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King Lear Beyond Genres

(S1) The image on my first slide is the cover of the old Signet Lear, edited by Russell Fraser, the kind of student focused text I still find useful to travel with, and read passages afresh, with edited sources and older critics such as Bradley and Hazlitt. This was the first edition of the play I read when I was 18. Sadly I no longer have the exact copy (I would love to see my jejeune old notes), but, 45 years later, I recall the Auckland bus I was on when I was reading the play for a second year course on Shakespearean tragedies. The play possessed me, as it still does. With the confidence of youth, the play then made full sense to me, and I learned to draft up the kind of commentary expected of students in the 1970s, on imagery and moral contradiction. Since then I've published on Lear and taught it many times. I've seen many live performances; I've played the King and Kent in workshop versions, and Albany in a full production about a decade ago; I have even workshopped scenes from Tate's notorious rewriting with high school actors. Through all these means, I know more about the play than I did but I understand it less, and there are sections when reading, seeing, hearing or teaching the play it eludes my grasp. In essence this paper is about the main zone of that elusiveness. I will try to explain what I mean in dramaturgical terms.

The 1608 quarto offers a "true chronicle history" (S2), and the 1623 FI the "tragedy" of King Lear (S3). If we split the difference and said that the play sets out concerns that are effectively, "tragical historical", we can see from the beginning a series of genre signals that would be well understood by the initial audiences of the play (such as the St Stephen's night court audience of 1606), and are hardwired into the way the characters behave and articulate their agendas. Assuming composition and performances in 1605 and 1606, audiences could likely find similar concerns staged in the lost play *Madon King of Britain* (in part likely derived as *Lear* is from Monmouth's *History of Britain*), or Chapman's *Caesar and Pompey* (1605). In Lear's first scene there is to be a peaceful succession from one generation to the next "that future strife may be prevented now". When the division of the kingdom becomes bifold, the characters flip strategy: they then know how to conduct the conflict of disputed succession, with the older sisters making war against their father, and with Cordelia, no sooner having been exiled to France, it seems, than she is preparing to invade Britian on behalf of her beleaguered father. To the end of the play, most of the characters then remain within a high stakes, high prestige drama, with extremes of violence and high astounding terms, as when Goneril and Regan berate each other, bickering over Edmund, and causing their mutual destruction.

Even beyond this, there remains a kingdom to share. The accommodation made for the future of Britain beyond the end of play is famously puzzling, with the final lines notoriously split between Edgar (Q) and Albany (F), but here some kind of tentative order is restored. This of course lacks the moral clarity and dynastic certainty asserted at the end of say *R3* or *Macbeth* (which can be

understood to traffic also along tragic/historical lines). Yet there is some kind of order.

When, at the end of Act 2, Lear and his remaining retinue depart into the storm and the night, Cornwall and Regan choose to stay inside where they will be safe and warm ("My Regan counsels well; come out o'th' storm"). Their choices can be understood also as dramaturgical: they choose to act within the confines of a dynastic, court-driven, conflict-driven story. But Lear makes a different choice, and this is what makes the play so compelling, and so hard to hold in your head. Lear longs for a new moral order, and he tries to find it in a new kind of play that he plays out within and to the side of the main dynastic action that unfolds.

As 3.2. opens, Lear stages himself as the centre of the storm which, according to the repeated stage direction, plays intermittently throughout the Act ("storm still") S4. In the Hamilton production I mentioned earlier, I was assigned to be behind a curtain shaking the thunder sheet to accompany live, and improvised drumming, as Albany is not back on stage until the middle of Act 4. For a Shakespearean this was a kind of peak experience. I could vigorously shake the board, thinking all the while, "I am the storm."

