“When we are born, we cry that we are come to this great stage of fools.”

A dramaturgical study of *King Lear*, from its 1608 performance before King James I to its 2013 Washington College production

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Honor Code

I pledge that I have abided by the Washington College Honor Code during the preparation for and completion of this assignment.

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Introduction: “Why is this reason’d?”

At first, the civilized world of 2013 seems nothing like the barbaric, violent kingdom over which Shakespeare’s aging King supposedly ruled in 800 BC. His was a land of blood-lust and greed, where bastards and daughters could not inherit, pagan gods were cursed and worshiped and the clashing of swords determined worthiness. Centuries later, however, “robes and furr’d gowns” continue to “hide all” (IV.vi.181). On February 11, 2013, televisions and newspapers were flooded with the revolutionary news that Pope Benedict XVI was stepping down from his role as leader of the Catholic Church – the first Pope to do so in nearly 600 years. During his eight years in the Papacy, Benedict was treated to a life of royalty: his Apostolic Palace included a private chapel, enormous library, gleaming kitchen, and a full staff of butlers, cooks, housekeepers and secretaries. He dined on lavish, multi-course meals – pasta with salmon and zucchini, rigatoni with prosciutto, strudel, tiramisu – and traveled in his famous “popemobile,” a white armored Mercedes SUV with a white leather, gold-trimmed interior\(^1\). After years of pampering, however, Benedict suddenly announced his abdication: “After having repeatedly examined my conscience before God, I have come to the certainty that my strengths, due to an advanced age, are no longer suited to an adequate exercise of the Petrine ministry,”\(^2\) he said. His comment echoes Lear’s decision to “shake all cares and business from our age…Conferring them on younger strengths, while we/ Unburdened crawl toward death” (I.i.43).

Benedict’s decision epitomizes how the 21st century world is in flux, politically, culturally and socially. In 2011, “the 99 percent” started the Occupy Wall Street Movement, a protest against economic inequality. The same year, a public uprising in Egypt led to the

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overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak and what protestors saw as a brutal, corrupt political regime. This was followed the overthrow of Lybian leader Colonel Muammar Gaddafi and the ongoing Syrian Civil War between government loyalists and protesters. After Russian President Vladamir Putin’s third reelection in 2011, nationwide protests spoke out against a supposedly corrupt election system. Fifteen-year-old Malala Yousafzai, a Pakastani activist for women’s rights under Taliban rule, survived an assassination attempt in October 2012; her efforts earned her *Time* magazine’s runner-up for Person of the Year and a Nobel Peace Prize nomination. Similarly, Benedict XVI’s revolutionary announcement embodies the changing sentiments of the world around him. His acknowledgment of his own limits as a ruler epitomizes shifting 21st notions of status and authority.

Benedict and William Shakespeare were born centuries apart, but their worlds are on many levels fundamentally the same. Shakespeare presented *King Lear* – a story that brought a king to rags and a great kingdom to ruin – during a time when his audience was reevaluating England’s traditional hierarchical system. Jacobean audiences were dictated by a strict hierarchical social system; even in Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre, royalty and noblemen displayed their gowns and jewels from boxed seats while the peasant groundlings stood crammed together below. England’s newly crowned King James I was an ardent follower of Divine Right of Kings, the concept that “the state of Monarchy is the supremest thing upon earth…Kings are justly called gods, for they exercise a manner or resemblance of Divine power upon earth.”3 Not all of his subjects, however, were as devoted to this concept of monarchical absolutism. James’ traditional ideologies were under scrutiny from subjects and scholars who wanted to respect, not

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3 James I, “A Speech to the Lords and Commons of the Parliament at West-Hall, on Wednesday the XXI. of March. Anno 1609 [1610]”, as reprinted in *The Works of the Most High and Mighty Prince, James … King of Great Britain, France and Ireland*. London 1616.
worship, their ruler. Shakespeare’s play grappled with elements of a shifting social and political landscape: Authority, religion, human nature, generational conflict, poverty and wealth.

When it was staged before James I at Whitehall, Shakespeare’s acting company would have presented the play in its most elemental form. Without a set on which to rely and establish time and place, the actors had to create their own world onstage. They used elaborate costumes to establish character, and used music and humor to engage their audience. Since then, staging practices have evolved. Today, audiences are meant to immerse themselves completely in the world of the play; they sit in darkness and focus on the brightly lit stage. Audiences at the Globe, on the other hand, were encouraged to eat, drink, laugh and talk during performances. Actors and spectators shared the same, natural lighting, so there was no hiding that they were in a theater. Characters spoke directly to the audience, constantly breaking down the fourth wall and acknowledging the story’s theatricality. Other staging conventions – young boys playing female roles, areas of the stage symbolizing heaven and hell, a disregard for historical accuracy with costumes and props – have also disappeared since the early seventeenth century. Today, although King Lear’s main themes certainly continue to resonate with spectators, a director needs to determine how to best stage the play so it resonates with a contemporary audience. The staging questions are virtually endless: Where and when should the play be set? Is the King an unforgiving tyrant or a senile old man? What happens to the Fool? Is this a story about redemption and love, or the inevitable destruction of humanity? A modern director often needs help answering these performance questions – and that is where my role as production dramaturg for King Lear began.

Although the practice and responsibilities associated with dramaturgy have always been present in the theater world, the role itself did not appear in America until the regional theater
movement thirty years ago. The word itself is cumbersome and awkward; even more difficult, however, is finding for it a single, concise definition. A dramaturg’s responsibilities vary dramatically depending on her theater, location and production assignments, and each has her own interpretation of what her job entails. Even the Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of America define the position in loose, ambiguous terms:

Working in theatres and playwrights' organizations, in colleges and universities, and on a project-by-project basis, dramaturgs contextualize the world of a play; establish connections among the text, actors, and audience; offer opportunities for playwrights; generate projects and programs; and create conversations about plays in their communities.

For classical works that require a significant amount of research and contextualization, a dramaturg’s tasks may include: assisting the director with casting and rehearsals and establishing his or her artistic vision; advising designers; editing, drafting, arranging and cutting versions of the text; providing the cast with images, videos, sounds and questions; exploring the world of the play and finding contemporary parallels; creating a lobby display and writing program notes; and researching the playwright, performance history and scholarly criticism; and working with the cast and production team to answer the deceptively simple question, “Why this play now?”

For Washington College’s Spring 2013 production of King Lear – a collaboration of faculty and students from both the English and drama departments – my role as dramaturg was particularly unconventional. Along with the abovementioned dramaturgical expectations, I had to convey our production’s message to a largely inexperienced cast and audience. Somehow, I needed to help our director, Dr. Jason Rubin, connect the ancient, paganistic world of the play with the world of our spectators – an enlightened, oftentimes insulated, American college

6 What is Dramaturgy?, Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas, April 1, 2013.
7 Ibid
environment. The early 17th and 21st century are both eras of dramatic conflict and change; it was my responsibility as dramaturg to draw parallels between the two and bring to light the relevance of Shakespeare’s tragedy.

To make those comparisons, I investigated the original world of the play and how it has evolved onstage since. In the following three chapters, I will provide a comprehensive overview of King Lear’s role in dramatic history and how its evolution has affected the central question which every director needs to confront: What is this play about? Within this, there are two other, primary decisions a director must make: Is this play a political fable or a family drama, and is it a story of redemption or hopelessness? As Marjorie Garber suggests in her analysis in Shakespeare After All, the text provides no clear answers to these challenges. Instead, production choices in design, context and performance provide final answers on stage (Garber 694).

Broadly, our production’s thematic focus resembled that described in “King Lear and Cymbeline”:

For Lear is not principally a play about ingratitude; nor is it about the consequences of a love contest. It is, as Professor Hardin Craig has brilliantly perceived, a play about kingship; its principal theme is authority and the consequences to the world when authority is abandoned. Like Othello, it is a great personal tragedy; but unlike Othello, it is political tragedy as well. It deals with basic ethical problems, but these are inseparable from political problems. The arena of the tragedy is not the individual life of man, but the life of the state; and in typically Renaissance fashion, the state is seen as the middle link in a great chain, with the physical universe above it and man’s personal family relations below it. Thus the great tragedy of the state has its repercussions in the world of private man and in the world of physical nature as well.8

While meaningful on a personal level as well, our King Lear was more of an examination of power and leadership and how the effects of an unstable political system impact society on a human level. It took more time to develop an answer to the second question, regarding themes of

redemption and resolution, but we ultimately decided that our production would instill a sense of hope. Some performances, such as Peter Brook’s 1962 production, end the story on a desolate note, making it more of a metaphor about the destruction of society: Edgar and Albany are left surrounded by the scattered remains of a once-great kingdom, and the final lines of the play – “We that are young/ Shall never see so much, nor live so long” (V.iii.300) -- are open-ended. They provide no satisfactory answer for how England’s future will unfold. Our production takes the stance that Edgar and Albany learn and grow from their tragic predecessors’ mistakes.

My thesis analyses how various stage interpretations answered the question of “Why this play now?” through directorial, performance and design choices. The following chapters address my most difficult dramaturgical challenges through three areas of research: The world of the play, its stage history, and the development of our Washington College production. Combined, the chapters trace the play’s development – from its debut before the King in 1608 to Ian McKellen’s 2007 performance to our 2013 staging – to better contextualize the play for a Washington College audience. The first two chapters provide examples of how thematic and performance choices have King Lear on stage since its presentation before King James I in 1606. My third chapter analyses the choices we made in our own production, using the play’s historical and performance history as a foundation.

Chapter One asks, “Why this play then?” How was King Lear relevant in the early seventeenth century, and how was it a commentary on the cultural and political atmosphere of the time? In particular, I compare Lear’s character to his contemporary foil, King James I. I argue that, although Shakespeare adhered to censorship guidelines, his play was still a parable about the dangers of absolute power. In the wake of the King’s coronation and his outspoken belief in Divine Right of Kings, Shakespeare’s tragedy would have resonated on a particularly
poignant level for his spectators, rich and poor alike. Understanding what the play originally meant on a cultural level originally is instrumental to developing what we want our *King Lear* to say to a 21st century audience.

My second chapter begins by investigating the play’s stage history, from Nahum Tate’s infamous rewrite through Peter Brook’s 1962 Royal Shakespeare Company production. The rest of the chapter focuses on *King Lear* in the 21st century, and how directorial, design and performance choices impact the play’s meaning for a contemporary audience. I selected three prominent stage productions of *King Lear*. For each, I examined the character of Lear himself—his portrayal of kingship and authority in the first scene, evidences of senility, his relationship with his daughters, and ultimately whether or not he achieved redemption. I determined which of the three examples were emotionally resonant, examining how various elements contributed to theme and character development.

