

# *King Lear* and Incest, 1969-2016: *In Media Res*

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## Abstract

The work, *King Lear*, without origin, authenticity, or telos, is always already in process — *in media res*. This essay analyzes one strand of this process in screenshots of six iterations that implicate incest in the work between 1969 and 2016: Stanley Cavell's 1969 essay, "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*" ; the Women's Theatre Group's 1987 *Lear's Daughters*; director Nicholas Hytner's 1990 Royal Shakespeare Company production; director Kristian Levring's 2000 film, *The King is Alive*; Season Three (2006) of the Canadian Television series, *Slings and Arrows*; and the Belarus Free Theatre's production of *King Lear* (2012, 2016). These instances circulate and remediate the work and the motif of incest through each other. As the deeply taboo subject emerges from hiding, the work metamorphoses. Lear is less sympathetic, the daughters are less stereotyped. The domestic, erotic, and political entwine and the work's redemptive qualities are challenged. *King Lear's* mobility is catalyzed as it adapts to the historically changing cultural surround; is appropriated by the talents and ideologies of makers; and is transformed by the multiple affordances of trans-media. Each remediation is shaped by prior instances and re-shaped by future audiences.<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

This essay maps instances when incest becomes part of (alters and is altered by) the "work," *King Lear*, in the half century following the publication of Stanley Cavell's "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*." It builds on and extends Margaret Jane Kidnie's claim (in *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation*) that the Shakespearean work is a "dynamic process that evolves over time in response to the needs and sensibilities of its users" (Kidnie [her italics] 2009, 2).<sup>2</sup> Remediation theory, likewise understanding a work through process and viewer experience, re-focuses Kidnie's analysis by examining how each medium remediates the work as it "appropriates the techniques, forms, and social significance of other media and attempts to rival or refashion them..." (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 65). Later scholars, more compatible with my views, characterize this process as one of "transmediality" or "intermediality," emphasizing not rivalry or erasure but "the persistence of prior affordances within new media" (Cimitile and Rowe 2011,

"Introduction," i; Iyengar 2016, 2). The work is perpetually re-made for new audiences who re-interpret its "aura" (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 75) and then view older iterations through this new lens.

Works are not only shaped by the resources and formal demands of their media. Each iteration is also an adaptation, adapted to and permeated by its own historical, geopolitical, and cultural surround. Each is simultaneously an appropriation, created by the talents and ideologies of its particular makers. But re-, trans-, or inter-mediation are useful terms for me because each signals my central claim: that the work is without origin or telos; it is always already in process. It is never authentic, has nothing to be faithful to, and does not progress. It is, especially today, subject to a "'global kaleidoscope'" of "performances, texts, and criticism traveling from many directions" (Litvin 2011, 2), as well as to prior iterations. Each instance of the work is, in effect, *in media res*.

Here I demonstrate this process with brief screenshots of six moments that implicate incest into the work, *King Lear*, within a delimited historical period, 1969 to 2016: Cavell's 1969 essay; the Women's Theatre Group's 1987 *Lear's Daughters*; Nicholas Hytner's 1990 Royal Shakespeare Company production; Kristian Levring's 2000 film, *The King is Alive*; Season Three (2006) of the Canadian Television series, *Slings and Arrows*; and the Belarus Free Theatre's production of *King Lear* (2012, 2016). These employ the "old" media of text, of theater production, and of film and TV screens to re-mediate the motif of incest and the work through each other.

The deeply taboo subject emerges from hiding and becomes increasingly visible, catalyzed by intersections between the work's adaptation to historical changes in the larger culture, its appropriation by the ideologies of makers, and the multiple affordances of different media. These instances participate in larger trends in the half-century's reproduction of *King Lear* that deny or re-shape redemptive readings, newly attend to and de-stereotype the daughters, withdraw sympathy from Lear, and represent how erotic/domestic power dynamics are integral to political structures. Instances may or may not directly influence or respond to each other. They take their place among many other strands of interpretation. Long after their first appearance, however, each remediation continues to shape recognition and interpretation of the work for subsequent audiences who read, see, or hear of them in classroom, library, theater, or on movie or TV screens or other digital devices.

"The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*": Close Reading and A "*Kind of Love*"

Stanley Cavell's essay first appeared in 1969 as the last chapter in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, concluding that book's analysis of skepticism, and again in 1987, re-contextualized as the opening chapter in Cavell's *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare*. It was influential and controversial then and remains so now — especially for its revelation, then disavowal, of something like incest in the play (see Wheeler 1989 and Strier 2017). Cavell, an ordinary language philosopher, claims that, in the absence of transcendent presence or reliable knowledge of other worlds and minds, knowledge itself must be foregone and others *acknowledged* (Cavell 1969, 324). The tragedy's cause, he claims, is Lear's need for Cordelia to love her father absolutely, his shamed refusal to admit his own love, and his consequent inability to acknowledge Cordelia's own desires and needs.

Incest, unnamed, surfaces momentarily midway through the eighty-five page essay when Cavell remarks:

it can be said that what Lear is ashamed of is not his need for love and his inability to return it but of the *nature* of his love for Cordelia. It is too far from the plain love of father for daughter. Even if we resist seeing in it the love of lovers, it is at least incompatible with the idea of her having any (other) lover. (1969, 299)

The tentative suggestion of a mutually incestuous love, shocking at the time, is immediately remediated: "We do not care whether the *kind* of love felt between these two is forbidden according to man's lights" (1969, 300). Who is "we," one now wonders?

