“The worst is not so long as we can say 'This is the worst.'

Themes of redemption and power in 21st century productions of *King Lear*

The only surviving record of a performance of *King Lear* during William Shakespeare’s lifetime is immortalized on the title page of the 1608 quarto: “As it was played before the King’s Majestie at Whitehall upon S. Stephens night in Christmas Hollidayes.”¹ Some scholars, however, contest that the play probably had a rich stage history during Shakespeare’s lifetime, at The Globe Theater as well as the King’s court.² The play’s titanic themes – nature, redemption, nothingness – and its relatively minimalistic staging would have made it ideal for a bare apron stage. When the players raised their black flag above the theater to signal a tragedy, Londoners would have flocked to the Bankside to see Richard Burbage in the title role. Props and stage pieces would have been minimal, maybe only a chair and Kent’s stocks. The King’s Players made no attempts to recreate Iron Age England. Most of the play’s iconic images – the storm, Lear’s throne room, the heath – were left for the audience’s imagination.

After years of attempting to perfectly recreate thunder and lightning onstage, many contemporary *King Lear* productions have returned to the internalized, stylistic staging of the play’s earliest days. As Henry Granville Barker explains in his landmark *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, “the storm is not in itself, moreover, dramatically important,

¹ William Shakespeare, *M. William Shakespeare, his true chronicle history of the life and death of King Lear, and his three daughters With the vnfortunate life of Edgar, sonne and heire to the Earle of Glocester, and his sullen and assumed humour of Tom of Bedlam* (1608).

only in its effect upon Lear.”³ Since this early twentieth century shift in performance theory, followed by Jan Kott’s and Peter Brook’s later, metaphorical interpretations, productions of *King Lear* have been diverse, to say the least. The play has been set everywhere from Celtic England to revolutionary Russia; some productions shower Lear and the Fool in water to the sound of realistic thunder crashing in the background for the storm scene, while others employ abstract instrumentals to symbolize the tempest in the King’s head; actors portraying the aging king have characterized him as cruel, senile, vengeful, jolly, even incestuous.

Understanding how a play has evolved in performance is an integral part of dramaturgical study, but for the purposes of my research with Washington College’s 2013 production, I am specifically concerned with *King Lear*’s poignancy in 2013: How can an audience of American college students relate to a story about a tyrannical Iron Age king? The first portion of this chapter will provide a comprehensive production history of the play, from the seventeenth century through Peter Brook’s 1962 staging. The rest of my research, however, will focus on modern performances, particularly images of power and authority and the characterization of Lear himself. The most effective examples – Barry Kyle’s 2001 Globe production and Trevor Nunn’s 2007 Royal Shakespeare Company production – retained elements of Brook’s dark, internal staging, portraying their Lears as flawed, sometimes cruel and abusive. Unlike Brook, however, those interpretations were not entirely hopeless, the story of one man fighting a losing battle against a godless universe; they were ultimately redemptive, implying that while power is corruptible, leaders are not inherently immoral. The less resonating staging – the 2006 Goodman Theater production directed by Robert Falls -- portrayed Lear and his

³ Prefaces pg 37
kingdom in the extreme to create a political parable: the King and his court were entirely
corrupt and reprehensible, and it was impossible to care about their tragic fate. Our
production goal more closely aligns with those of the Kyle and Barry stagings. Figures of
authority can be corrupt and cruel, but they are ultimately human. Even the most fallen
King can achieve redemption.

