

“As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods”:
The Ethical Crisis in Staging Nihilism in *King Lear*.

By Dr. Matthew Davies

In 1962, the avant-garde British theatre maker Peter Brook, preparing to direct Paul Scofield as King Lear for the Royal Shakespeare Company, described the role as “a mountain whose summit has never been reached, the way up strewn with shattered bodies of earlier visitors - Olivier here, Laughton there: it’s frightening.” As someone who has played the central role twice, the first time when I was more or less half the character’s age, I am sorely aware of Lear’s reputation for being unplayable. He is too complex, so grand in scale as to be almost absurd, better suited to the reader’s imagination, Charles Lamb sniffed, than to the histrionics of an actor who, “might more easily propose to personate the Satan of Milton upon a stage.” In our geriatric era, the challenge of performing Lear is as much a matter of age as of style. As Oliver Ford Davies, a recent “older” Lear, summarizes, “the actor is allowed size or subtlety, he can succeed in either the first or the second half, but not in both.” Despite *Lear*’s almost universal admiration among literary critics and readers as “this colossus that stands as the grandest effort of [Shakespeare’s] imagination,” to use the recent Arden editor’s description, *King Lear*’s fraught and uneven production history betrays a deep anxiety over its theatrical effects, its performativity, its meaning.

In this paper, I shall argue that for much of its stage history, *King Lear*’s performance issues were not only a matter of theatrical pragmatics, but also of ethics. The play’s undulating flow chart of success and failure, its periods of

popularity and disregard, its many inspirations and adaptations, traces each era's efforts to align Shakespeare's heterodox play to its own conceptions of tragedy and how far *King Lear* challenges the genre's artistic and ethical rationale. In the following pages, then, I shall first present a brief case for *King Lear*'s inherent nihilism, which, I shall argue, consistently undermines the play's more superficial redemptive qualities. Rather than litigate my claims by considering the complex operations of both judicial and natural law throughout the text, which others at this conference are more qualified to do than I am, I shall consider as evidence *King Lear*'s extraordinarily fraught stage history across four more or less coherent theatrical time zones: Jacobean, Restoration, Victorian, and Postmodern (or Post-War). I shall conclude with a few thoughts on where the play fits into our contemporary theatrical consciousness and addresses current concerns.

1.

Let me first, then, make the case for considering *King Lear* Shakespeare's hopeless masterpiece. *King Lear* was written sometime around 1605-06, and according to the frontispiece of the 1608 quarto, performed before King James enjoyed at "Whitehall upon S. Stephens Night in Christmas Holidays," 1606. St. Stephen's falls on December 26th, or Boxing Day as we Brits now call it, a traditional time of gift giving among extended families, which may strike some as pointedly ironic considering the drama's opening scene. In his recent work, *The Year of Lear: Shakespeare in 1606*, James Shapiro characterizes the play as marking the break in a three-year creative drought following the demise of Queen Elizabeth; a period of artistic crisis in which the playwright, struggling to find his Jacobean voice, wrote

only two plays: the compelling but generically problematic comedy, *Measure for Measure* and the less compelling Greco-satiric tragedy *Timon of Athens*, which even Shakespeare and his co-author Thomas Middleton seem to have abandoned. While Shapiro's thesis depends on dating *Othello* as a late Elizabethan work (a position by no means universally held among scholars), he makes a compelling case for considering *Lear*, alongside *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, as "late" tragedies driven by the immediate concerns and "cultural fault lines" of a new age: of dynastic union and the seeds of imperialism; of religious schisms and of homegrown terrorism. Shakespeare, Shapiro demonstrates, was not only for all time, but also for his time; and the time of *King Lear* was one of uncertainty, fear, and darkness: grist to the dramatist's mill.

Tragedies, needless to say, are encoded to end badly; it's in their generic DNA. But *King Lear* plumbs a different level of tragic awfulness, a Dantean circle of hell more wretched than those endured by the tragic heroes in *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, or, indeed, *Othello*. While Antony succumbs to Gluttony and Othello to Lust (Dante's second and fourth circles), and Macbeth perhaps to Heresy and certainly to Violence (the sixth and seventh circles), both Lear the man and *King Lear* the play descend into, and struggle to climb out of, a slippery pit deeper even than those Dante envisioned: the place where nothing has meaning, a point of pointlessness, the circle of nihilism. By nihilism, I mean something other than despair, although despair is most assuredly a by-product. I refer rather to the rejection of prevailing religious beliefs, moral principles, or natural laws, a sense that life is, rather than has become, devoid of meaning. Strictly a nineteenth century

term, nihilism as a doctrine has no direct equivalence in early modern philosophy since its tenets would have been widely considered atheistic, amoral, treasonous.