My final chapter is a critical examination of our own staging of *King Lear*. I trace the production’s development, from pre-rehearsal preparations—conceptual ideas, artistic design, casting—to in-class discussions, tech week run-throughs and our ultimately, our finished production on Decker stage. The research from my first two chapters was used to inform our own production process; understanding what choices were effective in previous productions provided the context necessary to make deliberate decisions in our own work.

To someone familiar with the text, the themes from *King Lear* are clearly relevant today—Benedict’s abdication, for example, indicates a similar shift in notions of power and authority to those of Shakespeare’s society. My job as dramaturg, however, requires that I illuminate such parallels for a director, cast and audience. To do so, I am comparing our Washington College vision of the play with how Shakespeare’s tragedy developed on stage, from the Globe Theatre
to the Royal Shakespeare Company to Decker Stage. I am examining what the play says about power and kingship, how those themes can be expressed onstage, and how our performance choices culminated in our own stage interpretation.
Chapter 1: “‘What is the cause of thunder?’”

Natural Law and absolutism in *King Lear* and the politics of King James I

On April 5, 1603, “accompanied with multitudes of his nobility and gentlemen,” King James IV of Scotland began a month-long procession through his new kingdom. His first stop was Berwick, and a half mile before the king even reached its gates, the town was smothered in a cloud of smoke from its soon-to-be monarch’s enormous train. James was greeted by the town mayor who “received him with great signs of joy, and the common people also, kneeling, shouting, and crying ‘Welcome’ and ‘God save King James’ till they were entreated to keep silent.”  

From town to town, the wine continued to flow; in return for the lavish celebrations, the King rewarded his new subjects with knighthoods and gifts, and even freed prisoners in anticipation of his impending coronation. On his April 21 arrival at Newark-upon-Trent, however, English subjects caught a glimpse of a dark side to their new monarch, an unforgiving, tempestuous contrast to the jolly king they so anticipated:

> Here in the Court was taken a cutpurse doing the deed, who though a bas pilfering fellow yet was gentleman-like in the outside. Good store of coin was found about him, and upon examination he confessed that he had come from Berwick to this place and played the cutpurse. When the King heard of it, he directed a warrant to the Recorder of Newark to have him hanged, which was accordingly executed.

Not even officially crowned England’s new king, James was already evidencing his belief in positive law – “asserting that law is simply whatever the sovereign commands” – over natural

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law -- “asserting a necessary relationship between law and morals.”

James’ councilors, horrified at the severity and rashness of their new king’s reaction, alerted him to the English custom of due process of law. Under the title of James I of England, he respected his kingdom’s court system as much as necessary. His belief in total authoritarianism, however, would continue to define his reign as king, forcing England as a whole to question its fundamental notions of power and kingship.

It is easy to imagine King Lear in place of James in this story, blind to conventions of justice and order, barking at his attendants to “Come not between the dragon and his wrath” (I.i.123). Disdain for compromise, excessive knighting of subjects, lavish entertainments at the expense of monarchical duties -- the parallels between England’s new king and Shakespeare’s tragic patriarch are not subtle, particularly given the time of the play’s conception. It was performed before the King himself on St. Stephen’s Day, 1606, only three years after his coronation and amidst growing tension concerning his controversial monarchical philosophy.

Similarly, the political world of King Lear is rife with tension between natural and positive law: On one side are Coredlia and Kent, embodiments of morality and goodness; on the other, an army of villains that are, as R.S. White describes, “represented as an equation between power and positive law, without reference to conscience or any ‘higher’ morality.” These antagonists exemplify the corruptive nature of authority, while their self-sacrificing counterparts demonstrate an alternative, enlightened philosophy toward power.

Lear is at the center of this bloody power struggle, and the play follows his evolution from a king into a human being. Given the political atmosphere in early Elizabethan England when the play was written, I argue that Shakespeare’s tragic king is a foil for James himself, and

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his story is a parable for the dangers of absolute authority. Shakespeare does not contest the
King’s divine source of power; he recognizes the relationship between God and monarch, but
demonstrates that the King is as human as a Bedlam beggar, and his actions are at the judgment
of God himself. A good king must enact natural law as well as positive, ruling morally as well as
politically. A king who disregards moral order in favor of institutional power is defying divine
laws, leading to the devolution of political stasis into chaos. James often compared himself to
Jove, the tempestuous god of thunder, sweeping down upon his subjects with the wrath and
power of a furious storm.\textsuperscript{14} One spectator described an instant in Parliament when an
“unexpected message” from the King “grew some amazement and silence. At last one stood up
and said, ‘The Prince’s command is like a thunderbolt; his command upon our allegiance like the
roaring of a lion.’”\textsuperscript{15} James not only believed his authority was derived from the heavens, he
expected to be treated with godlike status as well. Shakespeare questions these notions of power,
asking Poor Tom, “What is the cause of thunder?” (III.iv.151).

James’ devout absolutism permeated not only Parliament and the royal court, but all of
England. Immediately upon his instillation as king, James established his ideologies for his
subjects in a reprint of \textit{The Trew Law of Free Monarchies}.

\begin{quote}
And as ye see it manifest that the king is over-lord of the whole land, so is he is master
over every person that inhabiteth the same, having power over the life and death of every
one of them; for although a just prince will not take the life of any of his subjects without
a clear law, yet the same laws whereby he taketh them are made by himself or his
predecessors, and so the power flows always from himself.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{14} Leah S. Marcus, "Retrospective: King Lear on St. Stephen's Night, 1606," chap. 3, \textit{Puzzling Shakespeare: Local
Reading and its Discontents} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 118.
\textsuperscript{15} Harrison, G. B., ed, \textit{A Jacobean Journal, being a Record of those Things most Talked of
During the Years 1603-1606} (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941), 144.
\textsuperscript{16} James I, \textit{The Trew Law of Free Monarchy Revealed}, as reprinted in \textit{The Political Works of James I}. (New York:
\end{flushright}
According to his rules of kingship, James had a degree of responsibility toward his subjects to rule fairly and effectively. Any form of rebellion from these subjects, however, was treason against not only their king and country, but God himself. This positivist political theory was not new; in fact, it was old-fashioned, a call for an antiquated form of monarchy in which kings loomed over their subjects like gods. Alvin B. Kernan iterates that James’ theory was the product of a strictly traditional education of Scottish history, a focus on a primitive world where figures of power ruled clashed against nature and ruled with brute force. Like Lear and his ancient universe of Pagan gods, James emerged “out of the mists of the ancient past, as if there had always been kings of this kind.” In these kings’ worlds, where gods grant unquestionable authority to one man, morals are enacted when convenient; when they compromise a king’s authority, they fall wayside to his assertion of power.

There is, however, a glaring logical fallacy within James’s reasoning. If a king’s power is derived from God, he cannot be “called Gods” who “sit upon GODS throne.” Rather, he has a contract with God, who grants him power under the stipulation that he rule justly and morally. The King may be above the law, but he is at the mercy of God. Just as subjects recognizes the faults in his absolutism -- “When thou clowest thy crown i’the middle and gav’st away both parts, thou bor’st thine ass on they back o’er the dirt,” (I.iv.139) his Fool tells him -- James’s flawed set of political principles did not go uncontested. As Paul Shupack demonstrates, political theorists were arguing over two conflicting concepts of authority, one which “saw the king as a human being, serving as king by the grace of God, but still a frail human being,” the other

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17 Alvin Kernan, "The True King," *Shakespeare, the King's Playwright: Theater in the Stuart Court, 1603-1613* (Yale University Press, 1995), 97.
18 James I, ‘A Speech to the Lords and Commons of the Parliament at White-Hall, on Wednesday the XXI. Of March. Anno 1609 [1610]’, in *The Workes of the Most High and Mightie Prince, James … King of Britaine, France and Ireland* (London, 1616,) 529.
“taking the form of divine right of kings.”19 James, a fervent believer in the latter theory, entered a kingdom where the idea of the monarch as servant of the people was gradually taking hold. The tension between these two ideologies was especially evident in the King’s relations with Parliament, which had grown accustomed to working as a partner with instead of a servant to its monarch during Elizabeth’s reign. In his very first address to Parliament in March 1604, he advocated for his plan to unite Scotland and England, anticipating immediate accolades and support.20 After months without approval however, he responded with a speech that would define their consistently uneasy relationship: “I will not thank where I think no thanks due…You see I am not of such a stock as to praise fools…You see how in many things you did not do well. The best apology maker of you all, for all his eloquence, cannot make you all good.”21 The King remained at odds with the Commons throughout his rule, battling their desire for equilibrium between monarch and law in the hopes of instituting an authoritarian system.

Parliament was supported by a growing number of liberal-minded political theorists. One of the most radical of these was lawyer and jurist Sir Edward Coke, who advocated for a more balanced relationship between the King and lawmakers. In the face of James’s absolutism, he argued that justice be the responsibility of trained lawyers instead of a king unfamiliar with the intricacies of law. In one of his most famous exchanges with the King, he contested James’ protest that his word was greater than that of educated judges, saying “true it was that God had endowed his majesty with excellent science and great endowments of nature; but his majesty was not learned in the laws of his realm of England, and causes which concern the life or inheritance, 

20 Akrigg Letters of James VI and I. Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984, 235-7, as cited in Croft, King James.
21 John Phillips Kenyon, Stuart Constitution, 1603-1688 (2nd edn Cambridge 1986) pp. 29-37 as cited in Croft, Kroft, King James, 62
or goods, or fortunes, of his subject.” Coke saw James as an imperfect human being whose authority should be executed carefully and modestly, a sharp contrast to the King’s absolutism. Like James, Lear’s naturalist subjects call his positivism into question, and his kingdom is in a state of transition between two vastly oppositional political concepts. The play made its stage debut in the early years of James’ tempestuous relationship with Parliament and his subjects, but the already bristling political atmosphere undoubtedly influenced how the audience interpreted Lear’s transformation.

