

## CHAPTER ONE

The Critical Backstory

Joan Fitzpatrick

Shakespeare's *King Lear* was probably written in 1605 and performed shortly after, probably in 1606, by the King's Men at the Globe Theatre in London. Unfortunately, we have no eyewitness account of this or any other performances of *King Lear* during Shakespeare's lifetime, although such records do exist for other early modern performances of Shakespeare's plays.<sup>1</sup> The play was first printed in 1608 and referred to on its title page as *The True Chronicle History of the life and death of King Lear and his three daughters. With the unfortunate life of Edgar, sonne and heire to the Earle of Gloster, and his sullen and assumed humor of Tom of Bedlam*.<sup>2</sup> Those playgoers who went to see Shakespeare's *King Lear*, or who read the play, would have been surprised by his version of the story if they had read or seen other versions of it, such as the anonymous play *The True Chronicle History of King Leir and his three daughters, Gonorill, Ragan, and Cordella*, probably performed twice at the Rose in 1594 and first published in 1605.<sup>3</sup> This was the main source from which Shakespeare worked when writing his play. As Geoffrey Bullough indicated in his book on Shakespeare's sources, he was also clearly indebted to the English history available via Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1577) and John Higgins's *Mirror for Magistrates* (1574). He also used Samuel Harsnett's *Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* (1603) and Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth-century history *Historia regum Britanniae*, which features the story of Leir and which Shakespeare probably knew from the version in Edmund Spenser's epic poem *The Faerie Queene* (Book 2, canto 10), where the youngest daughter is named Cordelia, rather than 'Cordella' as in *Leir*. The subplot featuring Gloucester and his two sons comes from Sidney's *Arcadia* (specifically Book 2 Chapter 10), which features the story of a Paphlagonian king

who is mistreated by his illegitimate son but saved from suicide by his good and legitimate son.<sup>4</sup> As with most of his source material, Shakespeare reshaped the original in significant ways: for example, in the anonymous play, Leir initially wants Cordella to marry the King of Ireland not France, who turns up only after the division of the kingdom, but the most significant change Shakespeare made is that Leir and his youngest daughter die. Where the anonymous play ended in victory for the French army, Leir in power, and the reconciliation of Leir and Cordella, Shakespeare's play ends in tragedy.

A second edition of the play, also in Quarto form, was printed in 1619 with only minor differences that were accidentally introduced by the printer; the next printing, in the First Folio of 1623, incorporated a number of important changes that constitute deliberate revision by Shakespeare several years after his original composition. According to the *Textual Companion* to the Oxford Shakespeare

The Folio text contains about 100 lines not printed in Q; it does not contain about 300 lines (including one whole scene) which are present in Q; it also differs from Q in hundreds of substantive readings, and divides the play into acts and scenes.<sup>5</sup>

As the *Textual Companion* pointed out, several scholars 'have argued at great length the case for the artistic integrity and independence of the two early versions', so that what we have, in effect, are 'two different "versions" of the play'.<sup>6</sup> The differences between the versions are set out in considerable detail in Gary Taylor and Michael Warren's 1983 study<sup>7</sup> but, to summarize, it is usually thought that Q1 is more historical in scope and the Folio presents a more theatrical text, focusing less on France as an invading force and presumably reflecting changes Shakespeare made in order to make the play work better on stage. Those who encountered Shakespeare's play throughout the early to mid-seventeenth century would have experienced it much as playgoers did during Shakespeare's lifetime, that is, in the form of two distinct texts: the Quarto and Folio. It was later generations of readers who understood a conflated *King Lear* to be one play, a perception that lasted until 1986 with the publication of two distinct versions in the Oxford Shakespeare. But not all critics agree that the Q1 and F1 should be printed as two distinct '*King Leirs*'. R. A. Foakes, for example, acknowledges the differences between the 'versions', but argues that 'the reworking of *King Lear* is not so thorough as to mean that we have to think of two plays'.<sup>8</sup> In his recent Arden edition of *King Lear*, Foakes explains these differences in detail but presents the reader with only one text.<sup>9</sup>

The later seventeenth century saw an important development, with the production on stage of Nahum Tate's adaptation of *King Lear* in 1681. The play was printed in the same year with a title page that did not mention Shakespeare but announced the text as *The History of King Lear. Acted at the Duke's Theatre. Reviv'd with Alterations. By N. TATE*. In a foreword to his edition, Tate explains his reasons for making a major change to Shakespeare's original play by presenting a love affair between Cordelia and Edgar:

*'Twas my good Fortune to light on one Expedient to rectifie what was wanting in the Regularity and Probability of the Tale, which was to run through the whole A Love betwixt Edgar and Cordelia, that never chang'd word with each other in the Original. This renders Cordelia's Indifference and her Father's Passion in the first Scene probable. It likewise gives Countenance to Edgar's Disguise, making that a generous Design that was before a poor Shift to save his Life. The Distress of the Story is evidently heightned by it; and it particularly gave Occasion of a New Scene or Two, of more Success (perhaps) than Merit.'*<sup>10</sup>

Tate makes a connection between this major alteration and his revision of the play's ending:

*This Method necessarily threw me on making the Tale conclude in a Success to the innocent distrest Persons: Otherwise I must have incumbred the Stage with dead Bodies, which Conduct makes many Tragedies conclude with unseasonable Jest. Yet was I Rackt with no small Fears for so bold a Change, till I found it well receiv'd by my Audience . . .*<sup>11</sup>

Tate also cut the character of the fool, a decision that Sonia Massai noted was 'prompted by matters of ideological rather than dramatic concern': the main source of criticism of the king had to go.<sup>12</sup>

Tate has been much maligned for daring to rewrite Shakespeare but, as Stanley Wells pointed out

What Tate did to Shakespeare was not essentially different to what Shakespeare had done to *King Lear*: Shakespeare had turned an old tragicomedy into a tragedy, Tate reversed the process. In doing so he created a new, different play which, critics have increasingly argued, has its own artistic validity.<sup>13</sup>

Wells went on to acknowledge that by retaining so much of Shakespeare, Tate exposed himself to unflattering comparisons between Shakespeare's

verse and his own, but added that when Tate was writing, 'Shakespeare was not thought of as an immortal classic' and it was considered acceptable to adapt his works to suit 'the new theatrical and social circumstances of the time, as well as to changes in taste'.<sup>14</sup> Tate saw himself as a collaborator with Shakespeare, one who could correct the faults in *King Lear*, which he termed 'a Heap of Jewels, unstrung and unpolisht'.<sup>15</sup>

Tate's adaptation of *King Lear*, like Dryden's adaptation of a number of Shakespeare plays, including *Antony and Cleopatra* as *All for Love*, signalled a desire for fresh material in the period that followed the reopening of the theatres upon the Restoration of the monarchy. As Shakespeare's handling of the anonymous *King Lear* indicates, the tradition of reviving and altering old plays was well established. Like the early moderns who adapted source material for their playhouses, upon the Restoration, dramatists wanted something of their own. They also needed to adapt to new theatrical circumstances, namely more elaborate stage scenery and the presence of women for the first time on the public stage in the history of the English theatre. As Massai pointed out, the introduction of a love affair between Edgar and Cordelia and Tate's expansion of other female roles 'are clearly a tribute to the new practice' of women taking female roles.<sup>16</sup>

In 'The Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy' (1679) John Dryden put forward the view that drama ought to be didactic. Dryden admired Shakespeare, and thought him superior to the playwright John Fletcher (whose work he thought to be derivative of Shakespeare's),<sup>17</sup> but he criticized Shakespeare's 'defective' plots – most obviously, he thought, when compared to Jonson's, that adhered to the unities of time, place and action. Dryden also criticized Shakespeare's 'manner of expression' by which 'he often obscures his meaning by words, and sometimes makes it unintelligible'.<sup>18</sup> Thomas Rymer, admired by Dryden for his criticism of Shakespeare's plots,<sup>19</sup> also offered his views on what worked best in tragedy. In the essay, 'A Short View of Tragedy', he presented a lengthy criticism of Shakespeare's *Othello* in which he criticized Shakespeare's diction and was also perturbed by the play's 'moral', asking what crime Desdemona or her parents had committed to bring about her murder by Othello:

What instruction can we make out of this Catastrophe? Or whither must our reflection lead us? Is not this to envenome and sour our spirits, to make us repine and grumble at Providence; and the government of the World? If this be our end, what boots it to be Vertuous?<sup>20</sup>

Rymer did not write about *King Lear* but if he had then, presumably, he would have held a similar view about its dénouement.

