



“WHO
IS IT *that can
tell me*
who I am?
Lear’s
shadow.”

King Lear

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

edited by Michael R. Best and Alexa Alice Joubin

BROADVIEW SHAKESPEARE

"The Broadview *King Lear* is an excellent edition for students and readers of all ages. It provides a useful, unobtrusive view of the two early versions of Shakespeare's play-text, a clear and perceptive introduction to some key aspects of that play and to Shakespeare in general, compact glosses of words that might puzzle modern readers, and a well-chosen array of relevant documents that put the play into its key contexts."

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"This *King Lear* stands out for its educationally wise and theatrically astute text. The editors supply a cornucopia of supplementary material from prior and contemporary historical narratives and poetic and dramatic sources. Unlike any previous edition I've seen, here the display and explanation of Quarto and Folio variants appear as imaginative invitations rather than interruptions. Because they are so well presented, these textual alternatives will enlighten new readers and intrigue experienced teachers and players. The variant passages with their notes together reveal themselves as working guides through the practicalities and creative possibilities of staging plays in Shakespeare's time."

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K*ing Lear* is a play for our times. The central characters experience intense suffering in a hostile and unpredictable world. They face domestic cruelty, political defeat, and a stormy external environment that invades them "to the skin." They constantly question the meaning of their experiences as we watch their emotions range from despair to rage to unexpected tenderness and desperate hope as they are rejected, even tortured. Lear's daughters, as in a fairy tale, are three strong women. The eldest two vie for sexual and political power, while the youngest, Cordelia, is initially banished because of her plain speaking but then returns in a doomed attempt to restore her father to his throne.

King Lear has an unusual performance history. It was significantly revised, by Shakespeare or others, between its first two publications and was then succeeded by an adaptation that softened the ending so that Lear and Cordelia survived. In our own times *King Lear* is performed around the world in productions that explore its relevance to contemporary political and environmental challenges. This edition offers a distinctive "extended" text, taking the later Folio as a starting point and adding the lines that appear only in the Quarto, distinguished by a light gray background. Variations in individual words that are of critical interest are recorded in the margin.

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ISBN 978-1-55481-514-2



9 781554 815142



broadview press

www.broadviewpress.com

An independent academic publisher since 1985.

“UPON A WHEEL OF FIRE”:
PERFORMING *KING LEAR* ON STAGE
AND ON SCREEN

by Alexa Alice Joubin

Despite its prominence in the dramatic canon, *King Lear* occupies a peculiar position in stage and screen histories. Although tragedy is not usually the preferred companion for hard times, Anglophone pop culture gravitated towards *King Lear* through memes and quotes during the global pandemic of COVID-19, especially in early 2020. On Shakespeare’s birthday on 23 April 2020, at the height of the pandemic, Canada’s Stratford Festival kicked off its online film festival with artistic director Antoni Cimolino’s 2014 *King Lear*, which became their most watched video with 85,000 viewers.¹ For context, by the end of 2020, Stratfest@Home has attracted two million viewers from 103 countries. But there were other pop-cultural references to *Lear* and aging as an undignified process before the pandemic. In Christopher Nolan’s film *The Dark Knight* (2008), Gotham City’s district attorney Harvey Dent says, in a foreshadowing scene, that one either “dies a hero [in a timely manner]” or “live[s] long enough to see [oneself] become a villain,” implying that longevity simply brings more opportunities to embarrass oneself.

One reason for this popularity is that *Lear* was widely but erroneously thought to be written during a bubonic plague. Despite its bleak outlook, the play was appropriated to reassure audiences of their pre-existing beliefs about humanity during a global crisis. Although widely performed around the world in numerous languages and in a wide array of media from YouTube and Samurai film to *anime* and parody, the play does not have as many feature-length film adaptations in English as, say, *Hamlet* or *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, despite, or maybe because of, its lack of closure and its vivid imagery of hell, which is captured in Lear’s lines where he describes himself as bound “upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears / Do scald like molten lead” (4.6.47–48, TLN 2797).²

1 Stratford Festival, private communication, June 2021.

2 The wheel evokes both the medieval concept of the wheel of fortune and an instrument of torture. In Greek mythology, Ixion is punished for lusting after Zeus’ wife. Ixion is bound to a winged wheel of fire for eternity. (continued)

On the one hand, the poignant narrative enables its audiences to experience aging emotionally as an affective burden rather than knowing it intellectually as merely an inevitability. At the end of the play, we are told to “speak what we feel, not what we ought to say” (5.3.27, TLN 3299), in other words, to relate intuitively to what has transpired. We are not meant to assign blame by chalking the events up to well-known plot elements such as jealousy and greed. The play holds an important place in non-Anglophone cinema and theater works that decolonize disability, mortality (articulated through intergenerational conflicts), and such patriarchal concepts as filial piety and gender stereotypes. As early as 25 September 1626, it was staged as *Tragoedia von Lear, König in Engelandt* (*The Tragedy of Lear, King of England*) by the Wandering Troupe in Dresden (“Die ersten”).

These adaptations tend to focus on the tragedy’s emotional structure, rather than the lack of closure. Lear’s most eccentric moments (the division-of-the-kingdom scene and the first scene at Goneril’s castle) have been connected to the generational gap crystallized by the catchphrase “OK, Boomer,” which went viral after being used as a pejorative retort in 2019 by Chlöe Swarbrick, a member of the New Zealand Parliament in response to heckling from another member (“Green”). The question of dynastic succession and divisions in Shakespeare’s imaginary pre-Christian Britain gained further relevance in the post-Brexit era. An example is Richard Eyre’s 2018 film *King Lear*, which has been interpreted as a “Brexit allegory” (Smith 4). Diasporic artists and audiences, too, used *Lear* as a platform to discuss their concerns about xenophobia and racism.

On the other hand, throughout the centuries, some Anglophone critics and directors have repeatedly declared the play unstageable due to its cruel and nihilistic vision. For instance, English essayist Charles Lamb (1775–1834) maintained that *Lear* “cannot be acted” because it is “painful and disgusting” to see “an old man tottering about the stage with a walking-stick, turned out of doors by his daughters in a rainy night” (*Complete Works* 261). Lamb’s opinion reflected the Romantic pursuit

Regaining consciousness when reunited with Cordelia, Lear evokes the instrument of torture to visualize his suffering. See the illustration and further explanation of “wheel of fire” on page 232.

for the sublime and privileging of poetry, but it was also influenced by prevailing trends in eighteenth-century English theater. Likewise, Samuel Johnson (1709–84) considered the blinding of Gloucester “too horrid to be endured in dramatic exhibition” (*Works* 703). These comments converge on the idea that the cruelty in *Lear* is not suitable for public performance. Even those directors who admire the play’s depth speak in a negative tone of voice. English director Peter Brook believed that *Lear* was “a mountain whose summit had never been reached. On the way up one found the shattered bodies of other climbers strewn on every side” (Marowitz 135).

Indeed, Cordelia’s untimely death proved so unacceptable that Poet Laureate Nahum Tate (1652–1715) rewrote the play with a happy ending in 1681 (see Introduction, p. 16). Tate’s version dominated the English stage for 150 years from 1681 to 1838.¹ Tate also tailored his adaptation, particularly the role of Cordelia, to renowned Restoration-era actress Elizabeth Barry. The Fool is eliminated in Tate’s version, and the charitable children are rewarded. Cordelia lives and reunites with Lear (played by Thomas Betterton). She marries Edgar, who declares that “truth and virtue shall at last succeed” (see Appendix D1). Tate’s center-staging of Edgar echoes the character’s prominence in Shakespeare’s times. In the Quartos, Edgar is given a prominent role on the title page. This suggests that the actor’s performance was a hit. Tate further transformed Cordelia from a martyr to a “romantic and sentimental heroine” (Ford). The spotlight on Cordelia might be explained by the relative novelty of having women performing on the professional stage in England (Anthony). Shakespeare transformed the tragicomedy *King Leir* into a tragedy, and Tate offered a “corrective” by bringing back the tragicomedy (Wells, *History* 62). Generations of audiences were unaware that Shakespeare’s version did not carry poetic justice in its final scene. In other words, some directors believed that *Lear* could be staged only after revisions. *Lear* is not unique in its fate of being radically rewritten. John Dryden and William Davenant’s adaptation of *The Tempest*, entitled *The Tempest; or, The Enchanted Island* [perf. 1667, pub. 1670], dominated the English stage for nearly two centuries.