Of course, theatrical tragedy, according to Aristotle, is anything but meaningless; its purpose is to arouse pity and fear in an action of high importance, “wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions.” Wrung through the theatrical wringer our second-hand experience of tragic action leaves us, so the theory goes, emotionally cleansed and restored. And Shakespeare’s final speakers remind us that watching his tragedies is indeed good for us, healthy, restorative. The murdered Duncan’s eldest, Malcolm, having acquired a taste for English crumpet, Catholic equivocation, and continental primogeniture, promises to make all things “even” with his thanes, to recall exiled friends, and to punish Macbeth’s “cruel ministers”; all “by the grace of grace / To be performed in measure, time, and place.” Octavius Caesar, his plans to parade the vanquished Antony and Cleopatra through the streets of Rome foiled, magnanimously embraces the less politically advantageous but decidedly more expeditious alternative of attending a double funeral: “Our army shall / In solemn show attend the funeral,” he says, before adding with unseemly haste: “And then to Rome.” However unpleasant modern audiences might find these bloodless bureaucrats, there seems little doubt that their concluding words are genuine expressions of reassurance; they restore law and order, reset our moral compasses after, to borrow P.G. Wodehouse’s appropriately Learean phrase, “a wild night on the moors.”

King Lear offers something different, a far bleaker and morally ambivalent ending, and one that seems designed to shock Shakespeare’s audience. Gerald of

Wales' largely fictitious twelfth century tale of a sixth century king was familiar enough among a Tudor-Stuart literary culture hungry for British histories offering examples to emulate or eschew. Holinshed's 1587 *Chronicles*, Sir Philip Sidney's 1590 prose romance *Arcadia*, and the anonymous drama *The True Chronicle History of King Leir and his three daughters*, published in 1605, are all tangible sources for Shakespeare. While they differ in focus and in details, these histories arrive at the same conclusion; and it is here that Shakespeare shockingly deviates. Sturdily plowing their providential furrows across a pagan landscape, the source narratives reunite a chastened Lear with his youngest daughter and the old man dies peacefully in his bed, secure in the knowledge that a wiser Cordelia shall rule in his stead. (That she would be overthrown a few years later by her nephews and commit suicide is "an incidence of trouble in high places," as one source scholar puts it, "but not necessarily trouble without remedy or containment.") The pagan tale traces an archetypal Christian journey to redemption through suffering.

Shakespeare certainly included this reunification, in perhaps the play's most moving scene, when, emerging from his delirium, Lear gets down on his knees to ask of the daughter he finally seems to recognize, "Pray now, forgive and forget. I am old and foolish." But Shakespeare's play doesn't stop there, where his audience would have expected it to; it still has five hundred lines to go. Anticipating the protracted double funerary endings of *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare effectively adds a sixth act that drives the wheel of fortune beyond its providential sticking point towards that place of pointlessness.

In a series of ethical bait-and-switches, Shakespeare's final events stage moments of redemption and resolution only to have them brutally overthrown or undermined. As Shakespeare scholar Stephen Greenblatt puts it: "The play's nightmarish events continually lurch ahead of intentions, and even efforts to say 'I have seen the worst' are frustrated." And this frustration is felt most keenly in those ambivalent figures in whom we invest our hopes and expectations. When the victorious Edgar -- if fratricide can ever be considered victorious -- relates how he revealed himself to his long-suffering father, we learn that Gloucester's heart, caught between "joy and grief... burst smilingly." So we might add accidental parricide to Edgar's charge sheet. His determination to advocate at length for Kent's heroics in disguise, which fatally delays Edmund's intention to "do good" by confessing the plot to assassinate Lear and Cordelia, then shifts the tragic towards the absurd, since he now becomes accessory to their deaths also. Four deaths in one afternoon does not obviously promote one's qualifications to the highest office.

