English in Australia 135, December 2002

ENGLISH IN AUSTRALIA

[What I would fain call master': Challenging King Lear's Heritage

by Philippa Kelly, University of New South Wales

'There is … that peculiar breed of niggling intellectual which actually enjoys picking at the chicken-bones of art in order to re-create a semblance of the whole bird … produc[ing] the papers that scrutinise the punctuation, the typography, the syntax and the topical allusions of every play … But for people without such obsessions, whose main concern is reconstituting Shakespeare's main ideas and finding ways to dramatically extrapolate them, this myopic preoccupation with the canon seems, more than anything else, like the scrutiny of one chimpanzee fastidiously picking the nits off another. [1]

Although Charles Marowitz's amusing equation of academic nit-picking with canonical preoccupation is not fairly or accurately made, his statement has two uses. The first lies in his obvious preference for performance, which distinguishes itself against an irresistible parody of the tedious, self-centred academic who scrabbles minutely within the orbit of canonically validated texts. Secondly, he suggests two different kinds of movement: one, academically based, which assumes the canonical text as a richly textured artifact within whose 'bones' and hide scholars fastidiously burrow; the other, performance-based, which seeks not necessarily to know the canonical text better but to re-make it in various performative ways. This distinction between the inwardness of academe and the comparatively open vistas of performance is a telling one for many people fed up with the myopic excesses of scholarship and the narrow trajectory of academic achievement. My purpose in this paper is not to find ways of repudiating, or of justifying, academic absorption, but rather to speculate about the performative aspect of Marowitz's generalisation. I will begin by defining what makes a canonical text. I will then use Shakespeare's King Lear as a vehicle for addressing ways in which performance might challenge, and seek to open out, canonical thinking.

Thinking canonically

In its aesthetic dimension, the word 'canon' – derived from the formation of scriptural texts – refers to certain works that are accorded an aesthetic reverence on account of beliefs about their beauty and intrinsic worthiness. This reverence is, of course, implicitly informed by an array of cultural values and assumptions – about what 'speaks' to all people, about what is 'beautiful', what touches on 'human' sensibilities, and so on. Influential scholars – Harold Bloom, for instance – see Shakespeare as the embodiment of canonical value. Shakespeare is universal … the true multicultural author. He exists in all languages. He is put on the stage everywhere. Everyone feels that they are represented by him on the stage … I don't know who Shakespeare was … [but] one cares about wisdom, and in the end one wants to be judged by wisdom. If one hasn't got it, one has to ask the biblical question, 'Where shall wisdom be found?' And I suppose, for me, the answer is: wisdom is to be found in Shakespeare, provided you get it in the right way.[2]

Bloom's confidence in Shakespeare's capacity to speak for, and to, human nature is questioned by those who are concerned about exactly who is being represented – and spoken to – by Shakespeare. They argue that appreciation of Shakespeare's texts is perpetuated in the interests of the colonial appropriation of subordinated cultures.[3] In this context Shakespeare's 'universal' voice constitutes a liberal humanist 'appeal to the structures of feeling' that creates 'a "backlash" against multiculturalism, race politics, canon expansion, feminisms, gay and lesbian studies, and other foregroundings of "the political" in academic discourse' (Charnes 1996). Critics of Shakespeare's pre-eminence thus argue that the canonical status of Shakespeare's texts accords them a transparency that masks a whole set of cultural values and assumptions, 'substituting a false vision of unity for a reality that was and is ever more multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural' (Greenblatt 2001).

It remains, however, that many of the minorities whose diversity might be effaced by Shakespeare's voice themselves wish to continue staging and studying his works. Kiernan Ryan argues that this popularity is more than the result of simple colonial indoctrination. He argues for '[the plays] roving impulse to displace the perspective across a spectrum of identities and attitudes', an impulse that 'creates their structural identification with the common interests of our kind rather than with one sector of society at the expense of the rest' (1995, p. 35). Ryan isolates various verbal and theatrical devices such as metatheatre, dialogic discursive frames, and the reflexive opportunities offered by disguise and cross-dressing, which allow for Shakespeare's conditional and polyphonous range of meanings (pp. 35-36). From another perspective, Robert Weimann argues that far from going to great lengths to justify Shakespeare's canonical worthiness, we should recognise that Shakespeare himself was radically opposed to the very notions of consensus and univocality implied by the large measure of reverence his texts currently enjoy:
This throws an interesting light on debates about Shakespeare's contemporary cultural preeminence. Such debates assume for his plays a governing centrality of which the writer himself – who mentions authority no less than sixty times in plays which constantly engage in exploring the fragility of authority – was highly skeptical.

