

If a masterpiece is a work that gives questions rather than answers, can always offer something new, and is open to numerous readings and interpretations, then *KL* is arguably the greatest masterpiece of them all... It has been and is being read in many different (not always compatible) ways through time, even dismissing the issues about the establishment of the text. See the introduction to the NCS₃ edition — or the Arden one — for some examples.

We'll probably never know for sure whether that is due to readers' and critics' changing perspectives or to some (possibly deliberate) ambivalence or openness written in the text itself (or texts themselves). Still, Shak. and his troupe necessarily had one vision of the characters, beginning with Lear himself, *i.e.* one way of acting the play; lacking their production notes, modern actors or readers have to make their own choices.

Whether the text actually warrants it or not (see below for more about this), there is no doubt that *KL* does manage to speak to modern audiences, that it is indeed a play "not of an age, but for all time" (Ben Jonson).

Something to keep in mind (about *KL* and Shak.'s plays generally): the Elizabethan theatre didn't pay much attention to verisimilitude, either in terms of staging (no realistic / mimetic backdrops, etc.) or in terms of plot, psychology, and so on. One example of this is Lear's lapse into madness, which may seem unrealistically sudden to a (modern) reader. But one has to remember on the one hand that an actor can suggest mental instability in Lear before any explicit mention of it in the text, possibly from the very beginning; on the other hand that anyway many things go unnoticed when one is watching an engrossing spectacle — many blockbuster movies testify to this even today. And of course, medical theories now are not what they were then. The same kind of thing goes for the relationship between Goneril and Albany, or the sisters' attitude to Edmond, for example.

A special case of this lack of verisimilitude is the convention of "the impenetrable disguise": when a character dresses as someone else (Kent as Caius, Edgar as Tom or a peasant — or a woman as a man in other plays), the other characters never recognize him or her, even though the audience is expected to. (On the contrary, they were supposed to forget about the fact that female roles were played by men.) Truth be told, what seems rather implausible to us may very well have been less fantastic at a time when clothes really made the man, as some historical examples attest (e.g. Arbella Stuart and Lord Beauchamp's escapes).

COMPOSITION AND PUBLICATION, SOURCES, GENERAL CONTEXT

See the NCS edition. The legendary Lear is supposed to have reigned c. 800 BC.

The editorial debate: Two different texts, Q (the 1608 quarto) and F (the 1623 First Folio) + conflated versions. Two main hypotheses: *a posteriori* authorial revision or a lost ur-text. This is irrelevant to us: NCS gives an edition of the Folio text, and this is what we'll work on. (Note: as many recent editors, Halio adopted *and* rather than *an* for the synonym of *if*.)

After the recent (1603) **accession of James VII & I** to the throne of England; he termed himself King of Great Britain, even though Parliament didn't, and they refused his project of a union of the crowns. His two sons were Dukes of Albany and Cornwall: it can't be a coincidence, whatever meaning one ascribes to it. There was an Earl of Kent alive then (Henry Grey, sixth Earl, d. 1615); he was an official witness at the execution (1587) of Mary, Queen of Scots, James's mother. But it was the eighth creation of the title, the first one dating back to pre-Norman times: perhaps it was enough for the title to evoke ancient times — supposing that most people knew about it. There hadn't been an Earl of Gloucester since 1399, or before 1121, but a powerful barony of Gloucester had existed in Anglo-Saxon times (and the most famous Duke of Gloucester became Richard III, about whom Shak. had already written a play). All this suggests that the characters of the two earls are not direct references to anyone specific or to the Jacobean era, but rather a way to evoke legendary times — which would perhaps have helped soften the topical allusions in the names of the dukes.

A few publications of the time: Samuel Harsnett, *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*, 1603: against exorcisms, but also rational explanation for magic as well as madness; skeptical view of witchcraft, while James I firmly

believed in it. Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, 1605: the birth of the scientific method, the "Scientific Revolution". Florio's translation of Montaigne, 1603.

The Fool: Having a court jester was part of being a monarch at the time; James I's was Archibald Armstrong, who was finally fired by Charles I in 1637 after going too far for the last time; he had been disliked by many at court since the beginning of James's reign. The extent of the actual political role of real-life royal fools is debated, but the "all-licensed" fool whose apparent folly is actually wisdom was a cultural archetype, used by Shak. in several plays. Two types of fools: "natural" and "artificial" (sometimes called "clowns" and "fools" respectively). Critics can't seem to agree on which type Lear's fool is. Another common question about him is why (and how) he disappears after 3.6.