1 The theme of succession and dispossession in *King Lear* resonated with audiences during the Exclusion Crisis (1679–81). King Charles II sought to exclude his Catholic brother and his heirs from the thrones of England, Scotland, and Ireland.

Reception is more positive in modern times. *King Lear*'s lack of closure has been lauded as a sign that Shakespeare was ahead of his time. Polish critic Jan Kott (1914–2001) argued persuasively that *Lear* anticipated the nihilism in Samuel Beckett's 1953 absurdist play *Waiting for Godot*. Nonetheless, to this day, there is lingering resistance to *Lear*'s bleak ending. Harold Bloom wrote in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* in 1998 that his experiences of the play had invariably been disappointing (476–515), and Michael Billington, the celebrated and prolific British theater reviewer, called *Lear* “the most intractable of tragedies” in 2002.

Why is there so much tension in the play's performance history? As Michael Best points out, *King Lear* has been reproduced in versions that are difficult to reconcile even in its early reception history, including the 1608 Quarto, which may well have been based on a performance at Whitehall in 1606, and the 1623 First Folio, which was likely edited by Shakespeare's fellow actors to suit changing tastes and to serve readers (see Introduction, p. 11). The textual history has important implications for the performance history. When a work survives and appears in more than one form, we have both a vexing problem of interpretation and a rich opportunity for performing the variants.

To resolve the blind spots in the bifurcated history of performing *King Lear*, I offer multiple approaches to central scenes and themes in the play, illustrating a wide variety of interpretations from films and productions around the world. As opposed to a traditional, chronological account of the performance history, which gives the false impression of evolution and cohesion, analyses of contrasting interpretations of key scenes or tropes acknowledge and support the contradictory ways in which directors and audiences have approached *King Lear*.

REDEMPTION OR NIHILISM?

Nineteenth-century adaptations tend to stress the pathos of the play and the role of Cordelia as a healer, while twentieth-century productions emphasize the impersonality of the characters' demise (“As flies to wanton boys are we to th'gods; / They kill us for their sport,” 4.1.36–37, TLN 2221–22). Twenty-first-century interpretations explore a myriad of themes inspired by but not necessarily addressed directly in *King Lear*, such as race, gender, refugee crises (“Unaccommodated

man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal,” 3.4.106–07, TLN 1901–02), ecology, and accents and linguistic differences as divisive factors.

In the Anglophone world, the tragedy is seen either as a cautionary, often Christian-inflected, tale of redemption or as an existentialist vision of apocalyptic doom. However, the significance of *King Lear* goes beyond the traditional binary of nihilism and redemption, as Marxist cultural-materialist critic Jonathan Dollimore shows. Modern audiences tend to become hung up on the question of sympathy. In his critique of the humanist approach, Dollimore states that “for Lear, dispossession and displacement entail not redemptive suffering but a kind of suffering recognition” (196). Indeed, the question of redemption need not and should not be the sole focus of interpretive strategies. Lear can be both sympathetic and unsympathetic, both relatable and not relatable.

“RIPENESS IS ALL”?

Counselling his suicidal father, Edgar tells Gloucester that “Men must endure / Their going hence, even as their coming hither. / Ripeness is all” (5.2.9–11, TLN 2935). This contradicts the quasi-Catholic idea of “readiness is all” in *Hamlet* (5.2.220, TLN 3672). Presumably, in the pre-Christian context of *King Lear*, one should wait one’s turn, as set forth by Nature, by becoming “ripe” rather than taking an early departure from this life via suicide. One cannot get ready for death via religious final rites, either. The tragedy itself might be said to be a metaphysical exploration of the inevitable process and consequence of becoming “ripe.”

This sense of “ripeness” is at the core of the Anglophone hesitation to film or stage *King Lear*. The hesitation results from, and reinforces, the widely circulated myth that the role of Lear is both the pinnacle of any actor’s career and their swan song: namely, one has to be old enough to play it but young enough to have the stamina to pull it off (McGrath). The myth reflects the physical challenges actors face, for the role is physically demanding and emotionally exhausting. Edward Petherbridge had a stroke while rehearsing *King Lear* in Wellington, New Zealand, in 2007, which left him partially paralyzed (Appleyard). Timothy West asserted that, quite realistically, “you should play Lear while you’re young enough to lift Cordelia up and carry her” (Barnett).

As an icon, Lear has captured the imaginations of creators of meta-theatrical television programs, films, and stage works. The Canadian television series *Slings and Arrows* (2006) revolves around The New Burbage Festival, a fictionalized parallel to the famous Stratford Festival in Ontario. The third season of the series depicts the finale of the career and life of the aging Charles Kingman (the last major role of William Hutt, 1920–2007), who secretly battles terminal cancer. Kingman asks the director of a production of *King Lear* to keep his cancer diagnosis confidential so that he can play Lear before he dies. Hutt gave a legendary performance of Lear at the Stratford Festival a few years before filming the series. Like his character in *Slings and Arrows*, Hutt passed away shortly after playing Lear (Leveen 93–108). On film, Lear's struggles have also been mapped onto various characters' arcs, notably that of Sanjay Banerjee (Girish Karnad) in Sangeeta Datta's *Life Goes On* (2009), who struggles to relate to his three daughters after the sudden death of his wife. On stage, Anthony Sher has played a frail actor, Jack, renowned for his past performances of Lear, in *Kunene and the King* (2019), directed by Janice Honeyman. Coping with terminal liver cancer, Jack finds solace in *King Lear*.

While it is true that most English actors waited until their sixties to take on the role of Lear (for instance, Paul Scofield, Nigel Hawthorne, Anthony Hopkins, and Ian McKellen), the character's arc is at stake rather than the actor's age. Taking a cue from Lear's association of his age-induced frailty with femininity ("O, how this mother swells up toward my heart!" [2.2.253, TLN 1333]), at eighty-two Glenda Jackson performed a gender-swapped Lear in 2019 (Gold). Laurence Olivier (1907–89) took on the role both early and late in his career, in 1946 and 1983. Critics continue to debate whether Olivier's younger or older Lear was more effective.

However, authenticity in performance is derived from the mis-en-scène and acting methods rather than from the actors' off-stage identities. The insistence on matching an actor's age to that of the character is a form of ageism. John Gielgud played Lear when in his twenties (Williams), and more actors are now playing Lear early in their career. Canadian actor John Colicos played Lear at London's Old Vic at age twenty-two in 1951 (Hunt). The twenty-eight-year-old Indian actor Om Shivpuri played Lear in a professional production by the National School of Drama in Delhi, directed by Ebrahim Alkazi, in

1964 (Alkazi). British actor Timothy West was in his thirties when he played Lear at the 1971 Edinburgh Festival (Robertson). West believed, in fact, that Lear misrepresents his age: “If you play him as so old that it’s reasonable for him to abdicate, then it just becomes a play about difficult family relations. It’s much more effective to show that this man still has all his marbles to begin with and really should be ruling the country” (Barnett). In 1994, the thirty-nine-year-old Ben Thomas became the first Black actor to play Lear on the professional stage in England since Ira Aldridge’s performance 135 years before (Holland 181). Talawa Theatre Company made dramaturgical adjustments to portray a young Lear with a deteriorating heart condition whose “throne” was in twentieth-century Canary Wharf, London (Brewster).



Ben Thomas as King Lear, Talawa Theatre Company, London, 1994.

In 2002, Declan Donnellan staged a successful *King Lear* with sixteen young actors of the Royal Shakespeare Company’s Academy, starring Nonso Anozie, at the Young Vic. These actors were fresh out of drama school at the time. *Playbill* hailed it as the “youngest King Lear ever” (“Royal Shakespeare Company”). Interestingly, the director did not attempt to age the actors. Their youthful energy flowed through the reconceived characters.



Nonso Anozie played Lear when he was twenty-three years old, Young Vic, London, 2002.

There have been other creative solutions to demystify *Lear*. Bill Rauch cast two actors as Lear in alternating performances of his 2013 Oregon Shakespeare Festival production of *King Lear*. The dramaturgical decision showcased contrasting interpretations of the play and solved the pragmatic issue of labor by dividing the creative effort. Michael Winters played a childlike “Lear of Light” who suffers from dementia, truly a “foolish, fond old man” (4.6.61, TLN 2814). The daughters do not so much fear as worry for his well-being. In contrast, Jack Willis offered a wrathful “Lear of Darkness” who is a “bullying mob boss” (Minton and Quarmby 65). The bifurcated approach reflects the key descriptors of the aging monarch in Shakespeare: old and foolish, each word with adjacent but independent meanings and weight



Michael Winters as King Lear in Bill Rauch's production at the 2013 Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

(Rauch). Reviews of modern performances tend to describe Lear as senile, petulant, tyrannical, or egotistical. Former US president Donald Trump was compared to Lear (Olson). The character is rarely staged as or perceived to be a jolly presence, a choice that reflects Western biases against, and fear of, old age.

