

A Father–Daughter Paper

By Clark L. Wagner and Suzanne L. Wagner

Presented to the Chicago Literary Club
20 April 2015

Children, obey your parents in all things: for this is well pleasing unto the Lord.
Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged.

— The Letter of Paul to the Colossians 3:20–21

This evening's paper is listed in the scheme of exercises as "A Father–Daughter Paper." And so it will be. The subject of the paper, however, is another matter. And as we were casting about for a subject, it became clear to both of us that where fathers and daughters are concerned, there is one work of literature standing above all others that could serve as a vehicle for our joint effort. Accordingly, we decided to make Shakespeare's play *King Lear* the subject of our presentation, and in the process also find out what Lear himself has to say about the play.

We begin this evening with the obituary that appeared in the *Dover Press* the day after King Lear's death. Headlined "King Lear Is No More," it reads as follows:

DATELINE DOVER—Sometime in the year 805 B.C.

King Lear, late ruler of Britain, died yesterday in a field near Dover. He was eighty-five.

The Duke of Albany, the king's son-in-law, announced his death, adding that the king's demise was "a tragedy of the highest order, worthy of glorification by a bard perhaps yet unborn."

Lear ruled the kingdom for sixty years, longer than any king before him. During this period he gained control over surrounding tribal leaders by persuasion when possible and by force when persuasion failed, thereby enlarging the boundaries of his kingdom. A map believed to be among the late king's possessions defines those boundaries at the time of his death.

Lear was preceded in death by his father and mother as well as by his wife, Queen Lear. He had three daughters, Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia, all of whom also preceded him in death. There are no other family members, legitimate or otherwise, known to have survived him other than his son-in-law Albany.

The circumstances surrounding the king's death remain unclear. There have been rumors in recent months of a family quarrel over the division of his kingdom upon his retirement—a quarrel that reached global proportions with last week's thwarted invasion of Britain by French forces. Witnesses have also reported that the late king had recently been seen running around half-naked on a heath near Dover in a storm of unprecedented violence. The king was said to have been in a state of high agitation during this unseemly romp, sometimes bordering on madness itself.

The scene of the king's death was peopled with the bodies of others, including those of his three daughters. The body of the bastard son of the Earl of Gloucester was found nearby. Authorities are investigating the immediate cause of the king's death as well as whether any crimes have been committed. A warrant has also been issued for the arrest of the king's fool, who was last seen with the king the night of the storm.

≡ Suzanne Speaks ≡

A father–daughter paper on Shakespeare’s *King Lear*? A play in which the narcissistic father asks his three daughters each to declare the degree of their love for him so he can decide how to divide his kingdom among them? A play in which the two ruthless eldest daughters falsely flatter their father to further their ambitions? A play in which the father petulantly disowns his third and favorite daughter because she won’t play this game? A play in which the father is stripped of all his dignity and driven to madness by the daughters he mistakenly believed loved him most? A play in which the younger daughter’s efforts to save her foolish father and his kingdom lead only to her own murder and her father’s death from heartbreak and loss?

Well, after badgering my own father for close to two years to do a father–daughter paper in recognition of our being the first—and so far only—father–daughter members of the Chicago Literary Club, I could hardly say no when he finally said yes—and then, “Let’s do it on *King Lear*!”

Was this my father’s strong sense of the ironic coming through, or a subtle warning about what happens to daughters who don’t respect their aging father, or—most disturbingly—a Lear-like cluelessness about his suggested topic? Let’s be clear about this: On a list of the ten worst fathers in literature put together by a British newspaper in honor of Father’s Day, Lear is #1, beating out even King Laius from Greek mythology, who ordered his infant son, Oedipus, to be left exposed on a mountain to die.¹ This was certainly going to be an interesting father–daughter project. . . .

As with all Shakespeare’s plays, scholars have carefully documented the sources for *King Lear*. Typically there are many. There’s an earlier Elizabethan play titled *The True Chronicle History of King Leir*; there’s the mytho-historical legend of King Leir recounted by both Geoffrey of Monmouth in medieval times and again by Raphael Holinshed in 1577; and there are even some legal cases from Shakespeare’s time.

One of those legal cases involved Sir Brian Annesley a couple of years before the first performance of *King Lear* in 1606 for King James I. Sir Brian’s eldest daughter wanted control of his estate, and she and her husband tried to have him declared a lunatic—“altogether unfit to govern himself or his estate,” according to the husband in legal documents. Of Sir Brian’s three daughters (yes, three), the youngest, Cordell (yes, Cordell), defended her father in the case. Sir

Brian died soon thereafter in 1604, leaving most of his estate to Cordell. His last will and testament was challenged, of course, but successfully upheld by Cordell, who several years later even married one of the executors of her father's estate.²

Shakespeare may have been inspired by this real-life father-daughter legal battle, but in his own play no one wins, though apparently the popular performance version of *King Lear* from the late seventeenth century into the nineteenth was a Nahum Tate-authored rewrite with a happy ending. In it, Cordelia and Lear both live, she marries Edgar (the closest thing to a hero in the original), and together Cordelia and Edgar rule the kingdom while Lear enjoys his retirement.