THEMES, QUESTIONS, & ISSUES

**FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS — LEGITIMACY, AUTHORITY, & POWER — NATURE & HUMAN NATURE —
MADNESS & FOLLY — UNITY & DIVISION — SOCIAL ROLES —
LANGUAGE, HONESTY, DISSIMULATION, & DECEIT — ORDER & DISORDER; THE PREPOSTEROUS**

When do things start to go wrong (and why)? When does Lear's madness (and / or folly) first manifest itself?
Who (if anyone) are the heroes, and who the villains? Is Cordelia's silence justified? What about Edmond's ambitions?

A MOST LAMENTABLE SPECTACLE

Before any critical commentary, one can hardly deny that *KL* is highly effective as a pathetic piece of drama: the initial trial of the daughters and Cord.'s banishment, Lear on the moor, Glouc.'s blinding, Tom o'Bedlam, or Cord.'s death are high points on stage and are sure to move the audience — arousing Aristotle's terror and pity, perhaps? The Folio version is entitled *The Tragedy of KL*, not *The History* as in the Quarto.

Although it certainly wouldn't do the play justice to see it merely as a tearjerker, one should probably keep in mind that that was at least one of Shak.'s (and his actors') purposes...

THE POLITICAL STAKES: UNION & DISUNION OF THE KINGDOM(S)

See above about James VII & I and joining the kingdoms of England and Scotland (not to mention Wales and Ireland). As *Macbeth* (also first performed 1606) may show, Scotland was perceived as both close and exotic by English people (or at least Londoners); the legendary ancient setting of the play allows Shak. to refer to some kind of "British" identity (4.3.21 e.g., although he also uses the term "English"), which contrasts with the presence of two distinct sovereigns of France and Burgundy in 1.1. But on the other hand, the West Country accent Edgar assumes in 4.5 reveals how (linguistically at least) even England wasn't perceived as unified.

Whether Shak. had a strong political opinion to voice or not — maybe he was merely being politically shrewd, being now under the King's patronage —, the new association (if not union) of the crowns was part of the climate of the time.

Religious division was also part of the picture, as recently recalled by the Gunpowder Plot (1605). Given the legendary setting of the play, the religious conflict can't be apparent in *KL*, where the characters refer to pagan gods; but it must have been in most people's minds nonetheless, as it had divided the country / countries, even divided families, for close to a century. The very Protestant James was the son of the very Catholic Mary, for example. Furthermore, the Puritans, both in England and in Scotland, were on the rise — and were very vocal against the theatre amongst other things. The fact that Harsnett's *Declaration* is one of Shak.'s sources shows that religious antagonisms were in his mind.

In this light, it is probably significant that a recurrent stylistic device in *KL* — even though it is used by Shak. elsewhere as well — is the hendiadys (pleonastic doublet). Examples: "arch and patron" (2.1.58), "packs and sects" (5.3.18),

or "aidant and remediate" (4.3.17).

THE POLITICAL STAKES: AUTHORITY, MONARCHY, POWER

Whatever the institutional status of the two crowns, both England and Scotland were — and are — monarchies, the sovereign(s) being so by divine right, *i.e.* receiving their authority from God (whichever version of God they supported), which also means a duty towards God to fulfill that role; in this light, abdicating is not possible, and even "shak[ing] all cares and business from [one's] age" (1.1.34), albeit "retain[ing] / The name and all th'addition to a king" (1.1.129–30), means deserting one's divine mission. Furthermore, what Lear intends to do is to dissociate the two bodies of the King: legally speaking, in England the monarch has two bodies, the "body natural" (= the mortal human being) and the "body politic" (\approx the kingdom). This doctrine (made particularly famous for modern scholars by Ernst Kantorowicz in 1957) was notably used by lawyers in 1561, when they stated that

"the king has in him two Bodies, *viz.*, a Body natural, and a Body politic. His Body natural (if it be considered in itself) is a Body mortal, subject to all Infirmities that come by Nature or Accident, to the Imbecility of Infancy or old Age [...] But his Body politic is a Body that cannot be seen or handled, consisting of Policy and Government, and constituted for the Direction of the People, and the management of the public weal, and this Body is utterly void of Infancy, and old Age, and other natural Defects and Imbecilities, which the Body natural is subject to, and for this Cause, what the King does in his Body politic, cannot be invalidated or frustrated by any Disability in his natural Body." (Edmund Plowden, quoted in Wikipedia)

The King's "body natural" being "annexed to his body politic", the two can't be separated. It may be relevant that the doctrine of the two bodies was discussed in legal cases on several occasions in 1608, so was perhaps common(ish) knowledge in the preceding years.

