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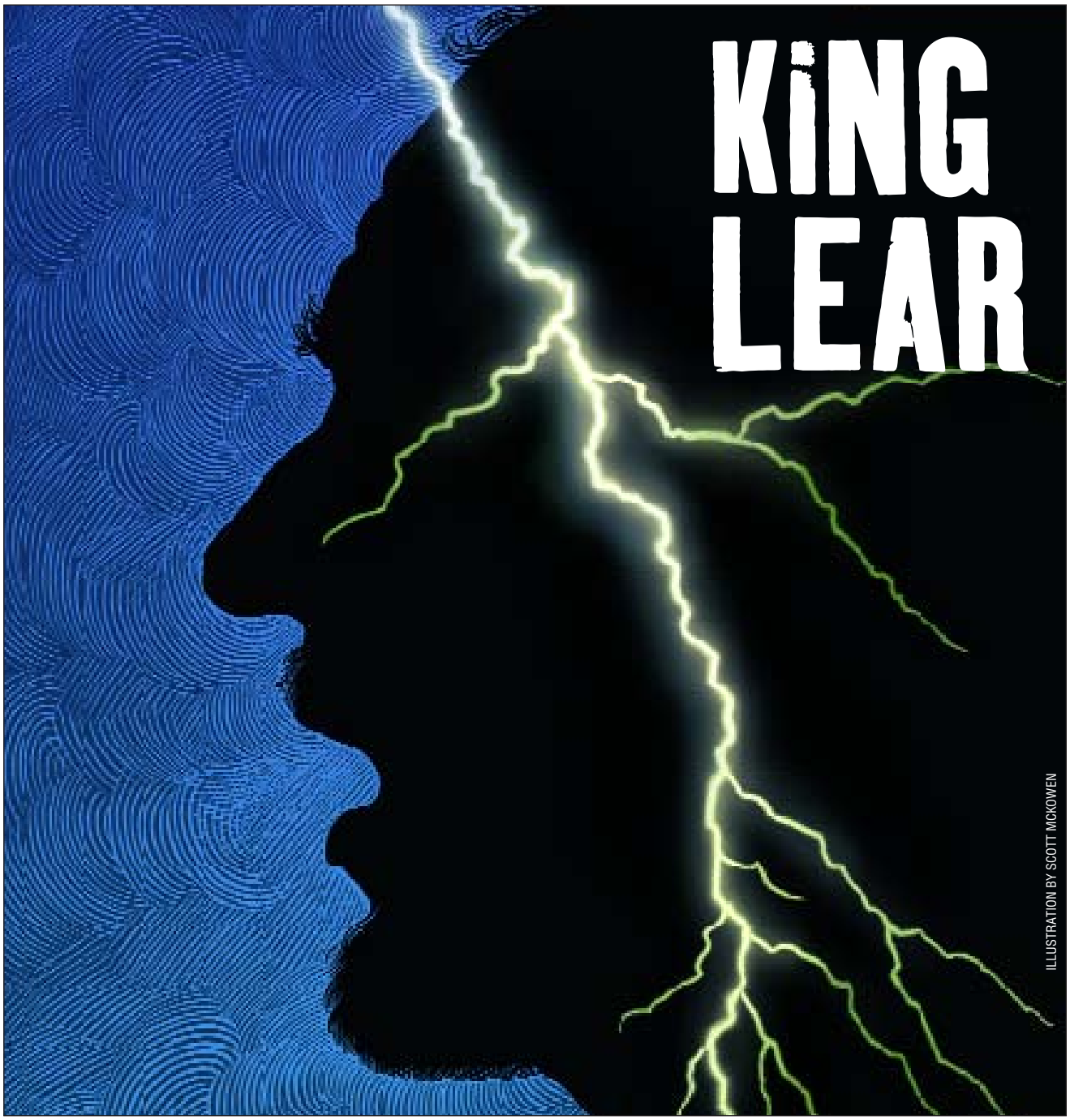
JANUARY 2007