In its 400 year history, *King Lear* has seen periods of immense popularity as well
as long stretches of critical scorn. The imaginative, abstract quality that made the play so
ideal for the empty Globe stage was a detriment to post-restoration scholars. Nahum Tate
described it as “a heap of jewels, unstrung, and unpolished,” and in 1681 published a
dramatic rewrite of the tragedy, *The History of King Lear*, which dominated the stage for
more than 150 years. In Tate’s rewrite, Lear is rightfully restored to power at the end, and
he puts his kingdom in the safe hands of his righteous daughter, Cordelia, and her
romantic interest, Edgar. The iconic Lear performer during the Tate period of stage
history was David Garrick, whose renditions were apparently so moving that, even
without a tragic ending, audiences were left in tears for days. His was a sympathetic
Lear, “a little old white-haired man…with spindle shanks, a tottering gait and great shoes
upon little feet,” and he interpreted the king as a “weak man…old and weakly fond of his
daughters…an Old Fool.” Garrick’s portrayal of Lear epitomized romantic sentiments of
theater and spectacle, the idea that a successful performance hinged on its dramatic effect
on the audience. His and Tate’s interpretations of the play characterized Lear as “a man
more sinned against than sinning,” an empathetic father in an unjust universe (III.i.63).

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The play disappeared once again during the Regency period, when theater managers preferred to avoid allusions to monarchical madness under King George III’s unstable reign. During this time, it was appreciated more as a work of literature than drama. As Charles Lamb famously argued in 1812:

…the Lear of Shakespeare cannot be acted. The contemptible machinery by which they mimic the storm which he goes out in, is not more inadequate to represent the horrors of the real elements, than any actor can be to represent Lear… The greatness of Lear is not in corporal dimension, but in intellectual: the explosions of his passion are terrible as a volcano: they are storms turning up and disclosing to the bottom that sea, his mind, with all its vast riches. It is his mind which is laid bare…Lear is essentially impossible to be represented on a stage.

The imaginative quality which made the play so perfect for the bare Globe stage was now a detriment, a story that was simply too large for early nineteenth century audiences.

Shakespeare’s original text returned to the stage in 1838 with William Charles Macready’s lauded performance. His audience was treated to the first revival of the Fool in more than a century, portrayed by the acclaimed actress Priscilla Horton. Unlike Garrick and other contemporary Lears, Macready avoided portraying Lear as a feeble old man, telling his friend that “the towering rage of thought with which his mind dilates identifying the heavens themselves with his griefs, and the power of conceiving such vast imaginings, would seem incompatible with a tottering, trembling frame, and betoken rather one of ‘mighty bone and bold emprise,’ in the outward bearing of a grand old

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This imposing, brazen version of Lear remained the primary performative interpretation well into the 20th century.

This extended to John Gielgud, who worked extensively with Henry Granville Barker in his 1940 reinterpretation of the role. Barker, still famous for his “Prefaces to Shakespeare,” personally assisted Gielgud with his performance. He told the young actor: “Lear is an oak. You are an ash. We must see how this will serve you.”10 Gielgud, a small actor, transformed himself into a powerful king with the help of an enormous beard and cloak; he used a hidden sling to carry Cordelia’s body onstage with one arm. Gielgud was praised for his quick, delicate shifts in mood and temperament; from line to line, his Lear changed from rash and terrifying to gentle and compassionate. He also integrated humor into his performance, stating that “he [Barker] thought the King should show a childlike, but often savage, sense of humour throughout.”11 Gielgud’s Lear was a touchstone for its humanity and realism.

King Lear rebounded in popularity in the twentieth century. Many productions focused on the play’s darker themes, including death and violence, ruthless leadership and questioning God’s presence in an unjust universe. Arguably the most transformative contemporary interpretation of King Lear was Peter Brook’s 1962 Royal Shakespeare Company production featuring Paul Scofield. Brooks was influenced by Jan Kott’s influential scholarly article, “King Lear and Endgame,” a comparison of the play and the works of Samuel Beckett and Theater of the Absurd. In the same fashion, Brooks’ production interpreted Lear on a much larger scale than had been seen before, staging it

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9 William Charles Macready, Macready’s reminiscences, and selections from his diaries and letters, volume one (Macmillan, 1865), 207.

10 Leggatt, King Lear, 25.

11 Ibid, 27.
as a metaphor for the fall of humanity, not just the fall of a kingdom.\textsuperscript{12} The design took place in “big, violent and therefore very realistic circumstances, with flesh and blood actors in very harsh, cruel and realistic situations.”\textsuperscript{13} Brook therefore created an antiquated, violent society, vaguely pinpointed as Iron Age or Anglo Saxon Britain. The few props used were significant: Gloucester’s astrological chart, a looming oval platform behind Lear’s throne in the first scene, an orb passed among the sisters to represent power, an ambiguous metal shape later used as a chair against which Lear leaned as he died.\textsuperscript{14} The minimalism of the set made the actors look as if they were drowning in the vast darkness of the stage, echoing back to Beckettian themes of godlessness.

