

## Rulership in Early Modern England: Shakespeare's *King Lear* in Context

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**Judit MUDRICZKI.** *Shakespeare's Art of Poesy in King Lear. An Emblematic Mirror of Governance on the Jacobean Stage.* Budapest – Paris: Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary – L'Harmattan Publishing, 2020. 115 p. + bibliography.

William Shakespeare's *King Lear* is not only a popular stage play, frequently and continuously performed since the early seventeenth century, but has also been discussed in numerous books and articles with a strictly scholarly focus, as well as in essays which use the playtext as a springboard for discussing philosophical or other intellectual issues. This essayistic approach characterizes, for instance, early twentieth-century Shakespeare scholars from A.C. Bradley<sup>1</sup> to G. Wilson Knight,<sup>2</sup> and lingers in Jan Kott's famous *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*,<sup>3</sup> Ted Hughes's rather imaginative *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*,<sup>4</sup> or Simon Palfrey's more recent *Poor Tom. Living King Lear*.<sup>5</sup> Judit Mudriczki positions her research

at the other end of the spectrum, and promises rigorous scholarly acumen, philological precision and logic; however, despite its many inspiring insights and merits, the monograph does not always meet such expectations.

Although at the very beginning Mudriczki declares that "this book is the revised and edited version of the PhD dissertation defended in 2010,"<sup>6</sup> the revision leaves much to be desired. A PhD dissertation and its revised version in a published monograph are not cast in the same mould. First of all, the scholarly achievements of the decade that elapsed between 2010 and 2020 are hardly taken into account; in addition, editing and revising errors remained in the published book. For instance, the references to added emphases, "coloured green, blue, and red" in the comparative appendix of the quarto and folio texts of a scene lose meaning in black and white typography, together with other markings (underlined lines) that receive no explanation in the main body of the text.<sup>7</sup> With careful editing and proofreading, the book might have escaped such embarrassing errors.

The book focuses on the printed version of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, which came out in 1608 and is known as the 'Pied Bull Quar-

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<sup>1</sup> A.C. BRADLEY, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Macmillan, 1904).

<sup>2</sup> G. Wilson KNIGHT, *The Wheel of Fire. Interpretations of Shakespeare's Tragedy* (Cleveland, New York: Meridian Books, 1930).

<sup>3</sup> Jan KOTT, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (London: Methuen, 1964).

<sup>4</sup> Ted HUGHES, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Simon PALFREY, *Poor Tom. Living King Lear* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014).

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<sup>6</sup> MUDRICZKI Judit, *Shakespeare's Art of Poesy in King Lear. An Emblematic Mirror of Governance on the Jacobean Stage* (Budapest – Paris: Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary – L'Harmattan Publishing, 2020), 7.

<sup>7</sup> "Appendix. The conflated texts of the 1608 quarto and the folio", MUDRICZKI, *Shakespeare's Art of Poesy...*, 84–86.

to.' This is a laudable and clear starting point, since the two extant textual versions of Shakespeare's *King Lear* (the 1608 quarto and the 1623 First Folio texts) already fostered much scholarly discussion and editing dilemmas, with by now classical works in the field like *The Division of the Kingdoms*.<sup>8</sup> These philological and canonised axioms are mentioned and used in a relevant way by Mudriczki, attesting to her knowledge of such questions concerning Shakespeare's play. However, this scholarly acumen seems to disappear on occasion, when other contemporary sources are discussed and enter into a dialogue with *King Lear*. For instance, the earlier *King Leir* play, which forms an important and integral part of the argumentation in Mudriczki's book, was published with a new introductory essay by Tiffany Stern already in 2002, which scholarly edition must have been taken into account.<sup>9</sup> One may or may not agree with Stern's proposition that Shakespeare wrote his version of the Lear story earlier than the publication of the *Leir* quarto in 1605, making this latter publication a printer's advertising hoax, capitalising on the King's Men successful new Lear story.<sup>10</sup> This claim is supported by the 'best guess' date of 1605 as for the writing of *King Lear* by Martin Wiggins in *British Drama 1533–1642: A Catalogue*, which is the most recent and trustworthy guide regarding dates of early modern drama.<sup>11</sup> It is not to be disputed that *The*