Exactly how much Shakespeare’s play resonated with the King’s court has been the subject of significant critical debate in recent years, specifically as it applies to differences between *The History of King Lear*, published in quarto form in 1607, and *The Tragedy of King Lear*, published in folio form in 1623. Many of the more significant changes – the removal of references to France and monopolies, the jarring absence of the mock-trail scene, Edgar’s expanded role and his assignment of the final line – have been used as evidence for censorship of more overt allusions to James in the second version. Since the publication of Gary Taylor’s essay in *The Division of Kingdoms: Shakespeare’s Two Versions of King Lear*, however, traditional explanations have given way to the theory that Shakespeare revised and republished his own work. Taylor attributes only two instances of evidenced censorship; the rest of the changes are the product of extensive authorial revision and the quarto and folio texts should be considered two completely independent plays. White makes a pertinent observation about the two texts on a thematic level, arguing that “where the Quarto presents explicitly issues of Natural

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Law, the Folio does so largely implicitly."26 Although White considers the texts thematically similar, his essay uses evidence from the more overt Quarto. For the purposes of my argument, however, I am relying on the Arden conflated version of the two texts. I agree with White that the both versions fundamentally tell the same story, but unlike many scholars who prefer to use the earlier, more explicit text, I consider the two versions to be fluid. There are pertinent details from both texts that provide insight into how the play is a reflection of the political atmosphere at the time, and I intend to use them interchangeably. As R.A. Foakes writes in his introduction to the Arden text, “readers should be free to make up their own minds.”27

Even the most ardent revision theorist cannot deny that the opening scene of both versions is, at its core, the same. It presents a king at the height of his power willingly renouncing his monarchial powers “to shake all cares and business from our age.”28 Lear’s intentions are deceptively simple: He intends to divide his kingdom among his three daughters and select a husband for his youngest (I.i.38). Some critics argue this division motif is complimentary of James’ own fixation with unifying Scotland and Britain.29 Certainly, his obsession with bringing his two kingdoms under “one worship to God, one kingdom entirely governed one uniformity in laws”30 was an enormous subject of debate among Parliament and England at large. Staging the opposite of James’s intents, a kingdom disintegrating as the result of division instead of unification of lands, does appear to reject the argument that Shakespeare was criticizing his king. As Harry V. Jaffa demonstrates, however, this decision is not the great king’s downfall. In fact, he argues that Lear is “the greatest of Shakespeare’s kings,”31 at least

26 White, History of King Lear, 187.
29 Pauline Croft, King James, 59
before he reconfigures his division plans in a fit rage. Although the text provides little history of the King’s years on the throne, his followers’ devotion suggests his reign has been favorable. Even in the throes of his master’s temper, Kent says “My life I never held but as a pawn/ To wage against thine enemies” (I.i.156). No one – not Kent, Cordelia, even his Fool – contests Lear’s original division plan. According to Jaffa, the plan is to divide the kingdom between his daughters and their husbands, “a third more opulent” to Cordelia with whom he would retire.\(^{31}\) Splitting the kingdom in three is a paradoxical method of ensuring unity in the future, creating “a balance of power…where there are three distinct forces, no one of which can overmatch the other two.”\(^{32}\) Shakespeare presents a competent, worthy king, who uses the law and tradition to ensure “that future strife/May be prevented now” (I.i.43). His division plan is not the playwright’s attempt to appease the king sitting in his audience; it is a savvy political maneuver by a man whose mental faculties are, at least for now, completely sound.

As Sandra Hole emphasizes, however, Lear’s decision is still an act of positive law, the first of many trials pitting moral law against authoritarian rule.\(^{33}\) Lear’s plans for the future of his kingdom constitute the play’s first speech, a lengthy announcement which offers no room for debate. He offers a series of commands during his first few lines; even his love test is framed with the order to “tell me…Which of you shall we say doth love us most” instead of a question (I.i.49). Having determined the allocation of his lands before the ceremonial announcement, the meaning behind this infamous test is evident: It is affirmation of his kingship in the face of impending death, essentially a ritualistic flattery contest. Flattery held profound implications for Shakespeare’s audience, particularly in terms of its relation to the royal court. James was

\(^{31}\) Ibid, 413.

\(^{32}\) Ibid, 441.

constantly showered with praises that often veered toward veneration more than honest compliments. James was so notorious for compulsively rewarding his flatterers with money and titles that praising him became “the orthodoxy of the court,” instilling a competition for favor mirroring Lear’s own love test. The Earl of Salisbury Algemon Cecil once described James as “Not only the wisest of kings (well I may say of most men) but the very image of an angel, that doth both bring good tidings and puts us in the fruition of all good things.” This praise verges on worship and reverence, resembling a prayer of thanks to a merciful god. Goneril and Regan’s answers rival Cecil’s adulations, claiming their love is “dearer than eyesight, space and liberty./ Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare,/ No less than life, with grace, health, beauty honour” (I.i.56). Lear places his daughters on the witness stand, and these testimonies of love are, if shallow and insincere, fit for a king.

When Cordelia is put on stand, she answers with what Hole describes as “a refusal to enter a plea of guilty or not guilty,” challenging the fundamental system of positive law. She recognizes the folly in her father’s love test, and offers him the most honest answer she can provide: “I cannot heave/ My heart into my mouth. I love your majesty/ According to my bond, no more nor less” (I.i.87). Cordelia’s reliance on her heart instead of superficial tradition is grounded in conscience and reason, an evocation of natural law. Lear responds with a warning that she “mend your speech a little/ Lest it may mar your fortunes” (I.i.93). Lear equates Cordelia’s status and dowry with her merit as a person, indicative of his materialistic values. He banishes Cordelia and Kent, his two most honest allies, in a fit of blind rage, insisting that “thou has sought to make us break our vows; Which we durst never yet, and with strained pride/ To come betwixt our sentences and our power” (I.i.168). In Lear’s eyes, these punishments are

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34 Akrigg, *Jacobean Court*, 245.
necessary on the grounds that the two protestors disrupted courtly order. Kent’s and Cordelia’s contended statements, however, resisted traditional practice for the sake of moral, natural law, even at the risk of their lives. Kent speaks with “plainness honour’s bound,” (I.i.149) and Cordelia’s words are not “untender” but “true” (I.i.107). Both recognize the court’s superficiality, and this enlightenment allows them to see more clearly the true nature of those around them. Before leaving for France, Cordelia tells her sisters “I know you what you are,” while Lear, clouded by his own authority, cannot even understand himself (I.i.271). It will take five acts of suffering and pain for him to finally see himself not as a king, but as a human and father.

When Lear next appears, his revised retirement plan is well underway. Significantly, however, Goneril expostulates about his stay at her castle before Lear reappears a scene later. She complains to Oswald that “By day and night he wrongs me…His knights grow riotous and himself upbraids us/ On every trifle” (I.iii.4-7). Goneril’s orders, to “put on what weary negligence you please” and “let his knights have colder looks among you,” seem harsh punishment for these minor annoyances (I.iii.13-24). Contextually, however, these knights’ unruly behavior would have resonated strongly with a contemporary audience. James was notorious for compulsively knighting subjects; on his coronation day alone, he dubbed 432 with the title.\footnote{Akrigg, Jacobean Pageant, 233.} His motivation for knighthood was largely materialistic: The rank cost 30 pounds, and in 1603 James declared that any subject with a yearly income of more than 40 pounds was required to be knighted.\footnote{Ibid, 233.} An increasing proportion of knights were now of common blood, and the romanticized connection between knighthood and chivalry crumbled. Only a few years into James’ reign, knights had developed a reputation for their extravagance and audacity,
particularly by those who hosted them when the king or an aristocrat visited with his train. One nobleman wrote in 1605 that “there are great complaints from Cambridge of the behavior of some of our new-made knights who usurp the place of ancient doctors very ill-manneredly…which is much resented in the University, for the young knights are of no noble birth.” Harrison, Jacobean Journal, 196. For those who were not burdened with feeding and lodging these men, the knighthood trend was a popular joke, as there was “scant an esquire to uphold the race.” Akrigg, Jacobean Pageant, 233. Goneril’s complaints were not, in this context, unfounded. Lear’s 100 knights nearly doubled the 60 which usually consisted of a king’s train, and although their unruliness is not dictated in the play’s stage directions, the audience would have inferred what those numbers meant to a hostess.

Goneril’s protestations, that Lear’s “insolent retinue/ Do hourly carp and quarrel, breaking forth/ In rank and not to be endured riots” (I.iv.192) are probably legitimate, albeit announced too candidly toward a king. Lear is again faced with a daughter whose challenge is perfectly logical, and once again, he rejects reasoned, natural law for kingly rage. Suddenly conscious of the shallowness of Goneril’s professions of love, he curses his mistake, striking at his head and saying “Beat at this gate that let thy folly in/ And thy dear judgment out” (I.iv.263). Once again, however, his judgment is misplaced. His self-reproach pertains only to his misplaced trust, not to his larger inability to see past his own authority. “Who is it that can tell me who I am?” he asks when Goneril undermines his authority by diminishing his train (I.iv.221). His answer is as superficial as his eldest daughters’ spouts of flattery: “I would learn that, for by the marks of sovereignty, knowledge and reason, I should be false persuaded I had daughters” (I.iv.223). Lear’s self-definition is intertwined with authority and entitlement, even now, when

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39 Harrison, Jacobean Journal, 196.
40 Akrigg, Jacobean Pageant, 233.
the validity of his earlier declarations is in question. Much like the real-life king sitting in the audience before him, Lear cannot see past his grandeur and recognize himself as a human being.

Stripped of the power to banish his eldest daughter, Lear curses her with one of his most famous pleas to the gods. It is one of many allusions he makes to the divine, which make appearances as early as the first scene when he banishes Cordelia “by the sacred radiance of the sun,/ The mysteries of Hecate and the night.” While denouncing Kent, he announces “by Jupiter/ This shall not be revoked” (1.i.111,179). As mentioned earlier James often drew parallels between himself and Jupiter, or Jove. The king, looming above his court and striking with bolts of lightning, was a frequent image in Parliament, a symbol of James’ impending wrath if his plans for the Union did not succeed.\(^42\) James’s unquestionable authority was equated to that of a god, just as Lear’s entitles him to call upon the heavens for power. In this later scene with Goneril, he appeals to the gods once more: “Hear, Nature, hear, dear goddess, hear;/ Suspend they purpose if thou didst intend/ To make this creature fruitful” (I.iv.267). Both of these entreaties, for Kent’s banishment and Goneril’s sterility, are committed in moments of outrage. Lear, like James, mistakes the nature of his relationship with the gods; he holds himself on their divine level, disregarding his human, monarchial responsibilities. In both kings’ worlds, power is divinely granted under the condition they rule with integrity. As the destruction of Lear’s kingdom demonstrates, a monarch’s failure to uphold this contract has devastating, earthly consequences.

