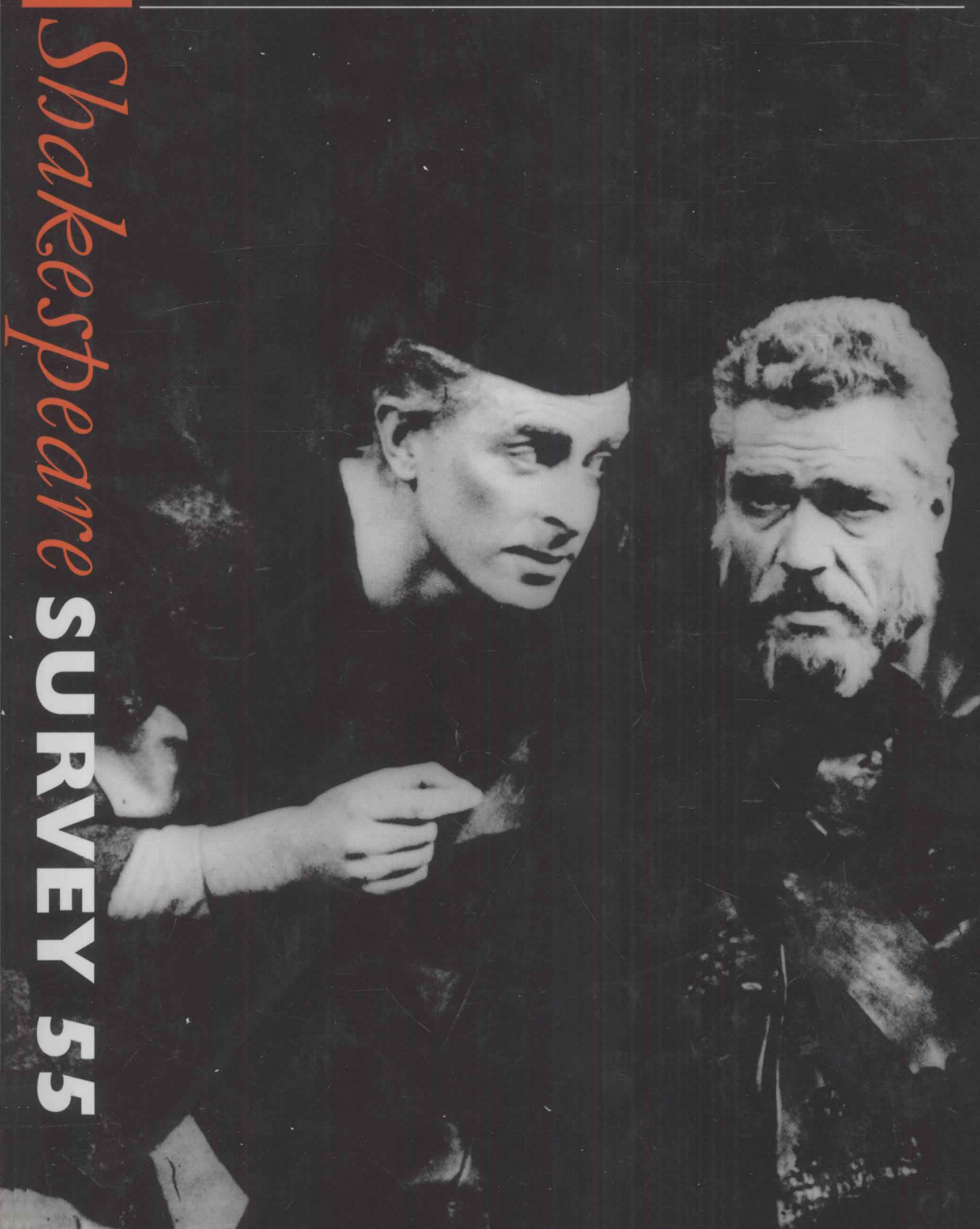
King Lear and its Afterlife

Shakespeare SURVEY 55



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King Lear and its Afterlife

EDITED BY

PETER HOLLAND

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Volume 56, on 'Shakespeare and Comedy' will be at press by the time this volume appears. The theme of Volume 57 will be '*Macbeth* and its Afterlife'. Submissions should be addressed to the Editor at The Shakespeare Institute, Church Street, Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire CV37 6HP, to arrive at the latest by 1 September 2003 for Volume 57. Pressures on space are heavy; priority is given to articles related to the theme of a particular volume. Please either enclose postage (overseas, in International Reply Coupons) or send a copy you do not wish to be returned. Submissions may also be made via email attachment to pholland@nd.edu. All articles submitted are read by the Editor and at least one member of the Advisory Board, whose indispensable assistance the Editor gratefully acknowledges.