Clearly Shakespeare was not interested in a happy ending, even if later audiences were. Almost no one survives his play, old or young, virtuous or despicable, not even the fool. That character completely disappears midplay, and so inexplicably that directors have to decide whether to simply ignore his disappearance or creatively account for it in productions. From the first scene, *King Lear* spirals inexorably downward into increasing darkness and horror. By the time Gloucester is getting his eyes gouged out by the Duke of Cornwall—egged on by his wife, Regan (Lear's middle daughter)—and it's only act 3 with two more to go, you realize Shakespeare is going way beyond his usual tragic fare. There is no redemption at the end of this play, no lesson moral or otherwise, just a stage littered with corpses.

So what *was* Shakespeare interested in with *King Lear*, one of his late plays? In preparing for this paper, I explored the play from a variety of perspectives after re-reading it for the first time since college. I looked at many scholarly essays, of course. None of them seemed to me to really know what to make of the play either, I'm afraid, even if the scholars didn't admit it.

I also watched several productions on stage and on film. There was Ian McKellen's Lear from a 2007 Royal Shakespeare Company production directed by Trevor Nunn, taped for PBS. In this production the characters kept looking up to the sky as if searching for divine guidance or explanation, but the heavens were always empty: God is dead, the production appeared to say, or maybe there never was one to begin with.

Then there was Larry Yando's Lear this past fall at Chicago Shakespeare Theatre. Directed by Barbara Gaines, the production conceit was that Lear's behavior derived from senile dementia. For me the conceit worked, but it was a twenty-first-century gloss on the play that Shakespeare might well have found reductive, and I missed much of the text Gaines cut in

reshaping the play for her interpretation, particularly those parts that would've raised more spiritual questions. Why look to the heavens if the tragedy originates in the aging human brain?

I searched for Akira Kurosawa's gorgeous 1985 film, *Ran*, which I had seen in the theater when it was first released, but believe it or not it's not available from Netflix, so I crossed it off my list for this paper. In cleaning out a cabinet at home one winter day, however, I was surprised to find I owned a video of it. Had I been so impressed with the film back in the 1980s that I'd bought it? I dusted off my VCR, slipped in the cassette, and was relieved to see that the tape had not degraded after so many years.

Set in feudal Japan, the film has the Lear-like Lord Hidetora, but instead of three daughters he has three sons among whom he divides his kingdom. An almost three-hour epic suffused with vivid colors and elements of classical Noh drama, *Ran* is highly stylized, and Kurosawa did not shy away from the cosmic themes that were lost in the recent Chicago Shakespeare Theatre production: The film's final image is a parchment painting of the Buddha lying amid the abandoned ruins of Hidetora's castle.

Ran, which means "chaos," does not mirror Shakespeare's play exactly. In particular, especially in the context of this paper, does it matter that Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia are replaced by three sons? Shakespeare does explore fathers and sons in *King Lear* through the characters of Gloucester, Edgar, and Edmond—a subplot that is actually so significant in the play it isn't really a subplot. Gloucester's relationships with his sons are no less disturbing than Lear's with his daughters, and both fathers fail to see their children for what they really are, whether good or evil, until it's way too late. For that reason—the parallels between the two men and their children in Shakespeare's play—Kurosawa's gender swapping doesn't really seem to matter: His film still feels like *King Lear*. Besides, Kurosawa gives Hidetora two memorable daughters-in-law to provide a female element in the film: one pious and forgiving, the other seductive and conniving. Of course, they're both dead by the end, and it's the good daughter-in-law's parchment painting of the Buddha crumpled in the castle ruins.

Given all this parent-child dysfunction in *King Lear*—whether between fathers and daughters or fathers and sons—you won't be surprised that Freud wrote an essay on the play, layering his own neurotic obsessions over Shakespeare's breakdown of family and kingdom. Surprisingly, Freud doesn't spend any time on the parent-child relationships in his analysis; there's no mention of Oedipus or Elektra or the like. For Freud, *King Lear* is all about an old man trying to

avoid death but finally coming to terms with it. His conclusion is certainly plausible, but not for the convoluted reasons he gives, many of which are downright kooky and unconvincing interpretations of the action and characters. And while Freud doesn't take up any of the themes of family that run through the play, he apparently was inspired to write the essay in part by one of his own daughters. According to the scholar Peter Gay in his introduction to the essay, "We have Freud's private word that one central motive for writing the paper was his growing awareness that his daughter Anna, his third and last daughter [!], was not only intellectually very remarkable but also emotionally very special to him."³ You certainly wouldn't guess this from Freud's essay, even if you knew he had any daughters, but how interesting that he privately imagined parallels of some sort between himself and Lear.

