KING LEAR

WIT STUDY GUIDES FOR LEAVING CERTIFICATE STUDENTS

www.wit.ie/wd200
CONTENTS

‘THE MAP IS NOT THE TERRITORY’: LEAR, KINGSHIP AND KINSHIP

BREWING UP A STORM: POWER AND EMPATHY IN KING LEAR

SHAKESPEARE’S THEATRE OF CRUELTY: KING LEAR
King Lear is a play, a dramatic text that tells a story. A story about a king, a story about a king who doesn't wish to be king anymore (or does he?), a story about families and about ambition, a story about loyalties and betrayals, a story about redemption, a story that ends in death. Shakespeare's plays are neatly categorized for us into genres of tragedy, history, comedy. In all of his tragic plays the eponymous hero dies at the end. Therefore we begin the reading of King Lear, or the viewing if we are lucky enough to see it performed, with certain expectations and are fairly certain of how it will end even if we are not familiar with the story. So why are we still attracted to such a play, one that is four hundred years old and, moreover, one that is set in a mythic, even more distant past? Maybe it is because we are all part of a family of one kind or another and we know from our own experiences that families can be complicated, and engaging with stories is still the most effective way there is of making sense of our own lives. Let's examine some of what makes the story of King Lear, his family and his kingdom, still compelling for us today.

The play text doesn't open with the character of Lear but instead with the Earls of Kent and Gloucester in mid-conversation speculating about the proposed division of the kingdom by the king. Edmund, Gloucester's son, is with them and he hears himself described to Kent as the son whom Gloucester "has so often blushed to acknowledge" and whose mother had "a son for her cradle ere she had a husband for her bed". He is the "whoreson [who] must be acknowledged" (1.i.22). We also learn that Gloucester has another "son by order of law", Edgar, one who by implication has all the rights of inheritance and social and parental approval. Very soon we hear Edmund ask:

```
Why bastard? wherefore base?
When my dimensions are as well compact,
My mind as generous and my shape as true,
As honest madam's issue? Why brand they us
With base? With baseness? Bastardy? Base, base?
```

(1.ii.6-10)

The subplot has already gotten underway and issues of inheritance and legitimacy are up front and centre.

As the play opens Lear is still the king with the power to command. He orders, “Give me the map there” (1.i.35), that two-dimensional representation of his kingdom, on which he has marked out how he intends to divide it between his three daughters. We already know that he has made his decisions about this from the opening conversation between Kent and Gloucester. But then he makes an extraordinary demand, extraordinary because we know that the map has already been marked out. He now wants each of his three daughters to declare, in public before the court, how much they love him. “Which of you shall we say doth love us most?” (1.1.49) he asks. He has set up a competition, a bizarre love competition, setting sister against sister for larger shares of the kingdom. They must stroke his ego, at his royal command. The older two, Goneril and Regan, understand the game that must be played and gush forth with their platitudes to flatter their father, the king:

```
GONERIL:  Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter;
Dearer than eye-sight, space, and liberty;
Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare
```

(1.i.53-55)
Surely no sensible person could be gullled by such transparent flattery? It seems almost comical but Lear preens on, hearing these command performances. However, Cordelia, the youngest daughter and the only one of the three without a husband, refuses to play this particular game. She speaks last and says simply, “I love your majesty / According to my bond; nor more nor less” (1.1.91-92). Cordelia argues with perfect logic that, as both of her sisters have husbands, then they cannot love their father all, as they have just declared. In his book, Shakespeare is Hard, but so is Life, journalist and critic Fintan O’Toole asks the reasonable question, “Why does Cordelia not join in this game of puffed-up language for the sake of peace and quiet?” (104). The answer provided by O’Toole is that this is outside Cordelia’s frame of reference, “her way of thinking and feeling is fundamentally feudal”, and her use of the word “bond” has decidedly feudal connotations. This is in contrast with her father and her sisters who quantify and compare in a manner that suggests an emerging capitalist, materialist (and arguably shallow) view of the world. But all Lear hears in Cordelia’s response is the word “Nothing” and this he cannot bear. Greenblatt observes that in that one word, “Lear hears what he most dreads: emptiness, loss of respect, the extinction of identity” (2310). Lear can hardly believe that this is the best Cordelia can do and he checks that she understands what is at stake: “speak again … mend your speech a little, Lest it may mar your fortunes” (1.1.92-93). But she stands by what she has said, that she loves her father but not all. Lear is now both frightened and dangerous. He gets into a fury and disinherits and banishes Cordelia. This scene, paradoxically, reveals Lear’s vulnerability and the courage and strength of Cordelia.