Unless otherwise indicated, Shakespeare quotations and references are keyed to the modern-spelling Complete Oxford Shakespeare (1986).

Review copies should be addressed to the Editor, as above. In attempting to survey the ever-increasing bulk of Shakespeare publications our reviewers inevitably have to exercise some selection. We are pleased to receive offprints of articles which help to draw our reviewers' attention to relevant material.

Volume 41 of *Shakespeare Survey* carried the first of Niky Rathbone's listings of professional Shakespeare productions in Britain; this volume carries the last of the fifteen she has assembled. All interested in Shakespeare in performance owe her much for showing us the astonishing range of Shakespeare stage-work throughout the UK. The feature will be continued by others in subsequent volumes of *Survey* but her achievement deserves our collective thanks.

P.D.H.

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KIERNAN RYAN

I

Since the 1960s, when it usurped the throne securely occupied till then by *Hamlet*, *King Lear* has reigned supreme as Shakespeare's masterpiece and the keystone of the canon. The last twenty years of the twentieth century have seen the play fall prey to a whole new tribe of critics, many of them hostile and bent on Bardicide. But none of them inclines one to doubt R. A. Foakes's prediction that 'for the immediate future *King Lear* will continue to be regarded as the central achievement of Shakespeare, if only because it speaks more largely than the other tragedies to the anxieties and problems of the modern world'.[1]

As the touchstone of literary value and star witness in defence of the discipline, the tragedy is fated to be the target of every critical approach keen to stake its claim to priority. The most persuasive account of what Shelley deemed 'the most perfect specimen of the dramatic art existing in the world'[2] seizes the flagship of the entire subject. *King Lear* has consequently become an exemplary site of contention between the leading schools of contemporary criticism; and to examine the most influential rival readings of *Lear* is to bring into focus not only the key disputes dividing Shakespeare studies today, but also the current predicament of criticism itself.

In his survey of critical views of *King Lear* between 1939 and 1979, G. R. Hibbard noted that 'a crucial shift was taking place round about 1960, not only in the controversy as to whether *King Lear* is, or is not, a Christian tragedy, but also in critical assumptions and methods'.[3] Looking back on accounts of *Lear* over the last two decades, it is plain that an equally crucial shift in assumptions and methods was taking place around 1980. In the 1960s, the Christian paradigm that had governed criticism of the play for most of the century was displaced by two new critical dynasties: on the one hand, upbeat humanist views of the tragedy as vindicating the value of human suffering; on the other, downbeat conceptions of *King Lear* as Shakespeare's *Endgame*, a vision of existence as a brutal, pointless joke. But with the advent of the 1980s, as the flood tide of theory began to lap round Stratford's sole claim to fame, this divided dispensation surrendered its sway to a fresh generation of critics, for whom the meaning of *Lear* was inseparable from questions of language, gender, power and the unconscious.

Shakespeare's greatest tragedy is now densely colonized by most breeds – and some curious cross-breeds – of poststructuralist, feminist, new-historicist, cultural-materialist and psychoanalytic criticism, and within each of these approaches, to make matters more complex, different tendencies can be discerned. The diversity of the readings they have spawned, however, masks a shared commitment to criticism as an inescapably political activity. It is this feature above all that distinguishes the

[1] *Hamlet Versus Lear: Cultural Politics and Shakespeare's Art* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 224.

[2] 'A Defence of Poetry', in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York, 1977), p. 489.

[3] '*King Lear*: A Retrospect, 1939–79', *Shakespeare Survey 33* (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 1–12; p. 9.

new wave of Shakespeare criticism from the Shakespeare criticism that preceded it, and that attracts the antipathy of more traditional scholars. Hitherto, critical quarrels about the vision of *King Lear* had been pursued with little thought for its bearing on the social and ideological problems of the present. But from the 1980s onward the issue was no longer whether *King Lear* counselled affirmation or despair, the way of the cross or the wisdom of oblivion. What mattered was whether the play sustained or subverted oppressive structures of power and perception in its world and our own.

II

For a number of scholars and critics, however, such interpretive issues begged the fundamental question of which text of *King Lear* one was talking about. New departures in criticism on the tragedy were accompanied by the revival of doubts about the authority of the editions on which the criticism was based. The arcane erudition of the textual scholar and the radical scepticism of the postmodern critic forged an unlikely, but mutually advantageous, alliance to scupper complacency about the identity of *King Lear*. For once, hard-core theory buffs could anchor their abstractions in evidence collated in the Rare Books Room, while editorial skills disdained as nitpicking drudgery could sell themselves as sexy, as the cutting edge of theory in practice.