Brook eliminated any notions of good and evil among characters; the villains and heroes were all kind and mean, bad and just. Kent was loyal to Lear but oftentimes bullying and cruel; the sisters were not monster-like, but somewhat understandable in their struggle to deal with their father’s unruliness; Gloucester slapped his bastard son while introducing him; and most notably, Lear was portrayed as a cold, ruthless leader. At only 40 years old, Scofield was not the crippled, frail King so many expected. One critic described him as “a figure of rigid, cold arrogance, set in tarnished gold, his hands clenched upon the arms of a crudely fashioned throne…[His] was the voice of an old man, but a man not yet infirm, a ruler still in command.”\textsuperscript{15} There were no redeeming qualities in this King, and Scofield’s performance was largely metaphorical, a representation of the downfall of society rather than the portrayal of a human being. This

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, 47.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, 42.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, 53.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 53.
is widely considered the darkest of *Lears*, without the glimmer of hope or renewal that so many directors choose to inject in their productions.

Brook’s impact on *King Lear* in performance has influenced virtually every production since, stretching well into the 21st century. Even the play’s 2001 return to the reconstructed Globe Theatre echoed elements of the 1962 RSC staging. Although director Barry Kyle’s design and staging were relatively traditional, more than one critic described the play as Beckettian; one writer from the *London Evening Standard* compared Lear and the Fool’s wandering in the storm to “Beckett’s Pozzo and Lucky in ‘Waiting for Godot,’ also struggling in limbo.”  

Like Beckett’s abandoned protagonists, the characters in this production were alone against the emptiness of the universe, which was in their case a blank stage. The Globe Theatre’s ornate, marble paintwork was hidden behind plain wooden planks, an even more minimalistic design than Jacobean audiences would have seen. The actors were forced to rely on costumes and props to evoke a sense of time and place, but Kyle purposefully aimed for ambiguity: “We have started from the view that any production of *King Lear* is likely to involve at least two periods. Lear’s world is coming to an end -- explosively -- and as personalities split apart and the world descends into monstrosity, a new era emerges,” he said in the program. In the first scene, everyone was dressed in simple, monochrome Jacobean gowns. As power shifted into the hands of the younger characters, however, the style of dress started to integrate elements of twentieth century militarism; Goneril and Regan’s armies brandished pistols and machetes, while Lear and Gloucester were still in traditional, Celtic dress.  

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17 Program  
18 Prompt book
end of the play, the older generation was surrounded by soldiers in dark, unfamiliar clothing, instilling a sense of inevitable doom.

Where Brook stripped all his characters of morals and heroism, however, Kyle portrayed the relationship between Edgar and Lear as “a means to achieve transformation, and ultimately for Lear, redemption.”19 The King, played by Julian Glover, began his transformation as a strong, authoritative ruler. A low table with a map of the earth greeted the audience before the court’s entrance, implying that Lear’s division of state was a deliberate, careful decision. Before his grand entrance, his three daughters entered and circled the map as if staking out their territory. Then, following a procession of drums and courtiers, the King strode onstage for Act I Scene I. Everyone dropped to one knee, and Lear took center stage as he declared his plans for the kingdom in a strong, unwavering voice. His entrance was extravagant, but Glover’s Lear was not just a vain, selfish leader; the map’s deliberate placement and his courtiers’ reverence toward him indicated that he was a politically motivated, if autonomous, leader. Even after Cordelia presented her treasonous answer, he continued to act with courtly decorum. He moved downstage and kept his back to his daughter as he disowned her; he only turned back around to push her to the ground at the end of the scene.20

Introduced as unpredictable and unfeeling toward others, his interaction with Goneril in Act I Scene III indicated that these characteristics had long affected his relationship with his daughters. He barreled his way onstage after pushing through the