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Inside OUT

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Synopsis

ALBANY: Striving to better, oft we mar what's well.
—King Lear

King Lear, a headstrong monarch who has built a vast medieval empire, decides to divide his kingdom among his three daughters, reserving the largest share for the one who says she loves him the most. Unable to distinguish between flattery and sincerity, Lear awards the realm to Goneril and Regan as he ignores his youngest, Cordelia, because she refuses to flatter him as her older sisters do. Bent on retaining all the trappings of a king while enjoying a retirement free of kingly responsibilities, Lear sets out with his extended
retinue to take up monthly residence at each of his elder daughters' homes. Outraged at the rowdy behavior of Lear and his knights, Goneril and Regan unite to turn Lear out. Shocked by his daughters' ingratitude, Lear begins to obsess and gradually goes mad, but in his insanity, he comes to know himself as a human being.

In the sub-plot, Gloucester is also blind to the consequences of his profligate youth and the fortunes of his bastard son, Edmund. Edmund plots to have his brother, Edgar, disinherited and overthrow his father. All the worst comes to both Lear and Gloucester, but in the wake of physical and psychological destruction, comes a spiritual regeneration in a haunting and touching play.

The Historical Context

GLOUCESTER: We have seen the best of our time: machinations, hollowness, treachery and all ruinous disorders, follow us disquietly to our graves.
—King Lear

When James VI of Scotland came to the English throne after Elizabeth I's death in 1603 with the title of James I of England, he was determined to unite the two kingdoms over which he now ruled. But his experiences as Scotland's monarch had hardly prepared him to govern England. Even during Elizabeth's reign, Parliament had begun the struggle for power that culminated the next century in the execution of Charles I and in the English Civil War.

At the same time James was trying to unite Scotland and England, he was pursuing an alliance with Spain, England's most feared enemy. Perhaps Shakespeare in viewing James' attempts "grew concerned, as English lawmakers had, that unification would ultimately mean division of the kingdoms and leave England vulnerable to foreign invasion by old enemies." [1]

The fact that Lear was dividing his kingdom and giving it over to his scheming daughters, served as a powerful reminder to Shakespeare's audience that Britain's worst enemies have often resided inside, rather than outside, the kingdom.

The play opens with Lear portrayed as an absolute monarch who demands unquestioning obedience. To Lear and Elizabeth I, the monarch was God's representative on Earth. King James I took this belief in the divine right of kings even farther; he considered himself "above the law, above the church, above the Parliament."[2] As god-given rulers, kings and queens had a god-given obligation: to keep their kingdom intact. Both Elizabeth and James shared the conviction that it would be a sin to abdicate or divide the kingdom. Therefore, the audience of 1606 (the King's court) was probably horrified at Lear's decision to retire and divide his kingdom.

The England of Elizabeth and James was a society in transition. A newly prosperous gentry and commercial class challenged the power of the king and the aristocracy. Political factions were formed, a fact strongly hinted at in the play, in the rivalry between Albany and Cornwall. In addition, the emerging middle class gave power to a new kind of individual. Powerful property owners felt very little obligation to the throne; these were "men on the make, filled with the spirit of radical individualism, driven by self-interest." [3] An example is Edmund, Gloucester's illegitimate, unscrupulous son, who rejects tradition and seeks to thrive by his own cunning, cruel as it may be.

Shakespeare also expressed the feelings of the dispossessed underclass who did not share in the affluence of the times. The enclosure of common fields by property owners was seen by the poor as land-grabbing and there were a number of riots. Beggars from Bedlam (the hospital for the insane) and the homeless were familiar figures who roamed the fields and villages, pleading for charity. Edgar calls attention to their plight in his disguise as Poor Tom.

Thus, in *King Lear,* Shakespeare gives expression to the crucial political and social issues of his times.

EDMUND: The base shall to th' legitimate. I grow; I prosper; Now gods, stand up for bastards!"
—King Lear

Gibson, Rex, ed. *Cambridge School Shakespeare: King Lear.* Cambridge, UK: University of Cambridge, 1996.

Halio, Jay L. *King Lear: a Guide to the Play.* London: Greenwood Press, 2001.

