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“Thou serv'st me, and I'll love thee”: Narcissistic Parenting in *King Lear*

Abstract

King Lear is conventionally seen as having the characteristics of an early modern monarch—one who wishes to exercise absolute authority over his subjects and who believes he has divine right to do so. More recently, the protagonist is also approached, both in critical works and on stage, as an old person with signs of dementia. The last four years I have been using an additional to the above approach, which brings the play closer to my students' hearts, turning *King Lear* into a favorite, and this is the view of Lear as someone suffering from Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD). Narcissism, though discussed by Freud in the early twentieth century, became a topic of rigorous research relatively recently. Narcissism is a condition that can be treated only by psychotherapy but the latter frequently fails because the patients—if they accept to consult a mental health practitioner in the first place—will neither acknowledge their problem, nor respond to therapy and accept guidance. If the latter description begins to remind us of Lear's stubborn refusal to be counselled, the following introduction to NPD by Mayo Clinic could be used as a very accurate description of the protagonist:

Narcissistic personality disorder is a mental health condition in which people have an unreasonably high sense of their own importance. They need and seek too much attention and want people to admire them. People with this disorder may lack the ability to understand or care about the feelings of others....and are easily upset by the slightest criticism....People with narcissistic personality disorder may be generally unhappy and disappointed when they're not given the special favors or admiration that they believe they deserve. They may find their relationships troubled and unfulfilling, and other people may not enjoy being around them.

Recent research has found that narcissistic parents cause serious and life-long damage to their children and this is forcefully illustrated in *King Lear*. It is noteworthy that the first scene turns our attention not to its protagonist but to another problematic, and probably narcissistic, father, the Duke of Gloucester, and his complicated relationship with his “bastard” son. An equally dysfunctional relationship between a father and his children is illustrated immediately

afterwards, with the powerful Lear appearing just as unwise, self-centered, unjust and cruel to his daughters—both to the two “scapegoats” and “the golden-child” (typical children roles found in families with a narcissistic parent). My paper will discuss the above points and suggest that the death of the four children and the deep wounds of the only one that survives, stand as proof of how harmful for the children narcissistic parenting can be. Drawing the students’ attention to dysfunctional family relationships and narcissism in *King Lear* can turn the latter into an eye-opener and a play they will be returning to throughout their lives.

King Lear as School Master: Rhizomatic Shakespeares and Indian cinematic ‘remakes’

Thea Buckley, British Shakespeare Association (Belfast)

Inviting us to consider the manifold ‘social, political, aesthetic, reparative, religious, idiosyncratic’ and other uses to which Shakespeare’s *King Lear* has so far been put, a question this seminar asks us to consider is: ‘Are there particular historical moments, social formations, political ideologies, or cultural changes that *King Lear* seems especially amenable for addressing?’ My contribution attempts to answer this by looking at one understudied Indian cinematic adaptation of *Lear*, Raja Paranjpe’s monochromatic Marathi-language *Oon Paus* (1954), as a post-Partition film. I discuss this an example of both reparative and rhizomatic Shakespeare, extending the latter theory (Lanier, 2014) to apply it in the context of the Indian regional-language ‘remake’, seeing these films as an interconnected network circulating new linguistic and thematic possibilities in the new nation.

In *Oon Paus*, Paranjpe plays beloved retired schoolteacher Babu Master, who is forced to live apart from his wife Kashibai (Sumati Gupte) after their house is sold and their ungrateful children will each house only one parent. Finally, a former student intervenes and reunites the couple, shaming their children. In her 2024 chapter “*King Lear* in times of crisis: A theory of reparative adaptation”, Alexa Joubin mentions the increased 2016 interest in *Lear* as a “‘Brexit play’ – a play about division and dispossession” (56); I argue that *Oon Paus* was produced as a version rewriting similar trauma, of India’s 1947 Partition, in a reparative effort. The film apparently was modelled on the English 1937 *Make Way For Tomorrow*, yet it adds a school theme and is not a tragedy.