*True Chronicle Historie of King Leir* came earlier than Shakespeare's *King Lear*, since we have a record of a performance, and an entry for a planned publication for *King Leir*, both in 1594,<sup>12</sup> therefore Shakespeare must have known this play from theatrical productions before writing his own version, even if one does not accept Stern's and Wiggins's suggestion of the first performances of *King Lear* preceding the publication of the *King Leir* quarto. However, such issues should be addressed (at least in passing) in a book that is so much focused on Shakespeare's contemporary sources and influences.

Shakespeare scholars, if they consider the early modern context, like Judit Mudriczki, tread on uneven and only partially charted terrain. There is little hard evidence concerning specific dates or facts related to the thriving theatrical world of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In order to avoid making easily refutable claims, one must first clarify and bear in mind how complicated the traffic of ideas and motifs was in early modern print and theatre, and adhere to the necessary scholarly rigour of positioning one's claims on the spectrum of the possible, the plausible, and the proba-

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IX. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011–2018).

<sup>12</sup> Philip Henslowe's *Diary* records that 'Kinge leare' was staged twice by the Queen's and Earl of Sussex's Men in April 1594, and the entry of 14 May 1594 in the Stationers' Register has 'Leire Kinge of England and his Three Daughters', as quoted in R. A. FOAKES, "Introduction", William SHAKESPEARE, *King Lear*, Arden 3 (London: Thomson Learning, 2005, editorial material 1997), 90. Foakes also agrees with Stern that the 26 November 1607 entry in the Stationers' Register for Shakespeare's version as well as the detailed title page of the 1608 published quarto suggest a marketing ploy on part of the printer-publisher to make the 'new' play simultaneously similar to and different from the 'old' one. (Ibid.)

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<sup>8</sup> *The Division of the Kingdoms. Shakespeare's Two Versions of King Lear*, ed by Gary TAYLOR, Michael WARREN (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> ANON., *King Leir. Globe Quartos*, ed by Tiffany STERN (London: Routledge, 2022). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203063484>

<sup>10</sup> Tiffany Stern as quoted by Jeffrey KAHAN, "Introduction", *King Lear. New Critical Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 89.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203090084>

<sup>11</sup> Martin WIGGINS, Catherine RICHARDSON, *British Drama 1533–1642: A Catalogue. Vol. I-*

ble.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, Mudriczki's repeated claim that the very first performance of *King Lear* took place in an elite setting, on St Stephen's Day, 1606 in Whitehall for a royal audience<sup>14</sup> takes a marketing ploy at face value; thus, her analysis of the potential implications of the published playtext being specifically suited to fit the performative context of such an elitist first night (enjoying special attention as the first performance after a plague-ridden year, written for a smaller and more intimate stage with 300 people in the audience, St. Stephen's Day being a day of charity, etc.) is, inevitably, based on a faulty premise. No one can tell for certain when and where the first performance of *King Lear* took place, we only have possible and probable indicators, as they are summed up, for instance, by Jeffrey Kahan (whose edited book is cited by Mudriczki in another context). Title pages in quarto editions served as advertising tools, and they can only be taken for fact with extreme caution. They have to be read critically, as, for in-

<sup>13</sup> This clarification of claims as 'the possible', 'the plausible', and 'the probable' is a necessary requirement in contemporary Shakespeare scholarship. The taxonomy was clarified, for instance, in T.G. SCHOONE-JONGEN'S *Shakespeare's Companies: William Shakespeare's Early Career and Acting Companies, 1577–1594* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008) but it has been employed in some form in serious scholarly monographs since 2000s, most recently, in David MCINNIS, *Shakespeare and Lost Plays. Reimagining Drama in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