If Shakespeare's plays are indeed so ambivalent about authority, how is it that postcolonial critics see them as the driving force of a literary canon that bosses many voices into one, specialising in the reification of a very few authors and in the exclusion and alienation of countless others? Certainly, as Michael Bristol notes, the driving force of a literary canon that bosses many voices into one, specialising in the reification of a very few ‘givens’ we have come to associate with this play.

‘givens’ we have come to associate with this play.

But what happens if we don’t want to see a geriatric, ill-tempered old man and his equally decrepit counterpart as the world’ (pp. 262–263). King Lear has been variously touted as representing ‘no less than the Self and the birth of Divine Love’ (Middleton Murry 1956, p. 338), as a ‘timeless, universal and mythical … story’ (Moelwyn Merchant 1982, p. 94), and as a single experience that proclaims a ‘larger synthesis’ (Granville-Barker 1936, p. 293). Performances of the play have elicited hyperbolic references to ‘a flaming torch beside which Michelangelo and Bach are but tapers'(Agate); to universal man, ‘made wise by affliction and redeemed by love’ (Batchelor 1978, p. 29); and to Shakespeare as ‘the Earth's heritage, not England's … the fundamentals of Lear's predicament are still relevant today’ (Balme). Such hyperbole, focused in on the figure of the aged king, can reach quite farcical proportions:

But I would beg that, when Lear speaks those great lines during the storm, the Fool be asked to remain in a motionless heap at his feet; his writings disturbed concentration upon the tragic king. (Harris)

But what happens if we don’t want to see a geriatric, ill-tempered old man and his equally decrepit counterpart as emblems of universal humanity? What other opportunities are there for calling on the history of thinking and debate that has accreted around King Lear in order to make fresh meanings and interpretations? One opportunity is afforded by discarding the structures of the text altogether, as Barrie Kosky recently did in staging an Australian production. Another opportunity emerges through feminist approaches, which refuse many of the ‘givens’ we have come to associate with this play.

The Kosky production

King Lear is a play that hinges on madness. In giving away his kingdom, an elderly king unplugs his crucial connection to the hierarchical system of which he has been head. Relationships are reconfigured; stern protocols are exposed to shifts in authority; obligation is revised by all three of Lear's daughters, and in large part discarded, by his older daughters; all is chaos in the natural realm and in the realm of an old man's mind. The sphere of the Globe becomes 'this distracted globe', the sphere of Lear's chaotic head. In this unhinged world, Lear's aged counterpart, Gloucester, is 'Goneril with a white beard' (4.6.96), and the ex-king appears 'crowned with weeds and flowers' (4.6.80), debating whether to give a piece of cheese to an imaginary mouse (4.6.89–90). Madness prevails, things change and go awry. But in an apprehension of the play, one might conventionally see madness (as have a huge number of critics) as a structuring feature of the play – in other words, as the key to interpreting the play in terms of an organic progression toward wisdom, in which blindness and insight, suffering and catharsis, are juxtaposed. In a conventional reading of King Lear, madness is the foundation for reintegration, and, for the most part, redemption, so that Edgar's 'reason in madness' (4.6) becomes an archetypal statement for the play.

King Lear and counter-hegemony

It is this project – finding new and counter-hegemonic ways of addressing the history of thinking that surrounds Shakespeare's texts – that has an especially challenging relationship to King Lear. Shakespeare's authoritative grasp of 'human nature' is assumed nowhere more strongly than in the body of opinion about this play. As A.C. Bradley famously put it early last century, there is a 'feeling which haunts us in King Lear', as though we were witnessing something universal, a conflict not so much of particular persons as of the powers of good and evil in the world’ (pp. 262–263). King Lear has been variously touted as representing 'no less than the Self and the birth of Divine Love' (Middleton Murry 1956, p. 338), as a 'timeless, universal and mythical … story' (Moelwyn Merchant 1982, p. 94), and as a single experience that proclaims a 'larger synthesis' (Granville-Barker 1936, p. 293). Performances of the play have elicited hyperbolic references to 'a flaming torch beside which Michelangelo and Bach are but tapers'(Agate); to universal man, 'made wise by affliction and redeemed by love' (Batchelor 1978, p. 29); and to Shakespeare as 'the Earth's heritage, not England's … the fundamentals of Lear's predicament are still relevant today’ (Balme). Such hyperbole, focused in on the figure of the aged king, can reach quite farcical proportions:

But I would beg that, when Lear speaks those great lines during the storm, the Fool be asked to remain in a motionless heap at his feet; his writings disturbed concentration upon the tragic king. (Harris)

This throws an interesting light on debates about Shakespeare's contemporary cultural preeminence. Such debates assume for his plays a governing centrality of which the writer himself – who mentions authority no less than sixty times in plays which constantly engage in exploring the fragility of authority – was highly skeptical.

If Shakespeare's plays are indeed so ambivalent about authority, how is it that postcolonial critics see them as the driving force of a literary canon that bosses many voices into one, specialising in the reification of a very few authors and in the exclusion and alienation of countless others? Certainly, as Michael Bristol notes, the driving force of a literary canon that bosses many voices into one, specialising in the reification of a very few ‘givens’ we have come to associate with this play.

‘givens’ we have come to associate with this play.

But what happens if we don’t want to see a geriatric, ill-tempered old man and his equally decrepit counterpart as the world’ (pp. 262–263). King Lear has been variously touted as representing ‘no less than the Self and the birth of Divine Love’ (Middleton Murry 1956, p. 338), as a ‘timeless, universal and mythical … story’ (Moelwyn Merchant 1982, p. 94), and as a single experience that proclaims a ‘larger synthesis’ (Granville-Barker 1936, p. 293). Performances of the play have elicited hyperbolic references to ‘a flaming torch beside which Michelangelo and Bach are but tapers'(Agate); to universal man, ‘made wise by affliction and redeemed by love’ (Batchelor 1978, p. 29); and to Shakespeare as ‘the Earth's heritage, not England's … the fundamentals of Lear's predicament are still relevant today’ (Balme). Such hyperbole, focused in on the figure of the aged king, can reach quite farcical proportions:

But I would beg that, when Lear speaks those great lines during the storm, the Fool be asked to remain in a motionless heap at his feet; his writings disturbed concentration upon the tragic king. (Harris)

But what happens if we don’t want to see a geriatric, ill-tempered old man and his equally decrepit counterpart as emblems of universal humanity? What other opportunities are there for calling on the history of thinking and debate that has accreted around King Lear in order to make fresh meanings and interpretations? One opportunity is afforded by discarding the structures of the text altogether, as Barrie Kosky recently did in staging an Australian production. Another opportunity emerges through feminist approaches, which refuse many of the ‘givens’ we have come to associate with this play.

The Kosky production

King Lear is a play that hinges on madness. In giving away his kingdom, an elderly king unplugs his crucial connection to the hierarchical system of which he has been head. Relationships are reconfigured; stern protocols are exposed to shifts in authority; obligation is revised by all three of Lear's daughters, and in large part discarded, by his older daughters; all is chaos in the natural realm and in the realm of an old man's mind. The sphere of the Globe becomes 'this distracted globe', the sphere of Lear's chaotic head. In this unhinged world, Lear's aged counterpart, Gloucester, is 'Goneril with a white beard' (4.6.96), and the ex-king appears 'crowned with weeds and flowers' (4.6.80), debating whether to give a piece of cheese to an imaginary mouse (4.6.89–90). Madness prevails, things change and go awry. But in an apprehension of the play, one might conventionally see madness (as have a huge number of critics) as a structuring feature of the play – in other words, as the key to interpreting the play in terms of an organic progression toward wisdom, in which blindness and insight, suffering and catharsis, are juxtaposed. In a conventional reading of King Lear, madness is the foundation for reintegration, and, for the most part, redemption, so that Edgar's 'reason in madness' (4.6) becomes an archetypal statement for the play.
In Barrie Kosky's 1998 production in Australia, this (familiar) King Lear. The Lear that is a cornerstone of school and university curricula, the Lear that offers some of the 'best' passages in the English language, disappeared. Kosky refused to contain the concept of madness as a structuring feature for his production. He cut loose conventional expectations for language, scenes and relationships, removing chunks of text and replacing them with dance-hall routines such as 'My heart belongs to Daddy' (sung by a female Fool). He choreographed pantomime dogs with large, floppy penises; Regan was characterised by a high-pitched whine; and a pervasive air of vaudeville mocked the tones of inexorable tragedy that have traditionally marked King Lear.