### Eighteenth-Century Editions and the Critics

A conflated *King Lear* has its origins in the early eighteenth century with Alexander Pope's new edition of Shakespeare's *Complete Works*, based largely on Nicholas Rowe's revised edition of 1714. Rowe had made some changes to the text, which he based on the Fourth Folio of 1685, but Pope went further by adding passages from the Quarto to the Folio text and deleting passages elsewhere from the Folio. He thus produced a conflation of the two texts, and one of the characteristics of Pope's edition was that he relegated to footnotes those passages from Shakespeare of which he disapproved. Lewis Theobald also produced a collected edition of Shakespeare's works in 1733 and in the preface was strongly critical of Pope, denouncing what he termed Pope's 'injury' to Shakespeare with his 'pompous' edition.<sup>21</sup> Eight years earlier, Theobald had attacked Pope's scholarship in *Shakespeare Restored: A Specimen of the Many Errors, as well committed, as Unamended, by Mr Pope in his Late Edition of this Poet*. Crucially, Theobald supported any changes made in his edition with evidence rather than the subjectivity that had governed Pope's edition, as Jean I. Marsden underlines, 'For Theobald, only evidence from Shakespeare's text, not an editor's faulty judgment, can authorize corrections and amendments.'<sup>22</sup> And so the serious job of editing Shakespeare had begun in earnest, although Theobald, too, presented a conflated text of *King Lear*, as was the editorial norm until the 1986 Oxford edition.

So eighteenth-century readers would have experienced a conflated *King Lear* and, since Tate's adaptation still held the stage, those watching the play in performance would have experienced a happy ending. What then did critics make of the play they knew as *King Lear* during this century? The project of eighteenth-century criticism was to aid discrimination of Shakespeare's writing so that its perceived faults would not be imitated by young writers. Shakespeare's deviations from Augustan neoclassicism, such as the unities of time, place and action, were considered errors but excusable ones because Shakespeare was thought to lack a classical education. The rise of the notion of intellectual property made it important to show that Shakespeare's plays were original, in the sense of new-made, rather than based on classical analogues – an unlearned Shakespeare was deemed more honourable than a learned one. And so emerged the notion of a writer who could be considered a 'poet of Nature': one who did not need learning in order to represent life.

In Samuel Johnson's 1765 edition of the *Complete Works*, his notes on *King Lear* praised the play as 'deservedly celebrated', remarking that 'The artful involutions of distinct interests, the striking opposition of contrary characters, the sudden changes of fortune, and the quick succession of events, fill the mind with a perpetual tumult of indignation,

pity, and hope.'<sup>23</sup> Regarding what he termed 'the seeming improbability of Lear's conduct', Johnson observed that it 'would be yet credible, if told of a petty prince of Guinea or Madagascar', in other words, an eighteenth-century reader or playgoer might encounter just such a king, in some far-flung corner of the known world. Crucially, Johnson contends that Shakespeare 'so minutely describes the characters of men, he commonly neglects and confounds the characters of ages, by mingling customs ancient and modern, English and foreign.'<sup>24</sup> This is typical of the Augustan tendency to read Shakespeare's characters as universal, not specific to a certain time or place. The stressing of such universality was partly a literary taste for the general but also served to explain Shakespeare's longevity since it also suggested that the general cannot go out of fashion.

Johnson cited his fellow critic Joseph Warton, who attacked *King Lear* as a savage and shocking play, but defended Shakespeare's depiction of the aggression shown towards Lear by his daughters: 'These objections may, I think, be answered, by repeating, that the cruelty of the daughters is an historical fact, to which the poet has added little, having only drawn it into a series by dialogue and action.'<sup>25</sup> So Shakespeare based his play on historical material and cannot be faulted for that. But Johnson is more critical of the most violent scene in the play: the blinding of Gloucester, which he describes as 'an act too horrid to be endured in dramattick exhibition, and such as must always compel the mind to relieve its distress by incredulity.'<sup>26</sup> For Johnson, this action was artistically indecorous. Johnson was not impressed, either, by the character of Edmund, and believed he inflicted 'injury' upon what he termed 'the simplicity of the action' but thought this 'abundantly recompensed' by the manner in which Shakespeare combined 'perfidy with perfidy [. . . ] connecting the wicked son with the wicked daughters, to impress this important moral, that villany is never at a stop, that crimes lead to crimes, and at last terminate in ruin.'<sup>27</sup> The key word here is 'moral': the reader or playgoer can, indeed should, learn from Shakespeare that evil deeds will meet their due reward. Johnson was most perturbed by Shakespeare's treatment of Cordelia: 'Shakespeare has suffered the virtue of Cordelia to perish in a just cause contrary to the natural ideas of justice, to the hope of the reader, and, what is yet more strange, to the faith of chronicles.'<sup>28</sup> He disagrees with Joseph Addison, who condemned Tate's happy ending for destroying some of the beauty of Shakespeare's original, observing that natural justice dictates that the wicked perish and the good be rewarded. Moreover, the public liked Tate's version:

In the present case the publick has decided. Cordelia, from the time of Tate, has always retired with victory and felicity. And, if my sensations could add any thing to the general suffrage, I might

relate, that I was many years ago so shocked by Cordelia's death, that I know not whether I ever endured to read again the last scenes of the play till I undertook to revise them as an editor.<sup>29</sup>

Tate's *Lear* continued to play in the London theatres, although other voices were added to Addison's view that his version was unpalatable. Among them was Frances Brooke who, commenting on a performance of *Lear* with Spranger Barry in the lead (a rival to David Garrick's *Lear*), wondered why Garrick, and by implication those who follow him, 'should yet prefer the adulterated cup of *Tate* to the pure genuine draught offered him by the master he avows to serve with such fervency of devotion.'<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Thomas Wilkes, who (like Johnson) noted that the happy conclusion 'sends away all the spectators exulting with gladness', objected that Tate 'has left out some of the finest speeches in the character of *Lear*.'<sup>31</sup> This was not entirely fair on Garrick since, as Jean Marsden has indicated, it seems likely that by the 1750s he had begun replacing large segments of Tate's adaptations with passages from Shakespeare.<sup>32</sup> In his edition of the play, published in 1773, Garrick cut Tate's depiction of the subplot featuring Gloucester and his sons and other Tate-authored scenes such as Cordelia's explanation for her apparently heartless answer. Yet Garrick retained many of the scenes from Tate that emphasized Cordelia's concern for her father so that 'scenes of daughterly love become the background for *Lear*'s suffering and for the play's emotional impact.'<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, the emphasis was still very much on *Lear* as a father who has been mistreated by his daughters, a domestic tragedy rather than the history of a king who has given away his crown.