If in Hollywood a ‘remake’ is generally one-way, a live action version of an animation, or a generational retake on a beloved classic, in India the remake is a rhizomatic phenomenon. A regional-language hit film is guaranteed a remake in Bollywood, and vice versa, often into one or more regional languages; narratives are redeployed, remixed with local stars, settings, and concerns. In this cinematic climate, the slippery ease with which regional Shakespeares overlap with, co-opt, and remake other local versions tells as much about the process as the product, a reinvention of both Shakespeare and the original creative adaptation.

Oon Paus was popular. *The Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema* (Rajadhyaksha) records a host of remakes, starting with B. R. Panthulu’s *School Master*, a Kannada-language “reform drama featuring an old but committed schoolteacher (Panthulu) who transforms the students of his native village though his own sons abandon him [...] until the entire village comes to his support” (357). Dubbed at the time in Tamil as *Engal Kudumbam Perisu* and Telugu as *Badi Pantulu*, the film was remade as *School Master* in Hindi (Panthulu, 1959), in Malayalam (Puttanna Kanagal, 1964), and in Tamil (Panthulu, 1973), and as *Badi Panthulu* in Telugu (P. Chandrasekhara Reddy, 1972).

These *Lear*-esque remakes deserve further study. In her chapter in *Shakespeare in Indian Cinemas* (Trivedi and Chakravarti, 2017), Nishi Pulgurtha names a (very different) *Lear* adaptation, *Gunasundari Katha* (1949), as one of two Telugu-language Shakespeares, yet omits *Badi Panthulu*. In Rampone’s and Mallin’s *Global King Lear* (2024), while at least three chapters including Joubin’s delve into Indian cinematic *Lears*, among these the cluster of *School Master* remakes merits a mere sentence. Ultimately, my paper positions these as a cycle, decentering and reterritorializing Shakespeare, in an ongoing negotiation and decolonization.

‘Come Unbundle Here’: Lear, Neoliberalism and The Promised End

Timothy Francisco, Youngstown State University

This essay uses *King Lear* as a frame for thinking through current crises in public higher education. Loosely deploying Lear’s division of the kingdom as an analogue of neoliberal strategies of ‘unbundling’ and outsourcing--strategies that are political and material-- I read Edmund Regan and Goneril’s exploitation of this move and of rhetorics of equality and utility, as parallel to redirections and exploitations of our own disciplinary desires for democratization and redistribution by neoliberal managers and conservative politicians. This post-modern conservative redirection is now being used to not only de-professionalize and downsize humanities, but also to install illiberal political and material reforms at public institutions in red states like Ohio.

Things we have to forget in order to be moved by *King Lear*

Eric S. Mallin, University of Texas at Austin

Leo Tolstoy found only “repulsion, weariness, and bewilderment” in the works of Shakespeare, especially in *King Lear*, the plot of which he painstakingly and often hilariously dismantles. He concludes that he believes “that Shakespeare cannot be recognized either as a great genius, or even as an average author.” While I wouldn’t go so far, I do believe *King Lear* owns a sufficient number of flaws to be taxed for poor artistry, and maybe worse. Tolstoy (scornfully) quotes Hazlitt on the play: “It is, then, the best of Shakespeare’s plays, for it is the one in which he was the most in earnest.” Other famous writers—Hazlitt, Hugo, Shelley and Swinburne—further constitute a pantheon of hyperbolic praise-givers that Tolstoy delightedly detonates.