Cavell's adventurous essay concludes with a traditional mid-century interpretation characteristic of Maynard Mack or even of A. C. Bradley. Lear is blameless (1969, 303); Cordelia is a willing participant: "all her words are words of love; to love is all she knows how to do. That is her problem and the cause of the tragedy of *King Lear*" (1969, 292). Her Christ-like sacrifice is also the play's "hope" (1969, 292, 302).<sup>3</sup> Cavell's failure to acknowledge the full implications of his penetrating insight, say for Cordelia, is enabled by two other silences: "the theme of politics" is deliberately eschewed and sexuality's role in the play is occluded (Cavell 1969, 295-296; Wheeler 1989, 154).

Cavell's refusal to name or grapple with incest is unsurprising — indeed commonplace — in its historical context. When the essay was first written, the subject — and even the word itself — went unspoken: "incest is not the taboo, speaking about it is" (Doane and Hodges 2001, 1). When spoken, the daughter was regularly blamed for being the provocative instigator, and the father was defended (Herman and Hirschman 1981, 36-42). But by the seventies, developments embryonic in the upheavals of the sixties allowed father/daughter incest and its power dynamics to become

visible in Anglo-American culture. These include the turn to theory and resultant "suspicious" interpretations of texts; the continuing "sexual revolution" with its acknowledgment of hitherto unspoken aspects of sexuality; and the feminist movement that validated women's stories of desire and sexual abuse.

Recovered stories of father/daughter incest soon proliferated in consciousness-raising groups and in print. Studies analyzed incest as the epitome of patriarchal power: "Father-daughter incest is not only the type of incest most frequently reported but also represents a paradigm of female sexual victimization. The relationship between father and daughter, adult male and female child, is one of the most unequal relationships imaginable" (Herman and Hirschman 1981, 4). Publicizing incest became a communal way to challenge and weaken the power of patriarchy — a pre-internet "reckoning" like that engendered through the #metoo movement's exposure of rape and sexual assault today. But then, as now, only certain victims' stories were told and those were often disbelieved and discredited.<sup>4</sup>

### *Lear's Daughters: Stage Adaptation: The Personal Is the Political*

*Lear's Daughters*, a socialist feminist adaptation of the play communally written and staged by the British Women's Theatre Group (WTG) in 1987, is a symbolic, post-modernist prequel to *King Lear* that performs this culturally concurrent incest discourse. In accord with the feminist mantra of the era, "the personal is the political," the play uncovers father/daughter (and King/servant) incest to expose how patriarchal dominance, sexual exploitation, and political tyranny secure each other. The work unfolds in fourteen fragments, narrated contrapuntally and contradictorily by the daughters as well as by the androgynous Fool and the nurse (who together ventriloquize the absent King and dead Queen). Although the protagonist daughters' stories *are* the play, the three remain, as the title insists, *Lear's*: produced, exploited, and destroyed by him. Incest, a never-named "secret," emerges gradually, partially, and retroactively — as ever. The prequel's last scene overlaps *King Lear's* first; it appropriates characters, themes, imagery and plot to produce *King Lear* as *its* sequel.

Although the work was conceived as a theater production, it continues to be most broadly circulated and consumed as a text analyzed by students and teachers in classrooms and by scholars in articles. The many students with whom I have read this play — or seen it in a local production — regularly claim they will never understand the work, *King Lear*, in the same way again. Their experience and mine confirm my central claim that the work is ever mobile.<sup>5</sup>

Each daughter's opening monologue imagines her individual creativity, sensuality, and identity, but these are successively scoured away. The Queen we learn was worked and ultimately "fuck[ed]" to death by the King seeking a son (*Lear's Daughters* 1991, 55). The daughters, craving

their father's power and touch, become rivals for his "love." Acquiring it is euphemized as "going downstairs" (1991, 29-30, 56-57, 67), and leads to each's "collapse" (scene 10, 53. scene 11, 61. scene 12, 65).

In scene 10, the Fool, playing Lear, demands that Cordelia "dance for Daddy" and calls her "pretty chick" and "my peach." She struggles to resist "tongues" and "bulging eyes" and spectators' "cheering" by declaring she is "tired," is "too big," is "not your baby" and finally: "No I don't want to. Cordelia not want to be Daddy's girl. (Cordelia collapses on floor)" (1991, 52-53).

In scene 12, Regan, confined to the castle since her mother's death three months earlier, confesses that she is expecting a (wanted) baby in "seven months' time": "I have taken everything, everything that I can feel or touch" (1991, 60). But Goneril teaches her that she is merchandise who must be "bred" and makes her abort the child. Terrified, Regan asks, "Will it take long?" and the Nurse answers, "No, I don't think so" (61). The painfully staged abortion of Lear's child stands in for incest. It ironically results in a stillborn boy, and Regan "collapses to the floor" (61).

Goneril seeks her Father's power and rule. In scene 10, we learn that in his room full of gold he "whispered, 'When you are Queen, this will be yours, This will be our secret — just you and me — and you mustn't tell.' Then he put his hand (*silence*) on my shoulder." But later "he pushed me away to kiss Cordelia" (57). Seeing Regan's abortion, the audience understands, in retrospect, that Goneril also had an (un-staged) abortion, hinted at by an earlier identical exchange when Goneril "(*holds her stomach*). Cries" and asks, "Will it take long?" and Regan answers, "No, I don't think so" (scene 8, 43).

Lear's incest exploits and destroys generation and reproduction, not only domestic and biological, but also political, economic, and environmental — as in Nanny's symbolic narrative of the Pied Piper who steals the kingdom's children. The Fool and the nurse, though "paid" employees of Lear, also "pay" when their bodies and reproductive capacities are exploited. The Fool parodies the endogamous reproduction incest produces by pulling a "fool doll" from beneath its clothes (scene 14, 67). After the daughters leave, the Fool takes their place: "That very night the Fool went downstairs, stood on the table, and began its turn," swallowing Lear's money, a payment for 103 kisses (scene 14, 67-68). Nanny, refusing Lear's "pieces of silver," reminds us she had to abandon her own child to nurse Lear's, but hints that she may have exchanged them — his son for her daughter (scene 10, 45-47). The Fool's rejected topic for the pivotal scene 10, ironically titled "Investment," is "Nanny tells all about her love life" (51), leaving one final secret repressed.