Having banished Cordelia, Lear now inserts a caveat as he carves his kingdom now into two and not three, “Only we still retain / The name, and all the additions to a king” (1.1.135-136), a sentence that might pass unnoticed, but it is a telling insertion. We have seen how little he understands about love but now we begin to realise how little he understands about power and responsibility. He wants the former without the latter. Kent, who has had the temerity to challenge Lear’s decision regarding Cordelia, to name what has just happened as “When power to flattery bows”, is also banished. The play then leaves the court, a place of certainties, and significantly never returns to it. The characters are from now on in constant motion, both physically and metaphorically. Lear begins his travels around his former kingdom, between both daughters who have inherited all, but with an ever-decreasing retinue as they make demands that to him are surprising, inappropriate and shocking.

It becomes clear very quickly that the two sisters are reluctant to give shelter or succor on his terms to their peripatetic father and once-king. As Goneril hears the approach of Lear she instructs her steward Oswald:

GONERIL:  
Put on what weary negligence you please,  
You and your fellows. I’d have it come to question.  
If he dislike it, let him to our sister,  
Whose mind and mine, I know, in that are one,  
Not to be overruled. Idle old man,  
That still would manage those authorities  
That he hath given away!  
(1.1.14-18)

Lear’s constant companion, the Fool, sees the situation for what it is and gives Lear a truthful commentary, which Lear is as yet unable to hear: “I am better than thou art now; I am a fool, thou art nothing” (1.4v.169). But we as readers, or as audience, are now in league with the writer as we see Lear’s situation for what it is through the words of the Fool. We are compelled at a very human level to watch this story, this tragedy, play out.
Very quickly Lear is forced to shed his kingly attributes, both material and symbolic, until finally he is so maddened and outraged by the treatment meted out to him by his two daughters and their husbands that he goes out into the stormy night, bereft of shelter and appropriate clothing, with just the Fool for company. But there are others out and exposed to the storm on the heath this night. Edgar, now an outcast through the machinations of Edmund, has been wandering around disguised as the madman, “Poor Tom”; his father, Gloucester, who has been horribly blinded by Cornwall, has been cast out to the elements without shelter or care; the banished Kent has disguised himself and follows and then tends to Lear. In Grigori Kozintsev's film version, the landscape now is shown to be bleak and pitiless. The wind and the “belly-pinched” wolves howl, bears prowl in the crackling, thorny undergrowth. Nature here is stark and without mercy.

However, it is in this pitiless landscape, in the storm scene on the heath as the rain spouts and the wind howls, that Lear gives the first intimation of transformation as he utters the line “My wits begin to turn”, then continues, addressing the Fool:

**LEAR:**

*Come on, my boy. How dost, my boy? Art cold?*
*I am cold myself. Where is this straw, my fellow?*
*The art of our necessities is strange,*
*That can make vile things precious. Come, your hovel.*
*Poor fool and knave, I have one part in my heart*
*That's sorry yet for thee.*

(3.ii.65-71)

With these words Lear shows the first signs of empathy for a fellow human, for the Fool. He is starting to shed his pomposity, his self-aggrandizement. As Lear, with the Fool and Kent, seek shelter from the elements in the filthy, dark hovel, crowded with ‘poor naked wretches’, what he sees there has him utter a speech of tremendous compassion and insight:

**LEAR:**

*Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,*
*That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,*
*How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,*
*Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you*
*From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en*
*Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;*
*Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,*
*That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,*
*And show the heavens more just.*

(3.iv.29-37)

The word “Nature” occurs nearly fifty times in *King Lear*, and the word, together with its opposite, “unnatural”, is full of significance in the world of this play (see Kettle). Over the course of its five acts it examines the nature of the parent-child relationship; the nature of the monarch-subject relationship; the role of the natural world in reflecting and intensifying the crises and turning-points of Lear, in particular during the storm scene on the heath. In Lear’s eyes, Goneril and Regan both become “unnatural hags” when they show the first signs of not bowing to their father’s will. As the play comes to its conclusion we witness what seems tragically inevitable when the established order, understood as natural, is disregarded and disrupted.

