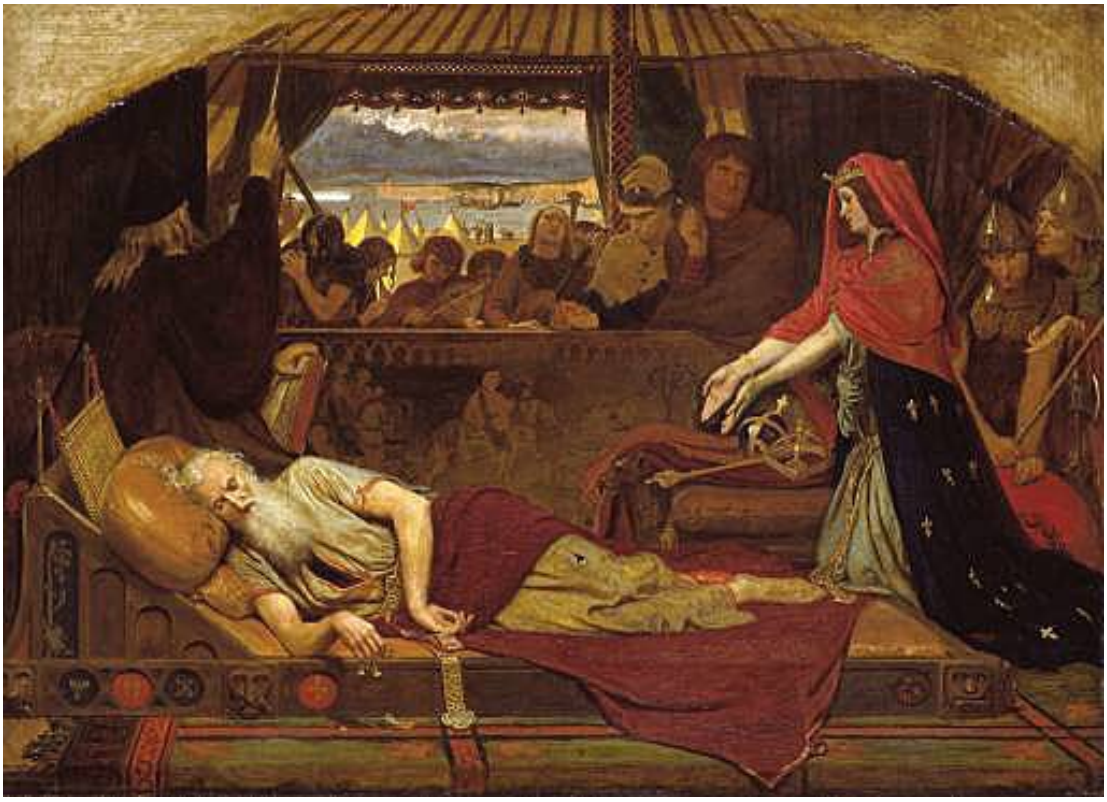
Meditations on Lear

by Evelyn Hooven (March 2018)



Lear and Cordelia, Ford Madox Brown, 1849-54

Introduction

One of the more celebrated and influential books of Shakespeare criticism in the last half-century was, without a doubt, Maynard Mack's King Lear in Our Time (*University of California Press, 1972), originally the distinguished Yale University professor's lecture series while Beekman Visiting Professor at Berkeley. While acknowledging his debt to those who had stimulated his views—previous critics and scholars, members of a graduate seminar, and others—Professor Mack singled out for special mention an essay on* Lear *which was a particular inspiration, the essay liberally quoted and paraphrased in the book, the essayist honored thus: "I am further grateful to my former student,* Evelyn G. Hooven, *who has understood better than most what it means, in Keats's words, to 'burn through the fierce*

dispute / Betwixt Damnation and impassion'd clay.'" (The reference is to Keats's "On Sitting Down to Read King Lear *Again.")*

Ms. Hooven has never chosen on her own to publish her essay—assuming (until corrected otherwise!) that having signally influenced and inspired someone else's book it had served its purpose. Having recently become aware of its existence, I judge that it is time this essay itself see the light of day. Here it appears with some editing.

Samuel Hux

NER Contributing Editor

King Lear is not only a great play for the theatre but also a kind of metaphor for theatre itself. For it is intensely concerned with the ways in which spiritual awareness must be realized through the body, tried upon the pulse, must become embodied in deed and word. There is an analogy between what Shakespeare's play is about and the very tools of the theatre medium. Just as the play insists upon and persistently emphasizes the relation between body and spirit, voice and garment, the outward journey and the inner one, so it also uses impersonation, the theatre's most elementary force, to enhance and intensify its themes. Even as the actor lends a character or idea his voice, body, gesture, and allows this character or idea or spirit to live within him, so in this

mysterious play the major agent takes upon himself, gathers unto himself the spirits and even the masks of some of the other characters. King Lear does not meet with his banished daughter Cordelia ("nor shall we ever see that face of hers again") until he has taken within himself the spirit of the Fool, of banished Kent, of Edgar's strange projection of a mad, beggared, unaccommodated man.