The sisters' cruel final monologues, as they prepare to fight for the crown that the Fool tosses and to step into *King Lear's* first scene, anticipate their actions in that play. *Lear's Daughters* re-frames the work by hinting at Lear's abuse to account sympathetically for the rivalry, erotic need,

and murderous rage that the three daughters unleash in *King Lear*. This version, like all others, does not, cannot "replace" or "annihilate" *King Lear*, as Lynne Bradley suggests (2010, 227, 235). Instead it passes it on, re-formed, offering one template for its ongoing process.

Various motifs from this eighties theater adaptation are visible in the following decades of the work's transmission, remediated in accord with the shifting discourse of incest and the particular demands of different media. By the late eighties and nineties, the emphasis of incest discourse has shifted from politicized critique of the violator's perfidy to an emphasis on the victim's personal trauma (resulting in dissociation, numbness, sexual dysfunction, inability to thrive). Healing is accomplished when incest is remembered and narrated and grieved (Doane and Hodges 2001, chapters 4, 5). This strand is most popularly represented in Jane Smiley's 1991 novel, *A Thousand Acres*, and in the 1997 film based on it. Like *A Thousand Acres*, the British theater production I will discuss next, mounted just before the novel was published, focuses on the family's unraveling.

*King Lear*, dir. Nicholas Hytner, Royal Shakespeare Company:  
Mainstream Theatre, Birth Order and Dysfunctional Families

Nicholas Hytner's RSC production was one of three well-known productions of *King Lear* playing in London and Stratford in the summer of 1990; the others were directed by Kenneth Branagh at his Renaissance Theatre Company and by Deborah Warner at the National. All three were debated, criticized, and defended. But most critics agreed that each emphasized the psychology of the family and the causes and consequences of disrupted bonds between parents and children while downplaying the work's political and cosmic resonances. Such concurrent productions may be partly a matter of theatrical fashion, partly a residue of the dominance in the seventies and eighties in the American and British academies of feminist and psychoanalytic criticism of Shakespeare, often focused on marriage and family. Also, in Britain, the Thatcherite government, an object of critique in *Lear's Daughters* a few years earlier (Gearhart 2012), was losing power, its consensus fraying amidst IRA bombings, riots, and economic decline.

Nicholas Hytner said that his 1990 Royal Shakespeare Company *King Lear* was "about the Family," "about us." Like the prequel, it asks how the sisters "have become what they are like" (quoted in Reynolds 1991, 246). Like the other British *Lears* that summer (and like Cavell's essay and the novel *A Thousand Acres*) the production emphasized the "domestic" over the "political" dimensions of the work (Nightingale 1997, 235). The daughters, as in the WTG play, are Lear's, positioned by their birth order within a destructive family configuration shaped by the father's incestuous need.

Within such a family, the three sisters were individualized. They were neither 'just' good nor 'just' bad. Goneril and Regan were neither blamed nor exonerated (Hytner, quoted in Reynolds 1991, 246). Since this mainstream theater production necessarily could not stage incest or its stand-in, abortion, it represented the motif indirectly. It dramatized perversely eroticized family dynamics by means of subtle, suggestive gestures and interactions, blocking, and stage tableaux.

King Lear (John Woods) is large, powerful, and volatile. His mercurial combination of brutal control over his daughters and desperate dependence on them is everywhere apparent in his violent rages and curses and his collapses into helplessness. As Carol Rutter aptly notes, although Woods' Lear is "infantilized to a bairn-hood that left him plaintively grasping for his daughter's maternal love, he was yet fiercely vigorous when he got them in his arms and made his daughters their mother to his evidently incestuous marital desire" (1997, 182).

Each of the daughters, as in *Lear's Daughters*, has agency to choose a response to their father's voracious need. In their desperate love and hate they now seek, now reject their father's "love" in accord with their desires and designated roles. Estelle Kohler's Goneril, the eldest, taking her mother's place, is her father's "consort," shown proudly co-hosting the opening ritual with him (Smallwood 1991, 352). Like Goneril in the feminist adaptation, she seeks Lear's favor to share his power and possessions. But she also draws pity when the gestures of the performance manifest her bitter childlessness, highlighting incest's legacy of reproductive barrenness as *Lear's Daughters* does. She "wince[s]" when Lear bequeaths her third to "thine and Albany's issue," and later throws herself desperately on Edmund, urging him, "Conceive," while placing his hand on her stomach (Smallwood 1991, 352).

Sally Dexter's Regan, the overlooked middle child, is sensual like her *Lear's Daughters* counterpart. Her need for her father and rage at his insufficient love unhinge her. Alone with Lear in 2.4, when he has fled from Goneril, she rocks him in her arms but when Goneril's trumpet is heard announcing her arrival, Lear grabs Regan hard, "as though taking her hostage," and she fights free to run and embrace Goneril (Rutter 1997, 202).

Regan's eroticized love and hate for her father is grotesquely displaced onto Gloucester in the scene of his blinding (3.7). In her flimsy nightgown, she is seductively vulnerable and mindlessly cruel. She viciously questions Gloucester, demanding that he "speak" as Lear demanded of her. After his eye is put out, she loses control, screaming, giggling, ecstatically slicing open the servant who stabs Cornwall. Then she rushes toward Gloucester as if to put out the second eye but veers off. Later, when Gloucester, eyes bloodied, is still bound in his chair, she embraces him from behind and sensually caresses his face. As he staggers off stage, she disconsolately follows him to the door as if wishing to go with him.