### The Romantics

Given the interest that the Romantic poets took in the natural world, it is not surprising that Samuel Coleridge's analysis of *King Lear* should begin with a focus on what he perceived to be a sense of physical movement in Shakespeare:

Of all Shakespeare's plays *Macbeth* is the most rapid, *Hamlet* the slowest, in movement. *Lear* combines length with rapidity – like the hurricane and the whirlpool absorbing while it advances. It begins as a stormy day in summer, with brightness; but that brightness is lurid, and anticipates the tempest.<sup>34</sup>

The use of natural imagery, specifically violent movements of water, to describe the play is also invoked to describe the state of *Lear*'s mind

when Coleridge compares *Lear*'s sufferings to those endured by Edgar: 'In Edgar's ravings Shakspeare all the while lets you see a fixed purpose, a practical end in view; – in *Lear*'s, there is only the brooding of the one anguish, an eddy without progression.'<sup>35</sup> This description of *Lear*'s madness as an eddy, water that runs contrary to the direction of the tide or current, with the sense of a lack of forward movement, is further developed in Coleridge's analysis of Act 3, Scene 4, which features *Lear*'s exposure to the storm. Here, Coleridge invokes pathetic fallacy in drawing parallels between the natural world and the psychological pain endured by *Lear* and those around him:

What a world's *convention* of agonies! Surely, never was such a scene conceived before or since. Take it but as a picture for the eye only, it is more terrific than any which a Michelangelo inspired by a Dante could have conceived, and which none but a Michelangelo could have executed. Or let it have been uttered to the blind, the howlings of convulsed nature would seem converted into the voice of conscious humanity.<sup>36</sup>

In his *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, Hazlitt would also consider 'the mind of *Lear*' in terms of the natural world, specifically its violence:

[it is] a tall ship driven about by the winds, buffeted by the furious waves, but that still rides above the storm, having its anchor fixed in the bottom of the sea; or it is like the sharp rock circled by the eddying whirlpool that foams and beats against it, or like the solid promontory pushed from its basis by the force of an earthquake.<sup>37</sup>

That Coleridge and Hazlitt share a vocabulary when describing *Lear*'s madness is perhaps inevitable, given that they came from the same philosophical tradition; it is perhaps unconsciously that they echo the natural language and imagery that refers to the storm and violent waters in the play itself, as when *Lear* calls upon nature: 'Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow, / You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout / Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks!' (3.2.1–3).<sup>38</sup>

The Romantics were keenly sensitive to the workings of the mind and mental disturbance so it is understandable that they should focus on a mind in appalling turmoil. However, their sensibilities balked at what they considered too much pain: Coleridge quickly passes over the most violent scene in the play, the blinding of Gloucester, stating only 'What can I say of this scene? – There is my reluctance to think Shakspeare wrong, and yet it is necessary to harmonize their [Goneril's and Regan's]

cruelty to their father.<sup>39</sup> Hazlitt says even less about it, referring only to Gloucester's generosity in suffering alongside Lear.<sup>40</sup>

Coleridge observes that Lear's division of his kingdom is a thing already decided by him before he asks for protestations of love from his daughters, thus 'the trial is but a trick' and 'the grossness of the old king's rage is in part the natural result of a silly trick suddenly and most unexpectedly baffled and disappointed'.<sup>41</sup> These references to Lear as a king make way for a focus on Lear the man, specifically Lear the father. Coleridge asserts that we might cut the scene where Lear divides his kingdom 'without any of the *effects* of improbability', something that could not happen in the plays of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, since what occurs early in their plays is 'perpetually recurring as the cause and *sine qua non* of the incidents and emotions'.<sup>42</sup> Like Dryden, Coleridge thought Beaumont and Fletcher's drama to be derivative of Shakespeare's.<sup>43</sup> Coleridge concentrates upon

[that] which in all ages has been, and ever will be, close and native to the heart of man, – parental anguish from filial ingratitude, the genuineness of worth, though confined in bluntness, and the execrable vileness of a smooth iniquity.<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, for Hazlitt also, Lear's sufferings were universal:

The passion which he [Shakespeare] has taken as his subject is that which strikes its root deepest into the human heart; of which the bond is the hardest to be unloosed; and the cancelling and tearing to pieces of which gives the greatest revulsion to the frame.<sup>45</sup>

Describing the other characters in the play, Coleridge considers Edmund's wickedness excusable since he is exposed to 'his own dishonour and his mother's infamy related by his father with an excusing shrug of the shoulders, and in a tone betwixt waggery and shame'; he admires Kent as 'the nearest to perfect goodness of all Shakspeare's characters', and the Fool as 'as wonderful a creation as Caliban – an inspired idiot'.<sup>46</sup> He also notes 'Something of disgust at the ruthless hypocrisy of her sisters, some little faulty admixture of pride and sullenness in Cordelia's "Nothing"'.<sup>47</sup> while the criticism directed towards Goneril and Regan concentrates on their unnaturalness:

The monster Goneril prepares what is *necessary*, while the character of Albany renders a still more maddening grievance possible; viz., Regan and Cornwall in perfect sympathy of monstrosity. Not a sentiment, not an image, which can give pleasure on its own

account, is admitted. Pure horror when they are introduced, and they are brought forward as little as possible.<sup>48</sup>

Although Lear is described as selfish in his desire to hear that his daughters love him, it is 'the selfishness of a loving and kindly nature', the actions of a father who needs to hear that he is loved and so who displays an understandable 'anxiety . . . distrust [and] . . . jealousy' out of 'mere fondness from love'.<sup>49</sup> For Coleridge 'All Lear's faults increase our pity. We refuse to know them otherwise than as means and aggravations of his sufferings and his daughter's ingratitude'.<sup>50</sup> Yet Goneril and Regan are not afforded any sympathy: Lear's eldest daughters are considered depraved creatures, with Coleridge referring specifically to 'the unfeminine violence' of Regan.<sup>51</sup>

Hazlitt also expresses pity for Lear, noting that it is 'his violent impetuosity, his blindness to every thing but the dictates of his passions or affections, that produces all his misfortunes, that aggravates his impatience of them, that enforces our pity for him'.<sup>52</sup> He similarly admires Kent and the Fool and offers an excuse for Edmund, noting that his honesty in his villainy is 'admirable' and that his character is one of 'careless, light-hearted villainy, contrasted with the sullen, rancorous malignity of Regan and Gonerill'.<sup>53</sup> He is more sympathetic towards Cordelia than Coleridge, claiming that she 'desires them [her sisters] to treat their father well' but portrays the same attitude towards Goneril and Regan, who reveal 'petrifying indifference' and 'cold, calculating, obdurate selfishness'.<sup>54</sup> At one point Hazlitt exclaims that 'they are so thoroughly hateful that we do not even like to repeat their names'.<sup>55</sup>

The sympathy for Lear and condemnation of Goneril and Regan evident in Coleridge and Hazlitt's criticism of the play highlights how reading *King Lear* can be a very different experience from seeing it performed. For example, it may be difficult for a reader to remember that Lear has one hundred knights in his retinue, a number that Goneril and Regan complain about and ask him to reduce, something Lear finds objectionable. A production might choose to show Lear's knights, even a smaller number of them for practical reasons, behaving badly, as when Goneril claims 'this our court, infected with their manners, / Shows like a riotous inn' and that is 'more like a tavern or a brothel / Than a graced palace' (1.4.221–24). As Foakes pointed out, Peter Brook in his 1962 production of the play 'brought on enough knights to cause something like a riot in Goneril's house when Lear overturned a table and his knights followed his example'.<sup>56</sup> Such a production would presumably increase audience sympathy for the exasperated daughters of an aged parent who hangs out with a loutish gang. Alternatively, a production that showed the knights being no trouble at all would presumably

provoke the opposite view, but the point is that productions tend to make decisions about the kind of indeterminacies that need not bother the reader.