“DIVIDED IN THREE OUR KINGDOM”

Performances of the division-of-the-kingdom scene reflect the reaction of each culture and generation to the challenging ethical burden within and beyond the play's action. The adaptation by Nahum Tate, for example, resonated with the audiences during the Exclusion Crisis

of the seventeenth century, a political episode in the Stuart successions. After King Charles II's brother James, the heir apparent, converted to Roman Catholicism, the king tried to exclude him from the succession for fear he would usher in a Catholic absolutist monarchy. As a result, there was propaganda both for and against exclusion and division. Other cultures and subsequent generations also adapted *King Lear* to explore pressing issues in their times.

After the UK's 23 June 2016 referendum to leave the European Union, directors and readers have turned to *King Lear* as a "Brexit play"—a play about division and dispossession, with the map as its central prop in the opening scene. In Eyre's film, for example, Anthony Hopkins's exiled Lear finds himself in pouring rain in a refugee camp, an unaccommodated man. The film alludes to the issue of migration and the refugee crisis in Europe (Eyre, *King Lear* [2018]). In the post-Brexit context, there is dramatic irony in Lear's decision to cut familial and political ties with Cordelia only to see her return from France to save him from oblivion. Lear's exile and search for refuge, as Stephen O'Neill points out, highlights "supranational connections" in the contemporary UK and in the play, as well as the importance of empathy.

The scene of regal abdication of *King Lear* is folkloric in origin (see Appendix A1). Structurally, when the scene begins, there are other divisions paralleling Lear's announcement: Cordelia versus her elder sisters, and Edgar in opposition to Edmund. Lear asks his daughters to publicly confess their love for him and, by extension, their loyalty to the throne. This is a highly performative act, which makes the scene dramatic and memorable. As a nonconformist, Cordelia refuses to play along, even if Lear makes it clear the game is rigged in her favor ("What can you say to draw / A third more opulent than your sisters?" [1.1.85–86, TLN 92]).

The first question we need to ask of this scene, however, is whether Lear's division of his kingdom is a ceremony with more symbolic than substantive meanings, a premeditated act of policy, or a public test of true love. Peter Brook's 1971 film does not treat the division of the kingdom ceremonially, although some stagings and films portray the scene as a solemn ceremony or a ritual without political weight, such as the *Kathakali King Lear*, which premiered at the London Globe in 1989 and toured internationally through 1999. Kalamandalam Padmanabhan Nair performed Lear in the *kathakali* style. The ritualistic quality of

Shakespeare's scene matched the ritualistic origin of the temple-driven genre of *kathakali*, which often portrays "non-worldly" characters drawn from the Indian epics. The Shakespearean motifs of betrayal and loss were fused seamlessly to classical *kathakali* forms of Malayalam lyrics and corresponding *mudra* (hand gestures). Co-produced by the French director-choreographer Annette Leday and Australian playwright David McRuvie, this adaptation treats the division of the kingdom and downfall of Lear as a cleansing ritual.

In *Songs of Lear* by the Polish company Song of the Goat (Teatr Pieśń Kozła), directed by Grzegorz Bral in 2016, Rafał Habel's Lear exiles and humiliates Cordelia by "ritually taking off her shoes" and throwing them to her sisters. As actors in a semicircle drum on chairs, Cordelia proceeds to sing her farewell speech, evoking a "lucid dream" (Bourus 481). The cast included Polish, English, Finnish, and Norwegian actors, and songs for the non-linear narrative poems were written by the Corsican composer Jean-Claude Acquaviva. Song of the Goat's approach is similar to that of Singaporean director Ong Keng Sen's *Lear Dreaming* (2012), a multimedia musical-theater piece. Featuring a cast of one, the Noh master-performer Umewaka Naohiko, *Lear Dreaming* conveys the external division of the kingdom and the internal division of selves through songs and percussion.

Other performances frame the scene as a premeditated act of policy. Based on a 1962 stage production at the Royal Shakespeare Company, Brook's film version was inspired by the theories of Jan Kott and Antonin Artaud (1896–1948). The division-of-the-kingdom scene is dominated by close-ups of the aging monarch, framing Paul Scofield's Lear as a solemn statue. Scofield's Lear speaks methodically and remains stern throughout the scene, which ends with him calmly banishing his youngest daughter. Meanwhile, Brook's decision to cut Cordelia's asides diminishes the weight of a potentially revelatory moment as well as Cordelia's self-discovery. The scene sets a sinister and nihilistic tone for the entire narrative. The film dramatizes Lear's recognition that kingship is a metonym and that he is but a human subject. To survive, he, like others, depends on sustenance (Brook, *King Lear* [1971]).

Still other versions present the scene as a test of human nature, if not of true love. Both the father-monarch and the daughters are put to the test. Some of the performances create a more sympathetic image

of Lear by making him a jolly “fond old man” who is returning to a childlike state due to his egotistical incredulity that Cordelia could be serious. Laurence Olivier’s Lear in Michael Elliott’s televised film (1983) laughs off Cordelia’s initial response (“Nothing, my lord”) and cajoles her, in a playful manner, to be more forthcoming. Lear’s line, “Mend your speech a little, / Lest you may mar your fortunes,” is spoken with doting tenderness, as Lear’s wink at Cordelia makes his favoritism clear. In most performances, the line takes on a sinister undertone, as a stern warning. The Stonehenge-like set turns the court into a temple in pre-Roman, pagan Britain. Against the mythical backdrop, a clear answer emerges to Lear’s question about who loves him most: himself.

In Belarus Free Theatre’s production of *King Lear* at the World Shakespeare Festival, directed by Vladimir Shcherban at the London Globe in 2012, Lear becomes both the volatile, capricious monarch and the clown in the very first scene. Teasing audience expectations, the production—with a liberal sprinkling of levity—amplifies the folkloric and comedic textures of Shakespeare’s tragedy. Aleh Sidorchik’s Lear emerges hunched over, in long, white hair. He slips, but as he falls, he whisks off his wig and laughs at the audience in a “gotcha” moment. Old age—traditionally the most sacred and horrifying element of this play—is turned inside out, as Sidorchik toys with the audience’s perception of old age in his parody. The traditional prop of a map of the kingdom is nowhere to be found. Instead, in Lear’s suitcase is the soil of the land that he plans to divide: each daughter would receive a “piece” of the land. To the tune of piano and accordion, Goneril and Regan take turns singing and dancing comically for Lear to express their love and devotion.

Akira Kurosawa’s 1985 Samurai film *Ran (Chaos)* also features some elements of merriment in this scene. Warlord Hidetora decides to retire but retain his title of “Great Lord.” Against counsel, Hidetora divides his kingdom among his three sons, Taro, Jiro, and Saburo, but asks them to remain united to defend the clan from invaders. Kurosawa frames the scene of division in the historical feudal Lord Mōri Motonari’s parable, with a twist. Known as “the legend of the three arrows,” the story depicts an aging father who demonstrates the power of a united front to his three sons. To teach his sons a lesson in unity, in the film Hidetora gives each son an arrow and tells him to break it, an action which they accomplish with ease, as in the



Aleh Sidorchik plays a mischievous Lear in Belarus Free Theatre's production of *King Lear* at the World Shakespeare Festival (directed by Vladimir Shcherban, London Globe, 2012).



Aleh Sidorchik's Lear toasts to the cheering audience during the division-of-the-kingdom scene in Belarus Free Theatre's production at the World Shakespeare Festival (directed by Vladimir Shcherban, London Globe, 2012).

Mōri legend. Hidetora then gives each a bundle of arrows, which the two elder sons are unable to break. However, Saburo (the equivalent to Cordelia), ever the odd one out, breaks the bundle of arrows with his knee to burst the bubble of his aging father's delusional plan. His act of defiance suggests that his father's childish fable is not suited for adults in a feudal world. It also highlights the irony in Hidetora's



In Akira Kurosawa's 1985 film *Ran*, warlord Hidetora teaches his three sons the lesson of unity using a bundle of arrows. Seated facing the camera, from right to left, are his sons Taro (equivalent to Goneril), Jiro (Regan), and Saburo (Cordelia).

delusional and self-contradictory lecture that calls for both a division and unification of his “kingdom.”