Albany, the other figure of authority, hardly fares better. As the top-ranking aristocrat, this wifeless, childless, frankly witless Duke is both unprepared and unwilling to take the throne, which he twice attempts to palm off on others. He first offers to restore to a devastated Lear the "absolute power" the old king has been trying to slough off for the entire play and which has gone to his head in more ways than one, and then suggests Kent and Edgar divvy up the kingdom's rule, having apparently learnt nothing from the civil war he somehow found himself winning. In both cases, his words fall on deaf, or indeed dead, ears. But, most troublingly, the deafest ears of all belong to the gods. Albany's plea that "the gods defend" Cordelia

elicits only Lear's anguished cries of, "Howl, howl, howl, howl," as he enters bearing his dead daughter in his arms. It is difficult to overstate how shocking this moment must have been to Shakespeare's audience. He effects a coup de theatre as wrenching, say, as Alfred Hitchcock's decision to kill off Janet Leigh in the first reel of *Psycho* -- something that *never* happened to headliners in Hollywood -- but with far more frightening implications than a clogged shower drain. In the words of Samuel Johnson, "Shakespeare has suffered the virtue of Cordelia to perish in a just cause, contrary to the natural ideas of justice." As the flawed tragic hero, Lear must die, like Gloucester, of a broken heart; but Cordelia's death is pointless, arbitrary, beyond the control of the lawmakers, mortal or divine.

It is hardly surprising then that Albany's perfunctory attempts at restoring order lack either royal or moral authority. How can they be anything other than empty platitudes when events so cruelly mock them; when his assurance that "all friends [will] taste / The wages of their virtue, and all foes / The cup of their deservings," is immediately met by Lear's harshest condemnation of natural justice: "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life, / And thou no breathe at all?" There's something clearly apocalyptic in the play's final moments, with Kent asking, "Is this the promised end?" and Albany responding gloomily "The eldest have borne most. We that are young / Shall never see so much, nor live so long." He may as well be wearing a placard proclaiming, "The end of the world is nigh!" But Shakespeare's unorthodox finale is something other than apocalyptic; it is, according to drama critic Fintan O'Toole, even worse: "Instead of deserved damnation and merited salvation, there is merely the big fat O, the nothing that haunts the play, the 'O, o, o,

o' with which Lear expires." This is the nothingness that resides at the heart of Shakespeare's nihilistic tragedy.

2.

Turning to the play's production history, we begin to detect traces of resistance in the echo soundings around its reception, especially at its *inception*. We must therefore begin at the beginning, even if the early modern period is easily the most challenging for theatre scholars to navigate. Since records of those evanescent Elizabethan and Jacobean performances are scant and Shakespeare's extra-dramatic writings non-existent, efforts to speculate on authorial intention invariably lead us on a fool's errand. (And yet, here I go.) Hardly legible, *Lear's* early performance history is no exception. If we are to believe the title page of the 1608 quarto -- and there's no good reason we shouldn't -- then we know the play was performed at least once, in front of King James at Whitehall at the end of 1606. We know, too, that the King's Men's leading actor, Richard Burbage, aged 42, played the role and he was praised for it in eulogies following his death in 1619: Lear was one of the parts that "lived in him." Yet, as Stanley Wells notes, "there are far fewer [contemporary] allusions to *King Lear* than to say, *Hamlet* or *Othello*." And, aside from a potential subsequent staging in Yorkshire in 1610 that may well have been of the earlier *King Leir*, we have no records of further performances until its revival following the restoration of Charles II in 1664. None! It's perfectly possible that *King Lear* was performed once and set aside by the company.

The play's unique textual history, however, suggests that, whether due to its popularity or its contentious nature, Shakespeare considerably reworked the play, --

the only time in his career that he would do so -- perhaps for further performances, perhaps with an eye on publication: either way, the implication is that something wasn't working or wasn't acceptable. Those here familiar with *King Lear* may have been surprised by some of my observations concerning the finale. Does Lear really die on a protracted ecphosis, or "O"? And doesn't Gloucester's son Edgar more appropriately end the play? Well, in the Folio of 1623, he certainly does, speaking the last four of approximately 100 lines that are not in the Quarto, which has 300 lines that do not appear in the Folio. For the past 300 years, editors have selected what they consider to be the best bits of these two texts to create conflated editions of a play that was, in reality, never written by Shakespeare. These differences are so great, and so authoritative, that modern editors, most notably those of the Oxford and Norton editions, now treat them as separate plays, in Norton's case on adjacent pages with a conflated text to follow: three plays for the price of one.