Hazlitt was typical of the Romantics in preferring to read *King Lear*, as his opinion of a production with Edmund Kean as Lear, in Tate's version of the play, demonstrates. Hazlitt had heard reports of the fabulous performances given by the actors David Garrick and John Kemble as Lear, but was disappointed in Kean whom he blamed for 'the deficiency and desultoriness of the interest excited'.<sup>57</sup> Hazlitt admired Kean in the part of Othello, but considered Lear too magnificent for his abilities: 'there is something (we don't know how) in the gigantic, outspread sorrows of Lear, that seems to elude his grasp, and baffle his attempts at comprehension'. Where Othello is 'like a river', Lear is 'more like a sea, swelling, chafing, raging, without bound, without hope, without beacon, or anchor'.<sup>58</sup> Quite a challenge for any actor and one suspects that even Garrick or Kemble would have fallen short of Hazlitt's expectations.

In addition, in an essay entitled 'On the Tragedies of Shakespeare', Charles Lamb notoriously proclaimed that 'the Lear of Shakespeare cannot be acted', denouncing the 'old man tottering about the stage with a walking stick' and his mistreatment that 'has nothing in it but what is painful and disgusting'.<sup>59</sup> Lamb specifically criticized efforts to stage the storm against which Lear rages: 'The contemptible machinery by which they mimic the storm which he goes out in, is not more inadequate to represent the horrors of the real elements, than any actor can be to represent Lear'.<sup>60</sup> Like the other Romantics, he expressed his views of the play via the imagery of the natural world, noting, 'The greatness of Lear is not in corporal dimension, but in intellectual: the explosions of his passion are terrible as a volcano: they are storms turning up and disclosing to the bottom that sea, his mind, with all its vast riches'.<sup>61</sup> The point is that, for the Romantics, no one could capture the essence of such a play. Although Hazlitt was more generous in his reviews of Kean playing Richard III and Hamlet,<sup>62</sup> he was generally critical of the efforts to stage Shakespeare, which could not hope to capture all the complexity only a reader could fully grasp. It would be easy to sneer at Lamb's anti-theatrical views, but we ought to bear in mind that, like the other Romantic critics, he was seeing Tate's Lear, of which he was highly critical: 'Tate has put his hook in the nostrils of this Leviathan, for Garrick and his followers, the showmen of the scene, to draw the mighty beast about more easily'. He is especially scathing of the happy ending: 'as if the living martyrdom that Lear had gone through, – the flaying of his feelings alive, did not make a fair dismissal from the stage of life the only decorous thing for him',<sup>63</sup> a point with which most modern readers or playgoers would arguably concur.

Another Romantic reader of Shakespeare, John Keats, wrote the famous poem 'On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again'. Here, Keats states that he must leave to one side a Romance he is either reading or writing since 'once again, the fierce dispute / Betwixt damnation and impassioned clay / Must I burn through, once more humbly assay / The bitter-sweet of this Shakespearian fruit' (lines 5–8). Keats's characterization of *King Lear* as a distinctly violent work is in keeping with the views of other Romantic critics. His praise of Shakespeare as 'Chief Poet!' (line 9, note Shakespeare is a 'poet' rather than a 'dramatist') is also typical, and marks a distinct departure from earlier critics such as Rymer, who were mostly critical of Shakespeare's writing. His reference to 'ye clouds of Albion, / Begetters of our deep eternal theme!' (lines 9–10) is Romantic in its emphasis on the universality of Shakespeare that we have encountered so far: England has produced Shakespeare and his works, but they speak of the wider world and universal themes. Keats describes the action of reading as going 'through the old oak forest' (line 10), again a typical Romantic reference to nature and the final lines of the poem feature a plea: 'Let me not wander in a barren dream, / But, when I am consumèd in the fire / Give me new Phoenix wings to fly at my desire' (lines 12–14).<sup>64</sup> This indicates the extreme emotions reading provoked for the Romantics; Keats does not approach the play as a critic or playgoer might but is absorbed by it, using the imagery of fire to evoke the intensity of his experience. Keats did go to the theatre, indeed he wrote in praise of Kean's performance as Othello and Richard III<sup>65</sup> but, similar to Hazlitt, his review is of the actor rather than the production. When he says of Kean, 'He feels his being as deeply as Wordsworth, or any other of our intellectual monopolists'<sup>66</sup> we know that he values reading poetry above all.

### Later Nineteenth-Century Critics

Tate's adaptation of *King Lear* dominated the English stage until 1838 when the first performance of Shakespeare's text (albeit a shortened and modified version) was staged, with William Charles Macready in the role of Lear.<sup>67</sup> The Romantic critics had made an impact in their view of the play as unperformable, although Victorian stage spectacle made every effort to prove them wrong. Among the critics, the focus on character criticism continued with Lear considered the personification of suffering and, above all, a father whose daughters had wronged him.

Charles Dickens saw Macready playing Lear and praised the production: it reintroduced the character of the Fool, who Dickens considered 'one of the most wonderful creations of Shakespeare's genius'.<sup>68</sup> Dickens imagines Shakespeare writing the play and 'feeling suddenly, with an

instinct of divinest genius, that its gigantic sorrows could never be presented on the stage' since, without the 'quiet pathos' of the fool, we would experience 'a suffering too frightful, a sublimity too remote, a grandeur too terrible'.<sup>69</sup> Dickens says little about the other characters in the play, and does not mention the blinding of Gloucester, but claims that Lear's 'love for the Fool is associated with Cordelia, who had been kind to the poor boy, and for the loss of whom he pines away'. His view of the elder sisters is in keeping with that of earlier critics when he refers to 'the wolf Goneril'.<sup>70</sup> He also regards the play as a domestic tragedy, never mentioning that Lear is a king but, rather, characterizing him as 'the father [ . . . ] broken down to his last despairing struggle, his heart swelling gradually upwards till it bursts in its closing sigh'.<sup>71</sup>

The Victorians tried to match the grandeur of a play many thought unperformable by using every technical innovation at their disposal, as is clear from an anonymous review of Charles Kean's production in 1858, with Kean in the role of Lear. The production was set in ancient Britain and the reviewer praised the marvellous scenery provided by 'the mechanist's and scene-painter's department' in the second scene of the third act when Lear contends with the storm:

The clouds and electric fluid travelling rapidly across the sky in the distance, and with a lurid gloom investing the entire landscape, were grandly terrific; and, when associated by the mind with the animated figures in the foreground – the raving Lear, the exhausted Fool, and the provident Kent – composed a picture that was truly sublime.<sup>72</sup>

But many remained unconvinced that Lear's mental turmoil could be realized and for them the best *Lear* was in the imagination. Writing in 1883, Henry James echoes the opinion of Charles Lamb when he asserts '*King Lear* is not to be acted', adding '*Lear* is a great and terrible poem, – the most sublime, possibly, of all dramatic poems; but it is not to my conception, a play'.<sup>73</sup> When Henry Irving presented a production of *King Lear* in 1892, he cut 46 per cent of the lines, six of the original twenty-six scenes, including the blinding of Gloucester, and made a number of other modifications, but still reviews of the play were mixed.<sup>74</sup> George Bernard Shaw proclaimed that Irving 'murdered Shakespeare's *Lear* so horribly in cutting it down that he made it unintelligible'.<sup>75</sup>