19 Prompt book
audience. He and his hunting party interrupted Oswald, who was quietly clearing dishes off Goneril’s table, with rousing shouts for dinner. The knights joined in Kent’s bullying of Oswald, which moved from harmless laughter to throwing the flailing servant into the audience. Goneril, her hair in a severe bun and dressed in a high-necked gown, brought a sense of calm and order to the chaotic scene. Although justified in her anger toward Lear, she did not raise her voice as she told him to “put away these dispositions which of late transport you from what you rightly are” (I.iv.226). She remained seated with her head bowed while her father circled the table, grabbing her chin and forcing her to look him in the eye on his line, “to have a thankless child” (I.iv.303). She looked at Albany after Lear left, wiping her eyes, and her line “do you mark that,” implied that this was not the first time her father had verbally abused her (I.iv.328).

Lear’s brute selfishness in the first two acts contrasted sharply with his transformation in the storm and subsequent scenes. In Act III Scene II, Lear appeared physically vulnerable for the first time, doubled over against the force of the storm. On his line “more sinned against than sinning,” a heavy gust of wind threw him backward, and Kent had to cover him with a blanket and support him through the rest of the scene. By the time Poor Tom appeared, half-naked and dripping wet, Lear already looked ravaged and broken. They kneeled together and embraced, but Tom stood when the King asked him “What hast thou been?” and answered with his arms outstretched; the audience was left with an image of a ragged, half-naked man assuming the position of Christ on the cross, and the once-regal King kneeling at his side.

The Christian imagery continued in Act IV Scene VI. Other than his costume change and incoherent speech, the King did not come across as mad; his demeanor was
deliberate, and he declared himself “every inch a king” with strength and deliberation (IV.vi.126). He was less of a mad king than a wise prophet, something Kyle specified in his costume notes: “he looks like a shepherd…Christian undertones with the crown of thorns.” This religious parallel continued in the final scene of the play. Lear entered at the end of Act V Scene III with Cordelia draped across his back, hunched over from the weight of her dead body like Jesus under the wooden cross. Kyle’s series of Christian imagery implied that Lear’s death was a form of redemption. A critic from The Telegraph noted that Kyle “emphasizes the play’s almost Beckett-like bleakness, but…it is the bracing compassion of this Lear that lingers most potently in the memory.” The audience’s final image from the 2001 Globe production was of a martyr in all-white, a redeemed King weeping over the victim of his mistake.

In contrast to the distinct minimalism of the Globe’s staging, the elaborate design in Nunn’s 2007 RSC production enhanced Lear’s transformative story. The design and costumes suggested a Russian Ruritania: a grand balcony with thick crimson drapes served as a backdrop for the first half of the play; Lear’s first costume was a decorated, elegant military uniform; and his soldiers were dressed to resemble Russian Cossacks. On a broader level, the world of the play was a militaristic kingdom grounded in meaningless custom and ritual. The production’s elaborate design outwardly seemed to contradict Brook’s barren, godless universe, but Nunn’s emphasis on empty ritualism connected to his focus on religion:

When everything in our history tells us to believe the gods will intervene on the side of virtue, Shakespeare says they don't... In the early scenes, Shakespeare’s play sets up the strong belief in his characters that human actions are overseen by the gods...But as the play progresses, more people pray and appeal for the

21 Kyle, Barry, “King Lear” (production program, 2001).
The battle at the climax of the story will determine whether or not good will triumph. Gloucester is urged to “pray, that the right may thrive.” He does. It doesn't. Finally, as it's realized that a death sentence is on both Lear and Cordelia, Albany leads all present in a final prayer as soldiers run to the prison – “The gods defend them.” The next word is “howl.” Cordelia is dead. No intervention. The gods aren't mentioned again.\textsuperscript{23}

Nunn established this question of the gods’ presence in a materialistic world even before Gloucester and Kent began their opening dialogue. In a wordless overture accompanied by solemn organ music, the entire court processed onstage and kneeled as their golden-clad King bestowed his silent blessings on Cordelia. The sequence looked like a religious ceremony, not the precursor to a formal political announcement.\textsuperscript{24}