R.A. Foakes has suggested that King Lear’s popularity in recent decades has been engendered by a feeling that it has a direct relation to a new political consciousness emerging from the Cold War, 'the rediscovery of the Holocaust, the renewed interest in Hiroshima, the development of the hydrogen bomb, and the building of the Berlin Wall' (1993, p. 71). In a similar vein, Michael Billington has claimed that King Lear 'accords with our [contemporary] vision of moral chaos.' But Kosky's production of King Lear set up a world where notions of sense and meaning were not just abandoned in despair – they were wildly mocked. John Bell played Lear as indeed the 'fool of fortune' (4.6.191), by turns petulant, bewildered and querulous, not so much 'bound/Upon a wheel of fire' (4.7.46) as staggering through a roguish dance-hall extravaganza. Bell's Lear progressed from unattractive irascibility to a state of benign bewilderment, engaging in a vague journey of which he knew neither the meaning nor the destination. This mood was brought home when the production re-opened in a bus-station setting after interval. Alone amidst a scattering of ragged orange plastic chairs, Bell performed a low-key, utterly distracted mad-scene. Utterly divested of his familiar symbols of grandiosity, Lear sat at home in his new surroundings, his absent-minded, speculative delivery chillingly underscored by the way in which he compulsively tore pieces of paper into tiny shreds. Chattering out his lines, he suggested that words, perhaps once pregnant, with meaning, were rendered utterly inconsequential in this world of random associations.

Audiences were at the very least arrested by Kosky's mercurial and willfully nonsensical production. Many audience members were so offended that they walked out in the middle of performances, sometimes writing letters to the press about the indignity to which they (and Shakespeare) had been subjected. Kosky himself was like a small boy playing with Lego, changing the production at will from night to night and thriving on the surplus of negative attention accorded to his iconoclasm. (The production's reception is epitomised by a story – perhaps an urban myth – of an outraged elderly audience member hitting Kosky over the head with her umbrella.) Refusing to allow his audiences the comfort of redemptivism or even of a recognisable despair, Kosky set a landmark King Lear for the turn of the century, a time of radical uncertainty.

_More than women's weapons, water drops: finding space for women in King Lear_

I was initially drawn to address the place of women in (and in relation to) King Lear by the obvious expectation that feminist perspectives can add interest and controversy to standard readings and productions of a canonical play, in this case perhaps wresting it out of the hands of the two elderly patriarchs and their devotees and giving it over to innovative women actors and critics. The odds are stacked against this possibility, even in numerical terms: in contrast to Lear's volatility – he has 166 lines in the folio's first scene alone – Regan has only 182 lines in the entire Folio edition. Goneril fares even worse: she has 149 lines in the Folio, while Cordelia has 107. But by rethinking the relationship between Lear and his daughters, it is possible to do more than give voice to (numerically) minor roles. These roles can also provoke debate about gender; about social and political possibilities for women, both in historical terms and in current contexts; and about the 'universal' questions that have historically been accepted as natural territory for men, aged or otherwise.

Carol Rutter offers a suggestion for countering masculinist presuppositions in relation to King Lear. She argues that while certain dramatic moments (like the death scenes) conventionally play out gendered expectations of female subordination, these expectations can be acknowledged and complicated by 'smart actors' who learn how to 'collaborate with [Shakespeare] to author themselves' (Rutter 2001. pp. 26, 140). In this sense the play's canonical valency can be used against itself – by this I mean that the archives of the play's historical preeminence can be called on as a backdrop to feminist re-thinnings. If everyone knows King Lear, then everyone knows broadly what to think of King Lear ('universal man's' journey toward self-knowledge, the lessons taught by repentance, the quality of stumbling when one sees, and so on). In this respect King Lear's very centrality can be called on to radically destabilise perceptions of what happens in the play, and what is important within the dynamics of the action. This, of course, is the value of performance for feminist approaches: while performance provides a context within a cultural moment, one of its very conditions is that no one cultural moment will yield a performance that is identical to another.