Ioppolo, Grace, ed. *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on William Shakespeare's King Lear.* London: Routledge, 2003.

1. Ioppolo, p. 9.
2. Halio, p. 17.
3. Gibson, p. 213.

Sources *of the Play*

The immediate source for the main plot of King Lear is *The True Chronicle History of King Leir,* an old play that was performed in the early 1590s but not published until 1605. But the Lear story had earlier antecedents, going back as far as Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of Great Britain* c. 1135. Shakespeare probably read Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Wales* (1587) which Shakespeare mined for *Macbeth* and for the English history plays. In Holinshed's account, King Leir holds the love contest in which Gonorilla and Regan insincerely swear their great love, but Cordeilla replies in honesty and truth. Leir then leaves his kingdom to Gonorilla and Regan to divide after his death, but leaves Cordeilla nothing.

After some time, impatient to inherit his kingdom, his sons-in-law, the dukes of Cornwall and Albany, revolt against Leir and depose him. Living under humiliating conditions, Leir flees to France where Cordeilla forgives and receives him. Cordeilla's husband, the King of France, mounts a military force against the dukes, who die in battle. Leir is restored to his throne which Cordeilla inherits after his death.

The sub-plot of Gloucester and his sons was based on an episode from *Arcadia*, a prose romance by Sir Philip Sidney, first published in 1590. In this tale the illegitimate son is responsible for blinding his own father after seizing his throne. The virtuous son is betrayed by his brother, loses his father's favor and is driven into exile. He returns to protect his father and, in leading this blind man, prevents him from committing suicide. The blind king eventually crowns his virtuous son as king and dies a happy man.

Shakespeare probably read Samuel Harsnett's *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*, an anti-Catholic pamphlet, for knowledge about the behavior and strange language used by Edgar in his guise as Poor Tom. This treatise listed the demons' names supposedly used by people who pretended to be possessed by devils.

The gossip of the day also may have provided Shakespeare with fodder for this play. All of London loved lurid tales of greed and suffering, and Sir William Allen, a former Lord Mayor of the city, was the subject of such a story. In his old age, Sir William made the mistake of dividing his estate among his three daughters and arranging to live alternately with each of them. Having acquired his wealth, the three women treated their father with disrespect and resented the expense of looking after him. In 1603 Sir Brian Annesly was the subject of gossip because his eldest daughter tried to have him certified as a lunatic so that she and her husband could gain control of the old man's wealth. However, Sir Brian had a younger daughter Cordell, who challenged her older sister in court, protesting that it was unjust to label an old man a lunatic.

At every word a reputation dies.
—Alexander Pope. Rape of the Lock, III.

Gibson, Rex, ed. *Cambridge School Shakespeare: King Lear*. Cambridge, UK: University of Cambridge, 1992.

Halio, Jay L. *King Lear: a Guide to the Play*. London: Greenwood Press, 2001.

The Two Texts of *King Lear* and the Double Plot

Shakespeare probably wrote *King Lear* sometime in 1605-06. On November 26, 1607, the play was entered in the Stationers' Register and the first printed version appeared in 1608 from the press of Nicholas Okes. This first edition, referred to as Q1 ("Pied Bull Quarto") by scholars, survives in a dozen copies, some with corrected pages, others with none.

Another and quite different version of *King Lear* appeared in the great Folio of 1623, a collection of Shakespeare's works by his fellow shareholders in the King's Men, John Heminge and Henry Condell. The Folio edition is referred to as F, and in it, Shakespeare revised the text of Q1, cutting some lines, adding others and altering some words and phrases. F (the Folio edition) cuts about 300 lines from Q1 and adds another 100; despite cuts, the play is still long—much longer than the usual Elizabethan drama. As far as characters are concerned, Albany is weakened; Edgar is strengthened; Goneril's nastiness is somewhat tempered, and the Fool views the world as topsy-turvy.