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<sup>14</sup> "the date given in the Stationers' Register [26 November 1607] and the allusion to the performance on the cover page of the Pied Bull Quarto suggest that Shakespeare's play debuted on stage at the royal court in 1606 during the monarch's winter solace" MUDRICZKI, *Shakespeare's Art of Poesie...*, 13, and later, 29, 115.

stance, Tiffany Stern pointed out in her *Documents of Performance*.<sup>15</sup> For this fact of the early modern print market, corroborated by numerous examples, the title page of the Pied Bull quarto is an often cited one: "M. William Shak-speare: HIS True Chronicle Historie of the life and death of King LEAR and his three Daughters. With the unfortunate life of Edgar, sonne and heire to the Earle of Gloster, and his sullen and assumed humor of TOM of Bedlam: As it was played before the Kings Maieste at Whitehall upon S. Stephans night in Christmas Hollidayes. By his Maiesties seruants playing vsually at the Gloabe on the Bancke-side. London, Printed for Nathaniel Butter, and are to be sold at his shop in Pauls Churchyard at the signe of the Pide Bull neere S. Austins Gate, 1608." Mudriczki accepts every piece of information on this title page as factual evidence, without making the distinction between what is clearly objective information and what is an advertising tool. The phrase "As it was played..." does not necessarily signify a debut performance, rather falls in line with other marketing triggers like "the sullen and assumed humour", the popular comic-madman phrase "Tom o' Bedlam", and the reference to the well-known story of the ancient king with his three daughters. All we can say with certainty is that *King Lear* was performed at both venues, Whitehall Palace and the Globe Theatre, in Shakespeare's lifetime, as supported by other evidence, and it is probable that it was quite new when it entertained the royal audience, probably during the Christmas festivities in 1606–1607, after a plague-ridden year when public theatres were closed for a long time. However, no production – even by professional acting companies – was allowed before the King unless the Master of Revels (then George Buc) had seen a previous performance of it. Although Mudriczki claims, quite correctly,

<sup>15</sup> Tiffany STERN, *Documents of Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

on page 14 that “it is impossible to prove whether the king was present at the performance of *King Lear* or not”, such caution with the plausibility of premises (and analyses built on them) is not exercised consistently throughout the monograph.

The emphasis on the quarto version of *King Lear* is a necessary but not entirely adequate focus for the whole book, which falls into three equally promising parts, after a general introduction of the historical context and an overview of previous scholarship. However, for the most part, this overview relies on canonical *Lear* scholarship up to the 1990s, not taking into consideration recent developments. For instance, Mudriczki simply repeats Urkowitz’s claim from 1980 that the Pied Bull quarto is based on Shakespeare’s manuscript, the so-called ‘foul papers’, while both the monograph itself and later scholarship question the validity of this idea, calling attention to the elements that are characteristic of a performance text put into print with no emendation.<sup>16</sup> Although such an overview of previous scholarship is a necessary feature in a doctoral dissertation, it could have been condensed and brought up to date for the current monograph, to provide more room for the author’s own findings, elaborated in the following three chapters. More significantly, the claims the book makes would have been more nuanced, had performance and repertory studies been taken into account, forming a significant portion of Shakespeare scholarship from Rosalyn Knutson’s important book in 1991<sup>17</sup> through Tiffany Stern’s *Documents of*

<sup>16</sup> In addition, Mudriczki makes two opposing claims on the same page that would need explanation to be reconciled: “based on Shakespeare’s foul papers” and “the text derives from a performed version,” MUDRICZKI, *Shakespeare’s Art of Poesie...*, 11.

<sup>17</sup> Rosalyn KNUTSON, *The Repertory of Shakespeare’s Company 1594–1613* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1991).