Lear’s godlike self-image begins to shatter when he hurling himself into the raging storm in act three. This moment is Lear’s emotional turning point, when he makes a noticeable shift from egocentrism to empathy. In his final speech before throwing himself to the mercy of the

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storm, he attempts to repress his fear and mortality, preferring to be affected with “noble anger” than let “women’s weapons, water-drops,/ Stain my man’s cheeks” (II.ii.465). This allusion to man instead of king indicates a gradual acknowledgment of his humanity, and as Hole notes, this scene signifies the first moment in which Lear sees himself as less than godlike. His attitude toward the gods is no longer commanding. Instead, he seeks their wisdom, imploring “I do not bid the thunder-bearer shoot,/ Nor tell tales of thee to high-judging Jove” (II.ii.415). It takes a full-fledged storm, however, for Lear to fully realize his vulnerability. No longer protected within castle walls or by an army 100 men strong, the King is at the mercy of nature and, by extension, the gods. “Here I stand your slave,” he tells them, “A poor, infirm, weak and despised old man” (III.ii.19). Lear is not the glorified monarch James insists upon, sitting for “God his Throne in the earth.” There is no throne in the midst of the gods’ storm, not even for the mightiest of kings.

Lear’s newfound humility, although not fully developed yet, is echoed in his interactions with his servants. As White suggests, natural law and humanitarianism are intertwined; positive law is an innately individualistic philosophy, while natural law, with its emphasis on empathy, is communitarian. Wandering through “sheets of fire” and “bursts of horrid thunder” Lear shows an unprecedented moment of kindness toward his drenched Fool. “How dost my boy?” he asks. “Art cold?...Come; your hovel./ Poor fool and knave ,I have one part in my heart/ That’s sorry yet for thee” (III.ii.71-73). By ushering his servants into the shelter of the hovel before himself, Lear blatantly contradicts royal custom and invokes natural law. Even more explicitly empathetic is his subsequent epiphany about the “poor naked wretches” who populate his kingdom.

How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,

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45 White, Natural Law, 210.
Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta’en
Too little care of this. Take psychic, pomp
Expose theyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
And show the heavens more just. (III.iv.27)

He is experiencing the cruel world outside his courtroom for the first time, and these sudden strains of poverty and vulnerability alert him to his failings as king. According to the Arden edition of the text, the reference to “phsycic” and “pomp” refers to the traditional stately robes used for his costume. “Superflux” echoes these images of luxury and excess. Scholars have noted this may allude to a medieval Christian teaching, a call for the wealthy to distribute their excess goods to the poor.46 By playing the role of humanitarian instead of monarch, Lear is demonstrating a shift toward naturalism and away from his earlier egotism.

Such sentiments would have reverberated strongly for contemporary audiences, particularly during the play’s 1606 debut before the King. St. Stephen’s Day was a celebration of charity, when poor boxes were opened and distributed and the rich welcomed peasants to feasts at their estates.47 Although James advocated for hospitality and altruism when he arrived from Scotland, his words proved to be empty promises; the larger population of England was as poor as ever, while James basked in the lavishness of his new kingdom’s court. The royal court’s expenses nearly doubled in the year after Elizabeth’s death, exploding from 47,000 pounds to about 93,000. A sizable portion of these expenditures were for James’ “Great Wardrobe,” and an entire department of the royal court was “charging a small fortune every year for the cloths, silks, velvets, furniture, saddle goods, etc.”48 Clothing was a status symbol, marking the difference between peasant and aristocrat. For James, costume was a physical representation of his status as

46 Foakes, King Lear, 273.
47 Marcus, “Retrospective,” 154
48 Akrigg, Jacobean Pageant, 98
king. Godfrey Goodman describes one instance of the King lashing out against a subject for marring his expensive costume: “‘Pestered by the suits of his grasping courtiers, he could shout: ‘You will never leave me alone. I would to God you had, first, my doublet, and then my shirt; and, when I were naked, I think you would leave me to be quiet.’”49 This commoner threatened not only James’s clothing, but his royal identity. His self-definition was grounded in status and title; without a wardrobe to differentiate him from his subjects, he would be stripped of his kingship and own self-worth.

Lear’s costume is equally as definitive. Throughout the play’s production history, Lear has been portrayed, and by extension costumed, as the quintessential English king, donning a classic crown and scarlet robe for the first half of the play.50 The deterioration in costume parallels the King’s own transformation; as he strips down to nothing, he sheds his role as king and is left a naked, vulnerable human. Clothing is intertwined with status and power; when Edgar constructs a life story for his character Poor Tom, he says that when he was a servant in the court, he “hath had there suits to his back, six shirts to his body” (III.iv.131). This specificity about wardrobe is used as evidence of his fall from wealth into poverty and madness. As White asserts, minimalism is an element of natural law, a signifier that excess has been distributed to those whose need is greater. Lear, aware of this connection and envious of Poor Tom’s disconnect from the superficial world of royalty, says “thou ow’st the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume...Off, off, you lendings: come, unbutton here” (III.iv.102, 106). While James lashed out against those who threatened to remove his robes, his fictional counterpart willingly sheds his clothes and welcomes the exposure of nakedness. Only some scenes ago, Lear was incensed about having members of his overflowing train dismissed.

50 Foakes, King Lear, 13.
Now, he is content with nothing. Lear’s ties to materialism and costume and, by extension, positive law, are beginning to sever.

Although Lear’s evolution is not complete until he reunites with Cordelia in act four, his understanding of naturalism deepens during the subsequent mock trial scene. The sequence is merely a projection of the King’s madness, but there are illuminating parallels between this courtroom fantasy and the trial of Lear’s daughters in act one. Lear walks through the motions of an actual trial for his two traitorous daughters, vying to “arraign them straight” with Edgar as his “most learned justice,” the Fool as “his yoke-fellow of equity,” and Kent the “commission” (III.vii.21,37). Lear attempts to enact as fair an arraignment as possible, allowing the judge to preside over the scene while he, the King, participates merely as a witness. He takes the stand and tells the court, “arraign her first, ‘tis Goneril -- I here take my oath before this honourable assembly – kicked the poor King her father” (III.vi.48). Here, Lear has enacted a system of checks and balances where his authority is subject to the order of common law. James strictly opposed Parliament’s common law principles, asserting that order was “a thing Regal, and proper to a King, to keep every Court within his own bounds.” His concept of a fair trial more closely follows the opening scene of the play in which the king banishes his two most loyal subjects for coming “between our sentence and our power” (I.i.183). Now, Lear not only accepts the concept of justice and moral order but welcomes it, even at the expense of relinquishing his own power. Although Lear later tells Gloucester that he is still “every inch a king,” echoes of the real king watching from the audience become less frequent from act four onward (IV.iii.123). In fact, his mad interaction with Gloucester is the last time Lear ever says the word “king.”

Lear’s reunion with Cordelia in act four completely diverges from the pattern of trial and testimony. Rather, it is a genuine interaction between father and daughter, and notions of

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51 James I, Speech in Star Chamber from Political Works of James I, 213.
kingship and power do not interfere. Lear is brought onstage in a chair, reminiscent of the throne which many productions include in the opening scene. For Lear the all-powerful king, that throne was a symbol of unquestionable authority, a chair that placed him before an entire court of subjects; here, he sits because he is too weak to stand, representative of his own mortality. He tells his daughter, “You do me wrong to take me out o’ the’ grave,” contradicting the godlike persona he embodied earlier (IV.vii.50). He even welcomes death as penance for his sins against Cordelia, telling her that “if you have poison for me, I will drink it./ I know you do not love me, for your sisters/ Have, as I do remember, done me wrong./ You haves some cause; they have not…Pray you now, forget, and forgive” (IV.vii.81,95). He retracts his condemnation of Cordelia’s protest, demonstrating that he grasps the concepts of justice and naturalism. He poorly judged his daughters in the first scene of the play; now, he can delineate between naturalism and positivism, even if it means admitting his own mortality.

He witnesses the frailty of life firsthand in the play’s final scene. “Howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones!” he cries as he carries his daughter’s lifeless body, the irrevocable consequence of his corruption of power, onstage (V.i.300). Throughout his journey, he “hath ever slenderly known himself,” but the differences between life and death are perfectly clear: “I know when one is dead and when one lives./ She’s dead as earth (V.i.303). Critics still struggle to understand this haunting image of Cordelia’s body in her once-great father’s arms. The outward meaninglessness of her death was so painful to interpret that the theater abandoned it altogether in the eighteenth century for Nahum Tate’s rewrite. His version, in which Cordelia and Edgar emerge triumphant, enforces a sense of moral order and presents audiences with a satisfying conclusion. Samuel Johnson, who favored Tate’s script over the original, wrote in the eighteenth century that “Shakespeare has suffered the virtue of Cordelia to perish in a just cause,
contrary to the natural ideas of justice.”

Natural justice would never have murdered the play’s most faultless character, particularly after the father who ignited the play’s tragic consequences has realized the gravity of his mistakes.

Since Shakespeare’s original play returned to the stage in the twentieth century, however, scholars have attempted to justify the playwright’s choice. Shupack argues that, if the play is a commentary on James’ rule, Cordelia’s death is not only fitting, but necessary. Her corpse symbolizes the inevitable failure of law to protect man from evil, indicating that society’s self-constructed systems of justice are useless without moral guidance. Other critics are more optimistic about the ending. White, for example, insists that the surviving characters have learned from the mistakes of their predecessors. “Evil may be dead, but so is good… these sobered witnesses have the equipment for enlightened moral judgment.” I agree with Shupack that Cordelia’s death depicts the consequences of corruptive power, but also with White’s assertion that the ending is ultimately hopeful. If this play is a parable specifically for King James, the survivors demonstrate how a ruler should learn by example. The final lines of the play indicate that Edgar and Albany, left to reconstruct their broken kingdom, have learned from their elders’ mistakes:

The weight of this sad time we must obey
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
The oldest hath born most; we that are young
Shall never see so much nor live so long. (V.i.380)

The end of the play is not as hopeless as Johnson and his contemporaries argued. Shakespeare’s audience knew that England would repair itself – they were watching a play about the history of their country, an account of a past king’s life. Instead of lamenting the irreparable damage Lear’s
mistakes cause, the kingdom’s survivors exemplify how a good leader should take heed from his predecessors’ failures. In particular, they were speaking to their own king sitting in the audience, entreatying him to learn from Lear’s downfall. Just as Edgar and Albany realize the corruptive nature of positivism and absolute power, James would hopefully recognize himself in and learn from his onstage foil.

Sitting in the audience on St Stephen’s Day, James was only 40 years old. He was in a strange, new kingdom, defending an antiquated system of government that likened kings to gods. Onstage before him was another king, ruler over a pagan, ancient land where authoritarian monarchy went unquestioned. Like James, he basked in the glory of kingship; he traveled with a train 100 knights strong, shirked his political responsibilities to hunt and feast, and was smothered in veneration and praise. Unlike the young king in the audience, however, Lear is facing death and with it, the consequences of a life of extravagance and selfishness. It is impossible to know how James interpreted the play, but as he realized his own mortality, he was faced with many of the same questions Lear grapples with onstage. In a speech to Parliament in 1620, only five years before his death, James said, “And this I dare boldly say, and I am not ashamed to speak it, that People owe a kind of Tribute to their King, as a thankfulness for his Love to them.” Here he still echoes the furious, godlike Lear from act one. In the same speech, however, he humbly says:

So, it may be, it pleased God seeing some Vanity in me to send back my words as wine spit into my own Face, so I may truly say I have piped unto you, but you have not danced, I have often mourned, but you have not lamented. But now I have put on this Resolution for the few days I have to live in this World, wherein I know not how far I have offended God.