Whatever conditions compelled *Lear's* many rewrites, the two examples mentioned above perhaps suggest ways in which pressure, possibly political pressure, was being exerted on the play's nihilism. (And I defend my passive voice here because we can't know by whom.) Let's take, first, Lear's dying words, which in the revised First Folio, allow him at least an illusory hope that Cordelia's lips are moving: "Look on her lips. / Look there, look there." O'Toole imagines that Shakespeare can't bear the "unyielding ferocity" of his original ending. Or perhaps Burbage, who has sometimes been blamed for the hammy "O"s, had a better sense of his audience's needs and revised his author: it happens. Either way, Lear's death is

rendered, if not less painful, at least as a blessed relief from the personal tortures he has endured on “the rack of this tough world.”

The Folio’s move to switch Albany for Edgar as the play’s, and therefore the kingdom’s preeminent speaker, is another theatrically more satisfying revision that, like Lear’s dying “look there,” endures to this day. But it is also a contentious move that risks undermining the play’s seeming political agenda, namely its tacit support of James’s desired Union of England and Scotland -- the failing centerpiece of his early administration -- through its converse staging of the disastrous consequences of dynastic *disunion*. As a King’s Man, Shakespeare was his royal patron’s *de facto* playwright, dramatizing James’ key concerns with equivocation and witchcraft (both treasonous), divine absolutism and, above all, the political confederation of Great Britain, a title James took for himself in 1604, although his Parliament refused to ratify it. (And thereby hangs a tale.)

Into his first British play, the 1608 *King Lear* quarto, Britain’s first playwright inserts two invented characters, Lear’s sons-in-law Albany (representing Scotland) and Cornwall (the Britons), employing the same ducal titles that James had just conferred on his own sons, his favored Henry, and his second born Charles. What’s in a name? Potentially a great deal. In making his choice, Shakespeare ensures that the political analogy lies at the very surface of his retelling of an ancient British tale. And yet, while Albany/Scotland/Charles should appropriately conclude the tragedy with words of reconciliation and hope, we might wonder how James felt witnessing not only the image of royal authority, stripped of its power, portrayed as a dog “obeyed in office,” but also of a divinely-anointed successor to whom the gods, if

they exist, are stone deaf. Given these pressures, we might read the Folio's transfer of authority to Edgar, although he represents the older Celtic peoples, as restoring a modicum of aristocratic stability. After all, as the sensitive intellectual hardened by survival in an alien landscape, Edgar bears more than a passing resemblance to King James. While we will never know what prompted the Folio King Lear's radical amendments, I suggest that textual alterations in Shakespeare's most radically revised play point to efforts, compelled or otherwise, to alleviate a political cynicism in the quarto that borders on polemic.

3.

Whether diminishing *King Lear's* nihilistic tone made it more playable, or indeed publishable, during the Jacobean or Carolinian periods, nothing could stop Shakespeare's words being silenced in 1642, when the Puritan lawmakers closed the theaters. Nor, twelve or so years later, would *King Lear* avoid the indignity endured by a number of Shakespeare's plays at the hands of the Restoration poet and playmaker William Davenant, that pug-nosed syphilitic who, apparently solving Edmund's queries, "Why bastard? Wherefore base?" by making a career by portraying himself as Shakespeare's lovechild, staged two bowdlerized versions of *King Lear* in the 1670s with little success. However, as the Restoration theatre began to find its own peculiar voice and style, Shakespeare's text would soon endure its most radical revision when, in 1681, Nahum Tate staged a version that cut 800 of Shakespeare's lines, "improved" a good many more, and, in the process, turned tragedy into melodrama. Among his many innovations, Tate excised the bitterly satirical Fool, dumped dynastic marriage with the King of France for a love affair

between Cordelia and Edgar -- which rather cleverly, Tate felt, aligned the Lear-Gloucester bi-plots -- and, most notoriously, concluded with a happy ending in which the young couple marry, while Gloucester, Lear, and Kent stroll off into contented retirement.