Despite months of research, when I sat down to start writing my parts of this father-daughter paper I still didn't feel I'd come to grips with Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Everyone's take on the play—whether as scholar, director, actor, philosopher, or psychoanalyst—seemed somehow inadequate.

≡ Clark Speaks ≡

In the countless productions that have been staged since the play was first performed in December 1606, producers, directors, and the actors have spoken for themselves, so to speak, presenting their own views, interpretations, and adaptations of the play.⁴ But never, insofar as we know—never has *King Lear* himself been given the opportunity to offer his own views on this play since Shakespeare first gave him life more than four hundred years ago . . . until this evening. So let us hear what Lear has to say. But I want to warn you: He does not seem to be in a very good mood.

≡ King Lear Speaks ≡

Good evening. My name is Lear. *King Lear*. I am a character in a play which I did not write; the writing of which I did not authorize; and about which I have now been asked to comment. I do so reluctantly, having long ago tried to put out of mind the torment to which Shakespeare, or whoever wrote this play, has subjected me. But I do so nevertheless—to put the record straight, so to speak. So let me begin. . . .

First of all, don't be surprised that I'm still around after all these years. Once Shakespeare got me out of his inkwell and onto the written page, I was here to stay. I'm living proof that great characters, once created, live forever. I have been present for all of the countless productions of the play that bears my name and will be here long after the curtain is drawn on the last performance—until “the last syllable of recorded time,” if you will. I also not only possess the advantage of knowing all that had happened before the play's first lines were written, but am acquainted with everything that has been spoken or written about this play since. And by the way, I have acquired password access to your website, so I have a pretty good idea of what transpires in these quarters on Monday evenings.

Well, one of the many questions about the play that audiences and critics inevitably discuss is this: Who was responsible for setting in motion the disastrous series of events that resulted in so much suffering and culminated in the deaths of all of the play's principal characters? Who, or what single act, or failure to act, triggered this tragic avalanche of destruction? Who's to blame? I will answer that question this evening, as well as others, but not before I've had the opportunity to dismiss a few of the false notions that surround my life in print, on stage, and in film.

There are those, for example, who assert that the play is about unsuccessful parenting, in respect of which the finger is pointed at me. They say, in effect, that I was a bad parent. Well, tell me, if you will, where the hell was Queen Lear when our three children were growing up? Nowhere on stage or in print—that's where she was.⁵ These were daughters, damn it! I was ruling a kingdom for a living, and what in God's name was I supposed to do with or know about daughters? I had asked for three battle-ready sons. Three daughters I was given! Two of them clearly, and the third as well, needed a mother's guidance and supervision. Let me tell you this: These one-parent kingdoms can be a nightmare.

I have also been accused of bad estate planning—by the lawyers, of course. Well, that's a joke of a high order. If I had listened to the lawyers, I would have lost my kingdom long before the opening line of act 1—through suspect legal advice, perpetual litigation, and wildly excessive attorneys' fees. I have been called an old fool, but at least I had the foresight to rely on my own rash—I mean strong—instincts instead of the profusely hedged opinions of those who constitute the world's second oldest profession. Better for me to have turned to Macbeth's three witches for advice.

By the way, I have another grievance, which has been festering for a long time, like about four hundred years. Scholars—and what do they know about anything!—scholars often discuss my play with reference to the play *Hamlet*. Ugh, Hamlet!—that pampered, schoolboy, ass of a prince was given all the good speaking lines by Shakespeare: brilliant lines, by turns soaring and insightful, the most quoted in all of world literature; and seven soliloquies to boot, while I got none, unless you call barking at lightning and thunder on the heath a soliloquy. But forget my speaking lines. I was a man of boldness and action, whereas the mincing Hamlet did nothing but temporize and equivocate. He doesn't even measure up to his playmate Fortinbras, who marched through Denmark on his way to trash Poland in less time than it took Hamlet to make up his mind what he wanted for dinner. But worst of all—the worst of all is Hamlet's noble death, nay, his apotheosis, compared to which my own death was little more than like the snuffing out of a guttering candle. So thank you, Shakespeare, or whoever you were, for such a dismal legacy.

Let me say this: I was every inch a king. Men feared me, as they feared the gods, and in their fear they revered and obeyed me. My kingdom was enlarged by manly persuasion and, where persuasion failed, by force of arms. I knew all the many satisfactions of a great king's appetite: war and conquest, fame and honor, hunting to the horn, gluttony at table, fornication, the power to banish and restore, absolute deference in all matters large and small . . . You may conclude, after all is said and done, that I did not rule wisely, but show me a philosopher-king and I in turn will show you a unicorn! Even after Shakespeare had put his pen down, my stature was undiminished. I have suffered ten thousand productions of this play, and none of the actors who played my part was a Lear. Is there any doubt, as thoughtful critics have concluded, Charles Lamb and Dr. Samuel Johnson among them—is there any doubt that the play is diminished in production?⁶ *Hamlet* is playable, *King Lear* is not. No stage ever erected has been large enough for Lear to act upon.

