15. *King Lear in the Theatre*

The first quarto of *King Lear,* published in 1608, is an indifferent text - a curate's egg. The first folio text (1623) is much better. It is apparently based on the first quarto corrected with reference to a prompt-copy, that is an acting version. The first quarto, whatever its provenance, seems not to have derived from an acting version. Despite the general superiority of the folio text, there are several important passages and one whole scene (Act IV sc.3) in the quarto which are not in the folio at all. One possible explanation for this is that these passages were in the play as Shakespeare wrote it, but were omitted from the play in performance, and therefore not in the prompt-copy.

There might have been several reasons for changing an author's text in performance: the need to censor politically sensitive material, the need to economize on actors, the need to make room for plenty of extemporized clowning, and, most often, simply to shorten. It seems that managements in Shakespeare's day felt, as many still do, that a play ought not to be much more than ‘two hours' traffic on the stage’. There is hardly a Shakespeare play which can be performed in two hours without heavy cuts. On what basis were such cuts made? Hamlet's speech to the players tells us that it was common practice in the Elizabethan theatre to attach more importance to pleasing the groundlings, who understood nothing but clowning and ‘inexplicable dumb-shows and noise’, than to pleasing the judicious, of whom there might be only one in an entire audience.

For those of us who are interested in the poetic coherence of the play, wherever you cut a mature play like *King Lear,* it bleeds. If the passages which are in Ql and not in F1 are indeed those which were cut in production, the cuts were savage indeed, and very damaging to the play. Gone are these lines after the blinding of Gloucester:

2 Serv. I'll never care what wickedness I do
If this man come to good.

3 Serv. If she live long,
And in the end meet the old course of death,
Women will all turn monsters.

2 Serv. Let's follow the old Earl, and get the Bedlam
To lead him where he would: his roguish madness
Allows itself to any thing.

3 Serv. Go thou; I'll fetch some flax and whites of eggs
To apply to his bleeding face. Now, heaven help himl

These from *Act IV, Sc. 2:*

Alb. I fear your disposition:

That nature, which condemns its origin,
Cannot be bordered certain in itself;
She that herself will sliver and disbranch
From her material sap, perforce must wither
And come to deadly use.

Gon. No more; the text is foolish.

Alb. Wisdom and goodness to the vile seem vile;
Filths savour but themselves. What have you done?
Tigers, not daughters, what have you performed?
A father, and a gracious aged man,
Whose reverence even the head-lugged bear would lick,
Most barbarous, most degenerate! have you madded.
Could my good brother suffer you to do it?
A man, a prince, by him so benefited!
If that the heavens do not their visible spirits
Send quickly down to tame these vile offences,
It will come,
Humanity must perforce prey on itself,
Like monsters of the deep.

Albany and the Third Servant share a perception of the unnaturalness. monstrousness, of the sisters. Both share with Edgar a belief in supernatural justice. Whether the play as a whole vindicates this belief is arguable. But the idea is certainly at the heart of the play, and Shakespeare must be allowed to state the terms of it as he wishes. There is a feeling in these speeches that the sisters are not so much wicked individuals who can be thwarted or killed, but an irresistible force of evil which can be combatted only by direct heavenly intervention. But a mere servant with sufficient indignation and courage has just killed Comwall. And the remaining servants, like the old tenant in the next scene who leads and clothes Gloucester 'come on't what will', display a humanity which cares what wickedness or goodness it does irrespective of punishments or rewards. Albany's speech may not constitute the play's ultimate wisdom. But what the prosaic Goneril dismisses as a foolish text is a very potent image of her sterility. She has not only broken her filial bond; she has severed her connection with humankind itself and cut herself off from its sustaining care and kindness. The sisters indeed prey on each other. But the humanity we have seen intimated again and again in incidents and images which find their fullest expression in Cordelia can affirm itself against the vilest offences and is indestructible.

Our first glimpse of Cordelia, after her long absence from the play comes in the scene entirely missing from the Folio. The Gentleman, in describing her to Kent, uses images of natural bounty and richness which contrast directly with the deadly and sterile images of Albany's speech:

Gent. Patience and sorrow strove

Who should express her goodliest. You have seen
Sunshine and rain at once; her smile and tears
Were like, a better way; those happy smilets
That played on her ripe lip seemed not to know
What guests were in her eyes; which parted thence,
As pearls from diamonds dropped. In brief,
Sorrow would be a rarity most beloved,
If all could so become it.