By his distorted conflation of power with love and his failure to distinguish between truth and the flattery he commanded, Lear set in train a catastrophic series of events that culminate in his entry on to the stage with the dead Cordelia in his arms as he gives voice to the devastating, heart-rending cry of “Howl, howl, howl!” (5.iii.256). It is through this awful journey, argues Kettle, that Lear evolves from being a king to being a man. To reach that point he has had to lose everything: his kingdom, his daughters, his Fool, his wits.
But we see him gain in understanding as, paradoxically, he seems to lose his reason and then, finally, he loses his life. The paper map, consulted by Lear as the play began, had no way of representing the complexity of family or of representing greed, pride, love, anger, shame, cruelty, horror. This became, for Lear, unmapped territory but one that he had to travel through and, by virtue of Shakespeare’s words, we are compelled to travel with him and bear witness to what seems very often unbearable. Perhaps it is this that makes it still compelling for us today.

References


Kozintsev, G. (dir.) (1971), King Lear [Film] LenFilm Studio

O’Toole, F. (2002) Shakespeare is Hard, but so is Life: A radical guide to Shakespearean tragedy London: Granta
Storms are unpredictable and show us the power of nature as a destructive force. Defined as a serious disturbance of the atmosphere, a storm can wreak havoc on land and property. The starting point for any storm is hot air, and Act 1, Scene 1 of *King Lear* provides the catalyst for the imminent storm, which gathers force in Act 2, Scene 4. When we meet Lear in Act 3, Scene 2, he is in a disturbed state in the eye of a storm complete with “cataracts” (heavy rain fall), “oak-cleaving thunderbolts”, and “all-shaking thunder”. Shakespeare’s use of the storm in this act provides Lear with the opportunity to come to an understanding of the nature of power as it relates to kingship, thus leading him to a realisation about integrity and empathy.

Act 1 opens with the inciting incident, the division of the kingdom. Gloucester informs Kent that Goneril’s husband, the Duke of Albany, and Regan’s husband, the Duke of Cornwall, are to receive equal shares of the kingdom:

**KENT:** I thought the King had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall.

**GLOUCESTER:** It did always seem so to us; but now, in the division of the kingdom, it appears not which of the Dukes he values most, for equalities are so weigh’d that curiosity in neither can make choice of either’s moiety.

(1.i.1-6)

This exchange between Gloucester and Kent indicates that *King Lear* has already played favourites and divided the kingdom based on his preference for his youngest daughter, Cordelia, over her sisters, and that she, or more likely her husband, is to receive the larger share of land. It is fitting that Gloucester speaks these words for he, too, will suffer at the hands of one of his children, Edmund, who desires his brother’s lands. The theatrical love contest that follows is a public display of Lear’s authority and control as King and father, as well as a test of his daughters’ love for him.

The language employed by each sister in this “rhetorical contest” (the phrase is used by Smith) is revealing of her character. Goneril and Regan shower their father, the King, with hyperbolic words. Goneril begins her speech with a statement on the inadequacy of words to express her feelings, “Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter” (1.i.56). This is an ironic statement for it is her skilful wielding of empty words that initially convinces Lear of the sincerity of her love for him. Regan builds on Goneril’s exaggerated declaration, but critiques her sister:

Sir, I am made
Of the selfsame metal that my sister is,
And prize me at her worth. In my true heart
I find she names the very deed of love;
Only she comes too short.