In point of fact, the textual problem posed by *King Lear* was hardly news when it was dug up and dusted down by the 'new revisionists' in the late 1970s. Every serious editor of the play since Pope and Johnson has had to grapple with the fact that it exists in two substantive versions, the Quarto of 1608 and the Folio of 1623, which differ from each other in a number of significant respects. The Quarto contains about 288 lines or part-lines that are not in the Folio, including the whole of 4.3; the Folio includes some 133 lines or part-lines that are absent from the Quarto; and between the two texts there are over 850 verbal variants. Most editors, ancient and modern, aware that neither text represents a reliable transcription of the script as performed by Shakespeare's company, and seeing no grounds for dubbing one version authentic and ditching the other, have created a single conflated text, incorporating as much of both versions as possible and using their best judgement to choose between the verbal variants. This might seem a reasonable solution to a tricky problem, especially when editors mark the points of conflation and emendation clearly and spell out the criteria for their decisions, so that readers may judge for themselves. But in 1978 Michael Warren published an article arguing that such mongrel texts violate the integrity of the Quarto and the Folio, which should be regarded as two distinct plays, marking successive stages in Shakespeare's conscious artistic revision of *King Lear*. To splice Quarto and Folio together was to pine for a single, pristine version of the play that never existed.[4]

Warren's contention unleashed a debate which peaked in the mid 1980s, but continued to reverberate throughout the following decade, and is only now showing signs of petering out. With the backing of further articles and books by Warren, Gary Taylor, Steven Urkowitz, Stanley Wells and John Kerrigan among others,[5] the bi-textual theory of *King Lear* rapidly became all the rage. It reached its apotheosis in the 1986 Oxford edition of *The Complete Works*, which published the Quarto and Folio texts side by side, and claimed confidently on the dustjacket that 'For the first time, *King Lear* is here printed both as Shakespeare originally wrote it and as he revised it, some years later, in the light

[4] 'Quarto and Folio *King Lear* and the Interpretation of Albany and Edgar', in *Shakespeare: Pattern of Great Excelling Nature*, ed. David Bevington and J. L. Halio (Newark, 1978), pp. 95–107.

[5] See in particular Gary Taylor, 'The War in *King Lear*', *Shakespeare Survey 33* (1980), pp. 27–34; Steven Urkowitz, *Shakespeare's Revision of 'King Lear'* (Princeton, 1980); and Gary Taylor and Michael Warren (eds.), *The Division of the Kingdoms: Shakespeare's Two Versions of 'King Lear'* (Oxford, 1983), which contains key essays by Wells, Kerrigan, Urkowitz and the editors. Seminal contributions to the debate were also made, from quite different standpoints, by P. W. K. Stone, *The Textual History of 'King Lear'* (London, 1980), and Peter W. M. Blayney, *The Texts of 'King Lear' and their Origins. Volume 1: Nicholas Okes and the First Quarto* (Cambridge, 1982).

of performance.'[6] More parallel-text editions have followed in the wake of Wells and Taylor,[7] and the 'new revisionists' have not ceased to defend their thesis against the assaults of the unconvinced.[8] But the ranks of the latter, which include Philip Edwards, David Bevington and Frank Kermode, have swelled, and their objections to the two-*Lears* hypothesis have dealt it a series of body blows from which it looks unlikely to recover.[9]

It is not simply that there is no way of proving that Shakespeare himself made the cuts and revisions in the Folio, which could just as well have been made by someone else or by several other people at different times. The problem is that most of the cuts and revisions are not convincing on artistic or theatrical grounds anyway. In the Folio *Lear*, moreover, as Richard Knowles lethally observes:

> No speech of any length is rewritten to make it substantially different in content or style, no new scenes or episodes are added, no changes are made in the order of existing scenes or episodes or speeches, no new characters are added, no named characters are omitted (or renamed), no new speeches are made to introduce or elaborate upon themes or to provide new and different motives. The reassignment of speeches may represent no more than normal scribal or compositorial error. If F *Lear* represents a new 'concept' of the play, it is remarkably limited in its means of revision.[10]

Even R. A. Foakes, who finds the evidence for Shakespeare's revision of *King Lear* persuasive, concludes that 'the reworking of *King Lear* is not so thorough as to mean that we have to think of two plays'.[11] So for his 1997 Arden edition of the tragedy he decided, like the overwhelming majority of recent editors, that the most prudent and practical solution was to produce a conflated text. *Plus ça change.*

III

For critics intent on the deconstruction of *King Lear* – an ambition which enjoyed a lively vogue in the 1980s – the textual controversy, like the Dover Cliff scene, was a gift horse in whose mouth few were prone to look. In his 1986 article 'Textual Properties', Jonathan Goldberg was swift to infer from the proliferation of *Lears* that the text of the tragedy was innately indeterminate, because 'Every text of a Shakespeare play exists in relationship to

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[6] Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (eds.), *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (Oxford, 1986).