The very distinction made in the play between soulless people whose power is strictly external, whose love is lust, whose authority is force, whose efforts and gains and losses are at once calculated and calculable, and people of soul whose value and outer gesture come from within, is essentially a theatrical one. For even as the spirit of a man inhabits the body and is expressed through the body, the theatre must, in an available and overpowering way, "embody its idea." (I am borrowing this phrase, in this context, from Stark Young; it is a recurrent phrase in his books on theatre.) And in great theatre, every rhythm, gesture, shadow, color, sound, radiance, arrangement is, itself, a metaphor for that idea whereby it exists.

The question, though, of whether *King Lear* is suitable or even possible for the stage persists and has long persisted. Is it wrong for the stage even as Goethe's *Faust* is wrong for the stage? Is this "Leviathan," either because of its theme and dramaturgy or because of the limitations imposed by theatrical performance, *simply too large for the stage?* The question is sometimes turned into a dichotomy—great poetic drama versus delimiting spectacle—as though the response could be evenly distributed between those who love words best and those who love theatre best. At other times the problem is seen as the purely practical one of staging extremities and improbabilities, as though the whole puzzle awaited some rare

producer who would be remarkably clever about staging the storm scenes and the fictive suicide of Gloucester and Edmund’s prestidigitations.

Too large for the stage? Perhaps it is true that the ideas in *King Lear* are not perfectly embodied dramatically and theatrically as they are, for example, in *Oedipus Rex* or *Othello* or *Macbeth.* But this imperfection, if that is what it is, does not diminish the value or even the effectiveness of the play for the theatre. An imperfection or uncertainty or imbalance similar to that in *King Lear*, though at once less blurred and less intense, exists also in the action of *Hamlet,* a play which no one seems to regard as unsuitable for the stage. For the delay in *Hamlet,* explain it though one will by circumstance or situation or psychology, is neither purely circumstantial nor a character flaw of indecisiveness but, rather, a metaphor for something very difficult to grasp or explain. Is it a metaphor for the *change that must take place* in the world of the young prince in order for him to do a deed that is, however just, also dire, unaccustomed, and irrevocable? One can only ask or suggest . . .

In *Hamlet,* and perhaps more so in *Lear*, there is something inaccessible that no single production can ever hope to succeed in expressing. But this means, merely, that just as no production of a Shakespeare play can ever hope to be definitive, productions of *Hamlet* or of *Lear* are likely to be even more partial than are those of other plays. The greatness of a production of *Lear* or of *Hamlet* will depend, even more than is usual in tragedy, upon the intensity and the extent of the power to suggest realms beneath and beyond what is, at any

given moment or from moment to moment expressed.

Yet *King Lear* presents problems which *Hamlet*, for all its mysterious complexity, does not present. *King Lear* does not have what one might call *an attractive or a dazzling surface* to offer to a theatre audience. Hamlet, after all, is a young prince who has been in love with a beautiful young woman and who lives in a court which, at the last—after intrigues and ghostly clamour and a play within a play and an interrupted funeral procession—collapses amid the brilliance of envenomed swords, poisoned goblets, a vision of felicity, and the final commemorative deed of a brave soldier and princely successor, Fortinbras. This is a surface which might, if one were so inclined, distract one from the tragic idea it is expressing.

There is in *Hamlet,* as in the Oresteia trilogy, also some *refuge*, if that is the right word, some stable center which the audience can hold to as well as the characters, a point of view which preserves a social system among men and is respected and honored. No such refuge exists in *Lear*. Though Edgar and Albany make such a point of view their own, it is always inadequate. It is superseded by the action. And, at the tragedy's end, it is as they acknowledge irrelevant. It is also possible—if one does not look and listen with all one's force and wonder—to view *Hamlet,* however, with the same moral equipment which preserves one. In *Hamlet* one can feel (unequivocally?) the justice of the prince's mission. Every right-thinking person knows which side to take: the young prince must avenge the hideous murder of his father. For the too tidily moral, however, there is the possibility of shifting emphasis at the end and concluding that Hamlet, too, deserved to die, for he killed Polonius and drove Ophelia mad and in self-defense (nothing more pious) gave Rosencrantz and Guildenstern his old school friends their death warrant.