Cordelia (Alex Kingston) defiantly challenges Lear from the start. In the first scene, as the older sisters declare their love as commanded, Cordelia is "being caressed by an adoring papa" (Smallwood 1991, 352). Loving and resisting, she performs the "two voices" the character evokes in *Lear's Daughters*, choosing resistance. She flees Lear's demand for love far downstage and right, defiantly flinging her asides directly to the audience. When she returns to declare the limited duty she owes, she kneels to Lear, he kisses her lips, and she pushes him forcefully away. Cordelia is "in some ways the strongest of the three sisters" (Nightingale 1997, 235).

When Cordelia returns, her reunion with her father is troubled, the scene unusually bleak. The customary white robes of Lear and Cordelia are replaced: Lear, in a wheelchair, is in black, and Cordelia wears a practical dark sweater vest over jodhpur-like trousers, her hair starkly pulled back. Cordelia is resigned as well as tender, and Lear remains dazed for much of the scene. When she asks his benediction, she kneels, kissing him on the lips. Lear, following his recognition of her as "my child, Cordelia," kisses her still more passionately on the lips. Family dynamics reestablish themselves, with Cordelia no longer resisting.

In the final scene, Lear's re-possession of Cordelia is disturbing. He carries in her limp contorted body and drops her carelessly on the bare floor, center stage, arms and legs akimbo, head awkwardly on a riser. With the dead bodies of Goneril and Regan produced, the stage positions of the dead sisters and Lear mirror those in the love test. Lear is, devastatingly, back in control. Speaking his final speeches, he lies beside Cordelia's sprawled dead body, her skirt hiked up, her shirt open, a bit of bra showing. He embraces and caresses her and, as he dies, "in a violent gesture of possession, [...] Lear pulled Cordelia's dead body on top of him so that she covered him with her death [...] a grotesque parody of an erotic embrace" (Rutter 1997, 215).

My next instances are produced on large and small screens in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The cultural conditions I sketched at the beginning of the essay remain salient. Incest and sexual exploitation are still hidden. But more often now, abuse is eventually revealed and is widely publicized through multiple media. Public outcry against coercive sexuality has burgeoned and broadened to condemn domestic assault, rape, child abuse and pornography, workplace sexual abuse, and harassment. Cover-ups in patriarchal institutions outside the family — the Catholic Church, the Boy Scouts, the military, the university, the workplace, and the entertainment world among others — are regularly exposed and sometimes even prosecuted — especially since the advent of the #metoo movement in 2018.

These cultural developments seep into the iterations of *King Lear* that I examine next. The Danish film, *The King is Alive*, and the Canadian Broadcast Company TV series, *Slings and Arrows*,



trans-mediate *King Lear* on screen. Each one challenges the colonization of its own national art institutions by the American corporate power exercised through Hollywood movies, musicals, or TV shows. In particular, each work exploits the resources of the theater-within-film genre by interpolating into its large or small screen the process of theater production: script, line readings, rehearsals, and fragments of performances of *King Lear*.

As is characteristic of this popular genre, fungible exchanges of meaning occur between the frame narrative and the staged *King Lear* within; these mirror — and model — the exchanges that take place between the work and its cultural surround. To accomplish their ends, each work self-reflexively explores the affordances, techniques, and practices of competing media by alluding to or including them. The potentials of the *Lear* story, the motif of incest, and the intermedial affordances re-mediate each other.<sup>6</sup> Incest emerges at both its most suggestive and benign and at its most visible and devastating.

### *The King is Alive: Play within Film on DVD: Doubled and Merged Roles*

A decade after Hytner's production, Kristian Levring's 2000 Danish film "refashion[s]" incest (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 65) and "resuscitates" (Calbi 2013, 40) the work, *King Lear*, within a post-colonial narrative of privileged European and American travelers stranded in the Namibian desert. Its film medium is emphasized by its self-conscious adherence to the rules of the Dogme95 manifesto (see its "Vows of Chastity," reproduced in Cartelli and Rowe 2007, 146). These rules enforce what are in effect "original" film practices. The film eschews all contemporary technology: artificial light, sound, tracking shots, constructed sets, brought-in props. It employs hand-held cameras and natural light and sound on a single desert location. The techniques are employed, according to Dogme Vows, to "force the truth" out of characters and settings (quoted in Cartelli and Rowe 2007, 146).

This search for truth is doubled when the travelers — by necessity, not choice — rehearse *King Lear* according to (reinvented) early modern theater practices in order to "keep spirits up" and to test whether man is more than a "poor bare forked animal" (Levring 2000, scene 7). We watch Lear emerge through a theater production in-process. As in the renaissance, actors rehearse outdoors — in the blinding desert sun and howling wind. They learn and practice their lines from "rolls," long scrolls of each individual part, handwritten on the back of pasted-together film scripts. Translating text to a modern sound medium, they tape-record lines to play them back. They gradually move off script as they begin rehearsing and re-rehearsing particular scenes with other actors.

The affordances of film, theater, and *Lear* text remediate each other. The scorching desert sun, howling wind, and blowing sand produced by daylight-only Dogme rules results in a hostile

screen setting and performance *mise-en-scène* that exacerbate the film and play characters' terrible ordeal. The re-cycling of the well-known film techniques used in Peter Brook's 1971 *King Lear* film — including jump cuts, single characters at the edge of or partially outside the frame, barely visible scenes, endless screeching wind — contributes that film's bleak nihilism to this one and exacerbates the characters' estrangement from their pasts, from each other, from themselves.

As film and play within take on each other's coloration to interpret each other's conflicts and narratives, they provide a microcosm of the larger work of intermediality in the work's process. Both the work's main Lear family plot and the Gloucester family subplot fission as identifications between film and play characters multiply or merge. The film offers (at least) two Lears, two Cordelias, and two potential interpretations, upending simple narratives of nihilism or redemption.