The leading critic of the later nineteenth century was Edward Dowden, whose *Shakespeare: A Critical Study of his Mind and Art*, the first critical book on Shakespeare by a professional academic, was published in 1875 and went through twelve British editions before 1901.<sup>76</sup> In the

preface, Dowden explained that his aim was to inquire into the mind of Shakespeare, 'to observe, as far as possible, in its several stages the growth of his intellect and character from youth to full maturity'.<sup>77</sup> Where earlier critics had focused on the minds of Shakespeare's characters, Dowden's objective was to explore what kind of mind it was that had created the plays, in order to better understand them:

The stupendous mass of Lear's agony, and the spasms of anguish which make Othello writhe in body as in mind, fell within the compass of the same imagination that included at the other extremity the trembling expectation of Troilus, before the entrance of Cressida [ . . . ]<sup>78</sup>

Yet Dowden resembled earlier critics in his conception of *King Lear* as almost unbearably magnificent in scale: he echoes Coleridge and Hazlitt when he describes it as a play where 'Everything [ . . . ] is in motion, and the motion is that of a tempest' so that 'All that we see around us is tempestuously whirling and heaving'.<sup>79</sup> Dowden emphasized 'the moral mystery, the grand inexplicableness of the play', observing that it has 'some vast impersonal significance, like the Prometheus bound of Æschylus, and like Goethe's *Faust*'.<sup>80</sup> Although Dowden noted that 'ethical principles radiate through the play', he maintained that its 'chief function is not, even indirectly, to teach or inculcate moral truth' but, rather, to 'free, arouse, dilate' in a manner similar to music.<sup>81</sup> Nonetheless, the play presented the reader with a sense that 'evil is abnormal' and 'good is normal'.<sup>82</sup> Like previous critics, Dowden admired the Fool and Kent and, like them, he found Edmund's behaviour explicable: 'His birth is shameful, and the brand burns into his heart and brain'.<sup>83</sup> He also accepted as a given Edgar's harsh moralizing of Gloucester's sin in begetting Edmund ('The dark and vicious place where thee he got / Cost him his eyes', 5.3.163–64), noting that 'Gloucester's sufferings do not appear to us inexplicably mysterious'.<sup>84</sup> Like those before him, he saw Goneril and Regan as monstrous, although he found Goneril the more abnormal and monstrous of the two and described Cordelia as possessing 'unmingled tenderness and strength, a pure redeeming ardour'.<sup>85</sup> He characterized Lear as 'grandly passive – played upon by all the manifold forces of nature and of society'.<sup>86</sup>

A few years after Dowden's *Shakespeare: His Mind and Art*, the poet and critic Algernon Charles Swinburne published *A Study of Shakespeare* (1880). Where Dowden found much of the play inexplicable, Swinburne considered it unrelentingly grim. Like Dowden, he found the play magnificent and made the same comparisons with classical writing: 'It is by

far the most Æschylean of his works; the most elemental and primeval, the most oceanic and Titanic in conception.<sup>87</sup> But Swinburne also thought it the least optimistic of Shakespeare's plays:

in one main point it differs radically from the work and the spirit of Æschylus. Its fatalism is of a darker and harder nature. To Prometheus the fetters of the lord and enemy of mankind were bitter [ . . . ] yet in the not utterly infinite or everlasting distance we see beyond them the promise of the morning on which mystery and justice shall be made one; when righteousness and omnipotence at last shall kiss each other. But on the horizon of Shakespeare's tragic fatalism we see no such twilight of atonement, such pledge of reconciliation as this.<sup>88</sup>

Swinburne thought Gloucester's view of the world ('As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods; / They kill us for their sport,' 4.1.37–38) served to 'strike the keynote of the whole poem.'<sup>89</sup> As for the characters, Regan is 'devilish', Goneril is 'hellish' and even Cordelia is imperfect, revealing 'one passing touch of intolerance for what her sister was afterwards to brand as indiscretion and dotage in their father.'<sup>90</sup> Although Kent is referred to as 'the exception' to the evil we witness in Regan, the play offers no hope. George Bernard Shaw concurred, noting that in other plays Shakespeare mixed comedy with tragedy, but 'Lear may pass for pure tragedy; for even the fool in Lear is tragic'<sup>91</sup> and observing what he termed 'the blasphemous despair of Lear.'<sup>92</sup>

Swinburne did not connect *King Lear* with early modern political realities and nor did Dowden. As Foakes pointed out, Denton Snider's *The Shakespearian Drama* was the first work to recognize that the play engaged with contemporary political issues: corruption, the abuse of power and, specifically, an absolutist monarchy. Unfortunately, as Foakes noted, Snider's work would be entirely eclipsed by A. C. Bradley's famous book *Shakespearean Tragedy*,<sup>93</sup> which will be considered below.

### The Twentieth Century

In an essay first published in 1906, 'Shakespeare and the Drama', Leo Tolstoy objected to Shakespeare's *King Lear* as 'absurd', complaining that its reputation was ill-deserved, since 'far from being the height of perfection it is a very poor, carelessly constructed work.'<sup>94</sup> Tolstoy objected that Shakespeare's play was unrealistic, noting that 'the characters all talk as no people ever talked or could talk'<sup>95</sup> and that he preferred the anonymous *King Leir*. His views on the play were challenged in an essay by George Orwell, 'Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool', first published in 1950,

yet even Orwell thought that Shakespeare's play would have been more appealing if some characters and scenes did not exist – if there had been only one wicked daughter and if the Dover Cliff scene and Edgar himself had been omitted.<sup>96</sup> More insightful criticism was forthcoming in A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*, first published in 1904 and based on a series of lectures Bradley delivered as Professor of poetry at Oxford. Bradley presents what is essentially an Aristotelian view of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth* with each tragedy containing, as Ruth Nevo put it, 'an idealized noble hero marred by a fatal flaw, which, after causing a convulsion in nature, is expiated by his death.'<sup>97</sup> Bradley considers Lear's flaw to be his self-indulgence: 'Lear follows an old man's whim, half generous, half selfish; and in a moment it looses all the powers of darkness upon him.'<sup>98</sup> Unlike Swinburne, Bradley views the world in which Lear is set as one that appears to be guided by 'a rational and a moral order' and one where consequences are important,<sup>99</sup> something he detected in all Shakespeare's tragedies. He claims that the play offers not a pointlessly cruel universe where suffering has no meaning, but one in which Lear is finally redeemed and suggests that the play might be more truthfully entitled 'The Redemption of King Lear'.