(1.i.70-74)

Regan’s language—“prize me” (i.e. value me), and “the very deed of love”—underlines the idea behind the love contest in which power and land are inextricably linked.
Like Goneril, words fail Cordelia in the expression of her love towards her father: “I cannot heave/My heart into my mouth” (1.i.93-94). However, unlike her sisters, she does not communicate with the false words of “that glib and oily art” (1.i.227). She states plainly: “I love your Majesty/According to my bond; no more nor less” (1.i.94-95). The word-play on “bond” relates to her relationship to Lear as a daughter, and also signifies her solemn word and her genuine love for her father. The very name “Cordelia”, which contains the word cordial within it, suggests an authenticity in her responses. As a consequence of not playing a part in the rhetorical love contest, Lear perceives Cordelia’s seeming lack of tenderness as a great insult, and he banishes her from his sight. Cordelia’s final exchanges with her sisters show the sincerity of her love for her father, and her knowledge of their deception.

At the end of this scene, Goneril and Regan, whose husbands now possess Cordelia’s share of land and share the “coronet” (1.i.141), agree to act together against Lear’s further displays of authority that the “inform and choleric years bring with them” (1.i.302). Therefore, from the beginning of the play, Lear’s ill judgment does not allow him to see “that in the world of the play love and respect flow towards possessions, but do not belong to people as individuals” (McEvoy 2006, 223). As a King, Lear’s greatest possession was his land, which is the source of his power, and his false daughters’ love. Since he has placed such value on his authoritative position only, in dividing up his kingdom and giving away all but “The name, and all th’additions to a king” (1.i.138), he leaves himself with nothing.

Lear personifies himself as a dragon in Act 1, and as the hot air rises, Lear’s authority and status is challenged causing a sharp decline from his status as King to that of a born fool. It is ironic that it is the insightful critiques of Lear’s decisions by his Fool that further emphasises Lear’s ill judgement: “Thou hadst little wit in thy bald crown when thou gav’st thy golden one away” (1.iv.178-179). The use of “thou” in their exchanges in this scene illustrates their closeness despite the status divide that exists between a King and his Fool. Lear’s gift of crown and lands does not secure Goneril and Regan’s love, but leaves him with nothing, a phrase that is echoed throughout the play: “Thou hast pared thy wit at both sides and left nothing I’ the middle (1.iv.205-206). In her exchanges with Lear, Goneril’s use of “you” is more formal (see Crystal), and this emotional distancing allows her to challenge the authority of her father: “As you are old and reverend, you should be wise” (1.iv.261). Lear is enraged and Goneril’s challenge provokes him to question his identity:

Doth any hear know me? This is not Lear. Doth Lear walk thus? Speak thus? Where are his eyes
... Who is it that can tell me who I am?
(1.iv.246-250)

McEvoy observes how “The tone and function of the questions change throughout the play revealing, like the animal metaphors, Lear’s changing persona” (2005, 419). Lear’s understanding of how his unwise decisions have led him to this moment is emerging, as he strikes his head saying: “Beat at this gate that let thy folly in/And thy dear judgment out!” (1.iv.293-294).

In Act 2, Scene 4, Winter is used symbolically by the Fool as he warns Lear that further cruelty is to come: “Winter’s not gone yet, if the wild-geese fly that way” (2.iv.46). As Lear’s fortunes change, the Fool suggests through the medium of song that this reversal of fortune is one of the reasons more of Lear’s followers have left him:

That sir which serves and seeks for gain,
And follows but for form,
Will pack when it begins to rain
And leave thee in the storm.
(2.iv.79-82)
The idea of storms and winter as symbolic of the dark times in the lives of characters is a useful metaphor and is employed in George R. R. Martin’s trilogy *A Song of Ice and Fire*, which is set in a similar pre-Christian world to that of *King Lear*. In Martin’s first book, aptly entitled *Game of Thrones* (1996), the Stark family motto, “winter is coming”, echoes throughout the work. On a literal level, the motto heralds in the harsh meteorological conditions about to befall the citizens of Westeros after nine years of summer. The motto also functions on a metaphorical level, foreshadowing the dark times that are imminent, as a result of the political machinations of the Lannister family in their attempts to secure the throne, and, like the Fool’s line “Winter’s not gone yet”, acts as a warning.