This shallow ritualism continued with Lear’s division of the kingdom in Act I Scene I. Although his voice was shaky, he King sat with perfect soldierly posture and read his speech from a series of notecards. The ambiguity behind the deliverance of his announcement was significant; it indicated that the ceremony was staged beforehand, but also hinted at encroaching senility. Within the safety and ritualism of his court, McKellen’s Lear was soft-spoken and endearing – he chuckled while joking that he would “unburdened crawl toward death” (I.i.43). Even when Cordelia disrupted courtly etiquette, he retained his kingly composure. Her answer, “Nothing, my Lord,” was spoken with a laugh, mocking the meaningless formalism her father had imposed.

While her sisters delivered professions of love from their designated positions, Cordelia walked to her father’s desk to speak with him directly and moved about the stage as she continued her lines. Lear remained seated. His responses were biting and cold, but he did not raise his voice. He simply lifted his hand to signal the court’s

\textsuperscript{23} Kyle, program, 2001.  
attention as he ordered Cordelia to “hence and avoid my sight” (I.i.137). Even Cordelia knelted at the gesture. As soon as a servant questioned the his divine authority, however, Lear dispensed of courtly procedure. When Kent told him that “Thou swear’st they gods in vain,” the King leapt from behind his desk and punched his loyal servant in the stomach” (I.i.184). He snatched the coronet meant for Cordelia from his desk, waving it wildly as he continued his tantrum. In Nunn’s staging, Lear and Cordelia’s sudden divergence from royal ceremonialism triggered his kingdom’s downfall; it was Kent’s questioning of the gods’ existence, however, that spurred Lear’s transformation.

As the nothingness of courtly materialism became evident, the world of the play transformed from a stately palace into a crumbling warzone. Gradually, the elaborate courtroom from the first scene fell into ruin. The balcony crumbled and cracks in the ceiling widened until the stage was covered in war debris. The answer to Nunn’s central question – where are the gods? – became eerily clear as Lear’s world literally fell to pieces around him: Lear’s prayers for help were never going to be answered. Instead of offering hints at redemption as Kyle did, Nunn’s world resembled an apocalyptic battlefield with no hope of resolution. He explained the Fool’s disappearance in the fourth act by killing him; soldiers stormed into the hovel after Kent, Lear and Edgar left, grabbed the King’s small, playful Fool, and hanged him from the rafters. Many directors leave the Fool’s exit untouched, trusting the audience to recognized that the King’s truth-teller and moral alter-ego is no longer necessary. In murdering his particularly comical Fool, however, Nunn emphasized the gravity of the kingdom’s downfall; one of the

25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
play’s few uncorrupt characters, and one of Lear’s most trusted servants, has been destroyed by the King’s own family. Two of the other morally upstanding characters were expelled from the production entirely. The brief dialogue at the end of Act III Scene VII – Gloucester’s servants discussing how to help their bleeding master – was cut, leaving the Earl to “smell his way to Dover” completely alone. The servants’ roles, while brief, are reminders of the resilience of human nature and the possibility of a return to order. The absence of the servants’ dialogue implied that everyone, even the working class, was corrupted by the daughters’ uprising. By Act V Scene III, Kent, Albany and Edgar were stranded onstage together, surrounded by piles of corpses and remnants of their fallen kingdom. It was a bleak enough image to conclude with, but Nunn darkened the ending even more by eliminating yet another virtuous character. On his final line, “I have a journey, sir, shortly to go; my master calls me, I must not say no,” Kent pulled a pistol from his holster and walked offstage, implying that he was going to take his own life (V.iii.390).