But let me return to the question at hand: Who was responsible for causing this dystopian mess? I know—I know I'm the tragic hero here, so suspicion has come to rest on me. Why, I barely walk onto the stage in the opening scene when Shakespeare has me say, "We shall express our darker purpose.—Give me the map." Darker *purpose*? What darker purpose? I merely wanted to divide up my kingdom and get on with my retirement. If that's a dark purpose, it's dark only in the sense that my plans had not been formally proclaimed to the family, not that I had some sinister undertaking in mind. But with Shakespeare you never know: He is often

careless in his use of the English language and keeps inserting words in his plays that have too many meanings and thus create hopeless ambiguities.⁷

You see my point, though: I've barely opened my mouth and Shakespeare has me condemning myself. But forget the words. That's Hamlet's realm, not mine. What is it that I did that makes me the villain in this cosmic farce? Well, the consensus seems to be that some flaw in my character led me to make a contest of dividing up my kingdom—that is, to make the stakes dependent on how much each of my daughters publicly acknowledged their love for me—and then, unforgivably (to most of you), to banish my youngest child, to make her my “sometime daughter” when she displeased me. Some say it was my pride, others a rash temperament. A few have even accused me of childlike behavior attributable to senile dementia. Harold Bloom, who considers himself to be Shakespeare's interpreter, and likes to hold himself out as my biographer, even asserts that I was acting out of a deep and compelling need for public demonstrations of love, which sounds to me like something Freud might have made up.⁸

Look, nobody's perfect. I made a few mistakes. But this was my kingdom, and if I wanted to play with it a little longer before dividing it up, it seems to me that those intended to benefit most from my retirement could have indulged me. My older two daughters, devils that they were, did so. But my youngest, the fairest, the one I loved most, Cordelia, when it was time for her to speak, what was her response? “Nothing,” she says! And when I pressed her further, there were so many artful qualifications to her answer that she would have been better off sticking with “Nothing.” At least I could have chalked that up to stage fright and got on with the business at hand. Instead, in view of this very public slap in the face—an insult to our dignity, our honor, and our authority—there was nothing for me to do other than hand her over to the King of France. Bloom at least got that right: There would have been no tragedy without Cordelia's prideful reluctance to participate in this childish—uh, I mean harmless—charade.⁹ So don't be so quick to lay the blame at my royal feet. And by the way, do you think Cordelia would have held fast to her reluctance if she had known what Shakespeare had in store for her by the end of the play?

I don't know whether this answer will satisfy you, but frankly I don't give a damn. I've been so badly beaten up in every performance of this play that the harshest condemnations on your part land on me as pillow feathers by comparison. I will have more to say later, but need a few minutes in which to text my literary agent. Excuse me.

≡ Suzanne Speaks Again ≡

Whatever the king may be texting, agents have been hearing from their clients for years about *Lear* projects. Shakespeare's play has inspired more than a few people to create their own versions and grapple with the meaning of the original. In the past few decades there have been novels like Jane Smiley's Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Thousand Acres*, set on a modern-day farm in Iowa and later turned into a movie starring Jason Robards and Jessica Lange. Besides that movie and Kurosawa's *Ran*, mentioned earlier, there have been other film adaptations and even a new and highly regarded TV series on Fox about a feuding African-American family with a hip-hop empire, which has already spawned a successful soundtrack. One of my personal favorites of the *Lear* "offspring" is a graphic-novel adaptation by Gareth Hinds with comic-book bubbles full of dialogue faithful to Shakespeare's play and vivid illustrations of the action.

There have even been two contemporary *King Lear* operas. The lesser-known version was commissioned by the Finnish National Opera in Helsinki and composed by Aulis Sallinen. It premiered in 2000 and starred the great Finnish bass Matti Salminen as Lear. While it appears to have been well received in Helsinki, it does not seem to have been produced elsewhere. I have no idea what it sounds like but can only imagine that Finnish is a tough language to sing.

The better-known version by the German composer Aribert Reimann has actually had several productions since its premiere in Munich in 1978 at the Bavarian State Opera, which commissioned it. Reimann wrote the role of Lear for the very famous German baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, who had suggested the subject to him.

Reimann's *Lear* (there's no "King" in the title) has been produced in Paris, London, and several other European cities. Its U.S. premiere was at San Francisco Opera in 1981 in an English translation that apparently preserved many of Shakespeare's lines. A *New York Times* review of the San Francisco production called it "a difficult, highly chromatic new opera."¹⁰ The review was mixed but intriguing enough to send me to YouTube, where I found video of the final ten minutes of the original Munich production with Fischer-Dieskau. The scene begins as Lear drags Cordelia's dead body onto the stage and it ends with his death; Lear's dying words are the last in the opera.

It's hard to judge an entire opera from the last ten minutes. Reimann's score requires a large orchestra and lots of percussion, and even with all the banging and clanging in the pit during the

final scene it's impossible not to be moved by Fischer-Dieskau's beautiful singing. With a baritone of his caliber this is a contemporary opera that would probably make for a powerful evening, and I'm tempted to head to Paris in the spring of 2016 to see the just-announced production with renowned baritone Bo Skovhus as Lear.