Lear’s treatment at the hands of his daughters in Act 2, Scene 4 is partly the cruelty the Fool predicts, as it precipitates the chaos of the following act. Gloucester informs Lear that his second daughter, Regan, and her husband, the Duke of Cornwall, do not wish to speak to Lear. His rage is palpable in his rhetorical questioning: “Deny to speak with me? They are sick? The are weary?” (2.iv.89). McEvoy suggests that Lear’s questioning “reveal[s] his frustration and mounting fury white subtly exposes the false and deceitful nature of Regan and Cornwall” (2005, 420-421). Lear’s emerging self-realisation is blocked by his fury, and he still considers himself as King referring to himself as “We are not ourselves” (2.iv.108), and cursing “Death on my state!” (2.iv.113). As the sisters collaborate in order to reduce Lear’s number of followers, which are the last symbols of his authority as King, Lear reminds them of his gifts in Act 2 Scene 1, “I gave you all—”; Regan, cutting across Lear, finishes his sentence, “And in good time you gave it!” (1.iv.253). His final line in this scene: “O fool, I shall go mad!” (2.iv.289) sends him into the storm and tempest, where his tornadic journey peaks on the heath.

Lear’s descent into madness is emphasised by the relationship between the rhythm of the language and Shakespeare’s use of pathetic fallacy as a literary device, as the “rain, wind, thunder, fire” of the storm embody Lear’s rage at his ill treatment at the hands of his “two pernicious daughters” (3.ii.22). Lear’s opening line in Act 3, Scene 2 sees him rage against the storm: “Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!” (3.ii.1). Rhythmically speaking, the line of metre is two beats short, but the two silent beats after the exclamation mark at the end of “cheeks!” can be heard. This pause allows the audience and the actors to hear the thunder and lightning described by Lear. Considering Lear’s physical and mental state in this scene the speech is quite even with two lines moving beyond the metre, illustrating the severity of the storm:

```
Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder
(3.ii.5-6)
```

Crystal observes that line endings in Shakespeare, which represent the end of a thought, are represented by full stops, question marks, and exclamation marks. The line endings may vary depending on the edition used. There are nine lines in the first part of Lear’s speech, which contains six line endings. Each thought ends on an exclamation mark (in bold) indicating Lear’s fury, which is emphasised by the raging storm:

```
Blow, winds, and crack your **cheeks! Rage! Blow!**
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
Till you have drench’d our steeples, drown’d the **cocks!**
You sulph’rous and thought-executing fires,
Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
Singe my white **head!** And thou, all-shaking thunder,
Strike flat the thick rotundity o’ the’ world,
Crack Nature’s moulds, all germains spill at once,
That make ingrateful **man!**
(3.ii.1-9)
```
Although there is an evenness in the metre of the speech the run-on lines and line endings can be interpreted as Lear’s emotional outpouring—his anger is too intense to stay within the metre, or within one thought. Four of the six thoughts (cheeks, rage, head, man) end before the end of the line emphasising Lear’s distress. The last line in this part of the speech is four beats short, where another peal of thunder and lightning can be heard. In the second part of the speech there are eleven lines, but twelve thoughts, seven of which end on exclamation marks. Four of the lines move beyond the metre (daughters, unkindness, children, slave), so the metre is working to also suggest his anger at his children’s cruelty. The final line of the speech—“So old and white as this! O! O! ‘tis foul!” (3.ii.24)—contains two Os allowing the actor to express Lear’s emotion at its highest point.

Lear’s outbursts as represented by the language, metre and the storm, clear the hot air, and begin to reveal his learning. As the scene continues, Lear turns his attention to one more in need than he—the Fool: “How dost, my boy? Art cold?” (3.i.68). As Lear, the Fool, and Kent find shelter, Lear continues the care for both Kent and the Fool. Lear’s reflection on the plight of others begins with the speech “Poor naked wretches, whereso’er you are/That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm” (3.iv.28-29). Because of his experience to date he can empathise with the plight of those less fortunate than he. His self-realisation is captured in the following lines: “That thou may’st shakes the superflux to them/And show the heavens more just” (3.iv.35-36). As King, his status would not allow him to empathise with others, “and feel what wretches feel” (3.iv.34). His loss of power and status as King, as a result of giving his lands away, has provided him with an opportunity to understand that in casting off what we do not need, thus identifying with others less fortunate than ourselves, we become more just to our fellow humans. The appearance of Poor Tom (Edgar) in this scene cements Lear’s realisation.