Among all of his tragedies, *King Lear* has the most fully developed double plot. Some critics believe Shakespeare used the Earl of Gloucester, Edgar and Edmund plot to universalize his themes; others to contrast Lear's reaction to his fate with Gloucester's. Whatever the reason, it makes a distinction "among various kinds of good and evil and a human being's possible response to them."[1] By connecting the two plots in Act V, Shakespeare intensifies the dramatic effect of his tragedy, showing how evil combines with evil but ultimately does not prevail.

Halio, Jay L. *King Lear: a Guide to the Play*. London: Greenwood Press, 2001.

Metzger, Sheri. *Shakespeare's King Lear.* New York: IDG Books, 1984.

1. Halio, p. 35.

Themes of the Play

I: Division of the Kingdom & Power

LEAR: Give me the map, there.
Know that we have divided
In three our kingdom, and 'tis our fast intent
To shake all cares and business from our age.
—King Lear

This announcement at the beginning of the play must have startled Shakespearean audiences. As the old adage goes: in unity there is strength; in division, weakness. Lear's most loyal servants—Kent and the Fool—try to dissuade him from his foolish plan, but for his trouble, Kent is banished and the Fool's words fall on deaf ears. Lear's resolve to give up the crown and divide the kingdom among his daughters and their husbands is really a contradiction. He does not want to renounce his power, but merely to give up the duties and responsibilities that accompany it. He desires "the name and all the addition of a king" without the work, but he learns "the bitter truth that in the real world these are incompatible aims."[1] Secondly, his motives for dividing the kingdom are suspect. He does not wish to divide the kingdom because he thinks this is a wise or just thing to do, but, in a public ceremony, to "test" his daughters love for him. His demand for approval proves to be tragically ineffective.

1. Salgado, p.34

II: Social Responsibility

Stripped of his power and forced to seek shelter from the storm in a hovel, Lear begins to think of others' welfare besides his own. Self-absorbed and obsessing about his own affairs, Lear's sense of responsibility is finally awakened when he realizes that he has always neglected the misery of his poorest subjects. He states that those who have more than enough should undergo what the underprivileged feel, an experience that should prompt them to distribute their wealth more equitably. Gloucester's experience, like Lear's, is one of deprivation and torment. After being blinded, he begins to 'see' and gives a purse of gold to Poor Tom, who is actually his son Edgar in disguise.

In an essay "The Feminine Principle" in the *Lincoln Center Theatre Review*, Jane Smiley (author of *A Thousand Acres*) feels that "Lear is a tremendous baby whose idea of how the world works and his own role within it is sadly mistaken and immature."[1] She contends that Lear never received what he bargained for, which was some feeling of being adored, some peace, comfort and worship that he felt entitled to. But he doesn't receive these approbations because when he was king, he did not fulfill his responsibilities. "Not only did he not come to understand himself, he did not come to understand his daughters or the nature of the world. As a result, he is the author of this destruction—the destruction not only of his family and his kingdom but also of his universe… . He is surrounded by meaninglessness because he never accepted his responsibility to make meaning of it… That is the tragedy of *King Lear*—that he was never a man when being a man was his job and his duty."[2]

1. Smiley, p. 16.
2. Smiley, p. 17.

LEAR: Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are—
I have ta'en too little care of this.
—King Lear

Themes of the Play (cont.)

III: Justice

LEAR: Look with thine ears:
see how yon justice rails upon yon simple thief.
Hark, in thine ear: change places, and, handy-dandy,
which is the justice and which is the thief?
—King Lear

A belief in the power of divine justice runs through the play, but the attitudes towards the pagan gods see-saw. Sometimes they are seen as kind and mighty; at other times, arbitrary, indifferent and cruel. For example, Gloucester thinks them spiteful: "As flies to wanton boys are we to th'gods;/ They kill us for their sport." Edgar, on the other hand, acknowledges that human affairs are watched over, considered and shaped by a divine justice: "The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices/ Make instruments to plague us."

Throughout the play men and women judge each other, but always appealing to some higher power or authority. Lear exiles Kent for criticizing him; Gloucester impulsively condemns Edgar; Goneril and Regan, having assumed power, judge Lear and pronounce punishment; Edmund sentences Lear and Cordelia to prison and issues their death warrant.