Following Charles Lamb in considering *King Lear* 'too huge for the stage',<sup>100</sup> Bradley embarks upon a critical analysis of the play as literature, dividing most of the characters in *King Lear* into two categories: good or evil. Among the latter, he finds Oswald 'the most contemptible of them'<sup>101</sup> but notes that we do feel some sympathy toward him because of the loyalty he shows towards Goneril, his mistress. Bradley is typical in his assessment of Goneril and Regan as monstrous, noting that Regan 'is the most hideous human being (if she is one) that Shakespeare ever drew' and he finds Cornwall a coward with 'no redeeming trait'.<sup>102</sup> He considers Edmund 'an adventurer pure and simple' and, like critics before him, has some sympathy for his behaviour, noting that his illegitimacy makes him 'the product of Nature', which thus explains why he rejects social order and moral codes.<sup>103</sup>

Among the good characters, he placed Cordelia, Kent, Edgar and the Fool, yet he recognizes their failings: Kent is 'hot and rash' and although he considers Cordelia in positive terms as 'a thing enskyed and sainted', he is also critical of her, noting that, 'At a moment where terrible issues join, Fate makes on her the one demand which she is unable to meet.'<sup>104</sup> Similarly, Edgar is considered good, and his determination admired, but he is too judgmental to be much liked.<sup>105</sup> For Bradley neither Gloucester nor Albany fit neatly into the categories of good or evil. He finds Gloucester 'weak though good-hearted' and thinks his character neither interesting nor distinct, while Albany's 'is merely sketched' and,



having just married Goneril, 'the idea is, I think, that he has been bewitched by her fiery beauty not less than by her dowry'.<sup>106</sup> Bradley's consideration of what might have attracted Albany to Goneril, something Shakespeare does not mention, is one example of his tendency to imagine the characters' lives outside the play. For example, he wonders what it must have been like for Cordelia when growing up:

Of all Shakespeare's heroines she knew least of joy. She grew up with Goneril and Regan for sisters. Even her love for her father must have been mingled with pain and anxiety. She must early have learned to school and repress emotion. She never knew the bliss of young love: there is no trace of such love for the King of France.<sup>107</sup>

Bradley has been much criticized for this approach to the plays, most famously in a 1933 essay by L. C. Knights, 'How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?',<sup>108</sup> the title based on her announcement, 'I have given suck, and know / How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me' (1.7.54–55). The question posed by Knights is rhetorical; Macbeth and his wife have no children and Knights's purpose is to denounce speculation about the lives of characters outside of what the fiction tells us.

Like the Romantic critics before him, A. C. Bradley did not concern himself with the generic distinction between drama, written for the stage, and poetry, written for private reading. The notion that Shakespeare's plays should be read as poems is no longer accepted and, although outright dismissal of the view has been challenged by Lukas Erne,<sup>109</sup> it is fair to say that the critical consensus is currently for a stage-centred view of Shakespeare. This development emerged in the first half of the twentieth century. In 1927, Harley Granville-Barker, a theatre director and playwright, published his *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, the first of a number of essays on Shakespeare's plays, including *King Lear*. Although Granville-Barker's influence would not make itself fully felt until the 1950s, this was the beginning of a move toward regarding Shakespeare primarily as a playwright and his plays as scripts for performance.

In his essay on *King Lear*, Granville-Barker's retort to Charles Lamb and A. C. Bradley, who both thought *King Lear* should not be performed, was that 'Shakespeare meant it to be acted, and he was a very practical playwright'.<sup>110</sup> Granville-Barker interprets *King Lear* from the actor's point of view, claiming that any good performance emerges from synergy between the actor and the text: 'the matured actor [ . . . ] must comprehend the character, identify himself with it, and then – forget himself in it'.<sup>111</sup> Crucially, a production should not aim at realism by presenting the storm on stage (something earlier critics had scorned)

because 'the storm is not in itself [ . . . ] dramatically important, only its effect upon Lear'.<sup>112</sup> Granville-Barker provides a fascinating analysis of the play's language (for example Shakespeare's use of repetition) and notes that it is anchored in a simplicity that prevents the characters from ranging so wide that 'interpretation could hardly compass them'.<sup>113</sup> He describes Edgar's 'imaginary tale of Dover' as consisting of 'the clearest-cut actualities of description' and, focusing on the play's final scene, points out that it is the 'contrast and reconciliation of grandeur and simplicity, this setting of vision in terms of actuality, this inarticulate passion which breaks now and again into memorable phrases' that makes the play 'directed to one end', and that end is its performance in a theatre.<sup>114</sup> In his section analysing 'the characters and their interplay', Granville-Barker focuses on Lear, specifically on what an actor should make of Lear's development as the play progresses and, throughout, he displays an actor's sensitivities to how a particular scene could most effectively come alive on stage.

It was precisely because Granville-Barker was an actor and playwright that his stage-centred views on Shakespeare, initially at least, did not penetrate the academy that still venerated Bradley. It was a book by a professional academic that triggered the rise in stage-centred thinking among professional academic critics and helped establish Shakespeare primarily as a dramatist rather than a poet. M. C. Bradbrook's *Elizabethan Stage Conditions*, first published in 1932, claimed that the key to understanding Shakespeare was to understand the theatre industry within which he worked. Commenting on *King Lear*, Bradbrook notes, 'It was only the bareness of the stage that allowed Shakespeare to introduce the heath scenes in *Lear*, where "the actor impersonates the storm and Lear together", or rather the poetry provides them both'.<sup>115</sup> For Bradbrook, to privilege the reading of Shakespeare's plays over their performance was to ignore the creative conditions which gave rise to them and, in effect, to misread drama as poetry.

Bradbrook's work was hugely influential and encouraged the performance of Shakespeare's plays as a serious subject for academic study. Another kind of criticism that was emerging in the 1930s, and one that took less time to make its impact felt, was 'New Criticism'. Character criticism, of the kind offered by Bradley, was still read, but a new generation of critics was becoming more interested in the language of the plays and how it impacted upon their structure. Soon character study was demoted, and symbols, metaphors and images, the minutiae within the whole, became more important. In 1930, G. Wilson Knight published his influential study *Wheel of Fire: Interpretation of Shakespeare's Tragedy*, in which he remarked that each of Shakespeare's plays should be understood as an 'expanded metaphor'.<sup>116</sup> The title of

the book is taken from an exchange between Lear and Cordelia when they meet for the first time since her return from France:

*Cordelia (to Lear)* How does my royal lord? How fares your  
majesty?

*Lear* You do me wrong to take me out o' th' grave.  
Thou art a soul in bliss, but I am bound  
Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears  
Do scald like molten lead. (4.6.37-41)

Knight was influenced by new particle physics, the process of splitting into smaller parts a larger whole, and thus conceived the play in those terms. For Knight, the image of 'a wheel of fire' indicates a larger meaning (the pain of mortal life), and his focus is on the symbolic function of character, whereby a Christ-like Cordelia is 'bright with an angel brightness'.<sup>117</sup> In his analysis of Goneril and Regan, Knight concentrates on the animalistic imagery and metaphors used to describe them, concluding that such language 'show[s] how firmly based on thoughts of nature is the philosophy of *King Lear*'.<sup>118</sup> The Fool becomes a 'symbol of humour' and Gloucester's physical torments are symbolic of the mental anguish suffered by Lear, whereby 'the Gloucester-theme throughout reflects and emphasizes and exaggerates all the percurrent qualities of the Lear theme'.<sup>119</sup>

In the preface to the fourth edition of the book, first published in 1949, Knight defended his work against accusations that he had been too critical of the work of his predecessors, specifically the character analysis of Bradley and the stage-centred approach to the plays promoted by Granville-Barker. Although he praises Bradley's approach, albeit less than effusively, he argues that 'the literary analysis of great drama in terms of theatrical technique accomplishes singularly little', adding that although a critic ought to be 'dramatically aware' his criticism of the play must attend to 'the penetration of its deeper meanings'.<sup>120</sup>

Consideration of metaphor and imagery in Shakespeare plays developed further in the work of Image Critics, the most important being Caroline Spurgeon, whose book *Shakespeare's Imagery: And What It Tells Us* was first published in 1935. Although she did not use the term 'unconscious' and did not announce herself as a psychoanalytical critic, Spurgeon was clearly doing such work when she identified conscious and unconscious images in Shakespeare's plays, noting patterns and repetitions in specific plays and comparing Shakespeare's use of imagery with that of his contemporaries such as Christopher Marlowe

and Ben Jonson. Spurgeon argued that the dominating image in *King Lear* is that of a body subjected to immense violence:

In the play we are conscious all through of the atmosphere of buffeting, strain and strife, and, at moments, of bodily tension to the point of agony [ . . . ] of a human body in anguished movement, tugged, wrenched, beaten, pierced, stung, scourged, dislocated, flayed, gashed, scalded, tortured, and finally broken on the rack.<sup>121</sup>

Spurgeon's work was hugely influential and her book was reprinted five times by 1968, and although she had her detractors such as Stanley Edgar Hyman, even he had to admit that Spurgeon's study 'does a good many things of real value' and that later critics were indebted to her work: he noted that, 'Almost all critical writing on Shakespeare since 1935 has taken advantage of Miss Spurgeon's researches' and 'the serious imaginative constructions it demands'.<sup>122</sup> One of the critics indebted to Spurgeon's work was Wolfgang Clemen who, in *The Development of Shakespeare's Imagery*, considered *King Lear* as the play most able to withstand an interpretation wholly on the basis of its imagery because its imagery 'seems to be more fully integrated into the structure of the drama'.<sup>123</sup> Clemen provides a detailed analysis of language used throughout the play, observing that many of the images in the first scene are prophetic and he attends to the play's focus on natural imagery, specifically references to the animal world. He considers figurative language a characteristic form of expression for Lear and the Fool: Lear's inability to understand others makes him speak 'to the elements, to nature to the heavens' and the Fool communicates to him 'in simile, proverb and image'.<sup>124</sup> Clemen argues that the 'bad' characters do not exploit the resources of poetic language and considers Goneril, Regan and Edmund 'calculating, cool and unimaginative people who are incapable of "creative" imagery'.<sup>125</sup> For Clemen, the middle acts of the play are the richest in imagery, since 'the outer drama has become an inner drama', plot is less important and the focus becomes 'not what Lear does, but what he suffers, feels and envisions with his inner eye',<sup>126</sup> his personal suffering symbolizing the suffering that is going on in the world around him.

We have seen that in the 1930s stage-centred criticism had begun to emerge and the study of language became more important than character study but still under-developed was an historicizing of the drama, an awareness of the plays as products of their time and thus specific to the world that had created them. An interest in historicism emerged again with Lily B. Campbell's *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes: Slaves of Passion*, first

published in 1930. Campbell incorporates early modern views about the body and philosophy. So, too, E. M. W. Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture*, first published in 1943, also presents the view that Shakespeare's plays reflected and endorsed the social and political realities of his time. These critics, later described as Old Historicists, structured their books innovatively by delaying a discussion of Shakespeare until after the reader had received what they termed 'background', their reconstruction of what they considered to be Shakespeare's thought-system. Old Historicism was very influential in the 1940s and 1950s, and incompatible with New Criticism that ignored the play's political context in order to focus on the metaphors and images that the New Critics thought explained the larger structure of the play. Campbell saw Shakespeare's plays as 'mirrors' of early modern ideology, while Tillyard considered the Elizabethans' outlook to be structured by what he termed 'the chain of being', a concept which described Shakespeare's world, and his understanding of it, as providential and ordered. Indeed, Nicholas Grene underlines that Tillyard read Shakespeare's history plays as

the grandly consistent embodiment of the orthodox political and social morality of the Elizabethan period, preaching order and hierarchy, condemning factious power-seeking and the anarchy of civil war to which it led, commending the divinely sanctioned centralised monarchy of the Tudors.<sup>127</sup>

Tillyard's view of what most Elizabethans believed about social order and providence was that God or his agents would punish those who violated God's order. Tillyard did not comment at great length on *King Lear*, but his re-creation of the Elizabethan mind-set encouraged the view that the play should be understood in terms of a violation against order and hierarchy and its conclusion as the putting right of that violation by divine providence. Campbell's *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes* included chapters on what were now known as 'the big four' Shakespeare plays, those that had been focused on by Bradley: *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. In the chapter on *King Lear*, Campbell shows that in the Renaissance, intemperate anger was condemned and thought invariably to bring shame upon those who gave way to it. Shakespeare, and his audience, would have believed the old especially prone to anger; it was also believed that old men used their age as an excuse for sloth, which makes Lear's decision to give up his kingdom a selfish desire to release himself from his duties. A contemporary audience would also have recognized Goneril and Regan as flatterers, something Lear cannot spot because he is guilty of self-love. These philosophical themes in the main plot are repeated in the Gloucester subplot, where, 'Again a

father is moved by the flattery of an undeserving child to cast off the loyal child and prefer the flatterer in his place.'<sup>128</sup> Campbell also considers other Renaissance ideas such as the relationship between the elements and the mind of man.

Later critics, the so-called New Historicists and Cultural Materialists, objected to what they saw as the totalizing models of ideology used by Old Historicism. What these later critics particularly disliked about their predecessors was what they perceived as the lack of space for dissent: they believed that the view of Elizabethan culture presented by critics such as Tillyard and Campbell suggested that no Elizabethan could think the unthinkable or could imagine a radically different ordering of the world. This is not quite fair on the Old Historicists, who would likely have acknowledged that their focus was on the culture's dominant beliefs and who had, after, all made important inroads into contextualizing Shakespeare studies, but all that tended to get lost in the new emphasis on the marginal and subversion that would emerge in the 1980s. New Historicism and Cultural Materialism did not develop until that decade and will be considered below, but first it is important to mention a significant development regarding critical consensus about the kind of play Shakespeare presented in *King Lear*.

In 1960, an essay by Barbara Everett, entitled 'The New *King Lear*' and published in the academic journal *Critical Quarterly*, questioned the established view that Shakespeare's play was primarily Christian in outlook and dealt with Lear's redemption. Everett noted that this view, expressed by Kenneth Muir in his recent Arden edition of the play, originated with A. C. Bradley, but misrepresented Bradley's suggestions as clear opinion. She traced the shift from a focus on plot to a focus on poetry so that, from the Romantics onwards, what actually happens in the play became less important than its poetry and what happens to Lear's body became less important than what might happen to his soul. The notion that Lear dies in an agony of ecstasy, suggested by Bradley, had become a commonplace, argued Everett, but critics tended to overlook what she termed Bradley's 'honest doubt'<sup>129</sup> about Lear's redemption and the complexity of his argument – for example his depiction of Cordelia as not entirely ideal.

Everett's essay was an important corrective to a view of the play that had long become orthodox and was taken up by William Elton in his book-length study of the play, *King Lear and the Gods*, first published in 1966. Elton challenged the still widespread view 'that Lear is an optimistically Christian drama' in the sense that Lear is redeemed by his suffering and that it indicates 'a cosmically derived plan, which somehow gives providential significance to the events of the tragedy.'<sup>130</sup> Elton pointed out that in the period in which Shakespeare was writing, the

concept of providence came increasingly into question and there emerged a view of God as apparently arbitrary and capricious. Moreover, the Christian reading of the play took little account of the heathen landscape in which it is set and of the role given to superstition; while Shakespeare's source, the anonymous play *King Leir*, is full of Christian emphases, these were clearly avoided by Shakespeare.<sup>131</sup> Crucially, Elton asserts that 'no evidence exists to show that Lear arrives finally at "salvation", "regeneration" or "redemption"; and 'the purported benevolent, just or special providence cannot be shown to be operative.'<sup>132</sup> According to Elton, 'those interpretations which see the tragedy as a traditional morality and those which see it as following the sin-suffering-redemption pattern are a result of unhistorical, a priori misreading of the work's significance.'<sup>133</sup> These critics seem to be on the right track but only until the end of Act Four because the fifth act destroys any sense of providential redemption.