In the division of his kingdom, Lear creates the conditions for a harsh storm to develop. The love contest displays his misplaced value on material things—such as land—as directly linked to love. When he gives away that land, which is the vehicle of his power, he gives away his kingship, and as McEvoy observes: “He is loved as a king because he is powerful. Without his power there is (apparently) nothing there to love” (2006, 223). Goneril and Regan’s cruelty in both their words and actions send Lear into a downward spiral, which finds him seeking shelter from the storm on the heath. While storms are changeable they can also clear the air, and it is in the company of Poor Tom, his loyal friend Kent, and his perceptive Fool where Lear comes to realise the stormy nature of power. His developing empathy leads him back to his fair Cordelia and to a better Lear.

References


Shakespeare's plays are full of remarkable coincidences and unbelievable incidents, scarcely credible cases of mistaken identity and bizarre and sometimes quite stupid decisions by seemingly intelligent people. In *Hamlet*, the Prince stages an elaborate play to try to capture the attention of his usurping uncle, rather than confront him outright as one might expect of a man who shows no hesitation in killing the elderly father of his friend. Moreover, he is very quick—for an educated man—to believe the words of a ghost. In *The Winter's Tale*, a man's wife hides for sixteen years from her husband (after he falsely accuses her of adultery), then is reconciled to him not in a tearful face-to-face meeting but only when he is convinced that a gifted artist has made a remarkable statue of her that will seem to come to life when he comes near it, the statue of course being the woman herself. The famous stage direction—"Exit, pursued by bear"—gives an idea of how unbelievable are events in *The Winter's Tale*. But there are many other such examples from across Shakespeare.

*King Lear* is no exception, indeed may lay claim to be amongst Shakespeare's more unbelievable plays. A seemingly respected King who has ruled, it is apparent, in relative harmony for many years decides to abdicate and divide his kingdom—notwithstanding that the division of kingdoms invariably leads to a dilution of authority, as a man in his position would know well. Moreover, he resolves to apportion sections of the kingdom to his daughters based on their public declaration of love, which is obviously not good politics: normally one would expect a sensible politician and ruler to take more than simply love into account in making such a serious decision. And he disregards his daughter Cordelia's protestations—though he admits to loving her the most—and instead falls for what fail to convince anyone else, the incredible and false declarations of his scheming older children, despite the best advice.

One incident in the play stands out as stretching the bounds of credulity, and indeed the limitations of the stage. In Act 4, Scene 6, Edgar (disguised as Poor Tom) leads his father, Gloucester (who—unbelievably—does not recognise him), seemingly to the edge of the cliffs of Dover. Gloucester wishes to commit suicide by throwing himself off. However, Edgar leaves him short of the cliff-edge so that when he falls—as he does—he simply falls on his face in the grass. Then Edgar convinces Gloucester that he has in fact fallen over the cliff and has miraculously survived. Furthermore, he compels Gloucester to believe that he is no longer Poor Tom (who, according to Edgar, is still at top of the cliff) but another stranger who will help him. This despite Edgar being Gloucester's beloved son and surely recognisable by voice alone to a doting father. The failure of the father to recognise the son; the transformation of the son from one character to another, without attracting any suspicion; the apparent fall from the cliff: all these stretch the credulity of the audience almost to breaking point. A.C. Bradley rightly speaks of the "grotesqueness of the incident for common sense" in his commentary on *King Lear* (203).