The most interesting opera version of *King Lear* is the one that never got written. Giuseppe Verdi spent much of his very long career trying to compose *Il Re Lear* but never succeeded. Early in his career he wanted to write the role for one of his favorite baritones, but that plan never got off the ground.

Several years later he actually started working with a librettist on a five-act opera, but the writer died before it was completed. In corresponding with the librettist Verdi had written, "*Re Lear* as a play is so vast and interwoven that it would seem to be impossible to fashion an opera from it. But, examining it closely it seems that the challenges, though large, are not insurmountable. You know that you should not treat this play using forms and methods that are familiar, but rather should treat it in an entirely new manner, one that is vast and shows no regard for customary forms."¹¹

Another writer turned the rough draft of the libretto into a very different three-act opera, completed in 1856, and Verdi even seems to have composed some music for it. The opera was never finished, though, despite repeated attempts. More than two decades after first considering *King Lear*, Verdi still wanted to do it when the Paris Opera came to him in 1865 for an opera. Instead of *Lear*, Verdi ended up composing *Don Carlos* for Paris. Disappointed, he wrote, "*Re Lear* is magnificent, sublime, pathetic, but it does not have enough scenic splendor for the Paris Opera."¹²

Verdi was a disciplined and prolific composer, so it's surprising he never completed *King Lear*, especially since he spent decades pursuing the project in one form or another. Over the years he did manage to masterfully adapt several Shakespeare plays for the opera: *Macbeth* (1847), *Otello* (1887), and his final opera, *Falstaff* (1893). Some scholars say that *Rigoletto* is the closest he came to a *Lear* opera, particularly in the father-daughter relationship, though many Verdi operas revolve around a father and a daughter, notably *Giovanna d'Arco*, *Luisa Miller*, *Simon Boccanegra*, and *Aida*.

What was it about *King Lear* that made it so hard for Verdi? Would he have pushed through the difficulties if the right singer and an opera house had shown enough interest? Would he have

been able to transcend all of opera's "customary forms" to compose a score fitting for a play "so vast and interwoven" as he considered *Lear* to be? I am truly disappointed that I'll never get to hear Verdi's aria for mad Lear on the heath, his ensemble as Gloucester is blinded, or his duets between Lear and Cordelia.

≡ **King Lear Speaks Again** ≡

Well! There you have it. Verdi brought Macbeth, Othello, and Falstaff to the operatic stage, but he found it impossible to do so in my case. *King Lear* not only can't be played, it can't be sung. Shakespeare, I tell you, was obviously going for something too deep for representation on stage, in speech or in song.¹³ But before we get to that, I want to dismiss some of the nuttier suggestions that have surfaced over time.

First, nobody is going to mistake this play for a self-help book on old age (or, for that matter, a planning manual for retirement). The lessons of old age are learned on the journey that gets us there, and by the time we get there it's too late to do much of anything about it, AARP notwithstanding. Nor is the play's lesson that it's dangerous to have daughters, or for that matter sons. Not only is the insanely fierce biological imperative driving reproduction completely beyond any semblance of control by the members of our feckless species¹⁴ (making any lesson in that regard meaningless), but the results flowing out of our reproductive activities are unpredictable, as you who have children can yourselves testify.

Next, some are fascinated by the words Shakespeare has me say to my youngest daughter in response to her refusal to speak. "Nothing will come of nothing" was my reply. Highly quotable words, but meaningless if you think about it, and wrong too. Look, nothing is the absence of anything, but the absence of anything is not nothing, so it seems to me that you start with *something* even though you refer to it as nothing . . . and so on. I never studied philology like Hamlet did, but you can see the absurdity of this kind of nonsense. And don't forget, it was *not* nothing that came from nothing when my daughter Cordelia responded to me with the word *nothing* and set in motion that disastrous chain of events that doomed us all.

Still others find something insightful in the words spoken by Gloucester's trueborn son, Edgar, in act 4, scene 1. I quote: "The worst is not / So long as we can say 'This is the worst.'" What's that all about? Any fool knows from his own experience that things are never so bad that

they can't get worse. Job and I, by the way, are probably the world's best-known exemplars of this truth, although the outcome was certainly better in Job's case than my own.

Finally—and this really drives me mad—scholars maintain that the heart of the play has to do with how my suffering led to self-discovery and self-knowledge and ultimately to my redemption.¹⁵ Is that so! Well, I'll grant you the suffering part: I lost my kingdom, I lost my mind, I lost Cordelia, and I lost my own life to boot. But what did I learn as a result of all this suffering? Let Shakespeare tell you. *He* put the words in my mouth. He has me announce, in act 4, scene 7, "I am old and foolish." [Lear pauses briefly] Is that right? [Lear pauses again] In other words, I discovered that I was a goddamned old fool! If you ask me, my suffering was grossly disproportionate to the value of that remarkable discovery. But more than that, what was I supposed to do with this hard-earned self-knowledge? All that can be said is that I died wise in my newfound awareness that I was a fool. What an ending to this monstrosity of a play! If you ask me, the last line spoken in this farce, addressed to the audience, over the human wreckage strewn across the stage—the last line spoken to the audience in this nightmare of a play, if you ask me, might as well have been, "Have a nice day!"