This scene also contains the first words of Cordelia herself since her 'unnatural' offence in the first scene, and her parting words to her sisters, 'I know you what you are':

Sisters! sisters! Shame of ladies! sisters!
Kent! father! sisters! What? i' th' storm? i' the' night?
Let pity not be believ'd!

And there are the indispensable lines in which Kent tells why Lear will not yield to see his daughter:

A sovereign shame so elbows him: his own unkindness,
That stripped her from his benediction, turned her
To foreign casualties, gave her dear rights
To his dog-hearted daughters, these things sting
His mind so venomously that burning shame
Detains him from Cordelia.

The final omission of any significance comes in Cordelia's first speech to her father in *Act IV Sc. 7.* But from the middle of it the Folio leaves out:

To stand against the deep dread-bolted thunder?
In the most terrible and nimble stroke
Of quick, cross lightning? to watch - poor perdu! –
With this thin helm?

None of these passages add anything indispensable to the play as story. All add greatly to the play as poem. If the assumption of the acting text is correct, the conclusion is obvious - that the way Shakespeare's plays work as poems was no more understood in his own day than it has ever been.

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The breaking of the tradition with the closing of the theatres from the Civil War until the Restoration was disastrous for Shakespeare production. After the Restoration the plays became mere vehicles for star actors and for scenic displays. All the scenic sophistication, spectacle and song and dance, which had formerly been

kept apart from the straight theatre in the court masques, now flooded in. Extensive cuts and transpositions had to be made to allow for it. Betterton, it seems, managed to retain something of the integrity of the old tradition. According to Cibber:

> Betterton never wanted,fire or force where his character demanded it; yet where it was not demanded, he never prostituted his power to the low ambition of a false applause. I have heard him say, he never thought any kind of applause equal to an attentive silence.

Betterton was the last actor to play *King Lear* in Shakespeare's version. His successors played contemporary versions, of which the favourite was Nahum Tate's.

Tate found Shakespeare's *King Lear* 'Nature without Art' – 'a heap of jewels untrung and unpolished, dazzling in their disorder.' He dropped the Fool, had the blinding of Gloucester done by the servants, contrived a marriage between Cordelia and Edgar, and ended the play with Lear in happy retirement at their hearth. Shakespeare's version was never played between 1681 and 1838. Tate was no eccentric. He had the approval of his age. The 18th century substituted for the idea of tragedy, the idea of poetic justice. This is how Samuel Johnson put the case:

> 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 the chronicles. Yet this conduct is justified by the Spectator, who blames Tate for giving Cordelia success and happiness in his alteration, and declares, that, in his opinion, the tragedy has lost half its beauty. A play in which the wicked prosper, and the virtuous miscarry, may doubtless be good, because it is a just representation of the common events of human life: but since all reasonable beings naturally love justice, I cannot easily be persuaded, that the observation of justice makes a play worse; or that if other excelencies are equal, the audience will not always rise better pleased from the final triumph of persecuted virtue.
>
> In the present case the public has decided. Cordelia, from the time of Tate, has always retired with victory and felicity. And, if my sensations could add anything 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.

Justice must be done in art precisely because it is not done in life. We must have happy endings because the public is better pleased by them. What shocks us so much in this passage is the realisation that the 18th century's finest critic did not know what tragedy was. In tragedy, if Shakespeare is affiming anything at all, he is affirming something much more weighty than that happy endings are pleasanter than unhappy. If love triumphs in a play because it deserves to, what has been said about the value of love in real life, where, as Johnson admits. there is no correlation between merit and success?

Few voices were raised against Tate in the 18th century. But at the beginning of the 19th Charles Lamb spoke out boldly:

> A 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. If he is to live and be happy after, if he could sustain this world's burden after, why all this pudder and preparation – why torment us with all this unnecessary sympathy? As if the childish pleasure of getting his gilt robes and sceptre again could tempt him to act over again his misused station – as if at this years, and with his experience, anything was left but to die.

By the time of the Romantics, the judicious did not go to the theatre, but read Shakespeare in their studies. Lamb thought that *King Lear* was virtually impossible to stage. For example, how could a storm of the magnitude of that described by Lear, be presented on stage? And if it could, you would not be able to hear Lear's description. That some-one as sensitive as Lamb could say this tells us a lot about the literalness of the theatre of his time.