*Performance* to Lucy Munro’s recent monograph on the King’s Men repertory.<sup>18</sup>

Each chapter approaches the 1608 quarto of *King Lear* from a different viewpoint: Chapter 1 focuses on “The dramaturgical and theatrical heritage: A contrastive reading of *Magnyfycence*, *King Leir* and *King Lear*”, Chapter 2 relates the poetical and rhetorical elements in Shakespeare’s playtext to a highly influential rhetorical treatise of the age, George Puttenham’s *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), highlighting two scenes, and the last chapter discusses the images of the body in *King Lear* as compared to the political-philosophical concept of the king’s two bodies, which was indeed a highly popular and much contested notion in late medieval and early modern England. All three focal points are relevant and promise new insights, however, they are only loosely held together by the emphasis on the 1608 quarto as the basic text for discussion. The reader would benefit more from such a structure if these three chapters had been connected more consistently, and, for instance, the highly inspiring references to emblems in Chapter 2 had been brought into meaningful dialogue with corporeal imagery discussed in Chapter 3. In addition, the length of the book (only 115 pages) does not allow for detailed and in-depth studies of such complex issues, thus, analyses remain somewhat superficial, by necessity.

The leading idea of the monograph features in the title of the Introduction, declaring *King Lear* as “a dramatized early modern mirror of governance,” citing King James’s own writing in the genre of ‘the mirror of princes’, in modern terms, a ‘guidebook’ for rulers, his *Basilikon Doron*. However, the book fails to discuss either *Basilikon Doron* in more detail or mention the first and most famous proponent of connections between historical royal performances and performed

<sup>18</sup> Lucy MUNRO, *Shakespeare in the Theatre. The King’s Men* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020). <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474262606>

kings in the age: Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*<sup>19</sup> does not even appear in the bibliography. On the other hand, the Introduction aptly summarizes and rightly criticizes the claims of a narrowly minded historicist approach, which would connect the inception of *King Lear* to James I and his personal issues, illnesses, and political problems. The monograph takes a more solid stance and promises to focus on available printed material, first discussing the Lear quarto text "on a macrostructural level" together with other 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century dramatic pieces, then "on a microstructural level", that is, analysing figurative language, and finally from a "theoretical viewpoint", negotiating contemporaneous ideas on governance. Even though I fail to see why dramaturgical elements would create "macrostructure" and tropes "microstructure", the intention to create a logical line of argumentation is acceptable, though the execution is marred by the lack of detailed and in-depth elaboration from each perspective, and by insufficient coherence between the chapters.

The first chapter engages in the comparative discussion of three dramatic texts: John Skelton (1460?–1529), King Henry VIII's court poet's "goodly interlude", *Magnyfycence*, the 1605 *King Leir* quarto and the 1608 *King Lear* quarto, with the aim to establish "an interpretive frame for a historicized understanding of Shakespeare's dramaturgy."<sup>20</sup> While the *Leir* play was undoubtedly close enough to the conception and later playhouse re-formulation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and comparing these two plays is a valid – though often discussed – research question, the choice of Skelton's elite play proves more tenuous. Mudriczki's claim that *Magnyfycence* "was undoubtedly available in print in his [Shakespeare's] life-

time"<sup>21</sup> is based on one scholarly article in 1999 (which I could not get hold of), whereas none of the available studies on the sources and influences of Shakespeare's *King Lear* after 2000 corroborate this, or even mention Skelton. Neither the *Short Title Catalogue* nor *Early English Books Online*, the two scholarly databases of early modern print, know about any printed edition of Skelton's play after 1533, although his other works were more or less continuously published between the 1560s and 1620s.<sup>22</sup> *Magnyfycence* was only performed in court sometime in the 1510s or early 1520s. Therefore, Shakespeare's awareness of *Magnyfycence* after more than 70 years of it being out of print and being never performed in public playhouses is a bold claim. Nevertheless, the comparative reading of an early 16<sup>th</sup> century allegorical morality play, a so-called Tudor interlude for the royal court and an early 17th century play, primarily intended for the public playhouse, may offer valuable insights. This chapter indeed makes very interesting observations, which present the new and innovative elements of this monograph, but a conscientious scholar must first clarify that what is being revealed about the similarities and differences in dramaturgy is educational for us in a historical perspective, but cannot be seen as influence. On the other hand, the "conceptual similarities" discussed are rather general, monarch figures did feature in lots of plays, and even the division of the kingdom appeared in a number of other, more contemporary plays. Nevertheless, what this chapter says about the significance of the mirror motif, of Fortune's wheel, and Poverty warning *Magnyfycence* similarly to