[7] Most notably Michael Warren (ed.), *The Complete 'King Lear', 1608–1623* (Berkeley, 1989) and René Weis (ed.), *King Lear: A Parallel Text Edition* (London and New York, 1983). *The Norton Shakespeare*, gen. ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York and London, 1997), which is based on the Oxford edition, hedges its bets by including a conflated text alongside the Quarto and Folio versions.

[8] See, for example, Gary Taylor, 'The Rhetorics of Reaction', in *Crisis in Editing: Texts of the English Renaissance*, ed. Randall McLeod (New York, 1994), pp. 19–59; Grace Ioppolo, 'The Idea of Shakespeare and the Two *Lears*', in *Lear from Study to Stage: Essays in Criticism*, ed. James Ogden and Arthur H. Scouten (Madison and London, 1997), pp. 45–56; and Steven Urkowitz, 'Preposterous Poststructuralism: Editorial Morality and the Ethics of Evidence', in *New Ways of Looking at Old Texts II*, ed. W. Speed Hill (Binghamton, 1998), pp. 83–90.

[9] See especially Philip Edwards, review of Urkowitz, *Shakespeare's Revision*, and Stone, *Textual History, Modern Language Review*, 77 (1982), 694–8; Sidney Thomas, 'Shakespeare's Supposed Revision of *King Lear*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 35 (1984), 506–11, and 'The Integrity of *King Lear*', *Modern Language Review*, 90 (1995), 572–84; Marion Trousdale, 'A Trip through the Divided Kingdoms', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 37 (1986), 218–23; David Bevington, 'Determining the Indeterminate: The Oxford Shakespeare', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 38 (1987), 501–19; Frank Kermode, 'Disintegration Once More', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 84 (1994), 93–111; Ann Meyer, 'Shakespeare's Art and the Texts of *King Lear*', *Studies in Bibliography*, 47 (1994), 128–46; Stanley Cavell, 'Skepticism as Iconoclasm: The Saturation of the Shakespearean Text', in *Shakespeare and the Twentieth Century*, ed. Jonathan Bate, Jill Levenson and Dieter Mehl (Newark and London, 1998), pp. 231–47; Robert Clare, 'Quarto and Folio: A Case for Conflation', in *Lear from Study to Stage*, ed. Ogden and Scouten, pp. 79–108; Richard Knowles, 'Two *Lears*? By Shakespeare?', ibid., pp. 57–78, and 'Merging the Kingdoms: *King Lear*', *Shakespearean International Yearbook*, 1 (1999), 266–86.

[10] Knowles, 'Two *Lears*?', pp. 63–4.

[11] Foakes, *Hamlet Versus Lear*, p. 111. Stanley Cavell sums the matter up thus: 'the sense that it is the same play under change is as strong as the sense that each change changes the play' ('Skepticism as Iconoclasm', p. 237).

scripts we will never have, to a series of revisions and collaborations that start as soon as there is a Shakespearean text.'[12] For this supposition dovetailed with his contention in 'Perspectives: Dover Cliff and the Conditions of Representation' that *King Lear* contrives in that scene to dive off the cliff after Gloucester, vanishing into a void in which no ground of cognition survives: 'In *King Lear* nothing comes of nothing, and the very language which would seem (to us) solidly to locate the world slides into an abyss, an uncreating, annihilative nothingness.'[13]

In 'Shakespeare, Derrida, and the End of Language in *King Lear*', which rode shotgun in the same volume as Goldberg's 'Perspectives', Jackson I. Cope also drew strength from the gospel according to Warren and Urkowitz. 'There are two texts. And therefore none. Or, rather, three or five', he averred, displaying the rampant indecisiveness of the full-blooded deconstructionist. Cope's *King Lear* is 'an absent pre-text', at whose heart lies 'the transcendent absurd which defines language as nothing come to unrest in never'.[14] In this it differs sharply from the *Lear*s conjured up by Terry Eagleton and Malcolm Evans, who proved that not all deconstructions of the play need come so inexorably to naught. For Eagleton, the tragedy tosses all and nothing, mind and body, sense and insanity into a vortex of reversals that confounds such false dichotomies to release us from their spell. By forcing the binary oppositions on which its vision depends to cancel each other out, the play undermines the mentality that holds hierarchy in place to this day: 'only the coupling of two negatives can hope to produce a positive'.[15] Evans begins by proposing, much like Goldberg, that 'The view from the cliff-edge, inscribed in the theatrical trope of the supplement, is the absent centre of the play, a regress into the "nothing" spoken by the Fool'. But, unlike Goldberg, he goes on to suggest intriguingly that the void in *King Lear* is an inverted expression of the 'utopian plenitude' obliquely adumbrated by the play.[16]