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56 Ibid., viii.
Shakespeare could not have predicted how the remaining nineteen years of James’ reign ended, but his play proved to be a prophetic commentary on authority and morals; even the king who likened himself to the god of thunder was, at heart, “a very foolish, fond old man” (IV,vii,54). Regardless of whether or not James learned from King Lear, the play remains a warning for leaders generations later: Even scarlet robes and a golden crown cannot protect a king from his own mortality.
Chapter Two: “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 Majesttie at Whitehall upon S. Stephens night in Christmas Hollidayes.” Some scholars, however, suggest that the play probably had a rich stage history during Shakespeare’s lifetime, at The Globe Theater as well as the King’s court. The play’s titanic themes – nature, redemption, nothingness – and its relatively minimalist 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 simulate 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, only in its effect upon Lear.” 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

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57 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).
59 *Prefaces* 37.
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 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,”\(^6\) 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 version, 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.\(^6\) \(^6\) 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.”\(^6\) 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.ii.63).

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.\(^6\) 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

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\(^6\) Nahum Tate, *The History of King Lear acted at the Duke’s Theatre* (London, 1681).
\(^6\) Leggatt, *King Lear*, 2.
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 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 grieves, 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 man.”65 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.”66 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

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65 William Charles Macready, Macready's reminiscences, and selections from his diaries and letters, volume one (Macmillan, 1865), 207.
66 Leggatt, King Lear, 25.
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.”

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 as a metaphor for the fall of humanity, not just the fall of a kingdom. The design took place in “big, violent and therefore very realistic circumstances, with flesh and blood actors in very harsh, cruel and realistic situations.”

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. 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.

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67 Ibid., 27.
68 Ibid., 47.
69 Ibid., 42.
70 Ibid., 53.
Brook eliminated any notions of good and evil among characters; the villains and heroes were all kind and mean, cruel 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, decked in gold and seated on a crude throne, Scofield was not the crippled, frail King so many expected. Kenneth Tynan said in his review: “Lay him to rest, the royal Lear with whom generations of star actors have made us reverently familiar; the majestic, ancient, wronged and maddened by his vicious daughters…Lay also to rest the archaic notion that Lear is automatically entitled to our sympathy.”

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 is widely considered the darkest of Lear’s, 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

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71 Kenneth Tynan, Curtains (New York: Antheneum, 1961), 34.
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. By the 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.” 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

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73 Barry Kyle, “King Lear” (production program, 2001).
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.\(^{76}\)

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 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.”77 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.”78

77 Barry Kyle, “King Lear” (production program, 2001).
Clearwood

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 intervention of the gods, to no avail. 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.79

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 soon-to-be bride in a white gown. The sequence looked like a religious ceremony, not the precursor to a formal political announcement.80

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79 Royal Shakespeare Company program, King Lear, 2007.
80 William, Shakespeare, King Lear, directed by Tervor Nunn, performed 2007, Stratford-upon-Avon, England, DVD.
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 attention as he ordered Cordelia to “hence and avoid my sight” (I.i.137). Even Cordelia kneeled 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.

81 Ibid.
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 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”

82 Ibid.
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 The Telegraph, 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.”\textsuperscript{84} 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 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.

\textsuperscript{84} Charles Spencer, “Sir Ian acts up a storm as Nunn plays the fool,” review of King Lear, by William Shakespeare,
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.”85 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 expectations.”86 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 ceremonials 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

85 Trevor Nunn, “King Lear” (production program, 2007).
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. 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. 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

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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.\(^90\) 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.\(^91\) 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

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\(^90\) Ibid 71.

\(^91\) Abarbanel, “King Lear,” TheaterMania.
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 centuries after its debut: the empathetic, enlightening journey of a man at the end of his life.
Chapter Three: “They have done their mischief.”

Washington College’s *The Tragedy of King Lear*

At our first official meeting as director and dramaturg last year, I began with a simple question: “What is this play about?” Jason Rubin answered immediately, “Power.” Although *King Lear* is dually a political and family drama, his vision of the play centered on Lear’s role as and devolution from King. Before delving into specific textual questions or production history research, we needed to identify the world of the play and how Lear’s story conformed with and broke from it. Everything from that meeting onward – set, lighting and costume design, casting, performance notes, research questions – stemmed from Rubin’s vision of Lear’s kingdom:

I want the best of two possible worlds: the theatrical one of illusions and the real one of genuine emotions and behaviors as displayed by the characters. I want a world in which the characters believe in multiple gods and the awesomeness and incomprehensibility of nature. This is a world in which Lear is looking for answers of why things happen when he once didn’t concern himself with questions because of his power and authority. He was too busy fighting, governing, being a father. In fact, the imponderables took second fiddle to the practical, everyday activities of day-to-day life. What if this is a world of shamans, superstitions, and pagan celebrations? Although I am not asking for a world where magic takes place, unicorns frolic, and people are bewitched, I am asking for a world almost ruled by nature, where fire, water, spring and winter signify the elemental. Where survival and existence trickle down from the gods to the king to the peasants. Where life is brutal, raw, intuitive and at the same time, uncomplicated.  

The physical manifestation of these abstract concepts resulted in a bare stage. Eventually, props and simple set pieces were added to give the actors more to play with, but the initial idea of an empty space remained consistent throughout the production’s development. *King Lear* is, after all, a play about nothing. No matter where Lear stages his opening ceremony – a lavish courtroom, an primitive circle of stones, a 20th century war room – it always leads to an unforgiving storm, a simple hovel and an empty field.

92 Jason Rubin, interview.
Rubin wanted to balance these concepts of emptiness and metatheatricality with a literal setting for the play: England in 800 BC. This specific choice of time and place worked on both a practical and metaphorical level. Shakespeare’s numerous sources for his play originally stretched back to Iron Age England when the mythical King Leir supposedly ruled over his kingdom and daughters. Ours is not the first production to reach back to the play’s origins as the basis for our world of the play. Along with restoring Shakespeare’s original text, William Macready’s 1838 production returned to the King’s ancient roots. Even earlier, David Garrick had received praise from critics for staging his King Lear in a rustic, druidic world.93 One of the most notable productions with a primitive setting, however, was Peter Brook’s Royal Shakespeare Company staging in 1962. As described in Chapter Two, Peter Scofield performed his Lear as an ancient King in a barbaric world; enormous stone structures surrounded the stage, and actors were costumed in crude garments made of leather and fur.94 Rubin and I discussed Brook’s design at length, as anyone familiar with the performance history of King Lear would quickly make the aesthetic connection between ours and Brook’s productions. Brook’s explanation for a minimalistic design was simple: “Why does one decorate a bad play? For that purpose – to decorate it. With Lear, on the contrary, one has to withdraw everything possible.”95 Although his Lear was distinctly set in ancient England, Brook highlighted meaning over spectacle by keeping what set pieces he used at a minimum.

Rubin also wanted to focus on story over design, but his visual conception was even more minimalistic than Brook’s. Rubin chose to evoke a sense of time and place through costuming alone. The stage itself served a more metaphorical purpose: “A vast empty stage is a symbol of a

93 Leggatt, King Lear, 14
94 Ibid, 16.
95 Peter Brook, The Empty Space (London, 1968) 89.
world that is inhabited by people who have the imagination to create a world of their visions…. An open stage also places the audience’s focus on the performers. What is the relationship and meaning of the human figure against the proscenium arch?  

Our production was to be overtly metatheatrical, with no pretense of total suspension of disbelief. Rubin decided almost immediately that shifts in time and place would be marked primarily by lighting; a square of light to represent the hovel, a circle of light for Lear’s court in the first scene, a projection of light on the stage floor for the map of England. Our audience would not be transported to 800 BC through the power of stage design and spectacle. Rather, they would see a group of actors dressing up in primitive gowns and furs on a bare stage. The only elements of a set were two rows of black, steel light towers between which actors entered and exited, and a small, circular platform that separated into three equal pieces. The minimalistic set looked contemporary, almost industrial. This sharp contrast between the period costumes and modern setting tore down the fourth wall between the actors and audience: Lear’s universe was not strictly Iron Age England, but rather a stage on which characters were trying to develop their own world. Rubin’s design choice challenged his actors to make something out of nothing, to prove that crowns and furs cannot disguise how everyone is ultimately human.

Fig. 3.1. Lear (Timothy Maloney) argues with Kent (Rob Wilson) after banishing Cordelia. The stage is almost empty, aside from two rows of light towers and a small, circular platform.

96 Rubin, interview.
This nothingness was part of our justification for titling our production *The Tragedy of King Lear*. Although some of our reasoning was simply our reliance on the Folio text, the decision was primarily based on Rubin’s emphasis on the definition of dramatic tragedy. One of the critical articles we discussed described the dramatic form as the following:

> Tragedy may indeed be defined as the eruption of nothingness, the triumph of nonbeing over being. Tragedy is waste, loss, diminishment, ruin, death—and all these are types of absence. Reduction to nothing is the abstract shape of tragic fact. In *King Lear* Shakespeare is distilling tragedy to its bare essence, purifying it almost.  

Although the Folio makes it clear that Lear’s story is a tragedy, Rubin and I examined the plot and characters to determine whether the addition of “The Tragedy of” was necessary for our production. We used Francis Fergusson’s three essential stages of tragedy – purpose, passion and perception – as the basis for our decision. According to Fergusson, a tragic hero passes through these three stages as he develops dramatically. He begins with purpose, the character’s initial, oftentimes selfish or narrow-minded, desire. In Lear’s case, this is an affirmation of power and a protest against the weaknesses of age. Fergusson’s second stage, passion, constitutes most of a play’s dramatic structure; a protagonist must suffer and struggle to achieve enlightenment. Lear’s passion begins with the neglect and cruelty he endures at the hands of his daughters and continues as he endures the battering of the storm and the reunion with his now-blinded companion. Finally, he suffers the ultimate pain as the result of his own mistakes: The death of his beloved daughter. Perception, or discovery, is a moment of enlightenment, when a character’s realizes how his or her actions led to tragedy. Lear’s perception is gradual; insight periodically gleans through in moments of rage and madness. “I did her wrong,” he laments to

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the Fool in the first act (I.v.24). As he rages against the storm in Act Three, he calls himself “a poor, inform, weak and despised old man” (III.ii.21). In the throes of madness, he recognizes the fleetingness of power: “they told me I was everything,” he tells Gloucester. “‘Tis a lie. I am not ague-proof” (IV.vi.123). He reaches the height of his perception when he humbles himself before Cordelia and asks her forgiveness in Act Four. He kneels before his daughter and says, “You must bear with me. Pray you now, forget, and forgive. I am old and foolish” (IV.vii.97). Lear’s distinct character arc conforms with Fregusson’s stages of drama. The inclusion of “The Tragedy of” emphasizes that King Lear is a journey, the story of how a man achieves enlightenment through suffering.