His criticisms are somewhat limited (poor differentiation between characters, unlikely emotion in improbable contexts, ineffective or deflating theatrical climaxes), but his long essay does make a convincing cumulative point: there is something wrong with *King Lear*. The possibility that what is “wrong” is also what so many have found compelling about the play animates my interest in the contradictions between critical reception and evaluation. Here, for instance, is an astonishing quotation from Victor Hugo that Tolstoy deposits but lets pass without comment:

Lear is the occasion for Cordelia. Maternity of the daughter toward the father; profound subject; maternity venerable among all other maternities, so admirably rendered by the legend of that Roman girl, who, in the depths of a prison nurses her old father. The young breast near the white beard! There is not a spectacle more holy. This filial breast is Cordelia. [Not, I note, “Cordelia’s.”] Once this figure dreamed of and found, Shakespeare created his drama....

Verging on the pornographic, or in technical language, utter ick, Hugo’s paeon to incestuous desire is less idiosyncratic than it seems; rather, it responds to Shakespeare’s plot and sensibility in a disturbingly transparent way. Familial over-investment scaffolds the plot and becomes the affective goal and core of the tragedy: the central catastrophe of the story is that Lear does not have the chance to live out his days in solitary confinement with his obediently loving, *married* daughter. As Jeffrey Kahan notes, not everyone has always been comfortable with this situation: in Nahum Tate’s notorious adaptation, “Edgar’s love of Cordelia was evidently not enough to

protect our heroine. Tate had to make sure that Lear, even in prison, was never alone with his daughter” (Kahan ed., 54).

Familial over-intimacy is far from the only thing in *Lear* that we must forget so that we may be moved by the play. Most of these have been discussed by other readers, though generally in an exculpatory fashion. In the interest of speaking what I feel, not what I ought to say, here are some others:

—Cordelia as sham heroine, skillful player of the sibling rivalry game that Lear rigs and that the rest of the play exfoliates (in, among other ways, the sisters’ risible desire for the same love object); then her near-entire, unintelligible disappearance as a subjectivity, as a character.

—Lear’s absurd summoning of a cosmic storm as sign of his lingering monarchical greatness, in spite of his pathetic fall.

—Edgar’s miraculous turn as Poor Tom, a figure that no psychology or history could possibly map from the “good but rather dull boy” (Ferne) we meet pre- and post-disguise.

—The play’s construction of a new genre: tragic sadism. And even that label grants more coherence than the drama possesses.

Reading *King Lear* Again with Jacques Lacan

James Newlin, Case Western Reserve University

Jacques Lacan’s seventh seminar, on the topic of “The Ethics of Psychoanalysis,” is a pivotal moment in his body of thought. In this seminar, held between 1959 and 1960, Lacan clarifies many of his most important concepts, including the suggestive notion of the “zone between two deaths”—or, the place where the subject transcends the strictures of the Symbolic and confronts the particular nature of their desire. While the seminar has been of major interest for scholars of literature—not least of all because of its dazzling critical readings of *Antigone* and *Oedipus at Colonus*—the seminar’s evocative reading of *King Lear* has largely gone overlooked. Certainly, Lacan’s discussion of *Lear* is brief; he cites the play at the close of the twenty-third session’s remarks, by way of further illustrating the zone between two deaths. Lacan underscores the brevity of his reading of *Lear*, insisting that he “does not have to emphasize” the connections between *Lear* and his model of desire: “just read the play again.”

It is this directive to “just read the play again” that indicates that *Lear* is a central text not only for this seminar but also for Lacan’s broader corpus. Moreover, it is precisely the reading’s brevity that indicates its importance for Lacan. In 1953, Lacan publicly left the Société psychanalytique de Paris after the organization chastised him for his use of variable-length sessions in his clinical practice. (Leaving the SPP meant leaving the International Psychoanalytical Association as well). The psychoanalytic establishment found these “short sessions” to be exploitative, but, for Lacan, the practice of abruptly ending a session, even to the point of disrupting a subject’s train of thought, can productively encourage the subject to engage with the work of analysis. Patients often fall into the habit of “filling the time.” “Scanning” or “cutting” the session at a particularly crucial instant encourages the analysand to fixate on what is important, by anxiously asking themselves, “why did my analyst stop me *there*?”