It should be remembered that Elton, like the critics before him and those who would come after, held views on *King Lear* that did not develop in a vacuum but were influenced by the world around them. In *'Hamlet' versus 'Lear'* (1993), Foakes considered why, since the mid-1950s, *King Lear* had knocked *Hamlet* off the top spot in generally being considered Shakespeare's most profound play. Foakes provided a list of world events that occurred between 1954 and 1965, among them the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and incidents relating to the development of nuclear weapons and noted that although there is no simple explanation for *King Lear* overtaking *Hamlet*, the shift in dominance of each play 'strikingly coincided with a period of political change.'<sup>134</sup> As Foakes indicated, the traditional understanding of *King Lear* as a play about 'Lear's pilgrimage to discover his soul' changed post-1960, whereby the play came to be seen as 'significant in political terms, in a world in which old men have held on to and abused power, often in corrupt or arbitrary ways.'<sup>135</sup> As we saw earlier, Swinburne also viewed the play as bleak, but he was the exception rather than the rule; in 1960s, the consensus had shifted.

Political consciousness was clearly at work in Jan Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, a study of Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies, originally written in Polish and first published in English in 1964, with the second edition revised for publication in 1967. In the chapter entitled '*King Lear*, or Endgame' Kott invokes Samuel Beckett's play and throughout draws parallels between Shakespeare and Beckett's *Endgame*, an example of what was termed 'the new theater', with its focus on the grotesque. In his analysis of the *King Lear*, Kott concentrates on the Dover cliff scene and the figure of the Fool. The Dover cliff scene is a 'pantomime', one in which 'a madman leads a blind man and talks him

into believing in a non-existing cliff'.<sup>136</sup> In this scene, Gloucester represents Everyman and his struggle in the world and it reveals the wider theme of the play, which is 'an inquiry into the meaning of this journey, into the existence or non-existence of Heaven and Hell'.<sup>137</sup> Gloucester's 'suicide mime' is grotesque and so, too, is the accompanying dialogue with his pleas to the Gods because they do not intervene. As Kott put it 'if the gods, and their moral order in the world, do not exist, Gloucester's suicide does not solve or alter anything. It is only a somersault on an empty stage'.<sup>138</sup> *King Lear* is, thus, concerned with 'the decay and fall of the world'<sup>139</sup> and it is a world where no one is healed, where even the good who survive are 'ruined pieces of nature', as Gloucester says to Lear when he meets him in his madness. For Kott, the Fool is a philosopher and the only figure in the play who stands apart from the dominant ideology and 'deprives majesty of its sacredness'.<sup>140</sup> In using 'dialectics, paradox and an absurd kind of humour', the Fool evokes the modern grotesque, exposing the absurdity of the world and taking Lear though 'the school of clown's philosophy'.<sup>141</sup>

Kott was living and writing under Eastern European Communist rule and it is clear that his understanding of *King Lear* was informed by the political realities of a one-party system where there was little free speech and challenging the ruling elite in any significant way was severely punished. He was what we would call a 'Presentist' critic, one for whom the present informs our understanding of the past, who considers Shakespeare's writings not in the context of Renaissance ideology or early modern staging, but in terms of current ideas and concepts and their relevance to his writings.

Campbell and Tillyard had used their synthesis of Elizabethan ideology as a map-grid to provide the bearings for critical interpretation. Where the Old Historicists tended to take the official line coming from centres of authority, like the Church and the Monarchy, and to assume that everyone believed what they were told to believe, the New Historicists wanted to emphasize that people can often see beyond the official line, and can think new thoughts forbidden by the dominant ideology in their culture. The New Historicist critic typically takes an obscure, marginal, non-literary text to read as a parallel text alongside the literary text, and draws common threads. In *Shakespearean Negotiations*, first published in 1988, Stephen Greenblatt's analysis of *King Lear*, 'Shakespeare and the Exorcists', is typically New Historicist in that it does not privilege the literary text but, instead, focuses on the interplay between *King Lear* and one of Shakespeare's sources, Samuel Harsnett's *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* (1603). Greenblatt considers what Harsnett's attack on Catholic exorcism can tell us about Edgar's feigned madness and how this relates to theatrical performance

itself. New Historicists and Cultural Materialists share a rejection of what they perceive as idealism, whether in the alleged totalizing models of ideology of the Old Historicists or the assertion of transcendent meanings in literary texts. This is clear from Jonathan Dollimore's *Radical Tragedy*, first published in 1980, which included a chapter on *King Lear*. Dollimore rejected Humanist readings of tragic protagonists from critics such as Clifford Leech<sup>142</sup> and Wilbur Sanders,<sup>143</sup> both of whom replaced the notion of Christian redemption by privileging humanity rather than God, offering an analysis of tragedy that 'mystifies suffering and invests man with a quasi-transcendent identity'.<sup>144</sup> Dollimore offers instead a materialist reading of *King Lear*, one that reminds us that it is 'above all, a play about power, property and inheritance'.<sup>145</sup>

Power, property and inheritance would also be the concerns of later critics who continued to engage with politics and produce theoretically inflected criticism. Unlike *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*, *King Lear* has not much interested critics investigating race and racism but an important area of criticism that emerged from the 1980s onwards was gender-criticism. With the emergence of feminist politics in the 1970s there was a new focus on the manner in which Shakespeare negotiated relationships between men and women. Where previous generations of mostly male critics had condemned the monstrous Goneril and Regan, praised the angelic Cordelia, and presented Lear as a flawed hero, feminist critics considered more carefully the gender dynamics at work in the plays. In her article 'The Patriarchal Bard', Kathleen McLuskie considered the play in terms of the patriarchal family as well as the misogyny of the play and its eponymous hero, arguing that Cordelia's 'saving love' works as 'an example of patriarchy restored'.<sup>146</sup> Another important essay was Coppélia Kahn's 'The Absent Mother in *King Lear*', which also focused on the patriarchal family, one where the figure of the mother has been suppressed. The very absence of a literal mother in the play, argues Kahn, 'points to her hidden presence',<sup>147</sup> such as when Lear describes the hysteria within him as a mother ('O, how this mother swells up toward my heart!', 2.2.231). Kahn proposes that 'Lear's madness is essentially his rage at being deprived of the maternal presence',<sup>148</sup> something he sought in Cordelia. She contends that, 'Despite a lifetime of strenuous defense against admitting feeling and the power of feminine presence into his world [ . . . ] Lear manages to let them in', learning finally to recognize her as his child and thus 'acknowledging the bond of paternity that he denied in the first act'.<sup>149</sup> Kahn's book was influenced by psychoanalysis, a critical approach also at work in Janet Adelman's 'Suffocating Mothers in *King Lear*', a chapter from her book-length study of masculinity and the maternal body in Shakespeare. Adelman argues that *King Lear* resembles *Hamlet* in dramatizing 'the

immense fear and longing of a son's relationship with a mother', the difference being that Lear is both father and son 'collapsed into one figure' and 'here all the traditional guarantees of identity itself dissolve in a terrifying female moisture in which mother and daughter, male and female, inner and outer, self and other, lose their boundaries, threatening a return to the primal chaos'.<sup>150</sup> The politicizing of *King Lear* would continue into the twenty-first century and one important theory to emerge was ecocriticism, an examination of cultural constructions of the natural world via its social and political contexts. Anthony Parr's focus on ecocriticism in the New Directions section of this volume suggests that this way of reading Shakespeare is getting the attention it deserves.

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