Scepticism about the objective existence of *King Lear* as a text has not only made strange bedfellows of some critics, but also trapped them in stark contradictions. Neither Gary Taylor nor Terence Hawkes might seem to have much in common with their deconstructive brethren, but they do both subscribe to the view that, as Taylor puts it in *Reinventing Shakespeare*, the Bard 'has become a black hole', and that 'We find in Shakespeare only what we bring to him or what others have left behind.'[17] In 'Lear's Maps', Hawkes is equally adamant that 'No "play itself" is ever available to us.'[18] There is no primal *King Lear*, we are assured, only a succession of revisions and rewritings on which we place our self-mirroring constructions. Hence in *Reinventing Shakespeare* Taylor dwells not on *King Lear*, but on the Victorian novel Bradley turned it into; while in 'Lear's Maps' Hawkes targets Granville-Barker's politically loaded wartime production of the play, which he understandably finds more rewarding than Shakespeare's non-existent text. How Taylor squares his editorial commitment to Shakespeare the reviser with his critical commitment to Shakespeare the black hole is as baffling as his ability to deliver, in *Moment By Moment By Shakespeare*, an acute conventional close reading of *King Lear* which exposes the aridity of both these pursuits.[19] But it is no more baffling than Hawkes's subsequent short book on *King Lear*, whose intimations of what lies beyond language Hawkes reveals through a trenchant analysis of Shakespeare's diction, making nonsense of his insistence that 'there is no "play itself", only our different readings of it'.[20]

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[12] *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 37 (1986), 213–17; p. 216.

[13] *Shakespeare and Deconstruction*, ed. G. Douglas Atkins and David M. Bergeron (New York, 1988), pp. 245–65; p. 254.

[14] Ibid., pp. 267–83; pp. 269, 277.

[15] *William Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 76–83; p. 78.

[16] *Signifying Nothing: Truth's True Contents in Shakespeare's Text* (Brighton, 1986), pp. 224–34; pp. 226, 228.

[17] *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present* (London, 1990), pp. 410, 411.

[18] Hawkes, *Meaning By Shakespeare* (London and New York, 1992), pp. 121–40; p. 136.

[19] 'Revolutions of Perspective: *King Lear*', in *Moment By Moment By Shakespeare* (London, 1985), pp. 162–236.

[20] *William Shakespeare: King Lear* (Plymouth, 1995), p. 41.

IV

From a province of criticism which regards *King Lear* as a play programmed to self-destruct or an essentialist delusion, it is refreshing to turn to a realm ruled by critics who are confident that the play exists and that it secretes not only a determinate significance, but also a definable political purpose, which can be teased out by restoring it to its early modern matrix. As the doyen of new historicism, Stephen Greenblatt, declares in his much-cited essay on *Lear*, 'Shakespeare and the Exorcists': 'Deconstructionist readings lead too readily and predictably to the void; in actual literary practice the perplexities into which one is led are not moments of pure, untrammeled *aporia* but localized strategies in particular historical encounters.'[21] Historically disposed critics of *King Lear*, however, diverge as much from each other as they do from the adepts of deconstruction. Indeed, the closer they move to the play's original context, the further the prospect of consensus among them recedes.

New historicists and cultural materialists may have hogged the limelight in this sector of *Lear* studies, but that has not stopped radical historicists of a less modish cast, whose roots are shamelessly pre-postmodern, from surviving right alongside them. For these critics, who might be characterized broadly as Marxist and humanist in orientation, *King Lear* is first and foremost a dramatic enactment of the transition from a feudal to a capitalist culture. Through the twin tragedies of Lear's and Gloucester's families, the play explores the human cost of embracing acquisitive individualism and kissing the medieval pieties goodbye. 'In all this is pictured', concludes Victor Kiernan, 'the tormented process of social change, the whirlpool at the conflux of two eras, and the impossibility of any smooth, easy progression from one to another.'[22]

The million-dollar question for critics of this stamp is where the play's final sympathies lie, and on this issue most of them see eye to eye. Some, like Kiernan and Franco Moretti,[23] see *Lear* as recognizing, not without misgivings, the need to move forward into the future, and as paving the way for the new order by demystifying the old. Walter Cohen even glimpses in the play utopian premonitions of the Levellers and Diggers.[24] But the majority, including David Aers, John Turner and David Margolies, tend to agree that the tragedy is equally disenchanted with the waxing and the waning world views, but unable to envisage 'any real alternative beyond the disintegrating traditional order and the utterly destructive individualism which emerges from it'.[25]