With his comments on *Lear*, Lacan effectively applies this rhetorical practice from his clinical practice to an instance of literary analysis. Lacan's reading is powerful in its own right as an illustration of the "zone between two deaths." But for an audience versed in his practice—and familiar with his ongoing battles with the SPP and IPA—a broader, deeper reading of the play's contrasting depictions of treating mental disquiet (in the form of the Fool laboring to outjest Lear's melancholy and Edgar trifling with Gloucester's despair) can be inferred. The play emerges as a virtual allegory for contemporary debates about the competing models of treatment, with profound implications for understanding the application of Lacan's methodology beyond the clinic, his account of the Freudian legacy of psychoanalysis, and our own understanding of what it means to "use" *King Lear*.

"How this mother swells up toward my heart": Disability and Deference in Two *Lears*

John-Paul Spiro, Villanova University

My paper uses Dan Colley's recent play *Lost Lear* to examine the dynamics of sympathy and deference to King Lear (and *King Lear*). *Lost Lear* presents Joy, an actor suffering from Alzheimer's, in an "immersive dementia community" in which she repeatedly rehearses the Shakespeare's play. Her estranged son, Conor, can only interact with her by assuming the role of Cordelia, and in true fulfillment of the part, he acts badly before he finally refuses to participate in Joy's reality. Colley's play extends Shakespeare's questions of how empathy and deference are solicited, earned, and coerced through definitions. In Shakespeare's play, the terms "father" and "king" are drained of their stipulative, definitional authority, only to be replaced in *Lost Lear* via Colley's reversals: Joy is female, a famous actor in a world of celebrity, and a disabled person undergoing a therapy which demands assent and imaginative participation. Conor's existence had always been an inconvenience to Joy, and her condition and its therapy require Conor to continue to support his mother's sense of herself at expense of his own needs and concerns.

I explore the questions raised in Shakespeare's and Colley's plays about definitions and the institutions that sustain them. Colley suggests, quite troublingly, that "disability" and "therapy" wield cultural power that mandates sympathy and deference with high human costs, no more or less legitimate than Shakespeare's portrayal of patriarchal monarchy. Colley foregrounds Conor's experiences of neglect, as well as his disappointment and anger, while presenting Joy's increasing isolation and dissolution as a continuation of

the self-absorption she exhibited throughout her life. Furthermore, Colley's deployment of the "immersive dementia village" as a metatheatrical device, along with its use of puppetry, film, and other strategies, continue Shakespeare's work of exposing the ways that structures of performance condition obedience and attention. Both plays leave us with the possibility that, after we see through these structures and definitions, the spectacle of ordinary suffering assumes its own authority.

Shakespeare in the Lyceum: *King Lear* as Public Utility

Jeanette Tran, Drake University

This essay explores the relationship between Shakespearean criticism and utility and responds to my own experiences using *King Lear* in public, first at the Des Moines Lyceum's 2024 Festival of Ideas, and then in an article on *King Lear* and family estrangement for *The Conversation*,

I historicize the desire to “use” Shakespeare in public, where public means extra-institutional settings, by discussing the role Shakespeare played in the American Lyceum movement that preceded my own attempt to use *King Lear* in that same public space. The work of nineteenth century Shakespearean lecturer and editor Henry N. Hudson, a man Mark Bayer describes as a liminal figure who stood between institutional and “Public Shakespeare” due to his preference for humanist, vernacular, aesthetic criticism over professional textual scholarship, is central to this history. I will theorize the centuries old desire to use, as well as the advantages of using, Shakespeare in public with the help of recent scholarship from Sharon O’Dair and Timothy Francisco on “Public Shakespeare.” As O’Dair and Francisco explain, Public Shakespeare was once the arena of non-elites but is now increasingly being co-opted by institutions and individual scholars responding to a variety of economic pressures or distress as they compete for jobs and status.