Henry (David Bradley), a former actor, writes down *King Lear* from memory, directs it, and takes on the title role when the first Lear actor collapses from DTs. Henry is first identified as a loving, grieving father when we hear his tape-recorded voice remembering his own estranged daughter, regretting his failure to "think about" her and resolving to "imagine her life" (Levring 2000, scene 8). In scene 10, Henry's grief inflects his rehearsal rendition of Lear's renunciation of Cordelia and his textual emendations (underlined; Arden text in parentheses):

Here I disclaim all my paternal care,  
Proximity (propinquity) and property of blood,  
 And as a stranger to my heart and me  
 Hold thee, from this, for ever. The barbarous Cronus (Scythian)  
 Or he that makes his generation messes  
 To gouge his appetite, shall to my bosom  
 Be as well neighbored, pitied, and relieved,  
 As thou my sometime daughter...  
 So be my grave my peace, as here I take (give)  
 Her father's heart from her!

(1.1.114-121, 125-6)

Henry conveys not rage (a commonplace interpretation) but pain and guilt through his line emphases, his textual changes, and his breakdown in tears, which the film augments with inset shots of stunned onlookers. His voice cracks on "sometime daughter." He painfully draws out "for ever," substitutes "proximity" (what he lacks) for "propinquity," compares himself not with a "Scythian" but with "Cronus" (who ate his own children), and "*takes*" rather than "*gives*" his heart from her.

Gina can only play Cordelia, however, if she convinces the reluctant Charles (David Calder) to play Gloucester. Charles (with a king's name) is the oldest traveler. He is domineering, cruelly judgmental, and estranged from all. His son, Paul, like Gloucester's loving son, Edgar, seeks his father's love and is rebuffed. He acts out in the film the sensual and moral flaws that Lear and Gloucester share, blurring customary distinctions between them. He will rehearse Gloucester only if Gina will "do a deal" with "payment on demand;" only if he can "fuck her till this madness ends." This exchange re-figures Cordelia's with Lear, of her declared love in exchange for his land. Charles demands sex in exchange for Gina's opportunity to achieve artistic self-expression. Gina/Cordelia's "sacrifice," as Charles calls it (Levring 2000, scene 9), re-mediate *King Lear*.

In scene 11 (titled, tellingly, "Love of a Thankless Child" on DVD liner notes), incestuous rape, hitherto unseen, is visible up close and at length. Charles, naked and on top, thrusts and groans while Gina screams and screams, her expression agonized. Charles's grandiose post-coital monologue extolls his power, amazing virility, and true "love," ignoring her revulsion. The scene enacts Charles's/Lear's need for control and their brutally possessive misogyny and contempt for women's sexual parts: "there's hell, there's darkness, / there is the sulphurous pit" (4.6.129-30). The rape also gives Gina the power to speak, to perform Cordelia's role movingly, and, dying, to denounce Charles.

Catherine, Goneril-like, driven mad with jealousy by Gina's acting and her intimacy with Henry, dents cans of carrots to poison her rival. Gina, so ill from vomiting that she cannot walk, still finds the strength to puncture Charles's nauseating self-regard. She taunts him as an "old Letch," tells him he made her "want to puke," and excoriates his terrible cruelty. Charles visibly ages and shrinks but then takes grotesque revenge by urinating on Gina's face to complete her death. In a shot from behind we see Charles's clothed body standing astride her. We watch the stream of urine, hear Gina's three slight gasps/gulps, watch her feet jerk, then jump cut to a shot of her dead face (scene 19). Charles strips, does pushups, shaves, and carefully dons his suit and tie before hanging himself in pride and abjection. Below his dangling body, Catherine keens and Henry weeps over Gina's death.

The film's ending scene (19) offers some faint hints of amelioration. The remaining characters huddle in a circle illuminated by a bonfire. Through lines appropriated from Lear's final scene, they acknowledge responsibility, beg and bestow forgiveness, and mourn Cordelia's death. In the film's last lines, Henry, with Gina's body stretched out beside him, tenderly speaks Lear's last lines to her: "I might have saved her; now she's gone forever. / Cordelia, Cordelia" (5.3.272-73). He has no illusion that "she lives" and is interrupted not by dying but — abruptly and anticlimactically — by the arrival of a busload of African rescuers. One Lear is dead; another is alive.

*Slings and Arrows*: Play within TV Series on  
DVD: Domestic and Institutional Quarrels

Levring's film appropriation pursues its own film aesthetic and its linked anti-Hollywood, anti-colonial agenda to make visible, as did *Lear's Daughters*, the vicious sexual and political corruption and consequent barrenness in *King Lear*. It also hints at the potential for self-knowledge and reconciliation in and through the play. That theme is central to the third and final season of *Slings and Arrows*, a Canadian Broadcasting Company 2006 workplace sitcom whose venue is the New Burbage Festival, a tender parody of Canada's Stratford Shakespeare Festival.

The season's six episodes record the arduous process of mounting a production of *King Lear* from first table reading through the final, one-off performance. The production is threatened by rival media — the venue's competing musical and American corporate entertainment — and by the company's and cast's internecine battles and breakdowns: "Shakespearean theatre, like *Lear* [and the actor who plays him], is difficult, mad, and moribund" (Osborne 2011, 3). As exchanges of meaning between screen narrative and play-in-process within unfold, the sitcom characters (and the TV audience) learn to interpret *King Lear* and their personal and institutional conflicts and renewals through each other. Inevitably the final "live" theater production's vitality and pathos, re-mediated through the TV screen, revive the potency of *King Lear* and of company members. Professional and erotic coercion threaten but are banished by the happy ending of the season and the series.