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries the plays were stifled by sound-effects and cluttered with scenery. Kean's 1820 production of *King Lear* had, in the storm scene, a heaving sea in the background, 'trees were made to see-saw back and forth, accompanied with the natural creak! creak! attending the operation, every infernal machine that was ever able to spit fire, spout rain, or make thunder' was used, and coloured transparencies bathed Lear in 'continual-changing supernatural tints'. Later actor-managers with more sophisticated machinery produced even more alarming effects. At the end of the century Irving was able to produce such realistic thunder that he became comepletely inaudible. As late as the 1940s both Olivier and Gieldud performed Lear against distractingly realistic storms. We have now recovered the spare, flexible theatre of Shakespeare's time. We realize that Lear can create a far more impressive storm in our imaginations than could possibly be created by spectacle and sound-effects, and that any attempt at these would be redundant.

In the 19th century we had a gradual return to Shakespeare's texts, but for the most part, as vehicles for the great actor managers, who cut the plays to throw their own parts into prominence, selected and trained their supporting actors to the same end, toured with a different supporting cast each night without rehearsals, declaimed the poetry and acted between the lines, gave encores in the middle of the performance … and for the stage designers with their spectacular and often totally irrelevant sets which took half-an-hour to put up and take down ...

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We have got rid of all that. The general standard of Shakespearean.acting today is, I think, very high. We know how we ought to approach the job of producing a major Shakespeare play:

> It is the producer's job to.find theatrical correlatives for the essential living heart of the play - the poet's inner dream.

This definition leaves plenty of room for experiment and originality, for using to the full the resources of the modem theatre and for playing upon the susceptibilities and preoccupations of the modem theatre audience. But for some producers, including the author of this quotation, Peter Brook, not enough.

There are two ways in which Shakespeare is frequently distorted in contemporary productions, often simultaneously. There is the pressure so many producers seem to feel to 'modernize' Shakespeare; not, that is, to underline the contemporary relevance of something already at the heart of the play, but to foist onto it some quite spurious relevance. The other way is to take the part for the whole. The director seizes upon a single idea which he offers as a penetrting new insight, though it hasprobably a critical commonplace for centuries. This he takes to be 'the essential living heart of the play', the hitherto lost key to its innermost meaning, and distorts the whole play to make it mean nothing more than this. But the heart *of Hamlet* or *King Lear* is no single idea. Any idea is a note in a chord, perhaps a discord, a strand in a pattern, a phase in a development.

The good director, like the good actor, should disappear into the production. The ability in a director to read a play and then give flesh to that particular vision of human experience the text holds in suspended animation always produces a richer theatrical experience than theatrical flair, originality, irrelevant business and forced contemporary relevance. But there is always an audience for such things. Shakespeare's audience wanted blood, bombast and clowning. Eighteenth century audiences wanted spectacle and happy endings and poetic justice and plays as vehicles for famous actors and actresses. Audiences in the sixties and seventies apparently wanted despair, absurdity and cruelty. Audiences have always wanted escapism and cheap laughs. Audiences have never wanted and never will want Shakespearean tragedy in all its depth and complexity. The only way to avoid playing to the lowest common denominator in the audience is for the director to see his responsibility not to the audience but to the work.

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At this point I should like to look in some detail at Peter Brook's famous production of *King Lear* at Stratford in 1962. Wilson Knight has some telling points to make about the setting of this production, and about Scofield's Lear:

> *King Lear* dramatizes the overthrow of an outward grandeur followed by the protagonist's advance through suffering to a kind of spiritualized royalty. Since we were given no suggestion of state, no fanfares or regality, at the opening, the lines
>
> > Take physic, pomp:
> > Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel
>
> which are of central import, became meaningless. There had been no pomp; and there was accordingly no physic.

> Lear was presented as a latish middle-aged man soured in temperament and ill-mannered. His elder daughters' flatteries were met by the same dour ill-humour as Cordelia's plain-speaking, without discernible difference or climax. His retainers were a group of scurvy ruffians as ill-mannered, scruffy and coarsely costumed as the King himself . . .
> It must from the start be the tyranny of a fine man; an autocrat, one bom to rule but spoiled by his position as king and father. It should have style and authority. And it must be the tyranny of an *old* man over eighty ... He must be able to talk convincingly of a head ‘so old and white as this’: and Cordelia of his ‘white flakes’ and his ‘thin helm’ too weak to be exposed to the elements. Mr. Scofield's Lear has a head of iron ready for anything. He was as tough as he was boorish.
> No drama was struck from the approach of madness. Lear's ‘I shalf go mad’ was given as a plain statement of fact. For his address to the storm he was a solitary figure on an empty stage, the lines spoken in a level voice and without gestures. The incident was in no sense a climax. but just another item in the sequence. Mr. Paul Scofield has a strong voice and his face impressive lines, but the impression remained stolid and the tone of his performance unvaried.