Back in the play, Lear assumes the elements are his to command; and he is still playing a royal part: "all germens spill at once that make ungrateful man." The King also then, histrionically, casts himself as the central protagonist of a tragic drama: "I will be the pattern of all patience"… ; "Pour on, I will endure", thus anticipating so many interpretations of his role against Aristotle's enduring

protocols for tragedy. As the Act continues though, the King's intensity rises as he is drawn further and further from his old court world. Crucially he turns also from his own concerns to think of the needs of the fool instead of himself .("come on my boy"), and together they seek shelter. He then meets Edgar in role as "poor tom", and the king is seduced through tom's baroque fantasia of the wretched figure who "swallows the old rat and the ditch-dog; drinks the green mantle of the standing pool; who is whipped form tithing to tithing". The King is drawn to play in a quite new way in this zone of abjection and physical disgust. This is the company he will need on his new stage. I've enfolded here a theatrical metaphor, for a core part of Shakespeare's dramaturgy is to immerse the king with staged figures who can be seen playing the parts of the wretched and downcast. These scenes have no precedent in the likely sources for the play. If he plays truly with his new retinue, the king perceives, he might seek answers to new questions: "let me talk with this philosopher"; he then insists: "I will keep still with my philosopher." Maybe Tom can answer his questions, now open-ended and, finally, unanswerable: "what is the cause of thunder?", and then, two scenes later: "is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" These questions resonate in a quite different way to the specific question, designed to be closed, definitive, which Lear launches in Act 1: "which of us shall we say does love us most?" The key difference is that the earlier prepared answers are fixed and known by everyone assembled for the first scene of the play.

After the trial scene (drastically edited from Quarto to Folio), we next see the King in 4.6, among the most demanding scenes on audience, actors and

readers that Shakespeare ever wrote. There are some differences between Q and F texts, but the conception of this scene from 1608 through to 1623 is consistent.

The king has slept in the litter, presumably, that has drawn him to the neighborhood of Dover Cliff. For the performer the break of nearly an act, presumably also, allows the actor to harbour strength for the strenuous scenes to come. Here we see most powerfully the new kind of play the king wants to be in. Edgar's evocation of what it means to peer down from the top of the cliff physically embodies the conceptual vertigo the scene induces, leading us beyond the limit of what we can understand and what, in most instances, performers can encompass: "How fearful/And dizzy 'tis, to cast one's eyes so low!"

In this space, Edgar voices several persona with assurance, calmly guiding his father through the cruel-seeming charade of the mock-suicide, and reflecting out to the audience the calculated series of performances he contrives through the scene. His father notes the change of his voice, as he is led near the edge of the imaginary Dover cliff, as Edgar first switches back to the accomplished kind of blank verse, suitable for a court-trained nobleman, we first hear him speak. In this vocal guise he provides the vertiginous visuals for Gloucester and the listening audience. After Gloucester's "fall" and "recovery" into life, Edgar then casts off the former self, who he claims watched Gloucester fall, evoking him as a form of the demons who appeared to possess him when he was Poor Tom: "…his eyes/Were two full moons; he had a thousand noses,/Horns whelked and waved like the enraged sea:/It was some fiend." When, at the end of the scene, Oswald enters and Edgar challenges him, he adopts a bizarrely comical Somersettish accent: "Chill pick your teeth", setting the challenge of the stout fight with

Oswald while in comical guise, riffing then back to his neutral stage cadence to close the scene and lead Gloucester back into the play. It is the kind of transition many actors can manage with assurance, but with a facility that risks putting the integrity of Edgar's actions into question.

On this stage of fools (as the king soon calls it) Gloucester plays too, but as often throughout Shakespeare's play, he struggles to keep up with the dramaturgical changes he is in the midst of. His approach to his own trauma is essentially bookish, as if he wished he could play out his predicament in the old-fashioned academic kind of tragedy he might have studied himself at school or university; so he takes on board his son's message of stoic endurance: "…I'll bear/Affliction till it cry out itself:/Enough, enough! and die." This vow anticipates the last time we see Gloucester alive, after the battle in Act 5. Here again he receives stoic teaching from his son: "Men must endure/Their going hence, even as their coming hither./Ripeness is all"(5.2.10). F1 adds a telling comment from Gloucester, apparently accepting this smoothly turned thought: "And that's true too." This exchange slips so easily from both father and son that it sounds like a hollow, well-rehearsed response to their afflictions, not the real thing.