In *The King Is Alive*, aspects of *Lear* are apparent in multiple film characters. Here another Charles, Charles Kingman, "is *Lear*": he lives out and performs the character's dual potentials. Kingman is a famous aging Canadian actor (performed by William Hutt, likewise a well-known aging Canadian actor and Stratford Festival regular). Charles longs to play *Lear* before his imminent death from cancer. He is frail and benevolent, and he garners sympathy, especially from his director, Geoffrey Tennant (Paul Gross), who vows to keep his secret and help him achieve his wish. But mismanaged cancer medication, the heroin he takes as pain-killer and stimulant, and his own impotent arrogance lead to rages and collapses. His increasingly abusive behavior toward the women in the cast — Ellen, playing Regan (Martha Burns), Barbara, playing Goneril (Janet Bailey), and Sophie, playing Cordelia (Sarah Polley) — is unrestrained by Geoffrey, his enabler.

Of course, no incest or rape is screened in a TV series seeking a broad audience. However, Charles's/*Lear*'s verbal and physical workplace abuse is eroticized by innuendos and shot angles, and within the context of a season in which "getting it up" is equated with theatrical potency. Director Geoffrey Tennant's erectile dysfunction represents his loss of vocation, and Richard (Mark

McKinney), the devalued Festival "numbers man," gets laid and is nicknamed "Big Dick" after helping mount "East Hastings," the Festival's terrible yet wildly successful musical about a junkie whore.

In several episodes, juxtaposed scenes represent contrasting aspects of Charles and contradictory potentials in *Lear*. Setting, lighting, costumes, grooming, and shot angles all reinforce these shifts. In episode 1, we first meet a twinkly eyed, impeccably groomed Charles wearing a bright green sweater, cheerfully directing elderly nursing home residents in an endearing rehearsal of Bottom and Titania falling in love (episode 1, scene 6). In stark contrast is the ominously scored concluding scene (1, 7). Charles, attired in dark brown, face white and drawn, wearily enters his barely lit, darkly furnished room, takes a bag from his suitcase, prepares heroin on a spoon, shoots up, and groans as he collapses on his bed.

In episode 2, juxtaposed Charles/*Lear* potentials emerge from the first table reading and rehearsals. Charles provides the cast with a poignant interpretation of King *Lear*'s movement toward self-knowledge. But when introduced to the three actresses, he demeans each one's body and career. Of Sophie, the scared ingénue playing Cordelia, he demands how much she weighs, fearing he won't be able to carry her (diminutive) body in the final scene. He declares Ellen's acting forgettable and claims only Barbara's blackness makes her memorable, later calling her a "cow" (2, 4).

In early rehearsals, he patronizingly lectures Ellen and Barbara, veteran Shakespeare actors, on speaking blank verse. He repeatedly denigrates Sophie's voice, pace, and delivery. As they rehearse the recognition scene, her Cordelia lovingly kneels to his *Lear* and asks, "do you know me, Sir?" He erupts harshly, "Girl, will you learn your lines" (2, 7).

As Charles's rehearsal attacks grow nastier, the women, like the characters they play, find courage to resist, further enraging him. In episode 3, when Charles is shakily rehearsing the opening scene, he speaks over Cordelia's first aside, then accuses Sophie of "jumping" on his line, claims (again) he can't "understand her," and calls her "Goneril." Instead of collapsing as earlier, she retorts, "This has nothing to do with me" and yells, "if you are going to blame someone for your own senility at least figure out who the fuck they are playing" (3, 7). Later, Barbara comments to Ellen that Charles is "all over Sophie" (5, 6).

The climax of Charles's abuse and its most eroticized expression occurs in episode 5, during an onstage rehearsal of Act 2 scene 2, with Ellen playing Regan and a stand-in for Goneril. When the daughters viciously strip *Lear* of his followers, Charles /*Lear* delivers in Ellen's face a terrifying rendition of "Oh Reason not the need" (2.4. 265-285). The scene is shot mostly from behind *Lear* to magnify his ferocity and Ellen's terror. Yelling "Why nature needs not what thou gorgeous wear'st"

and advancing on her, he rips off the lace overlay of her bodice (2.4 453-475). Shaken, Ellen falters and backs away: "we didn't rehearse this." He comes after her, shouting, "You unnatural hags, I will have such revenges on you both," and shoves her backward (2.4.280). Lear's successive lines are punctuated with three more shoves, each harder than the last, until she falls, groaning, to the floor. Twice she struggles to stand and is forced back down.

Shaken, Ellen escapes and later rages at Geoffrey that "he molested me in front of the entire company," and she quits their relationship and the play. The cast scatters, professional and personal relationships broken. The musical moves to the main stage and the *King Lear* production is cancelled.

Of course, as the conventional sitcom structure and the genre of theater in process within film demand, the finale in episode 6 brings forgiveness and reconciliation all round (Mazer 2009). Charles goes into remission, the cast's estrangements are healed, and sexual and theatrical potency are restored through the final unauthorized triumphant production of *King Lear*. Before the performance, Charles, beautiful and beneficent, asks the cast to forgive him and thanks them for sacrificing their jobs to enable his dying wish. He and Sophie, grinning broadly, exchange a joke: "Keep up the pace or I'll smoke you, girl." "You're on, old man" (6.6).