Although this “happy ending *Lear*” was received with increasing derision by literary and some theatrical critics -- Charles Lamb complained that Tate “had put his hook in the nostrils of this Leviathan [for the showmen] to draw the mighty beast more easily about” -- Tate’s adaptation proved remarkably durable, surviving in its essential form until well into the mid-nineteenth century. Indeed, until Edwin Booth performed Shakespeare’s text, or a conflated form of it, in 1875, America’s *Lear* had always, in reality, been Tate’s *Lear*. In the Preface to his adaptation, Tate describes Shakespeare’s play as “a heap of jewels unstrung and unpolished, yet so dazzling in their disorder that I soon perceived I had seized a treasure.” And, as his language here suggests, his adaptation was driven in large part by his era’s evolving sense of taste and decorum allied to heroic stories well told, what one Tate editor calls a preference for “good theatre rather than good drama.”

But Tate’s reversion to the tragicomic narrative that Shakespeare, after all, had adapted from the older *History of King Leir* also signaled an evolving ethical rethinking of tragedy, especially the pity it evokes, as less an Aristotelian purgation, which is self-serving, than as a social instinct, what John Dryden called “a concernment for the good.” To Tate’s mind, *King Lear*’s bleak finale, with its corpse-strewn stage, is both risible and wrong, and his Edgar, addressing the play’s final lines to Cordelia, reasserts the ethical value of the tragic experience: “Thy bright

example shall convince the world / (Whatever storms of fortune are decreed) / That truth and virtue shall at last succeed." However trite these sentiments might now sound, Tate's happy ending gained widespread support, in even the highest literary circles. Bowing to the "Tate Lear's" enduring popularity, Samuel Johnson concluded, "The publick has decided," before adding that he had "many years ago [been] so shocked by Cordelia's death," that he had refrained from reading those pages until he came to edit the play decades later. Although now little more than a curiosity, Tate's more optimistic version retains some support. "Tate's *Lear*," filtered through the playbook of the eighteenth century's most celebrated actor David Garrick, a renowned, and renownedly short, *Lear*, enjoyed a recent staging under the direction of my colleague and friend Beth Burns for The Hidden Room Theatre Company. Burns admitted that she and her actors appreciated "the less dire tone." "Tate's *Lear*", she told me, allowing that she was perhaps turning into her mother, "feels like a defense of goodness, sincerity, and wholesomeness, and an indictment of inconstancy and cynicism." Burns, like Johnson, has no great desire to see Shakespeare's play again. On an empathetic rather than political level, the ending is "simply too painful."

In variant forms, Tate's "happy ending *Lear*" dominated what literary scholars call the "long eighteenth century," and for about 150 years theatre producers overcame the problem of playing *King Lear*'s nihilism by not playing it at all. Even without one of the most celebrated pathetic deaths in the theatrical canon, all the great tragedians measured themselves by "Tate's *Lear*": from Betterton, Garrick, Springer, Barry, Kemble, and Kean right through to William Charles

Macready who, in 1838, finally brought Shakespeare's play to the Victorian stage -- albeit much shortened and without Gloucester's blinding. Even Macready, a scholarly actor with a deep fidelity to Shakespeare, was worried about how his audience would respond to the play's brutality and pessimism. And, a sound businessman, he had good reason, since unlike its adapted predecessor, Shakespeare's restored original would become the least popular of his major tragedies during a Victorian period that reified *Hamlet*. This aversion was in part due to the aesthetics of an age in which theatrical impresarios attracted crowds with lavish spectacles operated by huge crews showcasing the newest technologies. Lear's, and Shakespeare's, voice was inevitably lost in the storm. But Shakespeare's vision of a hostile universe and anarchic polity also ran counter to the evangelical Capitalism and energetic Imperialism of that ambitious age. Indeed, as the American nineteenth century social reformer and feminist Jane Addams suggests, Lear's championing of the "poor naked wretches [in] their looped and windowed raggedness," approaches a kind of benevolent proto-Socialism. Responding to the anti-authoritarian impulses of the original, Macready began a process of baptizing the play. Where, as one scholar puts it, Shakespeare had turned a Christian tale into a pagan one, the Victorians returned the narrative to its providential roots: the pagan Lear was born again.

Influenced by the Romantic movement's obsession with nature and natural man, the elder Garrick -- the shortest actor with the longest career playing Lear -- had created the kind of historically realized King with which we are quite familiar today: a Celtic ruler with a flowing beard and furry gown, and a father wrestling

with unruly daughters and his inner demons. Macready took this historical distancing much further by setting his *King Lear* within a henge-like circle of Druidic standing stones. In so doing, he created an historically transcendent mythical setting that internalized the play's action and staged Lear's journey as a pilgrimage towards enlightenment. A.C. Bradley, the preeminent late Victorian Shakespearean, even proposed retitling the play, *The Redemption of King Lear*.