The decision for including “The Tragedy of” in our play’s title was also an acknowledgment of our reliance on the Folio text. Rubin and I read and discussed both the Folio and Quarto versions of King Lear, citing and comparing our likes and dislikes about both. Some of the major differences in the Folio compared to the Quarto include: fewer references to the French army; the elimination of the mock trial sequence in Act III, scene vi and the servants’ promise to help the blinded Gloucester at the end of Act III, scene vii; significant cuts to Albany’s role; and an emphasis on Edgar’s role, including giving him the final speech instead of Albany.¹⁰⁰ Rubin staunchly preferred the Folio to the Quarto, not only because it is about 300 lines shorter than the other, but because of how the abovementioned differences altered plot and character development. The elimination of specific references to the French army, for example, diminished some of the play’s specificity of time and place. In accordance with the Folio text, we decided to cut all of Act IV, scene iii, which opens with allusions to the King of France and his marshal, Monsieur La Far. Limited references to specific elements of the French army provided the text with a more ambiguous setting, making our Iron Age world of the play easier to

¹⁰⁰ Bate, Rasmussen, King Lear, 16.
establish. Also, because La Far never appears in the play, removing this sequence leaves Cordelia as the leader of the army, indicating significant character growth during her time in France and strengthening her reappearance in Act IV, scene v.

Although we preferred the Folio to the Quarto, there were elements of each that we wanted to explore further. We decided a conflated text that relied more heavily on the Folio would be an ideal acting script. After browsing through several options, we agreed on the Folger edition. The Folger notes “aid the reader in imagining the play as a performance rather than as a series of events. Thus the stage directions are written with reference to the stage,”\(^{101}\) making it by far the most actor-friendly edition of the play we encountered. The edits also closely reflect our opinions on the text. In the introduction, editors Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine explain:

> The present edition is based upon a fresh examination of the early texts rather than upon any modern edition. It offers its readers the Folio printing of *King Lear*. But it offers an *edition* of the Folio because it prints such Q1 readings and such later editorial emendations as are, in the editors’ judgments, necessary to repair what may be errors and deficiencies in the Folio….\(^{102}\)

Although the Folger editors made many textual decisions and cuts already, Rubin and I needed to find ways to bring the 254-page script down to a three hour production. One of my first assignments as dramaturg was to identify lines, passages and scenes that could be eliminated. I specifically looked for moments that were either redundant – Oswald’s recount of Kent’s assault in Act II, scene iv, which the audience witnesses two scenes earlier – or convoluted – I suggested cutting parts of Poor Tom’s gibberish, for example.

Many decisions, such as the elimination of the mock trial and servant sequences, were significantly more challenging. Rubin emphatically opposed the inclusion of the trial scene on the grounds that it slowed the movement of the play. From a plot perspective, the sequence has

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\(^{101}\) Mowat, Werstine, Folger edition of *King Lear*, 1xv.

\(^{102}\) Ibid, 1xi.
no relevance: it is simply an elaborate interlude that allows Lear to act out his delusions with his ragtag team of followers. If Gary Taylor’s revisionist theory were assumed, Shakespeare cut this sequence from the text deliberately after it was published in Quarto form. Regardless of why it is omitted from the later text, however, some scholars assert that it serves a dramatic purpose. Garber, for example, explains it as “part ironic truth, part social satire, and part the final unmasking of ‘justice,’ as always limited and inadequate. From this moment the play will move deliberately toward the hope for mercy as contrasted with justice.”¹⁰³ This scene arguably marks a significant turning point in Lear’s development. In a play rife with themes of honor and truth, this is the only moment in which anyone alludes to an official justice system. Gloucester, Cordelia, Kent, Edgar – no one who is unfairly persecuted against receives a fair trial. It is significant, therefore, that the King who earlier banished two of his most loyal subjects is the first character to display a concern for justice. For the purposes of our production, however, this scene was redundant. Maloney traced Lear’s progress and growth from beginning to end, identifying moments of recognition and humility as early as Act I, scene iv. The mock trial scene usually represents a major turning point for the King; our Lear, however, had a more gradual learning curve, making those additional two pages unnecessary.

We did, however, decide to include the dialogue at the end of Act III, scene vii, even though it is only present in the Quarto. Many productions, including ours, place their intermission after the blinding scene. The decision to keep the servants’ dialogue, therefore, is monumental to how the first half of a production will end. According to Alexander Leggatt, the staging choice did not originally have such a monumental impact on productions: “In the Globe Theatre, assuming performances there were continuous, its effect would be not so much to remove comfort as to put stronger emphasis on the meeting of Gloucester and Edgar which

¹⁰³ 678
follows immediately after.”104 Brook’s influential production and his decision to eliminate the brief sequence exemplify how impactful the decision can be. The servants did not simply ignore their wounded master; rather, they actively tidied up the room around him, finally pushing him offstage when he got in their way.105 Even before the second half of the production, Brook implied that Lear’s kingdom was falling into irreparable chaos. Contrastingly, our production finished the first half with on a relatively more uplifting note. We kept the servants’ dialogue after Gloucester’s blinding to emphasize that although the repercussions of Lear’s mistake were far-reaching and tragic, there remained uncorrupted individuals who might later help rebuild the kingdom.

These themes of redemption and rebirth, along with Jason’s focus on power, were established even before the first lines of the play. The curtain rose to reveal Lear’s court dancing in a wide circle around the small platform. Everyone – the Fool, Lear’s servants, the King and his daughters – held hands for the dance, and the three parts of the platform formed a complete circle, indicating that the kingdom was in a harmonious, orderly state. The carefully choreographed dance contrasted, however, with the dissonant, metallic music. Rubin’s inspiration for the opening music and dance sequence was largely from a 2011 dance choreographed by Hofesh Shechter, "Political Mother." Recurring movements in Shechter’s dance – spins with arms spread upwards, crossover steps in wide circles – told a story about a society suffering through oppression and cruelty.106 Rubin wanted a similar atmosphere for his King Lear, an orderly world suddenly thrown into chaos. The opening dance indicated a sense of unity, a collective reliance on nature and ritual. Rubin characterized the Doctor as a shaman, a

104 Leggatt, King Lear, 54.
105 Ibid, 54.
healer with a connection to the spiritual and natural worlds. She silently blessed Cordelia, the suitors and Lear from the circular platform during the dance ceremony. The shaman held authority during this opening sequence, not Lear, implying that the society’s dependence on the gods and ceremonialism superseded all else, including monarchy; Lear established his authority during the love test in the first scene, but his belief in divine right of kings held him accountable to higher powers. As the music faded, everyone hurried offstage. Lear and Cordelia exited together, laughing and holding hands, emphasizing the closeness of their relationship.

The rest of the scene highlighted Lear’s status and authority. In the opening dialogue, Gloucester was jovial, laughing heartily as he introduced his bastard son to Kent and bragged about how “there was good sport at his making” (I.i.2). As soon as Lear’s trumpets blared, however, he changed his demeanor entirely and seriously announced, “The King is coming,” (I.i.33). He, Kent and Edmund quickly arranged themselves with the rest of the court in a semi-circle before the King. Lear’s opening costume was particularly indicative of his status: he wore an imposing, thick red gown with a massive fur collar. The rest of the court was dressed in neutral colors – grays, browns, blacks -- so Lear’s vibrancy made him the focal point of the scene. He was also the only person onstage who made use of the space. Everyone remained stationary while the King paced before them announcing his plans for retirement and division of the kingdom. He disrupted the arrangement when he pulled Goneril and Regan forward for their professions of love. Although Goneril and Regan fuel many later disasters in the play, it was Lear who forced them to break the circle in this first scene, emphasizing how his mistakes as a ruler set into motion the kingdom’s destruction. Contrastingly, Cordelia stepped forward of her own volition. She walked center stage independently, without Lear’s guidance or permission.
The rest of the court stood in frozen amazement: the King’s daughter had broken courtly decorum and directly contradicted the King.

Lear’s reaction, while incensed, was not nearly as terrifying or cruel as is portrayed in other performances. Ian McKellen, for example, leapt out of his chair and moved toward Cordelia, threatening to strike her,\(^{107}\) and Julian Glover actually threw her to the ground.\(^{108}\) Maloney’s performance indicated that Lear was less angry than he was disappointed. While McKellen and Glover screamed and raged at Cordelia, our Lear did not even raise his voice. In fact, it softened at times; he sat on the center platform and bowed his head on his line, “Better thou/ hadst not been born than not t’ have pleased me/ better,” (I.i.269) implying he was hurt by his youngest daughter’s disobedience, not just enraged that his authority was threatened. While his disownment of Cordelia was less violent and forceful than some performances, it was cruel on another level: he emphasized that she had fallen not only out of the King’s favor, but the gods’ as well. He declared to the court that “by the sacred radiance of the sun,/ The mysteries of Hecate and the night….Here I disclaim all my paternal care” (I.i.121). He raised his arms toward the heavens while referencing Hecate, and the entire court followed suit. Lear’s authority was both earthly and divine; Cordelia’s breach of conduct destroyed her repute with the King, the entire court, and the gods. When Kent broke decorum, stepping downstage and protesting Cordelia’s banishment, Lear’s response was again restrained. Only when Kent committed blasphemy – “Now by Apollo, king,/ Thou swear’st they gods in vain” (I.i.182) – did Lear react violently, shoving him with both hands. It was Kent’s denial of the gods, and by extension the King’s divine authority, that led to his banishment. Lear’s power was connected to ritualism and

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\(^{107}\) Nunn, recording.

\(^{108}\) Ibid.
a strict hierarchy; as soon as these formalities were usurped, Lear’s kingdom began to fall into a state of chaos.