If you want to know—and frankly I don't care whether you want to know or not—Shakespeare was trying to tell you something about the fundamental nature of our existence and of the world in which we live. And it's not good.

But I'm done for this evening. Let those two fools who brought me here tonight tell you what they think the play ultimately stands for. So thank you for your patience. And I hope you don't go home tonight wondering why you came in the first place.

≡ **Clark Speaks** ≡

Wow! I can't imagine a better-qualified candidate than Lear for a course in anger management. Worse yet, he skips out of here leaving us in the dark about the play's final message. Help us, Suzanne. What do you wish to say about that message?

≡ **Suzanne Speaks** ≡

Well, Dad. [Pause] In the spirit of Cordelia, I think that I'm going to say nothing.

≡ Clark Speaks ≡

Nothing! We're back where we started! What more?

≡ Suzanne Speaks ≡

Nothing, Father. Which word don't you understand?

≡ Clark Speaks ≡

Apparently I don't understand any of them. But look, we somehow need to bring this presentation to a close. Let's hand a "final message" statement to the secretary of the club, and also make it available to any members of the audience who want a copy—and then try to find Lear at the bar.

[To the audience] Thank you, as Lear would say, for your patience this evening.

Suzanne's and Clark's Promised End
Statement Handed to the Secretary of the Chicago Literary Club
20 April 2015

Audiences and critics alike disagree about the ultimate message that Shakespeare presents to us in *King Lear*. Some critics even say that the play cannot be reduced to a single message. All agree, however, that it is the darkest play in the Shakespeare canon. One opines that it is the “most terrible picture Shakespeare painted of the world” and another says that the play is, “in part, a play about the end of the world” itself.

By play's end, all the principal characters are dead, and all of them, arguably even the worst, had suffered in life to some degree. Of the play's three survivors, Lear's loyal Kent—as Lear (in the last scene) appears with Cordelia in his arms—Kent, stunned and incredulous at what he sees, wonders aloud, “Is this the promised end?” (that is, the end of the world as promised in the Bible) and soon thereafter announces that he will depart to follow Lear in death, while Gloucester's son Edgar and the Duke of Albany survey the wreckage of “the gored state.”

Throughout the play, expectations and hope for reasonable outcomes were defeated, justice and mercy denied. The good went down with the bad. Some had looked to the heavens for help, but none was forthcoming, with the stark implication that the ruling powers of the universe, if not actually malign (the gods “kill us for their sport,” Gloucester says), are indifferent not only to our suffering but even to our very existence.

There are those who try to extract from the cosmic darkness that defines this play some positive message, some hopeful sign that not all has been lost, that Lear's terrible suffering has not ultimately been in vain. Harold Bloom argues against such efforts: “Lear's suffering is neither redeemable nor redeemed. . . . You have to be a very determined Christianizer of literature to take any comfort from this most tragic of all tragedies. The play is a storm, with no subsequent clearing.”

What we take from the play depends in part on what we bring to it: our intellectual grounding, our emotional predispositions, and our own ideas and hopes regarding an unknown and uncertain future. Even allowing for strongly positive attributes in this regard, however, it is difficult to see how audiences and readers can mistake that Shakespeare has painted the darkest of worlds. Perhaps the most that can be said is that the dreadful “promised end” of which Kent speaks contains within it—or at least does not preclude—the possibility of a new beginning.

Citations available on request.

Notes

All quotations from *King Lear* in this paper are from the Folger edition of the play, *The Tragedy of King Lear*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993).

1. "Father's Day: Ten worst dads in literature," available online at www.telegraph.co.uk, original publication date unknown.

2. This legal case is described in the essay "Shakespeare finds his story," in *King Lear*, ed. Elspeth Bain, Jonathan Morris, and Rob Smith (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 202.

3. Peter Gay, ed., *The Freud Reader* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), p. 514.

4. Of the many recent, diverse productions of *King Lear*, not to be overlooked is the adaptation of the play that took place in spring 2014 in the Zaatari Refugee Camp in Jordan, on "a rocky rectangle of land surrounded by a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire," with one hundred Syrian children in the cast, all of whom already knew something about tragedy firsthand. The production was described in *The New York Times* on April 1, 2014, available online.

5. There is only one reference to Queen Lear in the play. In act 2, scene 4, Regan, the second daughter, says to Lear, "I am glad to see your Highness." In response, Lear says, "If thou shouldst not be glad, I would divorce me from thy (mother's) tomb." A play titled *Queen Lear*, adapted from Shakespeare by Tom Lanoye in which the king is instead the queen and the kingdom is a family-run multi-national corporation, opened in Amsterdam in March of this year.