Some directors have mapped the division of the kingdom onto linguistic differences in modern times. Set in 2020 against the backdrop of cosmopolitan Shanghai, a Mandarin/English bilingual production in Stratford-upon-Avon directed by David Tse brings the narrative to the twenty-first-century corporate context. *King Lear's* British-Chinese Cordelia has nothing to say in the division-of-the-kingdom scene because the meeting is conducted in Chinese. The only Chinese word at her disposal is *meiyou* (nothing) because, having grown up in Great Britain, she does not speak her father's language, Mandarin. She literally has “nothing” to say to her father, who demands a response in Mandarin despite knowing her situation. Her use of the word is both the result of linguistic deprivation and a protest against Lear's public test of love.

In collaboration with Japanese playwright Kishido Rio, Singaporean director Ong Keng Sen uses language as an identity marker in their multilingual adaptation of *Lear* (1997 and 1999). The Lear figure speaks Japanese and walks in the solemn style of Noh theater, while the Older Daughter, a composite figure of Goneril and Regan played by a *jingju*

female impersonator, speaks Mandarin. Their philosophical conversation, which is carried out in two languages and two distinct performance styles, is followed by a ritualistic division-of-the-kingdom scene. The younger sister (Cordelia) speaks Thai, although she remains silent most of the time. Similar to Tse's bilingual production, Ong's *Lear* offers a corrective to the prevalent conception that Asian languages and cultures are interchangeable.

In Tse's production, the test of love takes on new meaning in the context of diasporic communication. Confucian values infuse family roles into the social hierarchy, and Lear, located in Shanghai, insists on respect from his children at home and in business settings. The system of hierarchy seeks to fix and render immobile something that is inherently mobile: the language of love. This scene portrays the failure of such a fantasy. Residing in Shanghai close to their father, Regan and Goneril are fluent in Mandarin and are very articulate as they convince their father of their unconditional love. Cordelia, on the contrary, is both honest and linguistically challenged. She is unwilling, or perhaps unable, to follow her sisters' example. A member of the Chinese diaspora in London, Cordelia participates in this important family and business meeting via video link. In the tense exchange between Cordelia and Lear, the word "nothing" looms large as Chinese characters are projected onto the screen panels behind which Cordelia stands. The Chinese script, foreign to Cordelia, is superimposed on her face, symbolizing a form of linguistic violation and violence. Uninterested in the ontological or lexical significance of nothing, Lear urges Cordelia to give him something tangible, something he can understand in the context of corporate management.

Lear's test of love becomes a trick question in the modern corporate context. The scene is set around a table in a boardroom in Richard Eyre's 1998 *King Lear*, which features Ian Holm, and again in the setting of a formal business meeting in Eyre's 2018 *King Lear*. In the Dutch production *Koningin Lear* (*Queen Lear*), directed by Eric de Vroedt in 2015, Betty, the female CEO of Lear Inc., suffers from dementia. She proceeds to divide her shares among her three sons in a family and business meeting in the boardroom atop a skyscraper. While the modern boardroom is a popular choice for staging this scene, some adaptations have opted for a political allegory. Hundreds of balloons in *Lér Konungur* (*King Lear*), directed by Benedict Andrews at the National

Theatre of Iceland in Reykjavik in 2010, calls to mind American political conventions, with characters milling around in conservative contemporary business attire on a bare stage. Set in our contemporary period, the production critiques neoliberal, free-market capitalism driven by corporate interests.

The association of a modern patriarch with a family business has been a popular trope in adaptations of *Lear*. In Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather* trilogy (1972, 1974, 1990), mafia boss Vito Andolini Corleone holds court to grant favors and, like Lear, to divide up the family business. His two elder sons, Sonny and Fredo, end up working with a rival gang. The crisis of succession and the presence of three sons parallel the story of *Lear*, and the director himself explicitly mentioned that he looked for inspiration in "Edmund in *King Lear*, Lear himself, *Titus Andronicus*, and even *Romeo and Juliet*" (Cowie 242). The Godfather figure becomes "the last [bastion] of effective patriarchal power operating in a world that ... expresses its discomfort with ... patriarchal dominance" (Griggs 129). All of these adaptations, whether they feature a male or female Lear, reimagine the power shift in feminist contexts. For many modern directors, *King Lear* is a narrative about the undoing of the patriarchy.

"SO YOUNG, MY LORD, AND TRUE":
CORDELIA'S STORY

While *King Lear* is a narrative about aging for Lear and Gloucester as father figures, it is also Cordelia's coming-of-age story. By refusing to play her father's game, Cordelia transitions from a sheltered daughter to an adult who takes on the world. In folklore, the myth of cruel parents and their heroic child is common, and in modern times, the figure of Cordelia has been appropriated as a symbol of political resistance beyond the Anglophone world.

For example, the Korean narrative *Samgongbonpuri* (*Song of God of Destiny Samgong*), the core of the grand ritual *Jeju keungut*, includes a myth about an aging couple who call in their three daughters one by one to ask them to whom they owe the good fortune of their happy lives. The first and second daughters answer that they owe their happiness to their parents and to heavenly and earthly gods. This answer pleases their parents. The third daughter's honest answer, that they owe their good fortune to heaven ("the vertical line that runs down the middle of the

abdomen”), displeases her parents. They disown her and throw her out of the family. One day the parents trip on their doorsill and lose their eyesight in the fall. They are eventually reduced to wandering beggars. The youngest daughter happens to have set up a feast for beggars, where she is reunited with her parents. She forgives her parents and provides for them. She becomes Jeonsangsin, the god of destiny (Seo 92–95).

In *Uruwang* (*King Uru*), a musical production written and directed by Kim Myung-gon that ran at the National Theater of Korea during 2000–2004, Bari, the abandoned princess, learns that her father, King Uru, has been mistreated by her sisters, Gahwa and Yeonhwa. He has gone mad and is roaming aimlessly on a heath. Bari risks her life to retrieve an elixir that will cure her father. As she restores her father to his senses, Bari is stabbed by an assassin sent by a villain named Solji. Unbeknownst to the king, Bari miraculously survives the attack. When they reunite in a later scene, King Uru, full of remorse, asks Bari to forgive him before he dies for foolishly abandoning her at birth. Bari’s filial piety turns her into a shaman. She sings and dances the Dance of Life and Love to appease the souls of the departed. A better world awaits future generations (Lee 50–51). In *Uruwang*, Cordelia–Bari combats the Confucian patriarchy through compassion and perseverance. She still embodies the Confucian female virtues of devotion, resilience, and endurance, but by taking the moral high road she calls into question Confucian oppressions of women under the rubric of filial piety.

Like Shakespeare’s *Lear*, *Uruwang* dramatizes a test of filial love which, as Paul A. Kottman points out, does not hinge on any “rhetorical test” but on a future action: whether Lear’s daughters will “let him crawl unburdened toward death” and care for his aging body “without being ritually bound to do so” (92). Both narratives feature South Korean shamanism. Each is also an example of the archetype of a forgiving, unlikely heroine. Audiences familiar with Korean folklore would have heard echoes of the two myths when they encountered Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, while others may have seen parallels to the *Lear* narrative in the performance of *Uruwang* (Kim G.).

“UNACCOMMODATED MAN”

In some performances, place is a more important signifier than time. It is the location, whether it is the royal court or the heath,

that shapes the characters' actions. Peter Brook's *King Lear* does not contain references to specific historical periods. Instead, place provides an anchor for actions that can be read as timeless (Jackson 613). Recent scholarship by Andrew Bozio has highlighted the importance of perception of place in *King Lear* (Bozio). Set and shot in snowy Northern Jutland, Denmark, Brook's film highlights the theme of despair through its bleak landscape and its lack of a musical score. External, sartorial signs of regality are largely absent from Scofield's performance in the role of Lear. In *Ran*, which places its characters firmly among the animals and frequently in an epic natural landscape, Hidetora often asks *where* he is; he does not seem to be as invested in *who* he might be.

Drawing on one single line by Goneril ("When he returns from hunting / I will not speak with him" [1.3.8–9, TLN 514]), Kurosawa's *Ran* presents a lavish, extended opening scene of boar hunting. This is one of the few performances of *Lear* to open with a scene in nature. It has become a critical commonplace to read Lear's journey as that of an unaccommodated animal: the wild boar is a metaphor for Hidetora's degeneration from the hunter to the hunted. However, the film's Buddhist framework hints at Hidetora's reincarnation in the form of a boar after death. The line between humanity and the natural world is more porous and permeable in Shinto.