This deterioration of order was symbolized by the disassembling of the circular platform. By the time Lear entered in Act I, Scene iv, the three separate pieces were scattered across the stage, emphasizing how his rashness was destroying the entire kingdom. We faced a challenging staging question regarding the King’s entrance here: Is Goneril justified in accusing her father and his knights of “breaking forth/ In rank and not-to-be-endured riots” (I.iv.208)? The first half of this scene is one of the few moments where the audience sees Lear fulfilling his retirement plans, a rare glimpse into how the King behaves outside of the court. The rest of the scene is a power struggle between him and Goneril and needs to lead to the realization that he placed his trust in the wrong daughter.

Ultimately, we decided the audience should sympathize more with Lear than with Goneril. Lear was not a perfect houseguest – he and his knights returned from hunting with dead birds for dinner and the King slapped Oswald with his gloves for insulting him – but Goneril’s reaction was largely unsubstantiated. She stood on the middle platform and stared directly at her father and his knights as she insulted them: “Here do you keep a hundred knights and squires,/ Men so disordered, so debauched and bold./ That this our court, infected with their manners,/ Shows like a riotous inn” (I.iv.248). She leapt down from the platform at the end of the speech and kicked...
the Fool, who had been mockingly bowing to her. Goneril had not only threatened to diminish her father’s train, of which a modern audience would struggle to understand the implications, but she abused his servants as well. Lear’s fury – “degenerate bastard, I’ll not trouble thee,” (I.iv.263) he spat as his knights prepared to leave – was justified.

As Maloney stressed about his character, however, Lear’s development is complex; for almost every lesson he learns, he regresses again to an authoritative, prideful monarch. No matter how sympathetically the King is performed, his curse on Goneril is undeniably brutal. In our production, Lear walked toward his daughter as he delivered the speech: “Hear, Nature, hear, dear goddess hear!/ Suspend thy purpose if thou didst intend/ To make this creature fruitful” (I.iv. 289). Given our production’s emphasis on spirituality and the society’s devout belief in a higher power, the curse was particularly resonant; Lear was using his divine authority against another of his daughters. These moments of cruelty were balanced by more tender, intrinsic moments, particularly in the following scene. Lear was weary and distraught at this point. He answered his Fool’s riddles morosely, taking no joy out of the antics at which he laughed before. When the Fool made a pun about keeping a man’s brains in his heels, Lear could only manage a sarcastic, “Ha, ha, ha!” (I.v.13). The Fool’s jokes were superfluous here; Lear was beginning to recognize the gravity of his mistakes. “I did her wrong,” (I.v.23) he said in response to one of the Fool’s riddles. He joined the Fool on the platform near the end of the scene, hugging him closely for comfort as he pleaded, “O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven!” (I.v.45). The first act ended with Lear already somewhat remorseful, already “more sinned against than sinning” (III.x.x.).

In Act II, power shifted into the hands of Goneril and Regan, and by the time Lear confronted them in scene iv, he was completely helpless. Dismayed at seeing his servant in the

109 Timothy Maloney, interview.
stocks, he tried to deny Kent’s assertion that Regan and Cornwall had placed him there. “By Jupiter, I swear no…They durst not do ‘t./ They could not, would not do ‘t” (II.iv.23-26), he said. The audience laughed at his denial, but he was speaking in earnest: he refused to believe his daughter could be so unfeeling. When Regan finally entered, he treated her not as a man groveling for pity, but as a desperate, genuine father. He put his arm around her while complaining that Goneril “hath tied/ Sharp-toothed unkindness, like a vulture, here” (II.iv.151), clearly hoping she would respond with sympathy. Regan slipped out of his arm and tried to convince him to return to Goneril. Compared to her older sister, Regan was diplomatic and calm; she seemed afraid of confronting her father, in fact, indicating that the King retained a certain degree of authority. The power completely shifted when Goneril entered, strode downstage and took Regan by the hand. As the scene progressed, the sisters surrounded their father on either side, then cornered him on the edge of the stage. Pathetically, his hands clasping his head, Lear pleaded with them: “I gave you all…Made you my guardians, my depositaries” (II.iv.287-289). This desperation continued in his final speech before entering the storm. He argued with and denounced his daughters in a tone that was more fearful than angry, pacing back and forth downstage and looking up to the gods for help, begging, “You heavens, give me that patience, patience I need!” (II.iv.314). He displayed none of the fury he showed toward Goneril and Cordelia; this speech was an intrinsic moment, a fearful attempt to deny reality.

Toward the end of the speech – “I have full cause of weeping, but this heart/ Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws/ Or ere I’ll weep” (II.iv.324) – thunder began to crash. The storm’s correlation with Lear’s emotional despair indicated that it was “an expression of his psychic distress” rather than a literal tempest. The nature of the storm was overtly theatrical, not realistic. The thunder had a percussive, metallic underscore, and the lightning was

110 Jason Rubin, interview.
symbolized by a series of quick, flashing lights. While striking, the storm never upstaged Lear. Some productions stage the storm as overpowering and violent – Glover and McKellen were doubled over against the winds, and their lines were often drowned out against the sound effects – but ours was relatively subtle. Lear did not have to fight against the storm to be heard. Instead, it responded to his challenges against the gods: it struck on his lines, “yet I will call you servile ministers,/ That you will with two pernicious daughters join/ Your high-engendered battles ‘gainst a head/ So old and white as this” (III.ii.23) and “Let the great gods…Hide thee, thou bloody hand/ Thou perjured, and thou similar of virtue/ That art incestuous” (III.ii.50-58). The storm was a theatrical representation of the agony and confusion within Lear’s mind, preparing the audience for when the King breaks from reality himself.

While Lear seemed relatively unscathed by the storm, his followers – the Fool, Kent, Gloucester – indicated that he was in real, physical danger. The Fool was especially affected by the storm. He entered in the middle of Act III, scene ii with his arms around his shivering body, completely doubled over from the cold. Although he tried to comfort the King with a few riddles and songs, he was too preoccupied with keeping himself warm to focus on Lear the entire time; at one point, he made a tent out of his fur vest and one of the platforms and tried to crawl underneath it. Lear had displayed some kindness toward the Fool earlier, most notably when they were seated together in Act II, scene v. Here, however, Lear went even further, putting the Fool’s safety before his own. After Kent entered to persuade the King to find shelter, Lear suddenly recognized his Fool’s suffering: “My wits begin to turn. --/ Come on, my boy. How dost my boy? Art cold?,„Poor Fool and knave, I have one part in my heart/ That’s sorry yet for thee” (III.ii.70-80). Lear stopped moving to deliver this line, drawing the Fool close and embracing him against the storm. This selflessness continued in Act III, scene iv, when he told Kent to “go
in thyself” (III.iv.27) and gently pushed the Fool inside the hovel, telling him to “get thee in” (III.iv.31). Although the King was starting to lose track of reality, he was cognizant enough to see and feel others’ pain, something he was incapable of earlier in the play and marking a significant turning point in his development.

His greatest moments of enlightenment, however, were with Poor Tom. As the madman scurried around the stage, Lear followed him, asking again and again, “Didst thou give all to thy daughters?” (III.iv.53). After Poor Tom finally narrated the story of his demise from proud serving man to mad beggar, Lear looked at him with pity and understanding: “Is man no more than this?” (III.iv.109) he asked, staring at Poor Tom, curled up in a ball. “Consider him well,” he told Kent and the Fool. “…Ha, here’s three on ‘s are sophisticated. Thou art the thing itself” (III.iv.110-114). Although the King had been displaying moments of madness, he was completely lucid here. He stared at Poor Tom intently, comparing the beggar’s natural state to that of himself, Kent and the Fool. In awe of Poor Tom’s unadorned humanness, he began imitating him, unbuttoning his tunic then pulling his new philosopher upstage to imitate his movements and gestures. At this point in his story, Lear related more with the naked madman

Fig. 3.3. King Lear (Timothy Maloney) examines Poor Tom (Tye Van Horne): “Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art” (III.iv.113).
than his riddling court Fool, which made one of the play’s most difficult staging questions—

Why does the Fool disappear after the third act?—a fairly simple one. The King’s preference for
Poor Tom made it clear the Fool was no longer necessary. In Act III, scene vi, the Fool
fruitlessly attempted to riddle with the King, asking, “Prithee, nuncio, tell me whether a madman
be a gentleman or a yeoman” (III.vi.9). Lear answered, “A king, a king!” (III.vi.10) but his
attention completely focused on Poor Tom’s exploration of the hovel. The Fool recited the real
answer dejectedly, aware that the King had found a new favorite riddler. When Lear fell asleep
later in the scene, Poor Tom curled up beside him. The Fool took rest as well, but outside of the
circular light signifying the shelter. He had been pushed out of the ragtag group, so his
disappearance did not need to be explained by an execution or accidental death. Instead, as his
companions exited at the end of the scene, he left in the opposite direction. This simple choice
indicated that Lear had reached a point in his development where he no longer needed his Fool.

When Lear next appeared, he was even madder than Poor Tom. He entered Act IV, scene
vi wearing a crown of weeds and holding a bouquet of wildflowers, babbling about feeding mice
and shooting arrows at birds. He used the flowers as props, which not only helped him mime his
delusions to the audience, but also alluded to his world’s connection with nature; in his crazed,
human state, he reverted to the natural world and away from the superficialiality of thick robes
and meaningless ritual. He handed the flowers to Edgar and Gloucester throughout the scene,
using them as press money and a written challenge. These interactions were often teaching
moments; although trapped in his own, mad world, he was communicating through gibberish in
the same way Poor Tom taught him. After declaring himself “every inch a king” (IV.vi.127), for
example, he put his arm around Edgar and pointed at Gloucester: “When I stare, see how the
subject quakes” (IV.vi.129). He then explained to Edgar why adultery was not a crime, reasoning
that “Gloucester’s bastard son was kinder to his father than my daughters got ‘tween the lawful sheets” (IV.vi.132). Edgar nodded along, listening intently as he tried to understand Lear’s “reason in madness” (IV.vi.193), a reversal in the teacher-student roles Poor Tom and the King had fulfilled in Act Three. Now, Lear understood the shallowness of ritualism, the suffering of the poor and mad, and the gravity of his selfish mistakes. He no longer needed riddles and wisdom from Poor Tom or the Fool; he had reached an enlightenment that he could now communicate to others.

The King’s emotional journey culminated in his reunion with Cordelia. He was wheeled onstage in a large, wooden palanquin, propped up by pillows and covered with a fur blanket. The underscoring music was gentle, a contrast to the dissonant thunder from the storm scenes. “The great rage, / You see, is killed in him” (IV.vii.91), the Doctor explained; finally, after the tempest in his mind, Lear had reached a state of mental tranquility. He spoke softly and slowly as he gained consciousness, but when Cordelia asked him “look upon me, sir, / And hold your hands in benediction o’er me” (IV.vii.65) he scrambled off the palanquin and onto the ground with sudden energy. The moment he saw his youngest daughter, he dropped to his knees, a gesture of humility and remorse. As he asked her forgiveness, she put his arm around her, mirroring their interaction at the end of the opening dance. Where in Act I, scene i they were buoyant and lighthearted, however, here they walked offstage slowly and cautiously with Lear almost leaning on Cordelia for support. Their relationship had healed, but the nature of it had changed; Lear was no longer a proud King, but instead a humbled, remorseful father.