In 4.6, Lear himself has moved far beyond this form of tragic piety. It's telling that he enters and exits this scene running, eluding the soldiers seeking to recapture him, hence his gleeful vocalizing on the exit, with the "sa, sa, sa" that F1 adds. His volition is thus unimpeded. In contrast, when we next see him, he is evidently seated, bound up in the care of Cordelia and her doctors, and playing out the redemption scenario she has in mind.

In 4.6 we feel the full force of the deconstructive play the king set in train. He seems to be constantly on the move, playing out actions in rapid succession, and shifting from though to thought in a way that is very hard to contain, and for actors to control, while fully inhabiting the physical, emotional and intellectual churn implied. The King is in full melt-down mode. Stanley Wells notes that here "shafts of acute perception mingle with nonsense." Or as Edgar notes in his role as on-stage commentator on the king's new way of playing: "matter with impertinency mixed, reason with madness." Poor Tom and the fool are long gone from the king's world, but he is in dialogue with them throughout. This is a section of the play as difficult to track perhaps as it is to perform. Delirium seems to overwhelm Lear and then, at critical points, he comes into clarity, indicating awareness of who he is addressing ("I know thee well enough; thy name is Gloucester"), and advancing further his critique of the world he has left behind: "There thou might'st behold the great image of authority; a dog's obeyed in office." Here too, famously, the king offers his own version of stoic wisdom: "the first time we smell the air/We wail and cry." Yet, unlike Gloucester, he does not adhere solely to playing counsels of patience. He winds up again into staging his fantasy of vengeance and kingliness: "then kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!" Surrealism and vengeance, empathy and insight roll into one as he dashes off the stage.

The next exchange almost comes as a relief as Edgar switches in mode to being a commander at a battlefront, receiving news of the approach of Cordelia's forces and the impending final conflict. This returns us safely to the dramaturgical realm of the division of the kingdoms and the now inevitable