One of the key lines in the Folio text of Shakespeare's *King Lear* is the aging monarch's rhetorical question "Who is it that can tell me who I am?," to which the Fool answers, "Lear's shadow" (1.4.229–30, TLN 744). In the Quarto text, Lear proceeds to answer his own questions. Scofield's Lear in Brook's film does suffer from an identity crisis (who is Lear if he is no longer king?) that is typical of most Lears, but he is at the same time firmly planted in his solitude and tragic immobility. In contrast to films by Trevor Nunn and Michael Elliott, this scene in Brook's film does not treat the division of the kingdom ceremonially. What these performances do have in common, though, is that they do not look for closure in the tragedy.

While the heath is devoid of human-driven meaning-making processes in Shakespeare, it is given period- and location-specific meanings in Richard Eyre's 2018 film with visual references to refugee camps and Europe's refugee crisis, which peaked in 2015. Driven by wars and environmental disasters, over one million asylum seekers arrived via



Lear (Anthony Hopkins) and the Fool (Karl Johnson) sharing a coat in the storm in Richard Eyre's 2018 film.

the Mediterranean Sea into Europe from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere. Anthony Hopkins's disenfranchised Lear wanders among makeshift tents in a "Calais-like refugee camp" in the rain. His words "poor naked wretches" (3.4.28, TLN 1809) suggest self-recognition (he is now a refugee) and self-pity (he is an unaccommodated man). It is worth noting that the Fool and Lear share one coat in the rain, suggesting that the two characters are merging. This is a transitional point, as the Fool disappears from the narrative here. Lear wears the Fool's hat and literally and metaphorically inhabits the Fool's position from this point on. Peter Smith regards this sequence as "an explicit attack on the complacency of the English establishment" (3–4).

Unlike Brook's and Kurosawa's films, which pit humans against nature in this scene (the storm as an act of God), Eyre's version turns the iconic scene on the heath into a thesis on social justice. Under Lear's rule, the asylum seekers in the refugee camp make social inequality visible and palpable, much like the peasants in the opening sequence of Grigori Kozintsev's 1971 Russian-language film *Korol Lir*. Peasants, who will bear the brunt of political decisions, gather quietly outside the castle where Lear announces his plan, which treats the division of the kingdom as a whim without regard to the welfare of the people.

Whether the heath is the site of environmental or humanitarian disaster, Lear's interaction with the storm is the key to this scene. In

the play, Lear appears to curse the elements, but in performances Lear could be commanding:

Blow winds and crack your cheeks. Rage, blow
You cataracts, and hurricanoes spout,
Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks.
You sulfurous and thought-executing fires,
Vaunt-couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
Singe my white head, and thou all-shaking thunder,
Strike flat the thick rotundity o'th'world,
Crack nature's molds; all germens spill at once
That makes ingrateful man.
(3.2.1–9, TLN 1656–64)

The sequence of wind, rain, lightning, and thunder points to a brewing storm. Most performances have Lear call on wind gods and water spouts—beings who were banished to the edge of the early modern world. Some Lears rage on in a competition with the thunder, while others are weakened by the storm and express their frustration. Donald Sinden whispered the lines as a quiet invocation in the 1976 Royal Shakespeare Company production directed by Trevor Nunn. The emptiness of the heath parallels Lear's reduction to nothing. The raging storm echoes the internal storm in Lear's mind. While most stage productions depict the storm scene metonymically, torrential rain dominated the stage in Iceland-based Australian director Benedict Andrews's production. Actors were drenched by nine tons of water for over half an hour (Hamilton 188). As actors and their characters endured the discomfort, their suffering was conveyed to their live audiences.

Films, however, have the advantage of the post-production phase and a variety of effects to portray foul weather. Unlike stage actors, film actors on set do not have to be exposed to the elements in real time. In Eyre's *King Lear*, Hopkins attempts to command the weather as he hobbles on with the Fool as his crutch. A frustrated aside about a storm that is already there is quite different from calling for a storm to take place. In *Uruwang*, King Uru states explicitly that "Spirits in heaven heard my petition!" as the rain starts to fall. He orders the womb-like land (which has produced "ungrateful men") to "pray mercy to the fearsome spirits."

Nowhere is the struggle to lay ethical claims upon the dramatic situation more evident than in Taiwanese actor Wu Hsing-kuo's 2001 Buddhist interpretation in his solo Beijing opera *Li'er zaici* (*Lear is Here*). Within the realm of global Shakespeare, from Jean-Luc Godard's metacinematic film *King Lear* to Wu Hsing-kuo's Buddhist-inflected production, discourses of the making and unmaking of the self that echo religious formulations have played a key role in remixing Shakespeare's play as contemporary performance. How has the theatricalization of religion been used in cross-cultural readings of Shakespeare that are flirting with postmodernism?

Wu's *Lear* is an example of the autobiographical approach to self-knowledge and the use of Shakespearean text as a source of spiritual wisdom. Written, composed, directed, and performed by Wu himself at Ariane Mnouchkine's workshop at Odeon Theatre in Paris and later for his own Contemporary Legend Theatre in Taipei, the production inserts Wu's own life story into *Lear*'s narrative. Playing ten characters from Shakespeare's tragedy, Wu extrapolates the themes of domestic conflict, construction of selves and others, and notions of duty to family and duty to the state.

While Peter Brook's 1962 RSC production and subsequent film of *King Lear* engage with the theme of ecocriticism through an apocalyptic *mise-en-scène*, Wu's *Li'er zaici* offers an autobiographical, Brechtian approach to the tension between humanism and post-humanism—a theatrical deconstruction of the human condition. Following German playwright Bertolt Brecht's (1898–1956) call for actors to address the audience directly (a style known as epic theater), Wu breaks the fourth wall to think through, together with his audiences, *Lear*'s plight. In stark contrast with the Russian director Konstantin Stanislavsky's now-popular approach to present naturalistic stage action as “real,” Brecht takes inspiration from traditional, stylized Chinese theaters to train his actors to maintain a psychological distance between themselves and the characters they portrayed. In the storm scene, Wu, as both *Lear* and later as himself, an actor, presents nature as part of theatrical ecocriticism, an exploration of the relationship between nature and culture, and between humans and their habitat. *Lear* is frequently interpreted as a nihilistic tragedy, but Wu, coming from a

non-Western tradition, brings the human performer into the otherwise apocalyptic landscape to bear not only on the play's ecocritical discourse but also on the question of redemption.

Framed by anthropocentrism, *King Lear* is a tragedy about the relationship between human habitats and a nature that does not accommodate humans. Engaging with the *Lear* narrative in a comparative context allows students to put all of these questions in perspective. Lear attempts to command nature when he curses Regan and Goneril. The storm is both a natural climatic event and a manifestation of Lear's internal turmoil. The staging of such an apocalyptic spectacle gives Wu's personal narrative an ecocritical purpose that, in Steve Mentz's words, juxtaposes "the desire of the self to maintain its identity against the natural world's stubborn exteriority" (141). The adaptation demonstrates that all systems of order—natural or human-made—are inherently unstable.

THE KING'S TWO BODIES

Lear's dual identities as father and monarch exemplify the theory of the king's two bodies, a framework that sheds light on the connections between an actor's self-identity and the roles they embody on stage. The duality can be seen on several levels. The medieval political theology of the king's two bodies is a theme that has been highlighted by Shakespeare's *Richard II*, *King Lear*, and other plays (see Introduction, p. 29). Ernst Kantorowicz argues that the theory posits a distinction between the "body natural" (a monarch's corporeal being) and a transcendental "body politic" (7).¹ In this context, Lear's natural body shares biological attributes with other human beings. Lear would experience hunger, suffer under the elements, and die, as do all humans. Lear's transcendental body symbolizes his divine-ordained right to rule. The succession of monarchs is captured in the formulation "The King is dead. Long live the King." Within the *fabula* of *King Lear*, this idea of the king's two bodies also points to Lear's conflicting roles as a father and a monarch.