They were still holding each other when Edmund lead them on as prisoners of war in the final scene. For the first time in the play, Lear stood still. Content in his renewed relationship with his daughter, the prospect of life in prison did not throw him into a violent rage as it might
have earlier in the play. Instead, he spoke quietly and directly to Cordelia, pulling her closely and cupping her face in his hands. Their quiet, intimate moment contrasted with the scene behind them: Soldiers lined the perimeter of the stage while Edmund paced among them. He broke Lear and Cordelia’s tender moment with a harsh, “Take them away” (V.iii.21). Corralled offstage by two soldiers, they exited in the same fashion they entered: his arm around her shoulder like a shield.

When he reentered carrying Cordelia’s body, the stage was nearly empty; only Albany, Kent and Edgar were left in the aftermath of Edmund, Regan and Goneril’s deaths. Rubin cut the stage direction, “Goneril and Regan’s bodies brought out” (V.iii.284), despite my initial hesitation. I considered Lear surrounded by his three dead daughters an iconic image, one that echoes the opening scene of the play. Rubin was adamant, however, and when I saw the scene in performance, I understood his reasoning. Lear and Cordelia were almost completely alone in a universe that was once populated by the King’s loyal subjects, highlighting the play’s theme of nothingness. It also focused the audience’s attention less on how Lear’s mistakes had demolished his kingdom and more on the intimate, harrowing pain of losing a child. It helped us answer one of the most significant staging questions about the final scene: on how hopeless of a note should the play end?

Often, productions leave the audience with a final, haunting image to emphasize the permanency and enormity of Lear’s failures as King. In Kyle’s Globe interpretation, for example, Lear was surrounded by anonymous victims of war as well as his daughters’ corpses. Brook’s version was even more ominous: Edgar delivered his final lines while dragging his brother offstage, underscored by a faraway clap of thunder. The implication in his and Kyle’s

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111 Kyle, recording.
112 Legatt, King Lear, 54.
productions was that the tragedy would not end after Lear’s death; rather, the innate corruptness of human nature would perpetuate the world’s violence even further. Rubin and I interpreted the final moments of the play quite differently. Lear dies in a similar manner to Gloucester: “his flawed heart/ (Alack, too weak the conflict to support)/ ‘Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief,/ Burst smilingly” (V.iii.232). Maloney delivered arguably the saddest line of the play --"Thoul’t come no more,/ Never, never, never, never, never!” (V.iii.371)” – questioningly, implying that he was prepared to die and rejoin Cordelia’s spirit. He dies in a sudden moment of joy: “Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips/ Look there, look there!” (V.iii.374). In his final breaths, Lear believes his daughter is alive, and Maloney delivered the lines in an earnest, quietly passionate manner.

Rubin used the world’s reliance on nature and spiritualism to relieve the final moments of complete despair. Kent tells Edgar to “Vex not his ghost. O, let him pass!” (V.iii.380) and looks up toward the heavens. He, Edgar and Albany watch as Lear’s spirit leaves his body, indicated by the soft circle of light and gentle music. Kent’s final line – “I have a journey, sir, shortly to go;/ My master calls me. I must not say no” (V.iii.390) implied that he was going to take his own life, but he continued gazing at the heavens as he delivered it, emphasizing that he would be joining Lear’s spirit soon. Edgar’s closing speech also posed a significant performance decision; the lines can be interpreted in a number of ways – bitter, furious, despairing, hopeful – so we needed to carefully consider the message we wanted to deliver. Our Edgar spoke these final lines determinedly. He broke away from the sight of Lear and Cordelia and delivered his speech to the audience and Albany, indicating that he had learned from his elders’ mistakes and was resolved to restore the kingdom. As the curtain came down and the circle of light from the opening of the play reappeared, the surviving three members of Lear’s court raised their hands slowly to the
heavens. The repeat of this gesture demonstrated that, in spite of the bloodshed and despair, the play’s characters still had faith in a higher power and a resolution to mend the kingdom.

After one tech week rehearsal, Rubin asked me, “How traditional is our Lear?” Since Brook’s interpretation, staging the play in primitive England is a relatively popular staging choice; on the surface, our production might appear somewhat conventional. Many of our thematic and character choices, however, diverged from “typical” contemporary productions. Although Rubin focused on authority, Lear was not a brutal or ruthless leader. Rather, he was a goodhearted king, affectionate toward his servants and favorite daughter. Instead of being inherently cruel, as Falls and Brook interpreted the King, he was corrupted by vanity and the allure of power. He gradually recognized the effects of his mistake, and in the throes of madness, learned how to be human. Our King Lear was not only about how power can corrupt and destroy; it was also about compassion, growth and ultimately, redemption.
**Conclusion: “The wheel is come full circle”**

After he has been set in the stocks, Kent speaks a beautiful, often ignored line: “Nothing almost sees miracles/ But misery” (II.iii.180). For such a small statement, it embodies much of what our staging of *King Lear* intended to portray. Shakespeare was writing about power, but also foolishness, corruption, forgiveness and rebirth. Only through pain and suffering does Lear realize the gravity of his mistakes. In turn, the play’s surviving characters – Edgar, Kent and Albany – learn from Lear’s tragedy and grow into open-minded, capable leaders.

The line also encompasses the painful and rewarding process of bringing a play to life. *King Lear*, widely considered one of if not the most difficult of Shakespeare’s plays to stage, requires innumerable hours of time and energy. In our case, there were towers to weld, lights to hang, costumes to wash, blood to mix – between class time, rehearsals and tech work, the production team lived the play nonstop for almost an entire semester. As student dramaturg, I spent much of my time at my computer instead of in the rehearsal room, but I encountered my share of roadblocks and drudgery as well. My first dramaturgical assignment, for example, was completely unglamorous: I spent hours of my winter break junior year slogging through versions of *King Lear* – the Folio, the Quarto, two conflated editions – comparing, contrasting and identifying which version we might use for our production. When I returned for my spring semester, Rubin and I had another set of obstacles to tackle: putting together a cast, cutting down the text, and, what became the focus of my work, exploring the world of the play.

Little of my research about the world of *King Lear* was used directly in our production. The work presented in my first two chapters did, however, help inform Rubin and the cast about where the play came from. Delving into what the play meant to King James I and Shakespeare’s audience helped us narrow our focus, opening up conversations about the nature of power and
how a leader’s choices affect the society around him. Shakespeare’s *King Lear* was originally staged for a society on the verge of utter chaos; only a few decades after the playwright’s death, shifting notions of authority resulted in bloodshed and revolt. Understanding what the play meant to its intended Jacobean audience instilled for us the importance of power and authority as primary themes. Shakespeare had an advantage, however: his audience connected with the play on social and cultural levels that are completely foreign to a 21st century audience. Many of the references he makes – bastardy and inheritance laws, servitude and knighthood, paganism and divine authority – have no place in modern society. It is this disconnect that Andrew James Hartley argues makes the dramaturg’s role so crucial to Shakespeare in performance:

…Present day actors and directors are committed to the present, as they should be; theatre is about communication in the performative moment, to an audience of the performers’ contemporaries who necessarily struggle (consciously or otherwise) to connect with plays that are wholly different in form and method from drama that is written today…it is thus vital to recognize that the dramaturg – like the actors and director – is invested in the NOW of the theatrical moment, and is thus working for the present, living audience who will attend the show. The dramaturg’s paramount concern, therefore, is making the play work in the present, for the living, rather than being interested solely in the archaeology of the past or in the ways that performance can be considered an exploration of textual or theoretical ideas.113

Hartley calls the Shakespearean dramaturg a production’s “intellectual presence,”114 someone with access to answers, but only provides them when necessary. His definition of the term mirrors the approach I took during the collaborative process. I asked questions more than I answered, and although I conducted extensive research on the world of the play, I wanted the actors to experience moments of discovery on their own. My research on Shakespeare’s *King Lear* was a catalyst for thematic exploration and provided alternative ways of reading and understanding the text.

114 Ibid, 18.
My research on the play’s production history also invited discussion about the play. On the second day of class, I presented a visual exploration of the play’s stage history, touching on its Iron Age roots, through Nahum Tate’s rewrite, and finishing with 21st century adaptations. Each image presented a unique insight into the play and posed questions about how performance choices influence a production. We employed this critical approach to staging as we delved into rehearsals; actors were encouraged to consider each movement, vocal inflection and expression as it related to the play’s themes. Rubin specifically asked them to approach their characters with power in mind; “You’re each trying to fill the space with how you think the kingdom should be run,”115 he said in one rehearsal. Even the “good characters” were trying to achieve a specific goal, and that motivation needed to come across in every choice the actors made. My cache of performance examples helped immensely as actors examined how their characters would speak, move and interact. During a discussion about how to convey the nature of Edmund and Edgar’s relationship, for example, I remembered a moment from Act II, stage i of Barry Kyle’s Globe production; in his staging, the brothers embraced each other before staging the sword fight, implying a close relationship and in turn, emphasizing the enormity of Edmund’s betrayal. Rubin employed this staging choice in our production. While we did not use most of the examples I called upon, they were useful to consider as the actors embodied their characters in more complex ways.

Most significantly, however, my research on stage history highlighted the play’s immense cultural influence and our role within it. Although King Lear has waxed and waned in popularity, it continues to surface during periods of societal conflict. In the past 20 years, for example, dozens of notable actors have grappled with Shakespeare’s tragic king: Sam Waterston, Ian McKellen, Christopher Plummer and Stacy Keach, to name a few. Calling upon these

115 Jason Rubin, interview.
examples of past productions was a reminder of the enormity and validity of our production. The questions we asked in class and rehearsals – about gender, family, forgiveness, kingship, rebirth – are being posed in productions of the play across the globe. Our King Lear was a response to and conversation with every production we studied during the class. Washington College’s staging may have seemed insignificant compared to West End or Broadway performances, but each interpretation offers a distinctly unique perception of play. Ours presented a visceral, raw approach to Shakespeare’s play. Our Lear was endearing, our Cordelia strong, our Fool biting and insightful; they created an entire world out of an empty stage, populating it with their desires, fears and actions. This King Lear began, like every production, as an unmarked script and a vision in a director’s imagination. A year later, it proved how theater can, in fact, make something out of nothing.
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