Postmodern Marxist scholars, on the other hand, are disinclined to grant *King Lear* any such capacity for dispassionate critique. In *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation*, Richard Halpern identifies – at inordinate length – an ultimately 'retrograde movement'[26] in the play towards the comfort zone of feudalism. And in 'The Ideology of Superfluous Things: *King Lear* as Period Piece', Margreta de Grazia mounts a fearfully abstruse argument to demonstrate that *Lear* is not just an artefact of the

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[21] *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York, 1985), pp. 163–87; p. 164. This sentence was excised from the version of the essay reprinted in Greenblatt's *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 94–128.

[22] '*King Lear* (1605–06)', in Kiernan, *Eight Tragedies of Shakespeare* (London and New York, 1996), pp. 104–23; p. 108.

[23] 'The Great Eclipse: Tragic Form as the Consecration of Sovereignty', in Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms* (London, 1983), pp. 42–82.

[24] *Drama of a Nation: Public Theatre in Renaissance England and Spain* (Ithaca, 1985), pp. 327–56.

[25] David Aers and Gunther Kress, 'The Language of Social Order: Individual, Society and Historical Process in *King Lear*', in David Aers, Bob Hodge and Gunther Kress, *Literature, Language and Society in England 1580–1680* (Dublin and Totowa, 1981), 75–99; pp. 98–9. See also John Turner, '*King Lear*', in Graham Holderness, Nick Potter and John Turner, *Shakespeare: The Play of History* (Basingstoke and London, 1988), and David Margolies, '*King Lear*' and '*King Lear* II', in *Monsters of the Deep: Social Dissolution in Shakespeare's Tragedies* (Manchester, 1992), pp. 14–42 and 68–79.

[26] '"Historica Passio": *King Lear*'s Fall into Feudalism', in *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation: English Renaissance Culture and the Genealogy of Capital* (Ithaca and London, 1991), pp. 215–313; p. 247.

feudal era, but an aggressively '*anti*-Early Modern' text, in which 'the ideology of superfluous things holds the status quo in place by locking identity into property, the subject into the object'.[27] It is ironic that Halpern and de Grazia have to muster the headiest resources of materialist theory in order to arrive at the same judgement of *King Lear* as critics of a more conventional bent, using humbler conceptual tools.[28] In this respect, they have nothing to teach their close kin, the new historicists, much of whose ingenuity has likewise been spent on exposing *Lear*'s complicity with the status quo.

In *Power on Display*, for example, Leonard Tennenhouse construes the play as a strategy of the stage calculated to mystify, and so sustain, the authority of the Jacobean state. Taking his cue from Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, Tennenhouse contends that the original function of *King Lear* was the exemplary torture of a royal miscreant, who has violated the taboos that safeguard the mystique of sovereignty.[29] Greenblatt's approach in 'Shakespeare and the Exorcists', from which I quoted earlier, is incomparably subtler, but the bottom line is basically the same. Greenblatt detects in Harsnett's *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*, which Shakespeare drew upon for Poor Tom's ravings, the surreptitious logic of the entire tragedy. *King Lear* appropriates the obsolete charades of religion, Greenblatt suggests, to clinch the bewitchment of the audience through the rituals of drama. The play strives in part to unsettle official values, but it does so as a ploy to win the spectators' consent to their own subjection. Greenblatt takes a similar tack in 'The Cultivation of Anxiety: King Lear and his Heirs',[30] which pivots on the affinities he discerns between the play and a nineteenth-century American Baptist's account of breaking his infant son's will. Greenblatt's bleak conclusion is that *Lear*'s cultural mission was to suspend its audience in a state of trepidation that reinforced their political docility.

Not all new historicists, it should be stressed, hold that *King Lear* is the sly secret agent or the hapless dupe of domination. In *Puzzling Shakespeare*, Leah Marcus pulls the contextual focus as tight as it could be, pinpointing for analysis the performance of the tragedy before King James on St Stephen's Night, 1606.[31] In an attempt to nail at last the play's original objective and effect, Marcus spotlights its topical allusions to James's character and policy, and considers the influence the saint's story might have had on the royal spectators. But she is forced to infer that Shakespeare's attitude to his monarch in *King Lear* is, to say the least, ambiguous, and could have been slanted towards endorsement or indictment according to the audience. Annabel Patterson, however, has no doubt where Shakespeare's true sympathies lay when he wrote the play. Her relocation of *King Lear* in its time in *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice*[32] leads her to surmise that the man who penned Lear's speech to the 'Poor naked wretches' of his realm (3.4.28–36)[33] set out to speak for the victims of power, using every trick in the book to throw the censor off the scent.