Of course, the incident is only absurd and grotesque if we approach Shakespeare's play with a particular perception of Shakespeare's ambitions and a particular conception ourselves of what is valuable in a play. Specifically 4.vi challenges common sense only if we look for realism—including psychological realism—in *King Lear*. While we might wish to see the play as a study of what happens when someone makes a critical error of judgement, it is helpful also to step outside such a method of considering the play and to look at it in another way. Shakespeare's plays are not necessarily what literary critics call "mimetic" (from the Greek for "imitation"); that is, when we come to look at his plays, we should not be directed in our judgements on them by the extent to which the plays are in some way imitative of or true to life, including true to what we expect in terms of
character psychology, development, motivation and action. Consideration of *King Lear* as a study in character and as charting the development of a person, and a set of relationships, can only take us a certain distance in understanding the workings of the play, in other words. Indeed, taking the play to be a character study seems to downplay the experience of the play as a spectacle—as if the play were a drama played out on a psychiatrist’s couch. Another way of looking at the play, and potentially a richer treatment of it, is to begin with our experience of the play and, particularly, with our experience of the play as a piece of theatre. What, we can ask, is the nature of that experience? Another way to ask this is to ask, what are the memorable moments in our experience of the play? They seem to me to be moments of utter cruelty—unlike any other play by Shakespeare, and scarcely like any of the period in English theatre. Two incidents in particular are striking for their cruelty and it is worth dwelling a moment on each, before returning to the strange action of 4.vi.

The first of these memorably cruel incidents is the blinding of Gloucester. Gloucester is taken prisoner and interrogated. Asked by Regan why he has sent the King to Dover, Gloucester replies:

> Because I would not see thy cruel nails  
> Pluck out his poor old eyes; nor thy fierce sister  
> In his anointed flesh stick boarish fangs.  
> The sea, with such a storm as his bare head  
> In hell-black night endured, would have buoy’d up,  
> And quench’d the stelled fires:  
> Yet, poor old heart, he holp the heavens to rain.  
> If wolves had at thy gate howl’d that stern time,  
> Thou shouldst have said ‘Good porter, turn the key,’  
> All cruels else subscribed: but I shall see  
> The winged vengeance overtake such children.  

(3.vii. 54-64)

Gloucester’s description of the sisters’ cruelty (note that he uses the word twice in the speech) is intended to be metaphoric; the plucking out of Lear’s “poor old eyes” by his daughters is a figure of speech. Cornwall, however, in a cruelly ironic act, tortures Gloucester by interpreting that metaphor literally: “See’t shalt thou never,” he says, because “upon these eyes of thine I’ll set my foot” (65-6). He removes one of Gloucester’s eyes, Gloucester screaming all the whole, “O cruel! O you gods!” The removal of the second eye is delayed by the intervention of a servant who cannot countenance the cruelty. A brief duel, culminating in Regan stabbing the man to death, emphasises the deliberate and transgressive nature of the blinding of Gloucester by creating a delay in the action being carried out, momentarily distracting the audience from the horror (by introducing new horror, in fact) thus making the horror all the worse when we return to it.

---

**CORNWALL:** Lest it see more, prevent it. Out, vile jelly!  
> Where is thy lustre now?

**GLOUCESTER:** All dark and comfortless. Where’s my son Edmund?  
> Edmund, enkindle all the sparks of nature,  
> To quit this horrid act.

**REGAN:** Out, treacherous villain!  
> Thou call’st on him that hates thee: it was he  
> That made the overture of thy treasons to us;  
> Who is too good to pity thee.

**GLOUCESTER:** O my follies! then Edgar was abused.  
> Kind gods, forgive me that, and prosper him!

**REGAN:** Go thrust him out at gates, and let him smell  
> His way to Dover.  

(3.vii.81-92)
The exchange here emphasises the physical nature of the blinding: the “vile jelly” of his eye is thrown to the ground; he is sent to “smell/His way to Dover”. The cruel physical blinding of Gloucester is rendered the more horrible and cruel by the needless revelation to the old man that he has also been “blind” to the merits or otherwise of his children, and has abused and rejected the son who was most loyal to him.

A second incident from the play that seems to strike the play’s keynote is from the very end, when Lear enters with Cordelia’s corpse. It is important that it is not Cordelia’s death that we remember—indeed, we cannot remember it, since it happens off-stage tellingly. The incident that returns to the mind again and again is the spectacle of Lear entering with the body of Cordelia and the raw nature of his grief.