As shown, when humans exercise justice, there is no guarantee that it will be fair, proper or right. Possession of power seems to be more important than fairness. When Goneril gains her portion of the kingdom, she sees herself as the queen and above the law. Lear, in his madness, instead sees the fallability of judges and how powerful, rich people can avoid punishment for their crimes.

IV. Nature

Shakespeare and his contemporaries clung to the traditional belief that all of nature, human and otherwise, is somehow connected and integrated in an orderly fashion. To disturb one part of that order inevitably causes disruption in other parts. Nature is also a powerful means of controling people. Lear, as king, knows that if he can make everyone believe it is natural for him to rule and for his every wish to be obeyed, then he has power over them. If his daughters think it is natural to obey all their father's commands or if people believe that society is naturally hierarchical with a king at the top, then they are unlikely to challenge that "natural" state of affairs.

For much of the play, Lear believes everything he does is natural, but if anyone frustrates his desires, then that person is "unnatural" because he/she has disobeyed. His view of his family is the same as his view of the kingdom: "rigidly hierarchical with himself as father-king at the top, entitled to immediate and unstinting obedience.[1]

However, this view of the natural order of things is slowly transformed as he experiences pain and suffering.

Characters in the play can be grouped according to their view of nature, whether malign or benign. That view influences their opinions of society, of people and of how they should behave. Those who view nature as malevolent are linked to the savage selfishness of Edmund, Goneril and Regan. Nature is seen as a powerful force that drives and feeds ruthless and selfish impulses. Human beings behave like violent, predatory animals, preying on the naïve, innocent, vulnerable and elderly. They have no conscience or moral sensitivity and are concerned only with their personal advancement and profit.

LEAR: Which of you shall we say doth love us most,
That we our largest bounty may extend
Where nature doth merit challenge?"
—King Lear

Like Lear, Edmund sees nature as a deity, but thinks it favors the merciless, self-motivated individual. This "unnatural" (illegitimate) son of Gloucester will become the "natural" heir through

coldly calculating and conning his way through life. Goneril and Regan are Lear's legitimate daughters, but they shamelessly flatter him to gain a greater share of his wealth. After they do, they unnaturally renounce all family bonds and duties and cruelly exile Lear into the storm.

Gloucester, Kent, Edgar and Cordelia are shaped by a benign vision of nature as a "kind-hearted and benevolent force which strives for order, stability and harmony." [2]

Gloucester sees the world as orderly and hierarchical, but he values trust, loyalty and family bonds. When Edmund dupes him into believing Edgar's villainy, he proclaims his son is unnatural, detested and brutish. Kent's loyalty to his master Lear manifests itself in unwavering concern for his king. Cordelia's nature is truthful and honest; even when banished from the kingdom, her devotion to Lear acts as a healing force. Finally, Edgar may disguise himself as a mad beggar, but redeems, heals and restores his father to whom he remains faithful despite Gloucester's terrible words.

1. Gibson, p. 206.
2. Gibson, p. 207.

V: Madness/Reason

LEAR: O, let me not be mad,
not mad,sweet heaven!
Keep me in temper; I would not be mad!
—King Lear

In his book, *This Great Stage*, Robert Heilman ventures a diagnosis of Lear's madness: "It is a psycho-physiological phenomenon, the ultimate collapse of a high-strung but unstable personality brought, by a habitual unrestrained emotional violence, to a pitch of utterly frustrating discords at which it can no longer maintain its identity." [1]

His madness is an expression of the conflict within him. He still holds to his original beliefs about himself and his daughters, yet the Fool is stirring him to a clearer perception of the truth and the two sets of values conflict in him.

Seen from another point of view, Lear's breakdown is the expression of a failure to understand the complex situation in which he is involved. Finally, Lear's madness is also a symbol "of a disordered and distraught world where expectancies are defeated and norms condemned—it is a breach in nature." [2]

Lear tries to retain his role as supreme master by exercising authority over his daughters and their servants, but the attempt fails. "It is Lear's folly and his refusal to accept it that leads directly to his madness." [3] He recognizes that he is merely a man who won't admit his mistakes; thus, some reason emerges from his condition.