Patterson's brand of new historicism is the kind most congenial to cultural-materialist critics of *King Lear*, who share the new-historicist belief in transporting texts back to their time, but who are more open to the possibility that works like *Lear* were either subversive from the start or can be read in ways that serve progressive aims in the present. The seminal cultural-materialist reading of the tragedy is Jonathan Dollimore's '*King Lear* and Essentialist Humanism'. As its title intimates, Dollimore's account signals a break not only with previous Christian and existentialist approaches to

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[27] *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*, ed. Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan and Peter Stallybrass (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 17–42; p. 31.

[28] See, for example, Jerald W. Spotswood, 'Maintaining Hierarchy in *The Tragedie of King Lear*', *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900*, 38 (1998), 265–80.

[29] *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare's Genres* (New York and London, 1986), pp. 134–42.

[30] Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York and London, 1990), pp. 80–98.

[31] 'Retrospective: *King Lear* on St Stephen's Night, 1606', in *Puzzling Shakespeare: Local Reading and its Discontents* (Berkeley, 1988), pp. 148–59.

[32] Oxford, 1989, pp. 106–16.

[33] Textual references are to the Arden *King Lear*, ed. R. A. Foakes (Walton-on-Thames, 1997).

the play, but also with Marxist readings that harbour an attachment to humanist sentiments. '*King Lear* is, above all', Dollimore maintains, 'a play about power, property and inheritance', which rejects the notion of the noble tragic victim ultimately redeemed by death as an 'essentialist mystification'. It offers instead 'a decentring of the tragic subject', whose consciousness is revealed as the construction of the material conditions that govern his plight.[34]

Subsequent cultural–materialist responses to *Lear* have languished in the shadow of Dollimore's powerful essay. In 'The Information of the Absolute', Francis Barker detects arresting connections in the play between property and personality, and between tragedy and topography. But, unlike Dollimore, who sees *King Lear* as a Brechtian radical tragedy, Barker finds that '*Lear* ends in textual and discursive compromise',[35] stranded between its radical and its reactionary impulses. The cultural–materialist preoccupation with 'power, property and inheritance' in *King Lear* is given a topical twist in Richard Wilson's *Will Power*. Wilson resurrects the old-historicist analogy between Lear's story and the real-life case of Brian Annesley in an attempt to prove that the play revolves round 'the tragic cultural implications of testamentary power',[36] which foreshadow the dispossession of the Crown itself later in the century.

V

Three things are conspicuously missing from most historicist accounts of *King Lear* during the period under review. One is the suspicion that *Lear* may not be fully explicable in terms of its time, because its imaginative vision is straining towards the future, not slumped inside the past; however radical and subversive it is held to have been in its day, the tragedy remains the past-bound expression of a vanished world, the prisoner of a retrospective critical viewpoint. The second thing is close attention to the language and form of *King Lear*, which in some cases, as Greenblatt's essays illustrate, merely affords a pretext to discuss another text altogether. And the third is a sustained consideration of gender and the representation of women in *King Lear*, an oversight which feminist critics have not been slow to point out.

Just as Marxists, cultural materialists and new historicists have tended to polarize around the politics imputed to the text, so feminist readings have tended to divide into those who think the tragedy reveals a patriarchal Bard and those who maintain that it provides a critique of misogynistic masculinity. Within both these camps, moreover, distinctions can be drawn between critics who rest their case primarily on historical evidence, critics who call psychoanalytic theory to witness, and critics who shuffle both these methods together.

Kathleen McLuskie's arraignment of *Lear* as a phallocratic morality play, which stereotypes women as saintly or satanic and makes sure our empathy is invested in the tormented patriarch, has achieved, as Ann Thompson notes, 'notoriety as exemplifying some sort of dead end for feminism'.[37] But McLuskie is also a cultural materialist, and her critics too often overlook the fact that her condemnation of the play's sexual politics is the prelude to an attempt to read *Lear* against its historical grain to radicalize its modern impact, giving us 'the pleasure of understanding in place of the pleasure of emotional identification'.[38] Whether it marks a dead end or not, male critics have been quick to muscle in on McLuskie's act. Writing from 'a materialist, non-humanist perspective', David Simpson, for example, argues that in *King Lear* 'Paternalism is exposed to criticism only in

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[34] Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (Brighton, 1984), pp. 189–203; pp. 197, 202.