In an innovation that would endure for the next century, Macready also chose a young actress, Priscilla Horton, to play the Fool. Supporting his Christian interpretation of the play's action, Ms. Horton's youthful angelic demeanor and trill singing voice, which Dickens [unsurprisingly] found "exquisite," rendered the Fool less a satirical commentator than a Martyr: "And my poor Fool is hanged." In this casting teleology, the Martyred Fool becomes part of a triumvirate with the saintly Cordelia, played by an actress of the same age and mien as Horton and a Job-like Lear, who "loses his kingdom but gains his soul." This kind of mythic essentializing of *King Lear's* characters, with Lear, Cordelia, Edgar, and Kent representing a beneficent natural order ranged against the Machiavellian individualism and self-interest of Goneril, Regan, and Edmund might seem simplistic to modern audiences, but it more or less held sway until the middle of the twentieth century. A Christian staging, after all, solves the issue of Shakespeare's nihilistic ending. As Stanley Wells writes, "The problem of the death of Cordelia could be bypassed if she was seen as a saint or a symbol of divine love," and her "beautiful death" allows the actor to sound in Lear's dying words, "a note of unbearable joy."

4.

Such a redemptive interpretation of *Lear*, however, would not long survive the effects of the Second World War. In the dreadful shadow cast by the Concentration Camps and the fallout from the Atomic Bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, many felt that *King Lear*, in all its nihilistic beauty, finally found its time, its place, and its proper status as Shakespeare's modernist masterpiece. In *Shakespeare our Contemporary*, published in 1961, Jan Kott sees the "theme of *King Lear* as the decay and fall of the world," but presented in a genre other than History or Tragedy, since "the world is not healed again." The "new theatre" to which Kott argues *King Lear* belongs -- although Martin Esslin coined the term -- is the Theatre of the Absurd). Formulated on Albert Camus' existentialist philosophy that life is inherently without meaning, the Theatre of the Absurd, writes Esslin, "attacks the comfortable certainties of religious or political orthodoxy. It aims to shock its audience out of complacency." What shocks in *King Lear*, according to Kott, is that the "medieval and Renaissance orders of established values disintegrate" to be replaced by a grotesque charade without end. Aligning *Lear* with *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, the masterworks of Samuel Beckett, Absurdism's highest priest (with a red nose), Kott portrays *Lear's* terrain as a kind of macabre circus tent in which the tragic, decrepit Fool increasingly dominates, madness his natural philosophy. Kitt writes: "In Shakespeare, clowns often ape the gestures of kings and heroes, but only in *King Lear* are great tragic scenes shown *through* clowning." In this "cruel and mocking" world the madman leads the blind man up an imaginary hill to an illusory cliff where a pantomimed suicide falls flat on its face.

Kott, a Polish dissident who penned his quicksilver criticism as if feverishly anticipating the 4am knock at the door, had an enormous impact on both critics and theatre makers. Most famous among these, perhaps, is Peter Brooke, whose 1962 production for the Royal Shakespeare Company was, in his words, “calculated to repudiate every source of consolation with which we might greet the final disaster.” Brutal, bleak, glacial in its pacing and its monolithic central performance, Brooke’s calculation is telling, however, since to fulfill what he sees as its nihilistic destiny (if such a thing exists), Shakespeare’s narrative still needs further manipulation. In Brooke’s production, for instance, the knights behaved in the riotous fashion that Goneril only suggests in the text, overturning furniture, literally dismantling the set, in a manner designed to further reduce our sympathy for Lear. The production also cut the First Servant, that unnamed hero who attempts to intervene in Gloucester’s blinding and dies for it; such selfless sacrifice complicates the clarity of Brooke’s dark vision. Although less pervasive, Brooke’s interventions are no less intrusive than Tate’s, and suggest that staging *King Lear*’s nihilism proves no less challenging than repudiating it. Shakespeare, we are reminded, is a dramatist, not a dogmatist. That said, it was in the post-war years that *King Lear* finally earned its status as Shakespeare’s postmodern masterpiece, not only of the imagination but also on the stage. And it is telling that, in a recent poll of RSC actors and directors, Paul Schofield’s Lear towered above the rest as the greatest Shakespeare performance of modern times.