The idea of the state as one of the two bodies of the king went along with the image of the kingdom as a human body with the monarch as its head — see the frontispiece to Hobbes's *Leviathan* for a famous example —, a metaphor which led to parallels between politics and medicine. In this light, dividing his kingdom almost amounts to Lear's dismembering himself.

MADNESS & MEDICINE

The general theoretical framework of medicine was going through a radical change at the time, but the ancient theory of the four humours was still widely accepted: one's body is made up of four humours — blood, phlegm, melancholy (black bile), and choler (yellow bile) —, with four temperaments depending on which dominates in an individual, and several types of afflictions, physical or mental, in case of imbalance of the humours in the body. Several melancholic characters (most famously Hamlet) testify to the credit Shak. gave to this theory. Within this framework, mental conditions, up to madness, were ultimately physical troubles, which would be one explanation why Lear could become mad after being out in the storm. Modern distinctions between different forms of mental troubles (dementia, psychosis, etc.) didn't necessarily exist anyway.

The model could also be applied to the body politic, seen as analogous to the human body. Political or social imbalance meant that the state was ill and had to be cured until the normal order of things was back. A very clear example of such a view is the Greek myth of Oedipus, where the political and moral (incl. religious) stain manifests itself as a plague (an illness) in the city. In *KL*, Lear's quasi-abdication can be seen as upsetting the balance of things, and his madness, war, and the final deaths, as the "medical" consequences of it.

Another theory concerning madness was that it was due to demonic possession. This still held sway over many people, as evidenced by Harsnett's essay against it and its reflection in the character of Tom o'Bedlam.

The first Keeper of Bethlem Hospital (= Bedlam, London's asylum) to have been a doctor was appointed in 1619. While it didn't mean much improvement in the living conditions of the inmates, it shows that they were beginning to be perceived as patients and madness to fall within the realm of medicine and not mere charity any longer.

A note on *hysterica passio* (2.4.53). The word *hysteria* didn't mean in early modern times what it meant for Charcot or Freud, and one should be careful of anachronisms. The Hippocratic theory of hysteria caused by a displacement

(wandering) of the womb was not the only one, Galen explaining it within his humoral model; thus, it was not as exclusively a woman's affliction as was the case later. Still, many pages have been written about Lear's self-diagnosis, particularly by critics writing within a psychoanalytical or feminist framework. Kaara L. Peterson's 2006 article on the term seems to shed a much more convincing light on it than many of those pages: see quotations № 87–89 — although see below about the possible unnaturalness of a man's having a woman's disease.

THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL & METAPHYSICAL QUESTIONS OF THE RENAISSANCE

The Renaissance saw the advent of humanism and its opposition to scholastic thought relying on the authorities (Erasmus, Rabelais, Montaigne, etc. but also Machiavelli), with the particular case of the Reformation; the Scientific Revolution (Copernicus, Galileo, Bacon, etc.) with the birth of the modern scientific method and a first Age of Reason / an anticipation of the Age of Reason (= the Enlightenment); the birth of liberalism and capitalism; the Age of Discovery with the exploration (and colonisation) of the Americas and parts of Africa and Asia; medical discoveries and the questioning of the Galenic theory of humours.

All this led to a shaking or upsetting of authorities in many fields and many ways and of the mediaeval worldview. The Middle Ages saw the world as above all a *cosmos*, *i.e.* a divinely pre-ordained order, everything and everyone having their place and role from birth, or long before it in fact. The new early modern view, on the contrary, allowed for individuality, even individualism, a more directly personal identity, including the possibility of social mobility and opening new vistas in many ways. The many echoes of Montaigne (in Florio's recent translation) in the play reflect this intellectual and cultural context, and the questioning of the old order is explicit in Edmond's soliloquy at the beginning of 1.2, while the olden days of yore are evoked, in particular, in the chivalric duel at the end. In this light, it may be interesting to compare Lear's madness with that of Nebuchadnezzar in the Book of Daniel as well as Tom o'Bedlam's (faked) madness.

Shak.'s plays regularly raise questions about how one can acquire knowledge, about how one can make sure of what one sees or senses (see Hamlet and the ghost for example), about truth and deceit, etc. In *KL* the several letters are part of this questioning, and so is the Fool, who tells truths in the guise of folly. More generally, the play interrogates the place of man in the universe and the relation between nature and man (and human nature) — this is perhaps especially apparent in the scene on the moor, but is probably already introduced with the map in 1.1 and Lear acting like a "master and possessor" of his kingdom —, and the notions of necessity, determinism, and free will, as well as justice (including divine justice perhaps), especially through the image of the wheel of fortune (and several circular images: coronets, wreaths, O and zero, etc.).