The single illicit performance in a church basement without special lighting, sound, and minimal storm effects and props is endorsed when framed by shots of the warm approval of cast members in wings and the rapt, weeping audience on folding chairs out front. Two extended scenes, extensively re-shaped from earlier rehearsals, sum up the healing message of *King Lear* to the TV audience. As Lear and Cordelia are reconciled, she no longer kneels submissively in front of him but tenderly embraces his arm as he lovingly declares her to be "my child, Cordelia" and asks forgiveness. In the final scene, Lear's howls resound as he carries Cordelia's body through the audience to the stage; both are in flowing white robes. The concluding beautiful tableau shows Lear tenderly embracing Cordelia's dead body and caressing her face as he dies blissfully. The scene echoes the final tableau of a frail beatific white-clad Lear, performed by Lawrence Olivier in Michael Elliot's 1983 film production, who also dies embracing Cordelia.

Moments after the exuberant curtain call, Charles dies contentedly in his dressing room. In the last scene of the series, the Shakespeare cast, now jobless but reconciled and fulfilled, celebrate the marriage of Geoffrey and Ellen in their favorite pub. *King Lear* is re-interpreted and live theater is revitalized, re-mediated as a process through the TV series.

The Belarus Free Theatre's *King Lear*, 2012, 2016: The Political Is the Personal

Like *Lear's Daughters*, the Belarus Free Theatre's Brechtian production of *King Lear*, defiantly performed in Belarusian (with sparse super-titles in Chicago), deploys incest politically. The deed is integral to the troupe's searing critique of Belarus's ruthless Soviet-style dictatorship. The company's publicity, program notes, actor biographies, and interviews with cast members recount their exile from Belarus, where company founders and members have lost jobs, been banned from performing, detained, or jailed. (They still do pop-up underground performances there.) The 2016 Chicago Shakespeare Theater playbill notes that this production of *Lear* "draws on the resonances between Lear's fractured country and the contemporary states created after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, and draws parallels between Lear and Lukashenko, the self-appointed 'Daddy' of Belarus and leader of the last dictatorship in Europe for the last twenty-one years." Songs, dance, bodily performance, and *mise-en-scène* expose how tyrannical power maims and brutalizes citizens who internalize and re-enact its violence, often by means of erotic abuse.

Coercive sexuality is integral to the destructive calculus of extortion and compliance that marks all human relations in this production. The company's co-founder Natalia Kaliada explains: "When you live in a suppressed society, many things happen, but one is that a culture of sexual violence develops and grows very fast and this is what we explore" (quoted in Zaiontz 2013, 202). Disability symbolizes the effects of physical, sexual, and political violence in the production. When the whole cast assembles in Act One as audience to Lear's staged spectacle, many are maimed. An incontinent Gloucester (Pavel Radak-Haradnitski) is a paraplegic in a wheelchair who viciously brandishes a belt as whip. Kent (Dzianis Tarasenska), also paraplegic, wheels himself on a small cart. Edmund (Kiryl Kanstantsinau) shoots up. The King of France (Maryna Sazonava) is blind and bent double with age, disgusting Cordelia. Only Lear (Aleh Sidorchyk), after straightening up from the crouch in which he enters and pulling off his white wig, is powerful and sexy, the large black metal gauntlet on his right hand the expression of his tyrannical power.

Goneril (Yana Rusakevich) and Regan (Maryia Yurevich), in contemporary mini-dresses, energetically perform their vows of love in sensual song and dance routines, "a striptease," one reviewer says (Dickson 2012, 123). When Lear rewards them with full lingering kisses on the mouth, the onstage onlookers applaud. In contrast, Cordelia (Victoria Biran), her asides excised, is distinctively dressed in Eastern European "peasant" attire (a long full-skirted white embroidered dress, headdress, and red boots). She performs a mocking athletic parody of her sisters' lewdness. Her insolence is met by Lear's punch on the nose.

Eroticism and violence coalesce repeatedly throughout. In Act Two, Regan and Goneril compete to strip Lear of followers by waltzing him dizzily about until, cursing, he snatches up both together and frighteningly twirls them around and around, fur coats flying. Gloucester jams

Edmund's head into his own crotch, and the Fool performs fellatio on his own trombone. In Act Five, underneath the roiling red cloth representing the battle are glimpses of fighting, of mangled bodies, and of Edmund and Regan copulating, his hand clenching her throat.

Most shockingly, the imagined idyll of "Come let's away to prison" is replaced by an interpolated scene of Lear and Cordelia in prison, seated back to back, as menacing hooded guards interrogate them, catalog their possessions, then hang Cordelia. Kicking away her stool, the guards hoist her up, arms akimbo, legs spread eagled. She convulses, half naked in the guards' arms, her death an eroticized spectacle. Lear does not try to save her.<sup>7</sup>

Paternal and political exploitation converge here, as in *Lear's Daughters*, to destroy reproduction and deny a future to family and nation. Both instantiations, along with Hytner's production, show Lear's curse of sterility on Goneril playing out more broadly. In the Belarus production, Lear enters in the first scene pushing a pram containing a suitcase that is filled with dirt, the land he bequeaths. He dumps out the dirt into the skirts of Goneril and Regan, who, returning to their husbands, hitch their dirt-filled skirts up to their waists so they look pregnant — or as if simulating pregnancy. Albany (Yuriy Dalivelya) even approvingly strokes Goneril's dirt-belly.

Later, on the heath, Lear's crown of weeds is a large bird's nest filled with eggs. He cracks them deliberately one by one on the stage, madly signifying destroyed fertility and futurity. In the final scene, as in the first, all the characters (dead or alive) are again seated on side benches. Again Lear pushes in a pram from stage right, now with the disjointed puppet-like body of dead Cordelia sprawled over it. Lear speaks his last speeches quietly to her, propping her up in pram to sit opposite him, as if in intimate colloquy. Just before he dies, he kisses her full on the lips, then, dying, slumps over on top of her. Cavell's "*kind of love*" is no longer hidden and no longer benign.

