with Sheep*, a play with one human actor and a cast of nine sheep. Surely this play was cute but also, at times, chaotic, when the sheep did not perform with the discipline of human actors. How might we make sense of a cute, sheep-filled adaptation of *King Lear*? One answer is that Shakespeare’s play is cuter than we have realized. Shakespeare’s play contains the very structures and systems upon which the aesthetics of cuteness later forms. Given the early modern play’s interest in the family unit, gender relations, control, and power, we should not be surprised by performances of *King Lear with Sheep* because the adaptation, with its sheep as both cute animals and actors, makes explicit the play’s concerns about power and control that I have here teased out as concerns related to the cute aesthetic.
Works Cited