The wanton blackening of Lear's ‘men of choice and rarest parts / That all particulars of duty know’ is part of a general process of whitewashing the sisters. Brook justifies Goneril by claiming, without a shred of edvidence, that Lear ‘is smashing up her beautiful stately home’. Lear provokes his duaghters beyond endurance. Edmund is played as a sort of Renaissance Angry Young Man. You can't help liking him, even if he is a bit of a bastard.

Charles Marowitz, who was Brook's Assistant in in that production. kept a log during rehearsals, subsequently published in *Encore.* He summarises the plot of *Act IV Sc*. 6, and continues:

> The plot is as Beckettian as anything out of *Molloy or Malone Dies;* the scene, a metaphysical farce which ridicules life, death, sanity and illusion. This has been the germinal scene in Brook’s production of *King Lear,* and it has conditioned all the scenes with which it connects.

As this scene connects with every other scene in the play, this means that the entire production is geared to it. Yet the selection of this scene is quite arbitrary.

> In discussing the work of rehearsals, our frame of reference was always Beckettian ... It is not so much Shakespeare in the style of Beckett as it is Beckett in the style of Shakespeare, for Brook believes that the cue for Beckett's bleakness was given by the merciless *King Lear.*

To make the scene fit this description, the mock suicide has to be played as clowning - a circus somersault.The mighty gods with reference to whom the suicide scene gets its meaning exist no more than the cliff. Or rather it is they (as in Beckett's *Act*

Without Words) who have removed the cliff just as Gloucester was about to leap over it. The scene, played in this manner, is simply another illustration of Gloucester's conviction that 'as flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; They kill us for their sport' [IV i 361. In fact the sole purpose of the scene is to enact Edgar's spiritual reclamation of his father out of that sterile despair. By the end of it Gloucester is speaking of 'you ever-gentle gods'.

Act IV sc.6 is certainly an important and powerful scene. But the following scene is even more so. H.A Mason has cited Cordelia's first speech here as the most perfect example he knows of the expressiveness and sensitivity of the English language. From the middle of it Brook, following the folio, cut these lines:

> To stand against the deep dread-bolted thunder?
> In the most terrible and nimble stroke
> Of quick, cross lightning? to watch - poor perdu! –
> With this thin helm?

The structure of *King Lear* seems to me clearly V-shaped.We start with pomp and power, everyone happy, everything apparently stable. But very soon the play becomes permeated by images of darkness, blindness, unnaturalness and evil. Lear falls from capricious majesty to unaccomodated madness in the company of Poor Tom, the thing itself, a poor, bare, forked creature that was once heir to a dukedom, and of eyeless Gloucester looking for a place to die. The scene Brook chose as germinal marks the nadir of the play's movement. Thereafter Edgar and Cordelia take over as prime movers in the action in the place of Edmund and the sisters, and the play moves towards sanity, patience, reunion and, perhaps, redemption, through images of bounty and grace.

Brook did everything he could to destroy this upward movement and hold the play at the bottom of its spiritual abyss. He cut the scene between Kent and the Gentleman, and also the Gentleman's crucial lines:

> Thou hast one daughter
> Who redeems nature from the general curse
> Which twain have brought her to.

Out went Edmund's last moment of compassion, when, 'spite of mine own nature', he sends to save Cordelia. Cordelia and Edgar were reduced to nonentities. Every aspect of the production combined to try to make *King Lear* a play about totally unresolved suffering, offering no countiravailing affirmations, and therefore not a tragedy, but a play by Samuel Beckett which can be adequately summed up in the lines:

> As Flies to wanton boys are we to the Gods;
> They kill us for their sport.

And what a struggle Brook must have had in trying to stifle that catharsis.

One of the problems with Lear (Marowitz tells us) is that. like all great tragedies, it produces a catharsis. The audience leaves the play shaken but
. reassured. To remove the tint of sympathy usually found at the end of the Blinding Scene, Brook cut Comwall's servants and their commiseration of Gloucester's fate. Once the second 'vile jelly' had been thumbed out of his head, Gloucester is covered with a tattered rag and shoved off in the direction of Dover. Servants clearing the stage collide with the confused blind man and Rudely shove him aside. As he is groping about pathetically, the house-lights Come up – the action continuing in full light for several seconds afterwards. If this works, it should jar the audience into a new kind of adjustment to Gloucester and his tragedy. The house-lights remove all possibility of
aesthetic
Shelter, and the act of blinding is seen in a colder light than would be
possible
otherwise.