Like Brook’s production, Nunn’s King Lear ended on a relatively hopeless note, but it was effectively personal and human. Most critics lauded McKellen’s emotional depth and his sympathetic characterization of the King. One critic, from X, said that “Even in the opening scene there is vulnerability behind the furious despotism, and to watch this Lear's progress through anger, then madness, to humility and love is to be reminded of all that is best and worst in the human condition.” McKellen’s Lear was contradictory. He was both feeble and powerful, forgiving and cruel, vengeful and kind. Although his wavering voice and slow gait indicated signs of age, he resisted showing

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any signs of weakness in the first two acts. His interactions with his knights in Act I Scene III was an active exhibition of strength. His knights blasted guns to announce their arrival and aimed them at Kent as he identified himself. Lear laughed and cheered as they pulled down one of Goneril’s tapestries and yelled for dinner along with them. He continued this show of masculinity with Goneril, screaming his curse inches away from her face until she collapsed in tears.

His first major emotional turning point was in Act II Scene IV, when he sobbed as he said, “ere I’ll weep.” He wiped away his tears and regained his composure for “Fool, I shall go mad,” then strode offstage with the same act of dignity and power he displayed earlier (IV.ii.327). In the storm sequence, he completely surrendered to his sorrow and terror, trying to project his voice over the loud, realistic claps of thunder. A shower of isolated rain drenched him center stage, but he made no effort to leave the circle of light, indicating that the storm was more mental than physical. He managed to conquer the line “more sinned against than sinning,” but most of his words were overpowered by the storm, and he struggled to stand upright against the wind (III.ii.53). He was the most exposed however, emotionally and physically, in Act III Scene IV. Following Poor Tom’s example, he pulled down his pants and lifted his shirt over his head as he cried, “Off, off, you lendings! come unbutton here” (III.iv.116). He stumbled blindly as he struggled to work his shirt over his head, standing completely naked in front of the audience until the Fool finally dressed him again. Their interaction – the Fool pulling Lear’s trousers back up and his shirt back down – resembled that of a father dressing a helpless child, not a servant helping a king. By the time he was brought onstage to see Cordelia, Lear epitomized the image of a “poor, infirmed despised old man.” His brilliant
crimson uniform from the first scene was now replaced with a red pajama robe, and the Doctor needed to wake him with smelling salts. His decline continued through the final scene of the play, when he hobbled onstage with Cordelia in a white smock, leaning on a cane for support. Compared to his powerful delivery of lines at the beginning of the play, the lines spoken after he entered with Cordelia’s body in his arms were almost whispers; his howls were barely audible gasps. Although the final, despairing image echoed Brook’s Beckettian production, Nunn’s staging resonated on a more human, impactful level. It posed questions about godlessness and the destruction of society, but highlighted Lear’s emotional journey from King to father.

In contrast, the 2006 Goodman Theatre *King Lear* focused almost entirely on the political aspect of the play. Robert Falls’ production, featuring Stacy Keach, was set during the late twentieth century Yugoslavian civil war, a period of immense bloodshed and unrest. “I was forced to look deeper and deeper into the dark heart of *King Lear* in order to understand how something like it could happen,” Falls said in his program notes. “All the characters are capable of both good and evil, and we don’t often recognize the monsters that move among us until it’s too late.” As one critic noted, however, the production leaned more heavily on the evil side of human nature than the good: “Falls' version of *Lear* is entirely about power politics and sexual politics. The play is no longer about the getting of wisdom and recognizing too late the true importance of loyalty and love; it's about a corrupt, disorderly, and morally bankrupt society… Without question this is a truly memorable *King Lear*, although emotionally it is one of diminished

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29 Trevor Nunn, “King Lear” (production program, 2007).
expectations.” The production was so commercially popular that it enjoyed a 2008 revival at the Shakespeare Theater Company in Washington D.C. Its success was not rooted in emotional resonance, however, but in spectacle and show.