## Conclusion

It may seem that the process I have been tracing has reached some sort of conclusion. But that is not the case. The re-mediations of *King Lear* through the motif of incest that I trace from 1969 to 2016 are but a handful of screenshots within a tiny historical window in the unending and multifaceted process of this work from its prehistory into its future. Centuries ago the motif was available in Senecan tragedy, in chronicle histories, and in *King Leir*, parts of the cultural surround out of which portions of *King Lear* gradually converged (Lynne Bradley 2010, 11-31 ; McCabe 1993, esp. 171-190); Quilligan 2005, esp. 213-235). The work metamorphosed from multiple texts to ideas to words to scripts to rolls to rehearsals to staged performances and into multiple print versions: three Quartos and the First Folio and more.



Incest has appeared in multiple guises, hints, and displacements; for example, in such twentieth-century adaptations as Gordon Bottomley's prequel, *King Lear's Wife* (1923), Edward Bond's *Lear* (1971), and Howard Barker's *Seven Lears* (1989), all discussed by Lynne Bradley (2010, 99-108, chapter 3). Kordecki and Koskinen introduce the topic repeatedly in their feminist interpretations of each scene in *Re-visioning Lear's Daughters* (2010, see especially 59, notes 2-5, and the many other citations of incest in the index). Jean-Luc Godard's controversial 1987 film, *King Lear*, includes only fragments of the text and three characters from the play, but Don Learo and Cordelia remain central, and Cordelia's hotel bedsheets are found covered in blood. Norman Mailer and his daughter Kate, first chosen for the main roles, quit the film supposedly because of suggested incest. Many other adaptations, productions, and works of criticism, mostly unknown to me, have engaged the motif — or will. Many more will not, because the strand that I trace here is but one of many that continue to re-mediate the play.

In the five decades that I treat, the conditions I sketched at the beginning of the essay remain salient, although incest is now but one of the kinds of sexual abuse brought belatedly into the light. As I have shown, the incest motif has expanded its reach from Lear and Cordelia to all three daughters to the interpretation of the whole play. Through the implications of the motif, Lear often is less pitied than feared; the daughters are neither simply good nor simply evil. Interpretation shifts from their compliance to their resistance to their own erotic manipulations; from the domestic to the cultural to the political. But the process is neither linear nor inevitable.

Each of these instantiations of *King Lear* is adapted to fit a particular historical moment. Each speaks from a particular geopolitical locale. Each uses the resources, conventions, and genres of a particular medium. Each is created out of the preoccupations of particular practitioner(s). These include Stanley Cavell's engagement with mid-twentieth century Anglo-American philosophical debates; the Women's Theatre Group's participation in socialist feminist critique of Thatcher's England; Hytner's (and British theater's) commitment to directing family tragedies in which audiences can see themselves; Kristian Levring's commitment to Dogme95 rules and to Danish film purity; *Slings and Arrows'* engagements with Canada's art scene and especially with the Stratford Shakespeare Festival; and the Belarus Free Theatre's stubborn resistance to their country's dictator.

Each of these re-mediations participates in the ever-mobile process of the work, *King Lear*. Especially now, thanks to global networking, many iterations continue to circulate together through time and across geographic and media boundaries, morphing as they are absorbed and put to use in new media by new makers and audiences who are changed by them and, in turn, change them.

## Notes

1. I am grateful to the many colleagues whose astute comments strengthened this essay during its long process of gestation: to leaders and participants in an ISA seminar in 2016 and two SAA seminars in 2018 and 2019 and to Curtis Perry, Julia Saville, Brian Walsh, Margaret Jane Kidnie, and Joseph Valente. Special thanks to Devin Barkley for his expert help capturing screenshots.
2. In an earlier essay on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in process, I discuss Kidnie's claims (Neely 2013, 155-56 and note 2) and explore the minimal components necessary for work recognition (2013, 165-166). My approach here is partly congruous with Douglas Lanier's rhizomatic conception of Shakespeare that likewise emphasizes process and audience and "situates 'his' cultural authority not in the Shakespearean text at all but in the accrued power of Shakespearean adaptation, the multiple changing lines of force we and previous cultures have labeled 'Shakespeare...'" (Lanier 2014, 29). Shakespeare, who dominates Lanier's essay, is absent from mine.
3. To sustain his idealistic identification with Lear, Cavell imagines Cordelia as a compliant powerless child, "young" and "least" (1969, 292), and denies that she is or could be "defiant": "The idea of a defiant *small* girl seems grotesque, as an idea of Cordelia" (1969, 292, 295). Cavell's fantasized Cordelia often materializes in stage productions and films.
4. Judith Herman's book was a landmark in the emergence of incest in feminist activism. Janice Doane and Devon Hodges usefully trace the discourse's history from its political uses in the seventies (as in Toni Morrison's 1970 *The Bluest Eye*) to its later emphasis on individual trauma and recovery in the eighties.
5. I cite *Lear's Daughters* from a collection edited by Gabriele Griffin and Elaine Aston (1991, 19-69). The play is also available in Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier's popular anthology of Shakespeare adaptations (2000, 215-232). Elizabeth Klett directed a graduate/undergraduate student production at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign in 2001 that I have revisited on video. A production by the Yellow Earth Theater is available online at MIT Global Shakespeares. Although I have consumed this play by multiple means, my interpretation is text-derived and has emerged out of classroom discussions occurring between 1995 and 2011.
6. Stephen Purcell's 2016 essay on staged performances of *King Lear* within film, TV, and fiction, including *The King is Dead* and *Slings & Arrows*, quantitatively demonstrates that seven of the top nine *King Lear* passages rehearsed, recited, or performed in these involve Lear speeches — and three of the top four passages treated are from key scenes between Lear and his daughters.

7. Zaiontz describes the moment as a "radical visual gestus" where Cordelia "connotes through her movements the possibility of a double brutality, rape and murder at the hands of the state" (2013, 202).

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