A TOPSY-TURVY WORLD OF APPEARANCES

The sovereign / the state / society / the human body / the universe (actually the solar system): the Renaissance way of thinking relied strongly not only on the notion of the "great chain of beings" but on the idea of a correspondence between macrocosm and microcosm on all levels. So a disturbance on one level was bound to induce a disturbance on other levels. Thus, when Lear decides to dissociate his status as King and his role as ruler, it provokes an avalanche of troubles: not only his madness and eventual death, but also war, rifts in marriages and between siblings, disturbances in the social hierarchy — Oswald the upstart v. Kent and Edgar disguised as social inferiors, servants rebelling against their masters —, an upsetting of the familial order — in Lear's family and in Glouc.'s —, weather catastrophes, outpourings of feral violence and lust, etc: things fall apart because the centre doesn't hold, and general chaos ensues. The world, *i.e.* the play, is thus dominated by figures of disorder, inversion and reversal, topsy-turviness, folly, the carnivalesque (M. Bakhtin; but not here in a comic way), the unnatural, the preposterous (a term featured in, and central to, *MND*, written a few years before *KL*). This is embodied, among others, by the very character of the Fool, whose jokes often echo Feste's pronouncement in *Twelfth Night*: "A sentence is but a cheveril glove to a good wit — how quickly the wrong side may be turned outward!" (Feste also says that "Foolery [...] does walk about the orb like the sun, it shines everywhere": see Erasmus or Sebastian Brant). Since the Fool's role is to expose folly and tell the truth hidden behind appearances, one reason why he disappears mid-play may be that chaos has so taken over Lear's world that there's no mending it any longer, and any attempt would be futile.

In the meantime, the Fool contributes to a discourse on appearances and hypocrisy that begins with Cord.'s frank-

ness pitted against her sisters' rhetorical wiles in 1.1 then Edm.'s machinations in 1.2 and runs throughout the play. Some have interpreted Gonerill as an allegory of Vanity (see 2.2.32n). The concept of *theatrum mundi*, where "all the world's a stage" and people are "merely players" acting "many parts" (Jacques in *Twelfth Night*) was a way to express the idea that living in society means playing a role, assuming a persona.

But it also means that the stage is a (representation of the) world — see the Prologue to *Henry V*, or the very fact that Shak.'s playhouse was called the Globe. When Harsnett wrote against exorcisms, he meant to expose what he saw only as cheap tricks and histrionics. But this led him to cast aspersions on, or was based on his scorn for, theatrics in general. As a play, *KL* reaffirms the power of the theatre and its ability to represent truth: far from being mere appearance, mere artificiality, *i.e.* mere fallacy (Plato's opinion on art), it is a serious, legitimate mode of knowledge and self-knowledge (which Aristotle wouldn't have denied). One major passage from this perspective is the cliff scene between Glouc. and Edg.: are the characters actually on a cliff? On the Jacobean stage, nothing enabled the audience to tell whether Edg. was bluffing; anyway, the cliff is a lie, as is all the rest of the play. And at the end, the moment of pathetic climax, the dead bodies are actually people pretending to be dead (three of them were not even female, despite their characters being so). One passage in the play — arguably a severely undercommented one — even draws the audience's attention to the fact that the play is all illusion, convention, artificiality: Merlin's prophecy, delivered by the Fool in 3.2, who ends it with "This prophecy Merlin shall make, for I live before his time", not only "a third prophecy" (NCS) but a metatheatrical pointing out that the play is a play.

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The last couplet of the play is another undercommented moment — or rather arguably miscommented, editors and critics mainly focusing on whether "we" is a case of royal plural or includes Albany (with discussion as to the latter's age) rather than considering that it could apply to the audience (and the cast), *i.e.* Jacobean England, with the actor rather than the character addressing the public, as happens in *MND*, *Tempest*, *Hen V*, or *RJ* — with this line addressed to the spectators as well as to the characters: "Go hence, to have more talk of these sad things." —, and possibly *Hamlet* — "Take up the bodies. Such a sight as this / Becomes the field but here shows much amiss."

KL would then end on an exhortation to the people of the present (the "young") to reflect on what happened to people in the past ("the oldest"), suggesting that the era of legends is over, or soon will be — and that might be a good thing: after all, "May you live in interesting times" is said to be a curse...