At the end of the play, the threat at of a reassuring catharsis is even greater. I suggested that, instead of the silence and repose which follows the last couplet, it might be disturning to suggest another storm - a greater storm - was on the way. Once the final lines had been spoken, the thunder could clamour greater than ever before, implying that the worst was yet to come. Brook seconded the idea, but instead of an overpowering storm, preferred a faint, dull rumbling which would suggest something more ominous and less explicit.

If the living heart of the play is the bleakness of *Act IV Sc. 6,* how careless of Shakespeare to let these reassuring.catharses come creeping in all over the place. Not that 'reassuring' is an adjective I should ever have thought of in relation to the final catharsis of *King Lear.* But Mr. Marowitz gives no evidence of knowing what he means by a catharsis.

It was clearly not Shakespeare's intention to send the audience of *King Lear* out of the theatre to throw themselves in the Thames. The ending of the play is bleak enough, but must be taken in the context of what has gone before. Johnson objected to the play because it was too cruel, Marowitz because it was not cruel enough. Johnson is wrong because the play cannot achieve its ultimate affirmations without the apparently pointless and unnecessary death of Cordelia. Marowitz is wrong because that death becomes really pointless and unnecessary without those affirmations.

The Lear and Cordelia who are hauled off to prison have been transfigured by their reconciliation and rediscovered love. They no longer inhabit the world of 'court news'. Their new-blossomed love has created for them a world which cannot be touched by external events. It enables them to stand, as it were, outside time, as impervious to death as to prison bars. As Lear kneels to ask forgiveness and Cordelia kneels to ask his blessing, they have each indeed acquired by virtue of their suffering and their sacrifices the power to bless:

Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia,

The Gods themselves throw incense. Have I caught thee?
He that parts us shall bring a brand from heaven,
And fire us hence like foxes.

The Greeks believed that certain human attributes - love, honour, courage etc. - when they were affirmed to the ultimate degree, so that men and women would die for them, became absolutes which they called theoi - gods. The absoluteness of Cordelia's love lifts it beyond the reach of the worst that time and chance and evil can do to it. And Shakespeare makes sure that the worst they can do is done. The death of Cordelia is profoundly shocking, but if love can be shown to transcend the worst that life can set against it, even to the death of the person who has been its fullest embodiment, then something has been affirmed which is worth being shocked for. Another way of putting it is that when the sisters die, nothing remains of them, but when Cordelia dies, what she had stood for and embodied is actually validated and reinforced by her death.

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Why did Brook do it? What is the cause of these hard hearts? One reason appears to be that he had read Jan Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. In Kott's 37 page essay on *King Lear* Cordelia is never mentioned. If Shakespeare won't quite fit Kott's bed, he must have his head chopped off. Kott is doing for our time what Tate did for his. He believes that after two world wars and the concentration camps and the bomb, we can no longer take seriously any affirmations, human or metaphyscial; we can no longer, that is, respond to the values and meanings which go to make the catharsis of *King Lear.* We can respond fully only to unresolved tragedy, which is hardly to be distinguished from the absurd. Shakespeare is our contemporary; he felt just like that about human experience. Look at the histories (taking care not to notice the last scene of *Richard III* or *Henry V)* look at *Troilus and Cressida;* look at *King Lear* (but before you do, just let me remove a few distractions and irrelevances – Gloucester's servants, Lear's dignity, the evil in the sisters, Edgar, Cordelia, the poetry, the tragedy . . Now look! Hey presto, Samuel Beckett!). Judging by the almost hysterical reception given to Brook's Lear, the 20th century was as grateful to Kott as the 18th century was to Nahum Tate.

You may wonder why I have devoted so much time to a production of forty years ago. Brook's production was highly symptomatic of an approach to Shakespeare which is still pervasive, especially in the theatre. It has strongly influenced many subsequent productions. David Hare described it as 'the greatest production of the play'. Nicholas Hytner, soon, at the time of writing, to be Director of our Royal National Theatre, believes that the declarations of love by Goneril and Regan at the beginning are genuine and that Lear forfeits their love by his behaviour as their guest. Major Shakespearean productions are still in the hands of such people.

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