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 25.

<sup>22</sup> The *Short Title Catalogue* (<http://estc.bl.uk>, last accessed 20 November 2022) gives 1530, but the only extant copy as it appears in *Early English Books Online*, printed by J. Rastell, gives 1533, indicating that it is a second edition (<https://www.proquest.com/legacyredirect/ebo>, last accessed 20 November 2022).

<sup>19</sup> Stephen GREENBLATT, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning. From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 21.

Kent warning Lear, etc. is interesting and would be a good starting point for more in-depth analyses. The focus on flattery (and its rhetorical expression) as the main component in the kings' downfall in all three texts offers further valuable insights.

A more dramaturgically-oriented approach emerges in the second part of this chapter, which combines 'good' and 'bad' characters, and calls attention to the figure of the jester. The labelling of characters as good or bad, "attacking" or "protecting royal dignity", however, risks oversimplification, since the figures of Cordelia and the Fool in *King Lear* can hardly conform to such clear-cut distinctions. Categorizing the characters in *King Leir* as representing some moral choice (Leir's daughters, Perillus, Skalliger) or simply entertaining (Mumford, the Mariners) would be more illuminating if they were compared to their Shakespearean counterparts. The jester figure, however, is analysed in more detail in all three plays, although significant viewpoints are missing. The monograph wisely emphasizes and employs classical 'fool studies' by Enid Welsford,<sup>23</sup> David Wiles,<sup>24</sup> and Peter Happé,<sup>25</sup> in discussing the Vice character in pre-Shakespearean drama, however, mentions of Hungarian scholarship in the field are sorely missing, especially since Ágnes Matuska's groundbreaking studies on the Vice figure in interludes and Shakespeare were already published in 2005 and 2008, not to speak of her monograph on

<sup>23</sup> Enid WELSFORD, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1966).

<sup>24</sup> David WILES, *Shakespeare's Clown: Actor and Text in the Elizabethan Playhouse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>25</sup> Peter HAPPE, "Fancy and Foly: The Drama of Fools in *Magnyfycence*", *Comparative Drama* 27, No. 4 (1994): 425–452.

<https://doi.org/10.1353/cdr.1993.0034>

the subject, which came out in 2011.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, Mudriczki's analysis would have benefited tremendously from Indira Ghose's discussion of Lear's Fool regarding the Erasmian *Praise of Folly* context, or considering the concept of the carnival in *King Lear*.<sup>27</sup> Although being not only specific to these three plays but being more generally employed, the dramaturgical elements discussed in Mudriczki's comparative analysis (the use of letters, disguise, suicide attempts, and recoveries) offer an interesting and inspiring take on the texts, one would love to see that in a more elaborated form. In sum, this chapter proves the most inspiring one, even if it could have profited from acknowledging the achievements of the last decades of Shakespeare studies, both in international and Hungarian contexts. Since Mudriczki's monograph discusses early modern texts relating to Shakespeare's play, it would have been essential to address how recent scholarship shifted the focus from an earlier, rather positivistic way of source-hunting to different forms of interaction among early modern works and authors, influencing each other in multiple ways.<sup>28</sup>

The chapter on 'microstructural', that is, rhetorical elements is less satisfactory than the preceding comparative one. Again, phil-

<sup>26</sup> MATUSKA Ágnes, *The Vice-Device. Iago and Lear's Fool as Agents of Representational Crisis* (Szeged: JATE Press, 2011).