But what kind of production claims to enable a 'feminist' orientation for King Lear, and what does such an orientation entail? Does feminism assume masculinity as a natural Shakespearean default-position for 'important' themes and speeches, so that attention to female roles requires challenge and subversion? Does the idea of a feminist approach signal the claim that Shakespeare is not indeed sufficiently universal and multivocal to give voice to the kinds of gender concerns we are conscious of today? And further to this, are contemporary gender observations and ironies something we share with the all-purpose Shakespeare, or are they something we need to impose upon the structure of an outmoded albatross who requires recuperation in order to be relevant, or even in order not to embarrass us? Brian Gibbons tries to have it both ways when he says: While there are obvious differences between the formulations of the Renaissance and today, there is also a significant continuity, a
shared interest in certain issues'. But when a group of people gets down to the business of staging a Shakespeare play, they want to know, 'Well, what issues are the same, what issues are different?' And where does Shakespeare himself stand in relation to the issues we might want to highlight and challenge?

In her study of feminist performance, Sarah Werner acknowledges the shifting contexts that redefine the nature and scope of feminism, suggesting that the term more generally refers to 'those actors, directors and performances which strive to question received assumptions of Shakespeare's depiction of and appropriateness for women' (2001, p. 107n). In Werner's terms, then, feminist thought facilitates a re-thinking, or a re-opening, of established opinions and perceptions about female roles and audiences. This kind of flexibility might lead us to question what is ascribed to gender in the play, highlighting, for example, Lear's description of tears as 'women's weapons, water drops' (2.4.277), his allusion to emotion as the menstrual 'mother' that heaves toward his heart (2.4.56), and his famous revulsion at the 'sulphurous pit … burning, scalding, stench, consumption' (4.6.128–29). It might also challenge assumptions that the sisters embody essential qualities, that the play's 'universal' questions about age, control and suffering are implicitly masculine, or, alternatively, that misogyny in King Lear is less the property of the play than that of the gender-inflected ideas and terminologies imposed by critics. And how are these various perspectives absorbed within the structures of academe, in which intellectual struggles often sit uneasily with the career-driven need for authoritative approvals? This last question itself opens a different field of debate which takes us back to the issue of academic self-absorption highlighted at the beginning of this paper; and it is worth bearing in mind Phyllis Rackin's view that feminist scholarship might now speak so thoroughly to academic qualifications and credibilities that, 'adopted as a conceptual tool by women and men without a serious political commitment to feminist political agendas, criticism designated as “feminist” … can just as easily be used to naturalise women's oppression as to oppose it'.

While all of the above questions and possibilities might validly pertain to the broad scope of 'feminism', it is not so easy to see where they might lead. I would argue, however, that one of the aims of feminist thought is to refuse conceptual thumb-tacks that provide a common goal, refusing, in other words, to pin down common aims and flatten out divergences. I am not trying to put forward a reductive binary in which feminism defines itself in contrast to the supposed single-mindedness of 'patriarchal' thought: rather, I suggest that many feminist approaches pay attention to female roles and audiences, and that this attention in itself often marks out a difference in the way these roles, or the play, or the dramatist, might be perceived. Performatively, such differences might involve Regan as played with a stutter, Cordelia played as a deaf-mute, Lear played as a woman with a beard, or new contexts and settings that revisit and reorient familiar themes. It would be absurd to say that feminism alone attends to marks of difference: but what I do suggest is that feminist perspectives are mindful of, and interested in, differences – in representation, in interpretation – involving women.

**Feminist interventions through performance**

'He shrinks from no dramatic obstacle, but combats all the passages which call for declamation, denunciation, or expression of pathos with skilful determination … he is on all occasions powerful,' declared a reviewer of W.E. Sheridan's 1882 performance of the role of Lear in Australia; 'and his terrible denunciation of his unfilial daughter Goneril was so effectively rendered as to elicit a burst of hearty applause'. And in nineteenth-century America, Edwin Forrest's performance was described as follows:

**Anguish, wrath and helplessness drove him mad. The blood made a path from his heart to his brow, and hung there, a red cloud, over turned look and hands straight outstretched towards his unnatural daughter, he pouted out, in frenzied tones of mingled shriek and sob, his withered curue, half adjuration, half malediction. It was a terrible thing, almost too fearful to be gazed at as a work of art, yet true to the character, the words and the situation furnished by Shakespeare.** (Alger 2000, p. 782)

Forrest himself declared, moreover, 'I hold that next to God, Shakespeare comprehended the mind of man' (Alger 2000, p. 797).