Howl, howl, howl! O! you are men of stones:
Had I your tongues and eyes, I’d use them so
That heaven’s vault should crack. She’s gone for ever.
I know when one is dead, and when one lives;
She’s dead as earth. Lend me a looking-glass;
If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,
Why, then she lives.
(5.iii.256-262)

Cordelia’s very brief seeming revival (at least in Lear’s eyes)—“This feather stirs; she lives!”—functions in a manner not dissimilar to the brief interruption of the blinding of Gloucester described above: a momentary relief from the horror merely amplifies the cruelty when our attention returns to it. The reactions of Kent and the others to Lear here direct us to consider the spectacle before us, not the fact of her death: “Is this the promis’d end?” asks Kent, suggesting both that this might be the Apocalypse, the End of the World, and also the end of the play of course; to which Edgar replies, with an emphasis on the spectacle, “Or image of that horror?” (5.iii.263-4)

The French avant-garde theatre director, actor and theoretician, Antonin Artaud, advanced a notion of what he called “the Theatre of Cruelty” in the early twentieth century. Artaud speaks of the need to “rescue [the theatre] from its servitude to psychology and ‘human interest’” (56). For Artaud,

To consider the theatre as a second-hand psychological or moral function [...] is to diminish the profound poetic bearing of dreams as well as of the theatre. If the theatre, like dreams, is bloody and inhuman, it is, more than just that, to manifest and unforgettably root within us the idea of a perpetual conflict, a spasm in which life is continually lacerated, in which everything in creation rises up and exerts itself upon our appointed rank; it is in order to perpetuate in a concrete and immediate way the metaphysical idea of certain Fables whose very atrocity and energy show their origin and continuity in essential principles. (58)

In so doing, the theatre, for Artaud, creates the possibility of re-negotiating the “passionate equation between Man, Society, Nature and Objects” (56). In other words, true theatre for Artaud does not require a play to be psychologically or morally realistic; rather, true theatre exposes fundamental, metaphysical, spiritual questions and conflicts through “furnishing the spectator with the truthful precipitates of dreams, in which his taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his chimeras, his utopian sense of life and matter, even his cannibalism, pour out” (57).

The terrible incidents in King Lear described above—arguably amongst the most memorable in the English theatre—highlight the spectacular nature of the play, meaning, the emphasis in the play is on cruel spectacle, rather than (solely) on character development and character relationships. The play might be seen, in other words, as a seventeenth-century exposition of ideas Artaud came upon three hundred years later: King Lear may profitably be seen as a play that allows cruelty to “pour out”, in Artaud’s words. It is interesting in this
regard to note Edgar’s aside to the audience as he seems to toy with Gloucester: “Why I do trifle thus with his despair/Is done to cure it,” he says (4.vi.33-4). That is, his cruelty towards his father is designed to cure his father of his despair. Importantly, these lines are spoken as an aside—the audience, thus, becomes complicit in the action. Our experience at this moment in the play is not as victims of the cruelty of Edgar but, rather, as perpetrators of the cruelty: we are in league with him in acting the way he does. Similarly, we share in the cruel practice of Regan and Cornwall when they blind Gloucester, rather than dwell with the old man in his blindness: the public nature of the blinding acting ensures this. And finally we are the cruel Gods that treat human life with so little regard that Cordelia, a perfect innocent, can be crushed. When Gloucester says at the start of Act Four, “As flies to wanton boys, are we to th’Gods;/They kill us for their sport” (4.i.36-7), he could in fact be speaking about us, the audience, who revel in the killing and are entertained by it, not least by the utter cruelty of the death of Cordelia.

*King Lear*, in this reading, can be seen then not just as a play about a stupid monarch: his decision to divide up his kingdom becomes, in this understanding, merely a convenient plot device to start the drama. Rather, the play is about cruelty, principally our own, and offers us a means not simply to be sad at the tragedy of Lear but to be disturbed in equal measure by our capacity to relish it.

**References**