But *King Lear*—where so much dramatic emphasis rests upon banished and blinded and bemadded old men, where the most evil characters are hardly characters at all, but rather forces of insensible, dark, mechanistic, brutal opportunism, perversions of humanity, where the sense of common physical need and vulnerability mingles with visionary, lunatic cries—will give neither actor nor spectator refuge. There is, indeed, something in the play that persistently violates any effort to take it on the surface or to see with moderate or delimited perspective. The action seems not only to contradict any tendency to accept form without the spirit but also to violate any attempt to accept the outlines of the action without its details as well. One must accept the action fully in order to accept it at all. It is not flexible; it will not yield to transpositions or fragmentations. It is revelatory, I think, that *King Lear* has not been turned, as have for example *Hamlet, Much Ado, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Henry IV, The Tempest, Macbeth,* and especially *Romeo and Juliet*, into opera, ballet, dramatic symphony. Berlioz, at the height of dramatic romanticism, composed a *King Lear* overture, but he confessed that it evoked the play so little as to bear almost no relation to it.

But I have not spoken of another great problem, if problem it be, associated with *Lear.* I have said that there is no way of taking refuge, no means of distraction. And yet of all plays, one is most likely, here, to wish for refuge. For it is extraordinarily painful. So much so that beginning 65 years after Shakespeare's death "Shakespeare's" play was usually presented for a century and a half in bowdlerized form with a happy ending. So Samuel Johnson was not the only man, during

three centuries, who found the ending unbearable. And not only are the moments from Lear's entrance bearing Cordelia until the end some of the most painful moments possible to drama (for we are not, here, distanced by chorus or masks or operatic delivery or alexandrine couplets), but those moments seem to call into deep questioning something we have been taught to believe about the world, something we wish to believe and without which (for one has to be sustained, one has to hold onto something) the obstacles and the anguish and the blind injustice in the world appear to be senseless. We wish to believe that human suffering has some beneficent end, that it stirs, eventually, the curative and redemptive properties of the world. But if, indeed, our suffering has no purpose, if the end toward which we move is not *radiant* and *healing* and *harmonious*, but, rather, dark and void, then we who must leave the theatre after the brief (but also enduring) traffic is for the evening at rest and silent, we who must leave for a traffic literal and exigent and without messages, whose lives are so much longer and more obscure than this life of two hours, we do not wish to know it.

But let us go back a minute. Is the action of *King Lear*, with its agonizing final moments, so utterly unbearable? Does it strip one of what one must believe in order to go on living? Or is it, rather, that we must see it with new eyes, with unaccustomed faculties? Shall we see, if we do not avert our eyes, some rare and great radiance? Though it is for the play itself in its own sequence of detail to express that radiance, we, on the other hand, who are mere spectators can merely feel and puzzle, guess and suggest.

The action of *King Lear* resolutely declines to reinforce the notion that we were taught as children and that we still wish our fairy tales and other means of instructive entertainment

to reaffirm: that the good are rewarded and the evil punished. To some, the action may appear to indicate the very reverse: that the good are punished for their goodness, that virtue is pointless and comes to nothing, even to torment, in the end. But to many of us, in our time, no such neat inversion communicates itself. Furthermore, our very eclectic and daring *contemporary* theatre has led us to accept—sometimes too casually—the fact that drama often has a difficult morality and that the justice done in drama can be sharply different from what we expect in life or seek from our law courts.

Yet, even so, the ending of *King Lear* has an emphasis different from that which we witness in other tragedies. We know that by the end of most tragedies and several melodramas the hero will die. Many will even look forward to the death scene and to the grandeur with which the major actor will perform the feat of dying, just as many actors will be eager to demonstrate that they have found new or memorable or lustrous ways to die. We are not so prone as were those who lived in the age of Dryden or that of Samuel Johnson to see death as an exacting, histrionic punishment for evil-doing. Perhaps we are, in one respect, a little like Ibsen's Hedda Gabler: we are not averse to the hero's dying, but we wish him to do it "beautifully." It is what I can only call a sense of the *mystique* of death that we look forward to, that we expect.

Think of Romeo and Juliet who seem to be consumed by fire, seem to go in a blaze of light: at the play's end a light can be seen from the tomb by all the middle-aged living. Cleopatra turns air and fire as she goes, ritualistically arrayed, majestic, to death and her vision of Antony. Hamlet has his vision of felicity and release. It is in his old noble cadences that Othello utters his final, reconciling awareness and takes upon himself its inevitable consequence. The

catastrophic endings of many more recent plays as well occur in dramatic modes and tones related to these. We can summon up Rebecca and Rosmer in Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* embracing one another at the momentous bridge and disappearing into the haunted light. We will recall the very poignant, metaphoric death of young Hedwig the innocent and the loving in Ibsen's *Wild Duck*, and also the suicide of Constantin in Chekhov's *The Sea Gull*, who leaves the world to his jaded elders.

It is often suggested, then, by drama, that death is noble, that the great and good are short-lived; they do their deed and go in a configuration of lights; they are stung and pained and misled into death by a world that is far less true at heart, by a world of inferiors who are left with wonder or indifference or tardy knowledge; *they are like giants; they are like gods*