This interest in 'the mind of man', and in the closed circle of old men – Lear, Shakespeare and God (a very old man indeed) – has a whiff of the absurd in light of recent decades. It also highlights the shifting trajectory traversed by the vocabulary that represents changes in thinking about gender, culture and colonialism. While many recent productions of the play have emphasised Lear's domineering qualities (The Royal Shakespeare Company's 1976 London production, for instance), his childishness (Richard Eyre's 1997 London production at the Cottesloe Theatre), his headstrong wilfulness (Gale Edwards' 1988 State Theatre Company of South Australia production in Adelaide), or his unattractive irascibility (Australia's 1998 Bell Shakespeare Company production discussed above), some have used emblems that augment, or adumbrate, verbal challenges to perceptions of an old man's right to be aggrieved. In Deborah Warner's 1990 production of King Lear for London's National Theatre, Brian Cox decided to enter in a wheelchair in order to divert audience attention from Lear's suffering to his manipulative determination to have his own way:
The only image I have of Lear at the moment is of an old man in a wheelchair. The wheelchair could denote helplessness and also perhaps cunning. I got this idea from the amount of time I have spent in airports noticing the way the old are manoeuvred through passport queues or security checks. They arrive at the airport with loads of baggage, hale and hearty, and are transferred to a waiting wheelchair, which causes them to age twenty years. As soon as they arrive on board they are sprightly young things again. (Cox 1992, p. 15)

By using the wheelchair with reckless gleefulness, Cox's Lear conveyed the stubborn selfishness with which Goneril and Regan were justifiably exasperated. By 1.5, however, as Lear sat bundled up and vulnerable in Goneril's palace, he seemed ready for the geriatric ward.

Complications to the conventional focus on 'universal man' can of course be granted also by playing Regan and Goneril with a range of motive and reaction. In a Royal Shakespeare Company production in 1976, Judi Dench played Regan with a stutter, challenging stereotype divisions between the saintly and demonic sisters. In a discussion of the performance, Dench said she hoped that the stutter helped to suggest how Regan came to be as she was – she stuttered only in Lear's presence, and he showed impatience at her disability. The implication was that her 'filial ingratitude' (3.4.14) resulted not from a monstrous nature, but from parental tyranny (Wells 1994, p. 26). The San Francisco Shakespeare Festival's 2001 production emphasised the older sisters' femininity as a form of resistance to paternal tyranny. Goneril (Kay Kostopoulos) shrank away at her father's curse, clawing at her bosom as she wept silently. Her resolve literally swelled from this moment onward, as she thrust out her bosom and determined to take a stand against her father. Regan (Jenny Lord), bewitchingly beautiful and fragile, used her femininity as a means of rebuking Lear, treating him as a vulgar old carouser whose bad manners affronted her.

In producing the play for the State Theatre Company of South Australia in 1988, Gale Edwards directed the older sisters less as victims of their father's tyranny than as proactive women, eager to get on. Goneril and Regan appeared perfectly reasonable in their protestations about the behaviour of Lear and his hundred knights, while it was Lear who violently over-reacted. Yvonne Brewster, in her 1994 Talawa production in London, gave an extra edge to the two older sisters' cold reason, blending their common sense with a chilly devotion to personal gain. Goneril (Lolita Chakrabarti) and Regan (Cathy Tyson) were beautiful, strong-willed women intent on achieving what they felt to be their just deserts. Repeatedly licking her lips, Tyson accentuated Regan's increase in acquisitiveness as the action progressed. This suggestion of irresistible appetite, rather than innate evil, was supported by David Harewood's portrayal of a muscular, vigorous Edmund, who, through sheer presence, if not through birthright, deserved the power he craved. The hard-line strength of these performances highlighted a fundamental point about the emotional and political structure of King Lear. In this play a father and king variously censures his daughters in terms of their looks, their breeding, their words, even their procreative powers. Surely women thus constrained, once in possession of unaccustomed authority, would be tempted not only to wield it, but to ask their vindictive father, as Regan does, 'What would thou do, old man?'

By rethinking the relationship between Lear and his daughters, then, it is possible to do more than give voice to the plays' relatively small female roles. These roles can also provoke debate about gender, about social and political possibilities for women, and about the 'universal' questions that have always been accepted as fitting territory for aged men.