1 See Bernhard Jussen's assessment of the significance of Kantorowicz's work (102–17).

A Buddhist interpretive framework works well with the self-problematizing nature of *King Lear*. Lear's questioning of his identity shares similarities with Buddhist meditative practices. As James Howe suggests in *A Buddhist's Shakespeare*, there is rich material on meditation in the Shakespearean canon that has not been explicitly defined as Christian (178). Lear's quest for his self-identity as he ages is interpreted by Wu as a Buddhist pursuit of enlightenment. Wu's Lear engages in a dialogue with himself as he holds up his own opera beard, which approximates the *memento mori* practices of using an object as a reminder of death. Wu uses the narrative of *Lear* to create a redemptive arc for himself as an actor.

Several contemporary performances draw on quasi-religious discourses of the making and unmaking of the self. Kurosawa's *Ran* blends secular ethical messages with ideas of Buddhist enlightenment. Other examples include Godard's *King Lear* and Wu's production. In Taiwanese playwright Stan Lai's three-man production in Hong Kong in 2000, *Lear and the Thirty-seven-fold Practice of a Bodhisattva*, a pre-recorded Jigme Khyentse Rinpoche recites a fourteenth-century Tibetan Buddhist scripture.

One of the most compelling scenes in Wu's *King Lear* involves a meta-theatrical inquiry of the self. The mad Lear stands in the center of the stage after the storm scene on the heath (3.2). He proceeds to take off his *jingju* Beijing opera headdress and armor costume in full view of a packed audience. The onstage costume change breaks the fourth wall and *jingju* conventions of never taking off costumes onstage, revealing an actor who is dressed as if he were backstage. Wu interrogates himself and the eyeless headdress in a somber moment while touching his own eyes. He removes and methodically joins the stage beard to the hairpiece on the headdress, making it a faceless puppet. Wu's work with this prop makes clear that the empty eyes raise questions about his own identity and that of the character whose costume he no longer inhabits. Raising it above him and pondering it intently, he asks "Who am I?" before shifting his gaze to the audience and asking the same question, slightly revised, in the third person: "Doth any here know him?" Then he answers his own question: "He is not Lear." The prop thus functions as an emblem both of the emptiness of stage representation and of the actor's emptied self when he is not inhabited by the character. The prop

also represents the character King Lear, who now—like a puppet—has no life without an actor performing him.

The actor is self-conscious of the ways in which his own eyes become Lear's eyes. These two pairs of eyes represent the necessary split many performers experience on stage, a process of making null the performer's self-identity so that he or she becomes the character being performed. This enriches our understanding of acting in intercultural contexts.

In the same way that Lear loses his kingly identity, the actor sheds his costumes. He reflects on his and Lear's discombobulating experiences. The process bears significance here as a key trope in Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical theory. In what he calls the mirror stage, the subject comes to own their self-image by creating an ideal ego. Seeing oneself in a mirror is one of the first steps towards establishing one's subjectivity before mastering language and entering the society. Lacan maintains that the idealized ego—distinct from the material body—remains a coherent and stable image that the subject aspires towards. At later stages, as Lacan explains, the idealized image of oneself—one's role models—is filled in by others whom one emulates. Even then, the mirror image—whether of oneself or a stand-in—has a fundamentally anarchistic relationship to oneself (Lacan, "Mirror" 75–81). This metatheatrical scene highlights the narcissism in the character of Lear. The actor looks into the eyeless prop and sees himself looking back. Lear digs into his soul only to find his own ego. Lear's rhetorical question in the third person, "Doth any here know me?," thus reflects unconscious internal conflicts that eventually lead to bodily afflictions.

Dialogues between the actor and his prop are at the core of Wu's transformation from "Lear" to "the actor," as the program lists this character. Wu's dual performance as Lear and as the actor playing Lear resonates with several metatheatrical moments in other Shakespearean plays, including Macbeth's evocation of the "poor player" (5.5.19–28) who struts and frets and is heard no more and Hamlet's comparison of the fates of Yorick and Alexander the Great (5.1.193–200). The face without eyes is, like Lear's shadow, a figure of death. When the head-dress with beard is held aloft and Wu gazes at it, the hollow face, like Yorick's skull, symbolizes self-knowledge through a meditation on death and embodiment.

It comes as no surprise that *King Lear* has been used to perform social reparation. Passages from the tragedy have been used to play a healing role in narratives about aging and dying with dignity. Iconic scenes have also been used to comment on situations outside the play's world and its fictional logic. Kristian Levring's film *The King Is Alive* (2000), shot in the avant-garde style of Dogme 95,¹ features performances of *King Lear* as a desperate diversion by a group of tourists stranded in the Namibian desert. Some works take a more literal approach to the question of reparation. In Godard's *King Lear*, Peter Sellers's William Shakespeare Jr. the Fifth meets a Lear figure (Burgess Meredith) and Cordelia (Molly Ringwald) as he attempts to restore his ancestor's play after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

Other adaptations deploy Shakespeare's speeches as therapy for the characters and audiences. In Rituparno Ghosh's 2007 film *The Last Lear*, which is inspired by Utpal Dutt's play *Aajker Shahjahan*, an eccentric, aging Shakespearean stage actor in Kolkata, Harish "Harry" Mishra (Amitabh Bachchan), re-enacts scenes of plays he used to perform. In the final scene, Shabnam (Preity Zinta) comes to visit Harry and wakes him from a coma by reading lines from the reconciliation scene of *King Lear* (4.6). An actress herself and an admirer of Harry, Shabnam slips into the role of Cordelia, while Harry dies reciting the lines he knows by heart: "You are a spirit, I know.... Where have I been? ... I know not what to say.... I am a very foolish, fond old man" (4.6.50–61, TLN 2799–2814). It is a scene of reconciliation and self-recognition because in his career, Harry was ill-suited for the transition from stage to screen.

Like *The Last Lear*, John Kani's play *Kunene and the King*, directed by Janice Honeyman, coproduced by the RSC and Fugard Theatre, and performed by Kani and Anthony Sher at Stratford-upon-Avon and Cape Town in 2019, depicts how characters come to terms with aging, cultural biases, and their mortality through situations that parallel those in *Lear* and their re-enactment of scenes from the play. *Kunene and the King* features Lunga, a South African black male nurse, and

1 Initiated by Danish director Lars von Trier in Paris in 1995, the style of Dogme 95 is a "vow of chastity" to the medium of film. Trier insists that shooting must be performed by handheld cameras on location, with only diegetic sound and without special lighting or props.

Jack, an ill-tempered white actor coping with terminal liver cancer in South Africa. Throughout the play, they recite passages from *King Lear* to expose each other's cultural biases and eventually reconcile their differences.

The theme of domestic tragedy in *Lear* has inspired appropriations that examine the wounds of diasporic communities and tensions between different generations. Sangeeta Datta's 2009 film *Life Goes On* depicts the conflicts in an immigrant family of Hindus who move from Bengal to London. The film, set in modern-day London, draws on Bollywood conventions of elaborate singing and dancing sequences to create a cultural location that is neither here nor there. The theme of generational gap in Shakespeare's *King Lear* is reimaged here as cultural difference in a family where the father is attached to his Bengali traditions, but his three daughters, being second-generation British Indians, do not prioritize their supposed Bengali roots. After his wife passes away, the father attempts to bring his family closer emotionally. At this juncture, the youngest daughter happens to be cast as Cordelia in a college production, and, as the plot unfolds, key lines from *King Lear* begin to play a role in the divided family's redemptive arc of mutual forgiveness.

Similarly, *My Perfect Mind*, directed by Kathryn Hunter at the Young Vic, London, in 2014, addresses one of its two actors' traumatic experiences. Hunter co-wrote the play with her two actors, Paul Hunter and Edward Petherbridge. The two-man show by the theater company Told by An Idiot fictionalizes the story of Petherbridge, who has suffered a stroke two days into rehearsing *King Lear*. Petherbridge played himself in this show. Playing against numerous characters played by Hunter (a German psychiatrist, a Romanian professor, and the actor Laurence Olivier), Petherbridge recounted and celebrated the resilience of the human spirit through gleeful madness and in a series of comic moments. Through the text of *Lear*, Petherbridge embraced his frailty in a performance of his life story.

In a similar but more somber vein, in the independent film *Lear's Shadow*, two friends use *Lear* to prove their points as they argue against each other. Directed by Brian Elderling, this 2019 film is based on a 2017 play at Lineage Performing Arts Center in Pasadena. Stephen (David Blue) and Jack (Fred Cross) act out scenes of *Lear* while attempting to rebuild their friendship and deal with grief, with Stephen playing all three daughters to Jack's Lear (Elderling).