<sup>27</sup> Indira GHOSE, "Lear's Fool", in *Shakespeare and Laughter. A cultural history*, 169–208 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008). For the carnivalesque in *King Lear* here and the mock trial scene, see, for instance, Natália PIKLI, "King Lear: Carnival's anti-carnival", in *The Prism of Laughter: Shakespeare's very tragical mirth*, 119–153 (Saarbrücken, VDM Verlag, 2009).

<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, Janet CLARE, *Shakespeare's Stage Traffic. Imitation, Borrowing and Competition in Renaissance Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<https://doi.org/10.1017/cb09781139626934>

ological accuracy leaves much to be desired at the beginning of the chapter: Mudriczki lists several potential claims for George Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie* (only printed editions in 1589) bearing direct influence on Shakespeare, however, she does not clarify her position, and unfortunately does not exclude such obviously false claims as the one that Puttenham might have been Shakespeare's tutor, made by the conspiracy theorist Charles Murrey Willis, a proponent of Shakespeare not having written Shakespeare's works (he proposed that *Venus and Adonis* and the *Rape of Lucrece* was in fact written by Puttenham). Despite such problems, it is quite plausible that Puttenham's popular and frequently used treatise on rhetoric must have been known by Shakespeare to some extent. The following close reading of the love contest and the mock trial offers good and valuable insights regarding the tropes and figurative language dominant in these scenes; however, the allusions to and direct quotes from Puttenham's work do not add anything to the otherwise interesting analysis, merely repeat or rephrase the definition of the specific trope. More interestingly, the chapter discusses the significance and contemporary complexity of such concepts as the 'bond', and includes meaningful references to other relevant contemporary parallels and influences, like *The Tragedy of Gorboduc* (1561),<sup>29</sup> and emblem books depicting hearts and tongues in their representation of flatterers. The elaboration on the 'indecent' of the mock trial scene, however, suffers from a lack of a more informed perspective again,

<sup>29</sup> Being a morality-type play, and first performed before a monarch (Queen Elizabeth I in Whitehall in 1561), *Gorboduc* is a much more plausible influence on Shakespeare than *Magnyfycence*. It also contains the problem of the division of the kingdom, with printed editions in 1565, 1570, 1590 and a recorded performance, for instance, in Dublin in 1601.

failing to recognize the connection between indecent clothing, sumptuary laws, and carnivalesque aspects, or to point out that Puttenham's concept of 'indecent' in rhetoric is worlds apart from the treatment and representation of 'indecent' (both in clothes and behaviour) in the public theatre in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The final chapter on the body politic could be extended into a full-blown monograph alone: the late medieval and early modern concepts of the 'king's two bodies' and the corporeal analogy of the kingdom (with the king being the head, the counselors the eyes, etc.) were indeed highly popular and frequently used in politics and in literature. What can be done in 26 pages, however, is rightfully executed: the chapter clarifies the long and complicated line of thought from Plato to Shakespeare's contemporary, William Camden, and the famous tale of the belly in *Coriolanus* (1608), and even rightfully acknowledges that the 12<sup>th</sup> century author, John of Salisbury's Latin work on the subject might only have been known to Shakespeare via indirect transmission through Camden, Ben Jonson, and others. The chapter then turns to the disintegration of the body politic in the Lear story, and offers illuminating analyses on how different body parts relate to this concept in Shakespeare's 1608 playtext, which discussion could have been made fuller by referring back to the previously mentioned but not elaborated parallels with emblems.

In conclusion, *Shakespeare's Art of Poesy in King Lear* is a valuable introduction to Shakespeare's *King Lear* and its contemporary context regarding significant questions and popular motifs of the time. However, it needs to be read critically, especially concerning philological issues, and the reading of the book must be complemented and reconsidered in the light of recent scholarly achievements in Shakespeare studies.