The audience’s first glimpse into Lear’s world was a row of grimy urinals. Kent and Gloucester gossiped about the state of the kingdom while urinating, then the play transitioned to a gaudy banquet hall. Unlike the ceremonialism of Kyle’s and Nunn’s opening scenes, Fall staged an seedy, crude party as the setting for Lear’s love test. The King burst onstage and pushed his way through a crowd of partiers who were grinding to hip-hop music while swinging guns over their heads. Dressed in a powder blue suit and white shoes, Lear made it clear that he had no true intention of “unburdened crawl[ing] toward death” (I.i.43): he kicked his legs past his waist as he danced and drank with his subjects; he drunkenly groped Regan, a blonde “Paris Hilton-lookalike” in a hot-pink party dress; and above the everyone’s heads loomed a much younger version of the King, a massive, golden-framed portrait. The King was actively resisting time, putting on a display of youth and audacity in front of the daughters who would eventually take his place. The opening scene established an effectively disturbing status quo, but compared to the RSC and Globe productions, there was very little at stake; the kingdom was already in a state of chaos, so the dissemination that would encompass the next four acts seemed inevitable.

Falls stripped any traditional notions of “goodness” from the play. Kent, usually portrayed as unfailingly loyal and kindhearted, was as corrupt as any other character in

the Goodman production. Disguised as a skinhead thug, he threatened sexually violate Oswald with a tire iron for disrespecting the King instead of tripping him over his foot as in most productions. Gloucester, while not evil, could hardly be considered a redeeming character: “His early praise of base-born Edmund is the lecherous, look-what-I-sired boast of a rutting dog,” and he drunkenly smashed a vodka bottle over his head during the party sequence.\(^{32}\) Edgar was portrayed as a spoiled, pill-popping freeloader. Even the goth Cordelia was unlikable; in the first scene, she was less defiant than disgusted by her father’s gross display of power.\(^{33}\) In an abstract scene inserted into Act IV, dozens of cloth-wrapped bodies, including Gloucester’s, were lowered into an onstage pit, symbolizing the human sacrifices made during the kingdom’s power struggle. The impact of their anonymous deaths was lessened, however, because of how the kingdom’s inhabitants were portrayed: everyone – royalty, soldiers, servants – was selfish and corrupt, so their deaths came across as inevitable and, to some degree, deserved.

Lear followed a similar character arc. His antics in the first scene characterized him as a narcissistic dictator who was more interested in securing a lavish retirement than peace for his kingdom. McKellen and Glover were impetuous and cruel, but they took pride in their state. After a grand procession onstage, they divided their territory with dignity and ceremonialism on a map of the kingdom, implying that in his younger days at least, Lear was an effective King. Keach’s performance gave no such indication. This was a court long accustomed to riotousness and debauchery. Lear hacked away at portions of his kingdom, marked by mountains of icing on a decadent cake. He had no


reverence or deliberation, implying that his had been a long reign of extravagance. The focus of the production was the shortcomings of a kingdom, in fact, not the enlightenment of a selfish king. In all of his emotional touchstone scenes, Keach was overshadowed by atmosphere or politics. Even in the final, haunting image of the play was more of a political statement than the climax of Lear’s evolution. Cordelia’s naked, lifeless body – bruised and obviously raped -- was the focal point of Act V Scene III. Lear’s famous last words were insignificant compared to the brutally violated victim he carried in his arms. Cordelia’s corpse was a final commentary on the devolution of a senseless tyrannical government; Keach was merely the dictator who instigated his kingdom’s downfall, not a regretful father who had learned the error of his ways.

Staging King Lear is a balancing act; a director and dramaturg must approach both the political and personal aspects of the play. While Lear’s story is effective as a political parable, glazing over the emotional arc of the play diminishes its impact onstage. Our goal is to highlight our main themes – power and leadership – while ensuring the play is still a personal, family drama. Kyle’s and Nunn’s respective productions achieved just that: their Lears were imperfect and at times detestable, but they were performed with an approachability that made their downfall emotionally resonant. Falls’ staging was more concerned with relevancy and design than with character and story. Lear, one of Shakespeare’s most painfully tragic protagonists, was eclipsed by the spectacle of his kingdom’s downfall. Falls turned King Lear into a political metaphor about the inevitable decline of a corrupt government. While more relevant to contemporary audiences than a story about 800 B.C., it ignored what audiences continue to love about King Lear.

34 Ibid 71.
35 Abarbanel, “King Lear,” TheaterMania.
centuries after its debut: the empathetic, enlightening journey of a man at the end of his life.