Finally, it remains to be observed that by considering the question of Shakespeare's canonical status, as well as the questions, interpretations and interventions drawn into the discussion as a whole, I have sought to do three things: to ask what 'makes' a canonical text; to address aspects of its cultural impact; and, by looking in some detail at recent productions of King Lear, to approach the question of how we might use the history of thinking and interpretation that accrues around a canonical text while also challenging its assumptions and limitations. This argument is not made in a drive to find a quietest justification for canonical thinking (although this may be its effect). It is made rather in an attempt to acknowledge both the limitations and the uses of the body of ideas that circulates through, and around, canonically authorised works, illustrating my argument by exploring in particular some of the motives and insights that have charged and sustained performative challenges to King Lear's heritage. Ideas and priorities about a Shakespeare play may still in many forums be 'givens', but they need not be indulgently or uncritically entertained and regurgitated. By thinking about performance in light of what it means in various contexts, we can question our own preoccupations and biases. Such questioning makes it possible to reshape our understandings of a play's critical heritage and of our own capacity to intervene in it.

Notes


4. Michael Bristol, Big-Time Shakespeare. London, Routledge, 1996, p. 90. For more on this subject see also Lawrence Levine, Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America. Levine's study is more conservatively structured than Bristol's: an important premise in his argument is that a judgement can be shared about Shakespeare's qualitative superiority.

5. This point is made specifically in reference to Jerome McGann's approach to scholarly editing.


7. A.C. Bradley, for instance, alludes to the 'occasional recurrence, during his madness, of autocratic impatience or of desire for revenge', believing that such speeches enhance a redemptive perspective because they heighten 'Shakespeare's exposition of the effect of suffering in reviving the greatness and eliciting the sweetness of Lear's nature'. (p. 284)


9. Lisa Jardine argues that women in Shakespeare's plays are purely the effect of masculinity, with boy actors playing the woman's part for 'a male audience's appreciation.' (Boy Actors, Female Roles, and Elizabethan Eroticism. In David Scott Kastan and Peter Stallybrass (eds), Staging the Renaissance: Reinterpretation of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama. London and New York: Routledge, 1991, pp. 57–67.) Dympna Callaghan observes, 'A representational schema that understands sexual difference completely within the parameters of masculinity does not require women: it occurs entirely within a material economy of males,' leaving 'woman' as a body that is defined in masculinist terms. Shakespeare Without Women: Performing Race and Gender on the Renaissance Stage. London and New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 51. Valerie Traub is similarly concerned by tendencies to naturalize masculinity, seeing the price of redemption as at times 'a complete capitulation to masculine terms as well as the resurrection of the faulty structure of sexual dualism.' She goes on to resist the staunch position taken by such critics as Jardine who believe that there are no women in Shakespeare (ie only boys who play women). In contrast, Traub reads Shakespeare's plays as a site where sexual orientations can be played out with unusual fluidity, with women able to identify with male, female and transvestite roles in Shakespeare. (Jewels, Statues and Corpses: Containment of Female Erotic Power in Shakespeare's Plays', in Shakespeare and Gender: A History, ed. Deborah Parker and Ivo Kamps, London: Verso, 1995, pp. 120–141.)

10. Elizabeth Schafer, for instance, points out King Lear's 'vividly expressed and poetically effective misogyny, much of it voiced by Lear himself.' Noting that Lear's tirade against women is positioned late in the play when sympathy for the elderly king is riding high, she says, 'Negotiating this moment without endorsing … Lear's deep-seated loathing of women's sexuality presents a serious challenge.' (MsDirecting Shakespeare. London: Women's Press, 1998, p. 128.) In Coppelia Kahn's terms, Lear's misogyny gives way in the course of the play to a revelation of his 'hidden dependence on mothering.' ('Magic of bounty: Timon of Athens, Jacobean Patronage, and Maternal Power,' in Shakespearean Tragedy and Gender, eds Shirley Nelson Garner and Madelon Sprengnether, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, [pp. 135–167], p. 138.)

11. Graham Bradshaw offers a case in point: '…nothing that happens in King Lear makes us doubt that there is an essential difference between Cordelia's nature and that of her sisters.' (Misrepresentations: Shakespeare and the Materialists. Ithaca: Cornell, 1993, p. 216.) Feminists might usefully see such flatly-stated essentialisms as critical complicity with Lear's misogyny.


References

Agate, James (1944) Times (London), 16 April 1944.


Harris, Stewart (1952) Brisbane Telegraph .


