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978-0-521-28813-2 - Aspects of King Lear: Articles Reprinted from Shakespeare Survey

Edited by Kenneth Muir and Stanley Wells

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# ASPECTS OF *KING LEAR*

ARTICLES REPRINTED FROM *SHAKESPEARE SURVEY*

EDITED BY

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All the illustrations, unless otherwise credited, are from productions at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon. Grateful thanks are due to the following for permission to reproduce their photographs: Thomas Holte (4, 6, 7); the Governors of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon (5); the Harvard Theatre Collection (8, 10); Joe Cocks (11, 13); Heinemann Educational Ltd (12, 14, 15).

## PREFACE

It is arguable, as L. C. Knights has suggested, that whereas *Hamlet* was once the play which seemed to express the aspirations and frustrations of the age, now *King Lear* speaks directly to us all, whatever our beliefs or unbeliefs. Of course our view of the play is bound to be affected by our attitude to life. To Swinburne, and to numerous critics since his day, the key lines of the play are not those of choric figures such as Kent or Edgar, but Gloucester's 'As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods: / They kill us for their sport' – although, not long afterwards, and before he knows he is being succoured by Edgar, Gloucester prays directly to the 'ever-gentle gods'. A. C. Bradley, on the other hand, could argue that the theme of the play was the redemption of Lear; and his interpretation was followed by critics who would profess and call themselves Christians. John F. Danby, for example, regarded Cordelia as a Christ figure, one who redeemed 'nature from the general curse / Which twain have brought her to' – the 'twain' being Adam and Eve rather than Goneril and Regan. G. L. Bickersteth compared scenes of the play to Dante's *Purgatorio*.

There was naturally a reaction against such interpretations. Everyone noticed that the dusty answer to Albany's prayer for the safety of Lear and Cordelia was the entrance of Lear bearing the hanged Cordelia. W. R. Elton therefore argued in *King Lear and the Gods* (San Marino, California, 1966) that Shakespeare wrote a play which would not offend the pious, but containing a subtext to which sceptics and agnostics could eagerly respond. Yet in a play set in a pagan world one ought not to expect flights of angels to sing Lear and Cordelia to their rest. In any case, tragedy is bound to be pessimistic: Strindberg quite properly laughed at those people who wanted optimistic tragedies. Perhaps the most influential criticism of our time – now half a century old – is Wilson Knight's essay in *The Wheel of Fire* on the grotesque element in the play; and this has been vulgarized by some into the idea that Shakespeare was a forerunner of the Theatre of the Absurd.

The essays in the present volume cover a period of more than twenty years, mostly taken from the two volumes of *Shakespeare Survey* (13 and 33) devoted to the play. G. R. Hibbard's retrospect covers the main critical debates about the play since 1939 and the essays of Derek Peat, J. Stampfer, J. K. Walton, and Mary Lascelles show that the debate continues.

One recent trend, not otherwise represented, is touched on in Hibbard's retrospect. Until quite recently, all editors of the play, while accepting the First Folio text as the more reliable, nevertheless added the lines peculiar to the First Quarto. Now a number of critics, including Michael J. Warren, Steven Urkowitz, and Gary Taylor, have argued forcibly that the texts should not be conflated, since they believe that the Folio represents Shakespeare's own revision, its omissions and alterations being deliberate. We can never be certain, however, that all the alterations were Shakespeare's, and some of those he made may have been reluctant. It is difficult to believe that he would have cut the choric comments by Cornwall's servants at the end of Act III, when they are left alone after the blinding of Gloucester. Steven Urkowitz's book *Shakespeare's Revision of 'King Lear'* (Princeton, 1980), and Gary Taylor's essay 'The War in *King Lear*' (*Shakespeare Survey* 33), both appeared after the writing of Hibbard's retrospect, as did P. W. K. Stone's *The Textual History of 'King Lear'* (London, 1980), which argues that the quarto is based on a longhand report of the play which also strongly influenced the Folio text; but not many readers will see the necessity for the numerous emendations he proposes.

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Taking their cue from Charles Lamb (who had witnessed only Tate's adaptation) many critics have declared that Shakespeare's tragedies, and *King Lear* in particular, cannot be represented on the stage. This view was authoritatively questioned by Harley Granville-Barker in his splendid *Preface*; and despite Maynard Mack's justifiable scorn of some recent performances, the period covered by this collection of essays has given the lie to Lamb's declaration. The review articles in *Shakespeare Survey* do not provide materials for a survey of productions, but we include plates illustrating some of the more important. In 1959 Glen Byam Shaw directed Charles Laughton as Lear in a pictorially pleasing version, with designs by Motley, which did not explore the text with any great profundity, though Ian Holm was a poignantly intelligent Fool. The production is described by Muriel St Clare Byrne in 'King Lear at Stratford-upon-Avon', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 11 (1960), 189–206. Far more in keeping with the mood of the times was Peter Brook's 1962 version (discussed in J. L. Styan's *The Shakespeare Revolution* (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 217–23), which, with Paul Scofield as the King, was regarded by many as a triumph for both director and leading actor. Brook's vision of the play was harsh and austere, not entirely sympathetic with Lear, whose knights came some way to justifying Goneril's complaints of their behaviour. Acknowledging the influence of Jan Kott, Brook observed the Folio's omission of Gloucester's consoling servants; the blinded Gloucester, a sack over his head, groped his way off the stage as the house lights rose for the interval. Scofield's performance, searching, granite-voiced, offered no opportunity for easy emotional identification. Director and actor created a climax rather in the questions of the Dover Cliff scene than in the potential resolution of the reunion of Lear and Cordelia. The play's realization, though partial, was intense. Brook's film version of 1971, with Scofield again as Lear, is sympathetically discussed in Jack J. Jorgens's *Shakespeare on Film* (Bloomington and London, 1977) along with Grigori Kozintsev's film, of 1970, which used a translation by Boris Pasternak. Kozintsev's book *King Lear: The Space of Tragedy* is the director's fascinating diary recording the film's evolution and its relationship to Kozintsev's own experience of life and art, and goes some way to explain the greatness of his film.

In Trevor Nunn's 1968 production, Eric Porter offered a less intellectual but more warmly human Lear, impressive in the egocentric grandeur of his opening scene, touchingly absurd in his divestiture on the heath, dignified in his final suffering.

Buzz Goodbody's *Lear* at The Other Place – the Royal Shakespeare Company's studio theatre – in 1974 was, as the title warned, an adaptation, shortening the play for a cast of ten, emphasizing Edmund's sexual entanglements with Goneril and Regan, demanding the audience's imaginative participation in its use of the small space, in which Tony Church's Lear and Mike Gwilym's Edgar achieved overwhelming intimacy with their audience. In 1976 Trevor Nunn, working with John Barton and Barry Kyle, again directed the play at Stratford, this time with Donald Sinden as Lear. Nunn broke away from the customary Stonehenge-type settings and costumes, as may be seen particularly in our Plate 4. There is an excellent discussion of this production in Richard David's *Shakespeare in the Theatre* (Cambridge, 1978, pp. 95–105); *Shakespeare Survey* 33 includes an interview with Donald Sinden, 'Playing King Lear'.

K.M.

S.W.W.