6. Scholars throughout the centuries have come to different conclusions on this point. Charles Lamb was unequivocal: "Lear is essentially impossible to be represented on a stage" (quoted in "Critical Extracts," in *Major Literary Characters: King Lear*, ed. Harold Bloom [New York: Chelsea House, 1992], p. 18; hereafter cited as *Major Literary Characters*).

A. C. Bradley agrees: "*King Lear* is too huge for the stage" (quoted in Harley Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, vol. II [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946], p. 2; hereafter cited as *Prefaces to Shakespeare*).

Harold Bloom is of the same opinion: "The experience of reading *King Lear* . . . is altogether uncanny. I emphasize reading . . . because I have attended many stagings of *King Lear*, and invariably have regretted being there. Our directors and actors are defeated by this play, and I begin sadly to agree with Charles Lamb that we ought to keep rereading *King Lear* and avoid its staged travesties" (*Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* [New York: Riverhead Books, 1998], p. 476; hereafter cited as *The Invention of the Human*).

Another take is presented by Jonathan Bate in his introduction to the Modern Library edition of the play: "Few would deny that the role of Lear presents perhaps the greatest of all challenges

to the Shakespeare actor. There is a theater saying that by the time you're old enough to play it, you are too old to play it" (*King Lear* [New York: Modern Library, 2009], p. viii; hereafter cited as the Modern Library edition).

As for Dr. Samuel Johnson, having read the play "many years ago," he was so shocked by Cordelia's death that he wanted neither to see the play nor even to reread it (*Major Literary Characters*, p. 15).

Granville-Barker is foremost in defending staged versions of the play; he presents a lengthy (and persuasive) exposition of his thesis in his *Prefaces to Shakespeare* (pp. 1–10). And it is certain that producers, directors, and actors—perhaps in part inspired by the challenges in doing so—will continue to mount and perform stage productions of the play. As for *King Lear*, his position, as we have heard this evening, remains unchanged: He is adamant in his conviction, now some four hundred years later, that he is simply too great for the stage.

7. The phrase *darker purpose* is characterized as meaning "undeclared intention" in David Bevington's notes to the play (New York: Pearson Longnow, 2004), p. 1208; as "secret (with sinister connotations)" in the Modern Library edition (p. 5); as "more secret" by G. Blakemore Evans in *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), p. 1255; and as "hidden intention" by Russell Fraser in his edition (New York: Signet Classic, 1963), p. 40 (hereafter cited as the Signet Classic edition). Perhaps wisely, the meaning of these words is not characterized in the Folger edition of the play.

8. Commentators stress love as one of the play's important themes, particularly Lear's inability to comprehend its true meaning, noting, for example, how he barter for and measures his daughters' love for him in his division of the kingdom and, in the case of Goneril and Regan, in how many knights they will allow him to keep. For Harold Bloom, however, the theme of love is all-encompassing: "What the drama of *King Lear* truly outrages is our universal idealization of the value of familial love" (*The Invention of the Human*, p. 488). Also, "Lear's magnificent generosity of spirit, which makes him love too much, also prompts him to demand too much love" (*ibid.*, p. 512). And finally, "Lear, surging on through fury, madness, and clarifying though momentary epiphanies, is the largest figure of love desperately sought and blindly denied ever placed upon a stage or in print" (*ibid.*, p. 506).

9. Harold Bloom is clear on this matter: "Without Cordelia's initial reluctance, there would have been no tragedy" (*The Invention of the Human*, p. 485). Russell Fraser takes a like view: "[Cordelia's] fatal reserve . . . is the lever or prise that starts the play on its progress" (introduction to the Signet Classic edition, pp. xxx–xxxi).

The more interesting related question is, What accounts for Cordelia's reluctance? The answer must reside in large part in how we see and understand Cordelia as a person. Critics have covered the waterfront on how they characterize her as a person, so that there are many views—too many to enumerate here—for directors to choose from. Suffice it to say that directors (and readers) can make up their own minds on the matter and most likely find scholarly support for what they decide. That said, perhaps the characterization offered by Harley Granville-Barker is worth mentioning. In his *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, he holds that Lear and Cordelia are clashing characters, the clash sharper by their being "like in opposition to like," or "twin spirits" in pride: "Pride unchecked in Lear has grown monstrous and diseased with his years. In [Cordelia's]

youth it shows unspoiled, it is in flower. *But it is the same pride*" (p. 44, emphasis added). Also, "It will be a fatal error to present Cordelia as a meek saint. She has more than a touch of her father in her. She is as proud as he is, and as obstinate. . . . And being young, she answers uncalculatingly with pride to his pride" (p. 43). Granville-Barker also posits that "the broadcast violence of the play's whole action springs" from Cordelia's prideful reluctance to satisfy Lear's demand for a pleasing response.