One of the most gruesome scenes in *King Lear* is Act 3, Scene 7. Gloucester is blinded after he has been deceived by Lear's two elder daughters and betrayed by his own bastard son, Edmund. During the scene with strong metatheatrical elements, a servant cries out, "My lord, you have one eye left / To see some mischief on him" (3.7.78–79, TLN 2157), inadvertently prompting Regan and Cornwall to gouge out Gloucester's other eye. After his blinding, Gloucester says "I stumbled when I saw" (4.1.19, TLN 2200), referring to his failure to see the intentions of others when he still had eyesight. Now, even though he has no eyes, he sees the world more clearly.

On the modern stage, Gloucester is typically tied to a chair and tilted back for the blinding, preventing audiences from a full-frontal view of the process. The limits of theatrical realism enhance the horror by way of suggestion. The sounds of gouging out eyeballs and dripping blood complete the scene. On stage, while spectators still recoil at the stage action, the actor playing Gloucester always steps forward during the curtain call, eyes intact, when the play is over. On screen, the fictional frame contains the violent act but offers no immediate relief from the logic of *Lear*'s universe.

According to Erika Lin, in early modern performances "figurative meanings of sight take a backseat to the gory physicality of eyeballs dripping with blood and spitted on sharp pokers" (3). As playgoers surrounded the stage on three, and sometimes four, sides, it was challenging to create the illusion of the blinding of Gloucester even with the character tilted back. Therefore, the props of eyeballs were more important than the actors' subterfuge. Actors pretended to use pointed skewers to remove Gloucester's eyes from the eye sockets (2). Just as the loss of physical vision enhances Gloucester's perception and access to truth, audiences see the blinding all the more clearly in their imaginations when they cannot view the entire course of the violent action.

In modern performances, cloths are often used to cover Gloucester's eyes, transforming him into a blind prophet figure. In Richard Eyre's 2018 film, Jim Broadbent's Gloucester ends up having his emptied-out eye sockets covered by a piece of blood-stained white cloth. Broadbent had to sit through two hours of make-up to achieve the illusion. During an interview, he brought up the cinematic parallel to the idea of a blind



Carl Martin's "Home Shakespeare Festival," a kit for each play.

prophet who "sees" the world in clarity: "There is a prosthetic piece over my eyes, so I can actually open my eyes and look out" despite the bandage (Aftab).

Eyeballs are as iconic to *King Lear* as the skull is to *Hamlet* (the Danish prince is well known for his holding up Yorick's skull in the graveyard scene) and the dagger is to *Macbeth*, who sees a dagger floating in the air just when he is about to murder King Duncan. Eyeballs, in all their gruesome, bloody details, are featured as the central props in various kits, such as in the "Shakespeare in a Box: *King Lear* Party Game Play Theatre" set for amateur performers. It is sold in the shops of many theater companies and heritage sites, including the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford-upon-Avon and Globe Theatre in London. The kit promises that "All the living room's a stage! And your friends and family merely players, with their exits and entrances—and 45 minutes of utter enjoyment."

The eye is the dominant image in the poster for the Staten Island Shakespearean Theatre's production of *King Lear* in 2017, directed by



A poster for the Staten Island Shakespearean Theatre's *King Lear*, directed by Cara S. Liander in 2017.

Cara S. Liander. The production draws on the power of witness for victimhood. At the center of the poster is an eye fused with a Canon lens, hinting that it is an electronic implant and a prosthetic device. The eye belongs to a cyborg, consisting of human flesh and technology.

Staging such a scene as part of a live performance has proven to be much more impactful than filming it. While lacking in cinematic special effects, theater offers more shock value in its embodied performance of torture because audiences share the same space synchronously with the characters. Despite a warning, several audience members had to leave the auditorium during Rupert Goold's sold-out production of *King Lear* at the Everyman Theatre in Liverpool in 2008. Charlotte Randle's Regan uses her mouth to suck out the eyes of Gloucester (John Shrapnel) and spits them out.

Indeed, not seeing is believing. Imagining the gory scene in one's mind's eye—accentuated by sound effects—can make the performance even more shocking. Richard Eyre's film does not show us the fingers that gouge out Gloucester's eyeballs. Instead, with a medium closeup shot, the camera is trained on Regan's facial expressions as Cornwall holds and guides her hand to complete the revenge act. As Regan closes her eyes and moans in ecstasy, she seems to be aroused by torturing Gloucester. Instead of turning the blinding act into a spectacle, the film turns its eye on Regan and her husband.

CONCLUSION

Exploring the performance history of *King Lear* in a global context gives us insights into aspects of the play that have been muted by the Anglophone tradition and answers questions about the bifurcated histories of reception outlined above. The complex and intertwined themes in *Lear* offer room for both intellectual and emotional responses to the play. The global reception history of *Lear* reveals the limit of the popularized universalist notion of tragedy. The global history also demonstrates the play's capacity to speak to cultures far removed politically and historically from early modern England. Performances of *Lear* have made certain themes of contemporary cultural life more legible, such as the generational gap, filial piety, and loyalty and duty.

Are Lear's daughters implicated as a source of the tragedy that is often seen as a masculine narrative of aging? Does Cordelia's hanging enhance the tragic pathos surrounding her journey or is its main effect to highlight senseless male suffering? These questions are best answered in performative terms. Productions and films thrive in the space of textual ambiguity. Each performance offers one interpretation of these questions among many. As a play that begins with an aging monarch staging a fantastical, paradoxical last act as king, *Lear* lures us towards a final act of interpretation to nail down the nature of his sufferings. Yet on the page the play refuses to provide any sense of closure. Part of the play's history of performance is informed by a particular ethical burden to explain Lear's problems away or to legitimize the characters' suffering and the tragic pathos of the play. Other parts of its reception history point to the power of *Lear* to initiate conversations about aging, gender, and power.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Both actors and textual scholars have described *King Lear* as Shakespeare's Everest. In this current attempt to scale its heights, I have been assisted at every step by colleagues and friends, without whom I would have perished on the lower slopes. In working with *Lear*'s most challenging textual history, Michael Warren and Eric Rasmussen have been unfailing and generous guides; they also provided valuable feedback on my Introduction and notes. Richard Knowles graciously shared a proof of his monumental Variorum edition. I am especially grateful to my collaborator in this edition, Alexa Alice Joubin, for her stimulating and scholarly discussion of *King Lear* in performance and her valuable contributions to the Chronology and Bibliography; she brings a deep understanding of the play, especially as it is being performed before a global audience. Special thanks are also due to Roberta Livingstone, always my first and most stringent editor, and a constant source of encouragement from the very beginning.

I have been assisted by a team of colleagues and friends, in providing both moral support and detailed, careful reading of the edition in its various stages: Judith Weil, Herbert Weil, Gary Kuchar, and the late David Bevington. Two scholars have given me permission to use their fine texts in the supplementary materials appended to the edition: Lynne Bradley for her edition of Tate's *King Lear*, and Andrew Griffin for his invaluable edition of *King Lear* for the Queen's Men Editions. Amongst a long and splendid parade of research assistants for the Internet Shakespeare Editions over two decades, a number of names stand out for their assistance with *King Lear*. Sarah Milligan co-edited some of the supplementary materials and contributed significant background research on critical materials. Joey Takeda, Quinn MacDonald, Michelle Spelay, Hannah King, Beth Norris, Pat Atkins, and Telka Duxbury contributed specifically to checking the accuracy of the online texts of *King Lear*. Michael Joyce and Maxwell Terpstra, brilliant young programmers, helped shape my awareness of the opportunities for enhancing the digital interface of editions of Shakespeare and contributed many years of service in developing the original version of the Internet Shakespeare Editions. I would also like to thank the Broadview editorial team for its meticulous and professional preparation of the edition.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE AND *KING LEAR*:
A BRIEF CHRONOLOGY

- c. 1136 Likely date of composition of Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae*, which contains the earliest known version of the story of King Lear.
- 1509–47 Reign of Henry VIII.
- 1534 Polydore Vergil's *Historia Anglica* casts doubt on the veracity of Geoffrey of Monmouth's account; Act of Supremacy, declaring Henry VIII Head of the Church of England.
- 1547–53 Reign of Edward VI.
- 1553–58 Reign of Mary I; England returns to Catholicism.
- 1555 The first version of the *Mirror for Magistrates* published; Shakespeare used the edition of 1575.
- 1558–1603 Reign of Elizabeth I.
- 1558 John Knox, *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstruous Regiment of Women*.
- 1562 Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville's *Gorboduc* performed before Queen Elizabeth; it was published in 1565.
- 1563 Adoption of the Thirty-Nine Articles, establishing Anglicanism as a middle path between Roman Catholicism and more fundamentalist Protestantism.
- 1564 William Shakespeare baptized 26 April; birthdate unknown, but traditionally celebrated on St. George's Day, 23 April.
- 1569 Suppression of Northern Rebellion of Catholic earls.
- 1576 James Burbage builds The Theatre.
- 1577 Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* includes the story of Lear and his daughters; it was reprinted in 1587.
- 1578 John Lyly, *Euphues*.
- 1579 Edmund Spenser, *The Shepheardes Calendar*; Sir Philip Sidney's *Defense of Poetry*.
- 1582 Marriage to Anne Hathaway, November.
- 1583 Birth of Susanna, 26 May.