Gibson proposes a pattern to Lear's madness: In Act I, Lear's tendency to mental instability is established with his love trial, his banishment of Kent and his disowning of Cordelia.

In Act II, Lear is obsessed with the ungrateful behavior of Goneril and Regan. He rants of revenge and storms out of Gloucester's castle.

In Act III, Lear rages at the storm and his moods swing violently from anger to a quiet sympathy for the "poor, naked wretches." The Fool and Poor Tom deepen the sense of his decline into insanity until he rips off his clothes and hallucinates about devilish spirits.

In Act IV, Lear's language "combines sexual loathing with hallucinations about hell and damnation." [4] His disordered thoughts convey a certain reason when he speaks of mortality, justice and authority, but then he erupts into savage emotions: "And when I have stol'n upon these sons-in-law/ Then kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!" When he is reunited with Cordelia, his mental torment ceases.

In Act V, the cruel murder of Cordelia threatens Lear's sanity again ("Howl, howl, howl, howl"). He dies, his final words suggesting that he is deluding himself with the belief she lives.

1. Heilman, p. 173.
2. Heilman, p. 174.
3. Salgado, p. 17.
4. Gibson, p. 211.

Themes of the Play (cont.)

VI. The Family

CORDELIA: Love well our father:
To your professed bosoms I commit him.
But yet, alas, stood I within his grace,
I would prefer him to a better place.
—King Lear

The organization of the Elizabethan family and the society it mirrored was patriarchial, transmitting authority through the father. The family could be viewed as an economic unit which allowed one generation to build on the success of the previous one through the inheritance of property and power. But the children must await the death of a parent before they get anything; thus, Edmund, Goneril and Regan detest such "aged tyranny." Lear probably knows how they feel, so he controls his children by manipulating their expectations. But Lear does not understand or value family love; he holds the despicable love test that displays his absurdity and insensitivity. The daughter that truly loves him, Cordelia, is rejected. Similarly, the obtuse Gloucester, gulled by Edmund's letter of Edgar's supposed treachery, expresses the image that family problems are a symptom of a wider national and cosmic discord.

Stephen Greenblatt in *Will in the World* reports that in Shakespeare's time there were "maintenance agreements, contracts by which, in return for the transfer of family property, children undertook to provide food, clothing and shelter" for the elderly parent.[1] But *King Lear* is set in a pagan country far from the time of the Renaissance, of customary arrangements and legal protection. Nevertheless, the play expresses the fear of the playwright's own class: "the fear of humiliation, abandonment and a loss of identity in the wake of retirement."[2]

In Coppelia Kahn's essay, "The Absent Mother in *King Lear*," she discusses the fact that in the play we see only the godlike fathers who make or mar their children. Therefore, the children owe their existence to their fathers alone; the mother's role in procreation is ignored. What the play depicts "is the failure of that presence: the failure of a father's power to command love in a patriarchial world…. In this kind of world, masculine identity depends on repressing the vulnerability, dependency and capacity for feelings which are called feminine."[3]

Laurence Olivier may have alluded to this theory when he spoke about acting the role of King Lear. "Lear is easy… . He is simply bad-tempered arrogance with a crown perched on top. He obviously wasn't spanked by his mother often enough."[4]

1. Greenblatt, p. 359.
2. Greenblatt, p. 360.
3. Kahn, p. 62.
4. Epstein, p. 405.

VII. The Disintegration of the World and Nothingness

GLOUCESTER: O ruined piece of nature!
This great world/Shall so wear out to naught…
—King Lear

The word "nothing" reiterates throughout the play. Cordelia uses it first to answer Lear's love test. Then Lear responds with "Nothing will come of nothing." Gloucester uses it with Edmund. Goneril and Regan remind Lear that his former power is reduced to nothing. The Fool gives the word yet another interpretation, loss of identity: "I am a fool, thou art nothing." Many of the characters will be left with nothing at play's end and many will be brought to nothing, losing life itself.