While the motives that drive Shakespeareans to turn Shakespeare into a public utility are important to my analysis, I am equally interested in what it means to allow our imagined or real publics to shape the way we read, think about, discuss, and write about a play like *King Lear*. Hudson’s success as a public lecturer turned on his ability to play into the Lyceum’s demand for “useful” knowledge. An analysis of Hudson’s public *King Lear* lectures reveals the utility of Shakespeare *King Lear* in Hudson’s hands was largely moral, akin to modern self-help. A familiarity with Philip Sidney’s “Defense of Poesy” suggests Hudson’s goals in using Shakespeare for self-improvement were hardly novel. It is one thing to be familiar with the idea that poetry can lead us to virtue, however, and another thing entirely to try to enact this ideal in public. Ultimately, this essay’s aim is to question what happens when modern Public Shakespeareans become purveyors of moral instruction and self-help, not because they are qualified to provide that guidance, but because that is the framework they have inherited for understanding the usefulness and economic advantages of literary criticism. Self-help is popular, after all, because it is useful and cheaper than therapy.

Some Guides for Teaching the Texts of KING LEAR

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I take it as given that the schematic qualities of Shakespeare’s scripts originally assumed and required professional competence in script-interpretation on the part of their first users, the omniscient actors and associated personnel of Shakespeare’s company. For all other readers, especially modern students, editors, literary critics, and players, I believe that a play like *King Lear* should be seen in actual performance even before it is read. Video, live theater, classroom enactment, whatever. Although theatrical scripts potentially suggest stage movement as well as stage speech, few readers can imagine quite how actors may vocalize, gesture, and traverse the stage

platform to make sense of their words, to fulfill those "theatrical" potentialities implied by the words in the script. I feel that the concomitant failure in readers' visualizations of scripted stage-action remains the primary factor inhibiting our students from engaging with or fully enjoying their encounters with Shakespeare's scripts. I believe that our own pedagogic failure to call out and to visualize the suggested stage action reduces student (and even professorial) comprehension and appreciation of Shakespeare's plays.

This "seeing" problem with any printed script is compounded when we move towards analysis of Shakespeare's multiple-text plays. I have been arguing elsewhere that these fertile multiplicities display Shakespeare's – or maybe equally adept others' – purposeful drafts and revisions. In the past, for classes and lectures I prepared graphic displays, detailed action summaries, and narrative essays designed to help readers imagine the distinctive schemes for stage speech and action. "Live action" suggested by dialog and stage-directions in the earliest quartos and Folio versions appears as significant (rather than essentially trivial) textual variants in passages of *Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *Henry VI Parts 2 and 3*. The pedagogic material highlighting these variants appears as part of my seminar contribution.

Alleviating Pain and Ridicule in *King Lear*

Denise A. Walen, Vassar College

The blinding of Gloucester (3.7) and his suicide attempt (4.6) were controversial incidents in the staging of *King Lear*. The one considered too painful and the other too ridiculous or improbable for audiences to accept. AC Bradley thought each a "dramatic defect of the play," although he argued the suicide would not be "in the least absurd" in performance "if acted properly" (*Shakespearean Tragedy*, 1904, p.186). Bradley is far less tolerant of Gloucester's blinding, which he says has "been condemned almost universally." While the "physical horror of such a spectacle" is muted when reading the play, the scene subjects theatre spectators to a "sensation so violent as to overpower the purely tragic emotions" rendering the action "revolting or shocking" (p.188). Bradley followed in a long line of detractors. Johnson thought the blinding "an act too horrid to be endured in dramatic exhibition" (*Works*, 1765, 6:159). Tomas Warton considered "the utter improbability of Glo'ster's imagining, though blind, that he had leaped down Dover cliff" one of the plays "imperfections" (*The Adventurer*, no. 122, 1754). In 1770, *The Dramatic Censor* called the blinding an "insignificant, cruel, offensive scene" better left to narration (p. 362) and noted that many found the suicide a "laughable" incident that contained "great absurdities" (p. 364). From 1768 through 1924 neither scene was presented unaltered onstage. The blinding occurred offstage or was simply reported, as it was in Henry Irving's production of 1892. Lear's entrance on Edgar's line "But who comes here" (4.6.82), interrupted Gloucester's suicide for over a century. Objections to these scenes revolve around issues of dramaturgical accuracy and suitability, but they also rely on concepts of masculinity, emotion, age, ability, and religion. This paper will examine shifting cultural notions toward Gloucester's blinding and suicide attempt in *King Lear* and how they affect the text and staging of the play.