10. John Rockwell, "Opera: 'Lear' by Aribert Reimann," *The New York Times*, June 17, 1981, available online.

11. Verdi's correspondence quoted in Fred Plotkin, "Shakespeare and Opera: The Strange But True Story of Verdi's *King Lear*," available at www.wqxr.org as part of the "Operavore" blog, to which Plotkin contributes; hereafter cited as "Shakespeare and Opera."

12. Quoted by Plotkin in "Shakespeare and Opera."

13. The play bristles with questions and ideas. It is as if Shakespeare wanted to pack into the play as many ideas as he could that were consistent with the underlying theme. The scholar Harold C. Goddard quotes the amazed reaction of one of his students: "*King Lear* is a miracle. There is nothing in the whole world that is not in this play" (*The Meaning of Shakespeare*, vol. 2 [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951], p. 171; hereafter cited as *The Meaning of Shakespeare*). Lear himself, in speaking to us this evening, dismisses a few of the ideas that readers and audiences have focused on. Other ideas, some representing insights hard won by Lear and other of the play's characters, are listed below, together with pertinent textual references.

- A. Is man no more than an animal? "Is man no more than this. . . . Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art" (spoken by Lear, 3.4.109–15).
- B. Injustice. "Through tattered clothes (small) vices do appear. / Robes and furred gowns hide all. Plate sin / with gold, / And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks. / Arm it in rags, a pygmy's straw does pierce it" (spoken by Lear, 4.6.180–84).
- C. Utopian social justice. "Let the superfluous and lust-dieted man, / That slaves your ordinance, that will not see / Because he does not feel, feel your power quickly. / So distribution should undo excess / And each man have enough" (spoken by Gloucester, 4.1.77–81).
- D. Compassion. "Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are" (spoken by Lear, 3.4.32–36; also by Lear at 3.2.74–80).

- E. Christian spiritual wisdom. “Take physic, pomp. / Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel, / That thou may’st shake the superflux to them / And show the heavens more just” (spoken by Lear, 3.2.67; also by Lear at 3.4.28–36).
- F. Stoicism: We all die; it is only a matter of when. “Men must endure / Their going hence even as their coming hither. / Ripeness is all” (spoken by Edgar to Gloucester, 5.2.10–12). A more eloquent expression of this sentiment is spoken by Hamlet as he prepares to face Laertes in the fencing match that will be fatal to them both.
- G. “Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Deeply resonant throughout the play is Lord Acton’s trenchant and incontrovertible observation about the corrupting influence of power. Absolute and unbridled in Lear’s case before he gave away his throne, by which time the play’s machinery has irrevocably been set in motion (“The bow is bent and drawn. Make from the shaft” [1.1.160]), Lear’s power and authority are not only self-corrupting but corrosive and fatal for all over whom it is exercised.
- H. Are women human? For the most part, women do not fare well in Shakespeare’s tragedies: “Proper deformity shows not in the fiend / So horrid as in a woman” (spoken by Albany to Goneril, 4.2.74–75) and “Down from the waist, they are centaurs, though women all above” (spoken by Lear, 4.6.140–44).
- I. The capacity of humanity for self-destruction. “If that the heavens do not their visible spirits / Send quickly down to tame these vile offenses, / It will come: / Humanity must perforce prey on itself, / Like monsters of the deep” (spoken by Albany to Goneril, 4.2.57–61). In the play *Dunsinane*, which appeared at Chicago Shakespeare Theatre this winter, one of the characters declaims that war is the normal condition of human society, and peace merely an interlude. History, it seems, in broad terms supports this observation, showing that peace follows war either when one side is victorious (the more so when the winning side completely annihilates the other) or when both sides have effectively exhausted their resources in internecine conflict. If we accept this state of affairs as true, we have what may be called the peace paradox—that is, that peace exists only as a consequence of war.

14. This is not the time or place for a lecture on evolutionary biology. Suffice it to say, however, that human DNA is deeply coded for survival and reproduction. Where reproductive activity is concerned, institutional authority and individual restraint are no match for the strong (life) force at work. For a philosophical treatment of this phenomenon, readers may wish to consult Arthur Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Idea*, in *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*, ed. Irwin Edman (New York: Random House, 1928).

15. “The play is sometimes said to portray ‘the education of Lear,’ and its theme may indeed be described as the growth of wisdom through suffering as he learns the true meaning of love and becomes aware of who he is” (Robert Thomas Fallon, *A Theatergoer’s Guide to*

Shakespeare's Characters [Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2004], p. 171). Lear is, to say the least, not happy with aspects of this theme.

Those who are desperate for even the tiniest ray of light piercing the darkness of the play may wish to consult Harold Goddard and also Isaac Asimov, both of whom seem to suggest that Lear may have died “happy” believing that Cordelia is not dead at the play’s end and indeed has survived him (see Goddard’s *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, pp. 170–71, and Asimov’s “The English Plays,” in *Asimov’s Guide to Shakespeare*, vol. 2 [New York: Doubleday, 1970], p. 51).