Perhaps it is in the mood of "nothing" that Jan Kott in his essay "*King Lear*, or Endgame" believes the theme of the play is "the decay and fall of the world."[1] His argument contends that there is no one Edgar can invite to his coronation at the end. When the play begins, there was a king

Themes of the Play (cont.)

with his court and family; later, there are just four beggars walking about in a storm. The process of degradation reduces Lear's retinue from one hundred men to one and "everything that distinguishes a man—his titles, social position, even name—is lost."[2] In this view of *King Lear*, there is no catharsis, no consolation, and no redemption of Lear himself. Nothing.

1. Kott, p. 145.
2. Kott, p. 146.

Bruce, Susan, ed. *William Shakespeare's King Lear*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

Kott, Jan. "*King Lear,* or Endgame."

Epstein, Norrie. *The Friendly Shakespeare*. New York: Penguin Books, 1993.

Gibson, Rex, ed. *Cambridge School Shakespeare: King Lear*. Cambridge, UK: University of Cambridge, 1996.

Greenblatt, Stephen. *Will in the World*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2004.

Halio, Jay L. *King Lear: a Guide to the Play*. London: Greenwood Press, 2001.

Heilman, Robert. *This Great Stage*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1963.

Ioppolo, Grace, ed. *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on William Shakespeare's King Lear*. London: Routledge, 2003.

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The Fool

An excerpt from "Who's the Fool?" by Beatrice K. Otto

Lear's fool may be the world's best-known court jester, more alive to people than any other, real or imagined… . He is someone who is existentially bound to speak out regardless of the consequences, with humor and indirection, while understanding his master well enough to penetrate the armor of self-deceit and swagger.

Many of Shakespeare's characters are universal, so it should come as no surprise that his Fool existed in reality in most major civilizations and many minor ones around the globe—across Europe, Russia, Persia, Turkey and the Arabic world, the Aztecs, India, China and turning up in various guises in many American and African tribes. The earliest we hear of one is in the Egyptian Sixth Dynasty (2323-2150 BC), when the Pharaoh wrote: "Thou hast said that thou hast brought a dancing dwarf. Come northward to the court immediately. Bring this dwarf with thee to rejoice and gladden the heart of the king of Upper and Lower Egypt, Neferkere, who lives forever."

Dwarves were hot stuff in the jester world. Hunchbacks, too, or, failing that, a certain crazy litheness or corporeal quirkiness, which combined nicely with their freedom from normal constraints….

Dismissal, exile (often temporary), slaps or execution (rarely) could befall the jester whose wisecracks either missed the mark, or, more likely, hit home too hard, standing on the corn of the king's conscience. In Europe, the standard fool's response to being told never to show his face in court again was to come back with a bucket over his head. The alternative, on being told never to set foot in the country again, was to fill his boots with foreign soil and breezily stride back in. To be forgiven with laughter.

Fools tend to reveal things as they really are….

THE FOOL *(cont.)*

The truth revealing role is what sets the jester apart from the hordes of entertainers, musicians, tumblers, bards and storytellers trouping through the court. He encompassed all of these. He often had musical talent or a poetic bent, and quite often it was through ditties or doggerel that he made his point….

Jesters often interceded on the part of those who could not defend themselves….The jester's license could also serve as useful cover for the expression of political opinion…. Yet it was often the idiot jester who would turn the king's mood so that others could get near him without losing their heads. And some made the effort simply out of kindness, wanting to relieve their king's sorrow or worry, as Lear's Fool "labors to outjest/His heart-strook injuries."

Despite the occupational hazards of speaking out in the presence of omnipotencies, records of the relationship between jesters and the powerful people they served show that on balance they were treated with great affection, solicitude and respect. Their formally humble or haphazard status was commonly complemented by long-term tenure during which they were well cared for—sometimes to the end of their days.

After his jester Birbal died, Mogul Emperor Akbar wrote: "When I was melancholy/Birbal gave me everything/Except more sorrow to bear."

From *Lincoln Center Theatre Review.* "Who's the Fool?" by Beatrice K. Otto. New York: Loncoln Center Theatre, 2004