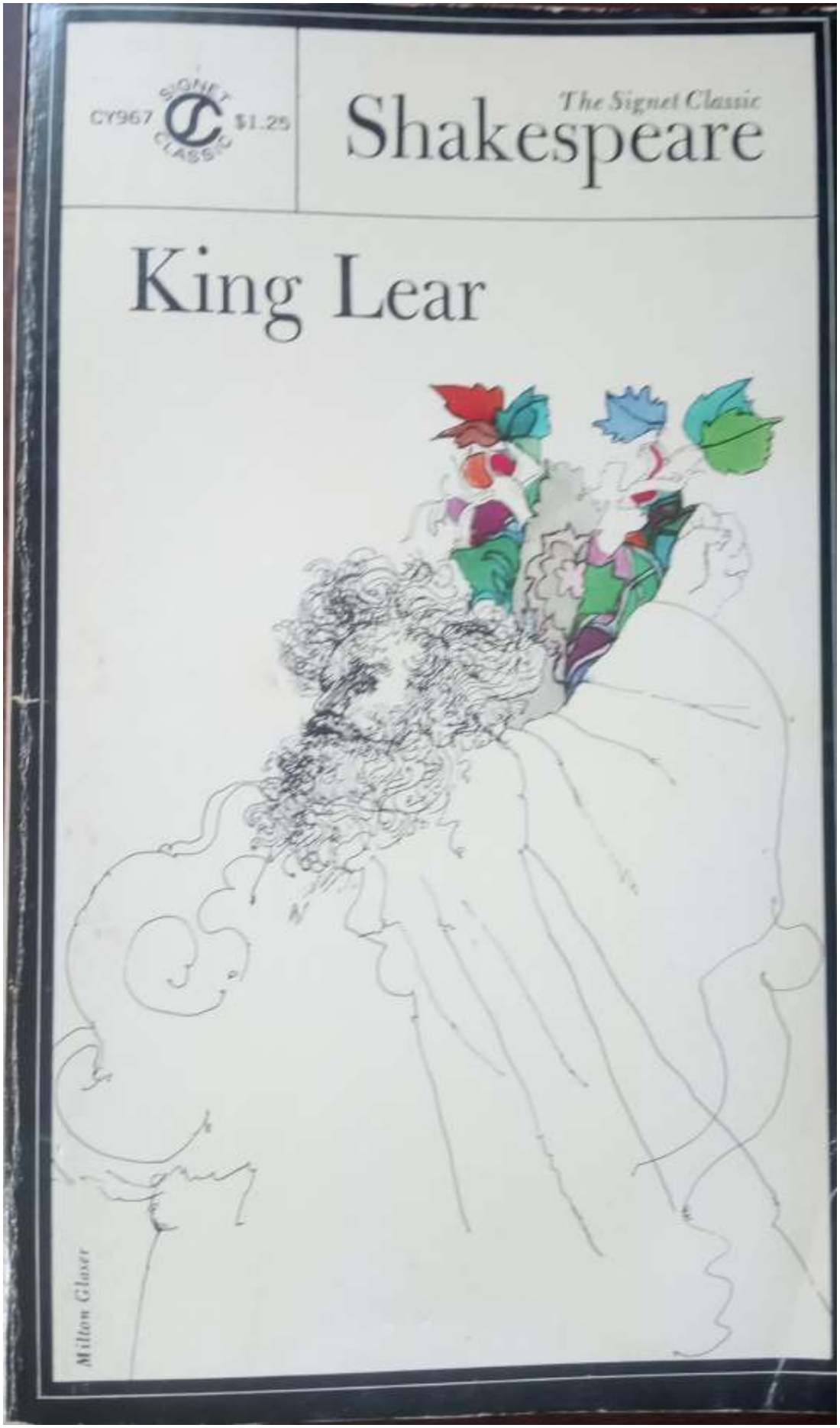
military face-off between Cordelia and her two sisters. The intensity of 4.6 seems to play out to the side of that final conflict, and that is why I think of it as issuing from a different kind of playmaking, and one for which there is really no precedent.

How then to characterize this new kind of action? Here I would reach again for the Polonius-inspired genre labelling toolkit. Not tragical or historical but then what? Perhaps apocalyptic/pastoral would work. The scene is apocalyptic in that through it the king embodies in a radical way his understanding of how the world works. Yet here is not the soothing, numbing citation of the apocalypse in the Book of Revelation, which sounds in the last scene of the play ("is this the promised end/or image of that horror?"), as those echoes hold out the hope that the world will not solve its afflictions, but that a supernatural force will. The apocalypse the king projects could also be seen as a moment of true pastoral: garlanded with flowers, the king in 4.6 is literally as far from the centre of court life as he can get, before he leaves his life altogether. Out in the open he is then open to playing his new perceptions of how the world works. This again is quite different from the graceful citation of Virgil and Theocritus in pastoral mode, tropes any Renaissance poet can rework with preposterous fluency. The pastoral here is jarring, not soothing.

Over the 400 hundred years since the publication of the 1623 Folio, the genre categories of Comedies/Histories/Tragedies have proven enduring guides to understanding Shakespeare; and it is striking that only two supplementary

genre labels---"romance" and "problem play" have gained wide acceptance since then. However useful, though, these categories seem insufficiently flexible for capturing the immanent force , the phenomenology of what Lear drives through the play in Act 3 and Act 4. I don't have definitive answers to my own hesitations and confusions in this part of the play. So I will end with words from Stanley Cavell. Here he is describing his own dealings with Hamlet and Othello as well as with King Lear; let them stand as well for our ongoing negotiation with F1:

> …what has happened has stopped but it has not come to an end; we have yet to come to terms with what has happened; we do not know where it will end. (Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare*, Cambridge 1987, p. 113).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