- 1583–84 Plots against Elizabeth on behalf of Mary Queen of Scots.
- 1584 John Lyly, *Galatea*.
- 1585 Births of Hamnet and Judith, February. Earl of Leicester sent to aid the Dutch against the Spanish.
- 1587 Execution of Mary Queen of Scots, 8 February.
- 1588 At some point, Shakespeare moves to London; family remains in Stratford.
War with Spain; the Spanish Armada fleet destroyed in July.
- 1588–94 Shakespeare writes his early comedies and histories and his early tragedy *Titus Andronicus*.
- 1590 Sir Philip Sidney, *Arcadia*; Edmund Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, Books 1–3; Richard Jones, *Book of Honor and Arms*.
- 1592 Shakespeare attacked in print by Robert Greene in *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit*.
- 1593 *Venus and Adonis*.
- 1593–1603 The *Sonnets*. Mostly composed late 1580s–early 1600s; published 1609.
- 1594 Shakespeare joins the Lord Chamberlain's Men; *The Rape of Lucrece*.
Comedy of Errors performed at Gray's Inn, 28 December.
The anonymous play *The Chronicle History of King Leir* entered in the Stationers' Register on 14 May.
Only known performances of *The Chronicle History of King Leir* at the Rose, 6 and 8 April.
- 1594–95 *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Richard II*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *King John*.
- 1596–98 *Henry IV Parts 1 and 2*, *The Merchant of Venice*.
- 1597 Earl of Essex sent to Ireland to put down a rebellion led by the Earl of Tyrone.
George Chapman, *An Humorous Day's Mirth*.
- 1598 Ben Jonson, *Every Man in His Humour*.
- 1598–99 *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.
- 1599 Shakespeare's company moves to the Globe; *As You Like It*, *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*.

- The Passionate Pilgrim*, attributed to Shakespeare, published.
Robert Armin replaces Will Kempe as the company clown.
Prohibition and public burning of satires.
- 1600–02 *Twelfth Night*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Hamlet*, *All's Well That Ends Well*.
- 1601 Shakespeare's father dies.
Essex's abortive rebellion and subsequent execution;
Thomas Dekker, *Satiromastix*; Ben Jonson, *Poetaster*; the
"Poet's War," a literary feud among Dekker, Jonson, and
John Marston.
- 1602 First recorded performance of *Twelfth Night*, Middle
Temple Hall, 2 February.
- 1603 Death of Elizabeth I; coronation of James I, 24 March.
Shakespeare's company the Lord Chamberlain's Men is
renamed the King's Men.
Samuel Harsnett's *Declaration of Egregious Popish
Impostures* published.
John Florio's translation of Montaigne's *Essais*
published.
- 1603–04 *Measure for Measure*, *Othello*.
- 1604 James's confrontation of the Puritans at the Hampton
Court Conference.
Peace with Spain.
- 1605 The Gunpowder Plot foiled, 5 November.
In the months of September and October there were
eclipses of the sun and moon within a few weeks of each
other, an occurrence which may lie behind Gloucester's
reference to eclipses of the sun and moon in *King Lear*.
The Chronicle History of King Leir entered again in the
Stationers' Register on 8 May, published later that year.
- 1605–06 *King Lear*.
- 1606–07 *Macbeth*, *Timon of Athens*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Pericles*.
- 1606 *King Lear* acted at court on 16 December, the first
recorded performance.
- 1608 Publication of the Quarto version (Q1) of *King Lear*.
Coriolanus; Thomas Dekker's *The Bellman of London*.

- 1608–10 Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *Philaster*.
- 1609–11 *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, *The Tempest*.
- 1613–14 Shakespeare in retirement, living in Stratford.
Henry VIII, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*; the Globe burns down, soon rebuilt “in far fairer manner than before.”
 In collaboration with John Fletcher, *Henry VIII*, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, and the lost play *Cardenio*.
- 1616 Death of Shakespeare, 23 April; buried 25 April.
- 1619 Publication of Q2.
- 1623 Publication of the First Folio (F).
- 1681 Nahum Tate publishes a version of the play in which the good characters survive and Cordelia marries Edgar.
 This version holds the stage for 150 years.
- 1725 Alexander Pope's edition of Shakespeare offers the first conflated text of the play.
- 1838 William Charles Macready restores Shakespeare's text to the stage.
- 1859 Ira Aldridge plays *King Lear* in St. Petersburg, Russia.
- 1904 A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*.
- 1909 *King Lear*, directed by William V. Ranous (Vitograph).
- 1964 Jan Kott's “*King Lear or Endgame*” in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*.
- 1969 Stanley Cavell, “The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*.”
- 1971 Grigori Kozintsev's film *Korol Lir*; Peter Brook's film *King Lear*; Edward Bond's *Lear*; Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather*.
- 1976 Trevor Nunn directs *King Lear*, Royal Shakespeare Company.
- 1983 Gary Taylor and Michael Warren, *The Division of the Kingdoms: Shakespeare's Two Versions of “King Lear.”*
 Laurence Olivier plays Lear in Michael Elliott's film.
- 1985 Akira Kurosawa's Samurai film *Ran* adapts the Lear story.
 Kathleen McCluskie, “The Patriarchal Bard.”
- 1986 The Oxford University Press edition of the *Complete Works* prints both Q and F.
 Coppélia Kahn, “The Absent Mother in *King Lear*.”

- 1987 Jean-Luc Godard's film *King Lear*.
- 1997 Arden III edition of *King Lear*, a conflation edited by R.A. Foakes.
Ong Keng Sen directs *Lear* (TheatreWorks, Singapore) at the Festival of Perth, Australia.
- 1999 *Kathakali King Lear*, directed by Annette Leday at the London Globe; Yukio Ninagawa directs *King Lear*, Royal Shakespeare Company, starring Nigel Hawthorne.
- 2000 *The King Is Alive*, directed Kristian Levring (Newmarket Capital Group, Denmark).
- 2001 Wu Hsing-kuo directs and performs *Lear Is Here* (Contemporary Legend Theatre, Taiwan), Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, New York.
- 2004 Kim Myung-gon's *King Uru* stages in Seoul, South Korea.
- 2006 *Slings and Arrows*, Canadian television series.
- 2009 Sangeeta Datta's film *Life Goes On*.
- 2018 Richard Eyre's film *King Lear* (BBC and Amazon).
- 2019 Glenda Jackson plays Lear in Sam Gold's Broadway production.

—Michael Best and Alexa Alice Joubin

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—Michael Best and Alexa Alice Joubin

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: *King Lear* / William Shakespeare ; edited by Michael R. Best with Alexa Alice Joubin.
Names: Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616, author. | Best, Michael R., editor. | Joubin, Alexa Alice, 1973- editor.
Description: Includes bibliographical references.
Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20230140319 | Canadiana (ebook) 20230140351 | ISBN 9781554815142 (softcover) | ISBN 9781460407899 (EPUB) | ISBN 9781770488427 (PDF)
Classification: LCC PR2819.A2 B47 2023 | DDC 822.3/3—dc23

Broadview Press handles its own distribution in North America:

PO Box 1243, Peterborough, Ontario K9J 7H5, Canada
555 Riverwalk Parkway, Tonawanda, NY 14150, USA
Tel: (705) 743-8990; Fax: (705) 743-8353
email: customerservice@broadviewpress.com

For all territories outside of North America, distribution is handled by Eurospan Group.

Canada

Broadview Press acknowledges the financial support of the Government of Canada for our publishing activities.

Copy-edited by Colleen Humbert
Book design by Michel Vrana
Typeset in MVB Verdigris Pro

PRINTED IN CANADA