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Lear has been on quite a journey over the past four hundred years, sometimes dressed in unrecognizable clothes and speaking unfamiliar lines, and he is still to be found regularly wandering around the moors or picking flowers from the hedgerows near Dover's Cliffs. Unmoored from the *zeitgeist*, however, *King Lear* has perhaps lost some of the magisterial reputation it enjoyed during what Wells called the "heady nihilism" of the Sixties, and productions nowadays tend to cherry pick from bleak and recuperative readings as they present more nuanced, qualified interpretations of the play's meaning. But we might note a presiding feature of the past two decades that articulates a growing crisis of our age, the crisis of aging. Jan Powell, Artistic Director of Quill Theatre in Richmond, and director of my third production of this play in ten years, recently described this more domestic approach, one whose universality lies in its commonality. "How not to give into the agony when you see life increasingly passing you by," Powell feels the play asks, "knowing that you're becoming irrelevant, unneeded, a bother who's in the way, after having been the center of your own social universe for so long?" Actors -- just like real people! -- are getting older and staying stronger longer, and the age of Lear performers has risen sharply since the role was first written for the 42-year-old Burbage. But Oliver Ford Davies has also noted a tendency associated with this casting trend. In an age of Method acting, older actors frequently opt for diagnostically accurate portrayals of mental and physical wasting -- Dementia, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's Disease, or Multiple Sclerosis -- that, although heartbreaking, perhaps allows actors to take a short cut up "the high mountain," to borrow Kott's image, "that everyone admires, but no one particularly wishes to

climb.” Describing Deborah Warner’s 1990 Royal National Theatre production, one critic wrote of her wheelchair-bound King: “bundled up with a rug over his knees, Lear looked old and vulnerable, a geriatric out-patient waiting for the ambulance to take him home.” We might wonder whether, by mitigating Lear’s physical demands, we also short-change the play’s metaphysical challenges in staging the paradox articulated by the American philosopher Stanley Cavell: “we can only learn through suffering, [but] have nothing to learn from it.”

A child of the Sixties and devotee of many RSC productions during the Eighties and Nineties, I clearly read this kind of mitigated nihilism as the natural end point of *King Lear*. But, for me, that doesn’t make the play inherently despairing. As Esslin writes of the Absurd perspective, “the challenge is to accept the human condition as it is, in all its mystery and absurdity, and to bear it with dignity, nobly, responsibly; precisely *because* there are no easy solutions to the mysteries of existence, because ultimately man is alone in a meaningless world. The shedding of easy solutions, of comforting illusions, may be painful, but it leaves behind it a sense of freedom and relief.”

I witnessed *King Lear*’s capacity to generate such dignity this past summer, when, visiting my elderly father in mid-Wales, I was taken to visit a celebrated metal sculptor in a remote hill farm. Tall, gaunt, white haired, he was in every way an ancient Briton, a Lear-like figure, who, having just lost his devoted wife far too young, and having raged alone against the injustice of the world for many months, was slowly re-emerging into the light. Over the inevitable cup of tea, he noticed me repeatedly glancing at a shaped piece of metal hanging, like a mobile, in a window; it

was about a foot high. Within a jagged, rusting, bruised metal sheet, he had cut an ellipsis to create something resembling an eye; beneath that the excess metal hung by a filigree thread like a tear.

The artist invited me to take a closer look and to tell me what I saw. In tiny letters around the eye, etched in a different Welsh metal (there were seven in all), I read: "As flies to wanton boys are we go the gods." This was Gloucester's empty socket staring blindly into a world of grief. It was a shocking, disturbing moment, but also an uplifting one. For, in creating his own "hollow crown," in staging this acutely personal piece of performance art, the sculptor had taken the first steps beyond his despair: he was working again, making art, trying to find some point in the pointless. And he chose *King Lear*, he passionately explained to me, for the first in a proposed series of five Shakespeare-inspired pieces, precisely because the play offered the purest articulation of the survival of human dignity in the face of rage and hopelessness. It is because *King Lear's* nihilism is so painful and honest, so lacking in solutions and easy resolutions, that it gives the grieving man comfort, recognition from beyond the mirror. "When we are born, we [may] cry that we are come to this great stage of fools," but at least that means we're in good company.

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