[35] Barker, *The Culture of Violence: Essays on Tragedy and History* (Manchester and Chicago, 1993), pp. 3–31; p. 31.

[36] *Will Power: Essays on Shakespearean Authority* (Hemel Hempstead, 1993), pp. 215–30; p. 230.

[37] 'Are There Any Women in *King Lear*?', in *The Matter of Difference: Materialist Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, ed. Valerie Wayne (Hemel Hempstead, 1991), pp. 117–28; p. 126.

[38] 'The Patriarchal Bard: Feminist Criticism and Shakespeare: *King Lear* and *Measure for Measure*', in *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, ed. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Manchester, 1985), pp. 88–108; p. 105.

order that it might be subliminally reaffirmed'.[39] A less equivocal analysis of the play's sexual posture is supplied by Peter L. Rudnytsky, the title of whose essay, '"The darke and vicious place": The Dread of the Vagina in *King Lear*',[40] cannot be accused of beating around the bush.

Nor, for that matter, can Philippa Berry's eccentric account of the play in 'Cordelia's Bond and Britannia's Missing Middle', possibly because in *Lear* 'for many miles about / There's scarce a bush' (2.2.492), as Berry herself points out. Berry yokes a cultural–materialist approach, rich in antiquarian lore, to a deconstructive compulsion to turn the topical into the tropical at every opportunity. Her aim is to explain the role of Cordelia in '*King Lear*'s strikingly scatological refiguration of James's new British kingdom'. But the essay's obsession with cloacal issues reduces the text's politics to a misogynistic pathology rooted in the rectum: 'a morally compromised kingship is implied to have an unsettling association with a suggestively feminized anality'.[41] 'Blow winds and crack your cheeks!' (3.2.1) will never sound quite the same again.

Two feminist essays on *King Lear* outshine all the others, casting new light into the darkest reaches of the tragedy. In 'The Absent Mother in *King Lear*', Coppélia Kahn sets out 'like an archaeologist, to uncover the hidden mother in the hero's inner world'. Her psychoanalytic excavations unearth a play which, far from being a devious apologist for patriarchy, depicts instead the 'tragedy of masculinity', dramatizing the cost of 'repressing the vulnerability, dependency and capacity for feeling which are called "feminine"'. At the very point when 'a masculine identity crisis' in Jacobean society was provoking the reinforcement of patriarchal authority in reality, Shakespeare was aggravating that crisis by staging 'Lear's progress toward acceptance of the woman in himself'.[42]

A much less sanguine – indeed, a diametrically opposed – view of the misogynistic monarch is taken by Janet Adelman in 'Suffocating Mothers in *King Lear*'. At first it looks as though Adelman intends to angle in the same lake of darkness as Rudnytsky and Berry: the blind Gloucester's 'bleeding rings' (5.3.188), we are told, transform his face into a horrific image of a menstruating vagina, and 'the very wetness of the storm comes to seem a sexual wetness, a monstrous spilling of germens'.[43] But the essay rapidly mutates into a compelling reversal of Kahn's reading. Adelman's *King Lear* is not so much a covert plug for the maternal impulse in men as a seductive masculine fantasy in which that impulse is exterminated. In a bold final twist of her argument, however, Adelman refuses to gender as exclusively male a mother-complex by which women, including Adelman herself, are just as afflicted as men.

VI

The essays by Kahn and Adelman provide a natural bridge to those critics whose overriding concern with the play is psychoanalytic, and who prefer to treat *King Lear* on the couch rather than in the context of Jacobean culture, or in response to modern political imperatives. Symptomatic readings of this sort are less interested in *Lear* as a poetic drama, with its own distinctive idiom and design, than as a diagnostic challenge or a confirmation of the theory brought to bear on it.

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[39] 'Great Things of Us Forgot: Seeing *Lear* Better', in *Futures for English*, ed. Colin MacCabe (Manchester, 1988), pp. 15–31; p. 18.

[40] *Modern Philology*, 96 (1998–9), 291–311.

[41] Berry, *Shakespeare's Feminine Endings: Disfiguring Death in the Tragedies* (New York and London, 1999), pp. 135–66; pp. 135–6.

[42] *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago and London, 1986), pp. 33–49; pp. 35, 36, 47, 46. A sympathetic male view of men in *Lear* as practising their own form of mutual care and kindness, which owes nothing to, and fears nothing from, femininity, is provided by Peter Erickson's essay 'Maternal Images and Male Bonds', in his *Patriarchal Structures in Shakespeare's Drama* (Berkeley and London, 1985), pp. 103–15.

[43] Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, 'Hamlet' to 'The Tempest'* (New York and London, 1992), pp. 103–29; p. 111.