Nothing Will Come of Nothing: The Un/naturally Un/conditional Familial Love
in *King Lear* and *Mom and Dad* (2017)

Shay Williams, University of New Hampshire

The way we view family and how it is regarded in our modern culture would be well served to compare to family values and behaviours of the past, and more specifically, to early modern culture, represented in this paper by the Bard himself. As displayed in the modern example of the film, parents place such a high standard, and pressures on themselves to consider themselves (if at all), “good parents.” Not to mention, those who start a family/wed because of societal norms: find a partner, get married, get a 9-5 job/stay at home, and have children. As can be seen in the Shakespearian text, unconditional love is not a standard that is important to base commitment or truth upon, nor is being a parent conducive to any form of being a beneficial and important part of society. In fact, giving up one’s own agency to view their children/family as an extension of themselves can do much more harm than good.

This paper will attempt to tackle horrors of familial love, which have been used copiously in films that include all types of horror tropes/sub-genres: body horror, torture, cannibalism, the supernatural; all shredding the conceit that a loving family is a natural thing.

In *Lear*, it could be argued that the main reason for the happenings that turn from bad, to worse, to tragedy, originate from the “**un**-condition” part of the word “unconditional,” Lear is in a state of un-condition, because he is untethered from everything that gave him a sense of self: his kingship, and his family, which he believed loved him, and through that love did he acquire his own self-worth. This has caused him to be divorced from time, space, coherence, and recognition of his environment.

The Bowen Family Systems Theory argues that the main reasons for the dysfunctional relationships in *King Lear* are the projection of Lear’s anxieties or unresolved conflicts onto his daughters. These bring about what these refer to as low self-differentiation (maintaining one’s individuality while remaining connected to others, or, maintaining commitment while remaining a separate individual). This commitment is seen as the bane of all parents’ existence, as well as their reason for living, in *Mom and Dad* (2017). The horror of family is witnessed from the first moment we are introduced to the Ryans family in the film, as it is shown in the first scene of *King Lear*, when we are introduced to the King, his three daughters, and his demand of unconditional love from them.

‘Distribution should undo excess:’ *Lear*, poverty, and collectivity

Matt Zarnowiecki, Touro University

In this essay, I evaluate the extent to which *King Lear* can be used toward the end of social justice, particularly relief for the most abjectly poor by those at the apex of power and wealth. I look primarily at Lear’s call to “shake the superflux” in act 3.4, mostly because it has always seemed to me to be such an anemic response to abject poverty. Can *Lear* imagine, or even enable, some a movement toward equality among the richest and most powerful and the most abjectly poor and powerless? I’ve sought to answer this question in three ways: by examining analyses in the *Arden Research Handbook of Shakespeare and Social Justice*, by examining Deborah Shuger’s essay on

the topic of suffering and relief according to patristic and medieval sources, and, more briefly, by considering a recent production of *Lear* and the discussion that followed it. What I find in this brief foray is overall confirmation for my own impressions of *Lear*'s weakness as an anti-poverty play (with a few surprising and fascinating moments from characters other than the king) but also confirmation that others, including critics and theater practitioners, are convinced of *Lear*'s potential for "use" toward a more communitarian and justice-minded purpose.