

LEN BERKMAN

A Beef Stew For Shakespeare: Food for the Journey to Cordelia Lear

WHEN YOUR MIND throws an idea at you, how often do you pause to track its source? How often do you know its source immediately? No matter which or how often, I invariably find the pondering process provocative.

Invited by the Mass Review's editors to trace the origin of my short-story, *Cordelia Lear*, that appears in this journal's current print issue, I can't resist a quick contrast of the decades of *Cordelia Lear's* formative quirks with the virtually instant 'birth' of a full-length play that—with apology for the following pompous metaphor—flew into existence like Athena from the head of Zeus during my wife Joyce's and my overnight stay in the early 1980s at the Manhattan apartment of our dear friends, Susan Yankowitz and Herb Leibowitz—two illustrious writers who, with unstoppable inspiration, would also play catalysts for this year's birthing of *Cordelia Lear*. On that earlier occasion, Susan enlivened our first cup of morning coffee with a twinkling quandary: “In the dream I've just now awakened from, I was dating a man for the very first time after I'd had a mastectomy and reconstructive surgery. I liked him. And so I wondered: After how many dates with him should I confess, ‘These are not my breasts?’” Susan's plays and fiction present relentless such self-probing conundrums.

How can any of us who are likewise unable to shake such darkly comic impulses resist the inspiration to take winding forest paths of our own? The society of the play I turned out in 1984, *These Are Not My Breasts*, sparked an onslaught of curiosity among its audiences that our culture in 2022 has palpably intensified: “How did you,” pop the questions, “come to write a play in which your gender-transitioning characters outnumber the two who stay female from start to finish?” My answer is swift.

By contrast, what I stirred to the surface from within me from

2021 into 2022 as *Cordelia Lear* has been stewing since my earliest teaching experiences at Smith College in 1969. My survey courses dangled before me the chance not simply to link but to pit one classic playwright against another, and therein acquaint students with what, after lengths of undergrad and graduate study of Shakespeare, made me boil, especially given the general curricular-worship of this Bard of Avon's "major" plays. Even in Shakespeare's "lesser" plays, so much deserves applause, but stubborn blindness to the evident flaws in his most admired, most widely performed plays strikes me as an insult to sight. At the very least, public debate (for societal as well as literary/theatrical benefit) is more than warranted.

My splendid Smith colleague, costume designer Kiki Smith, now decades into her professional designing for Shakespeare and Company in Lenox, has always been game for such debate. In the early 1980s, before an audience of roughly one hundred and fifty students, Kiki set up a civilized boxing match between me and the Company's spirited and formidable Founding Artistic Director, Tina Packer—we would debate the merits and demerits of, for starters, *King Lear*. I would say, perhaps arguably, that after ninety excitedly brutal minutes neither of us was down for the count. Naturally, as Tina and I chatted amiably in the aftermath, some of our audience approached us agog: "You're still friends?!?" Why wouldn't we be? Shakespeare was still standing square on his feet, as well.

Across the decades since, all I need do to spark a private or public argument over *Hamlet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Tempest*, et al. is cite productions that thrillingly reveal essential insights that Shakespearean scripts fail to perceive or engineer. Jonathan Miller's London staging of *Merchant* in 1970 provided a startling instance: At the final act's *exeunt*, unguided by the text, the Merchant Shylock's daughter Jessica did not whisk herself offstage with the other cheery members of her cast. After all, in this production, she had to banter through an excruciating stretch of time as the sole on-stage figure to hear, as the audience hears—and, as Shakespeare does not indicate *anyone* hearing—Shylock's agonized, off-stage wailing.

I grew up with professor after professor, critic after critic, engaged in lip-smacking analytic relish of Shakespeare's "controversial problem comedy," including heated charges and defense of its portrayal of Jews. By contrast, Miller directed his exposing light not on Shylock but on Portia—as an unmerciful, bitter, unacknowledged hypocrite.

And Miller staged Jessica as gagged. Whereas all others onstage with her make their traditional, applause-inviting departure, Jessica remained, standing alone, looking at us, her demeanor blocking our applause. I had goosebumps, knowing that Jessica has no further lines, no Shakespearean reason to remain center stage, no scripted means to share with us what she's going through.

In productions I'd seen previously, Jessica blended in with her Christian social universe. In Miller's production, she started to advance downstage, toward a spot where a closing monologue might, in a different play, be expected. And she begins opening her mouth, no longer gagged, to break through the 'invisible fourth wall' that won't truly spring up for centuries . . . to speak to us directly.

Yet, of course, she cannot speak. Right then, right there, the performance curtain crashed down between us and this Jessica who would otherwise tell us the wealth of what Shakespeare ignored in her. In the play's final dramatic sequence, Shakespeare's bald neglect of the humiliated Shylock would never have brought us to the edge of our seats—not with our intense anticipation of what an upright, devoted daughter might feel and express, as she sheds her heritage to join her fatherless culture.

You can tell, I'm sure, that Shakespeare's markedly inconsistent empathy with certain of his key characters makes me seethe. On route back to King Lear, I'll offer my perspective toward that arch murderer Hamlet. As he thrusts his weapon through the arras that conceals an eavesdropper in his mother's bedroom, Hamlet presumes he's at last avenging his father by killing Claudius. When, instead, it's Polonius who falls through the arras fatally wounded, Hamlet is only disappointed, and far from upset that he has murdered a *human being*—albeit a loquacious, often silly, human being—and, too, the protective father of his erstwhile sweetheart.

In 2008, Michael Thalheimer's *Hamlet* at the Thalia Theatre in Hamburg, Germany underscored this complex oversight: In Thalheimer's production the fatally wounded Polonius fell through the arras—bleeding, *alive*, in agony. Hamlet, undistracted, simply resumed his bedroom confrontation with Gertrude—belatedly, off-handedly, registering Polonius's wretched state. (By contrast, we in the audience could not take our eyes off of Polonius as he staggered downstage and onto the stage apron.) As Hamlet—oblivious to moral irony—berated his mother's insidious glide over murder and infidelity, Thalheimer's

production offered us the *would-be* heroic, *would-be* righteous Hamlet, whom we herald as an outright hero at the price of dismissing, as Shakespeare recurrently does, the lives of those who “don’t count.”

Years earlier, assigned by an astute Brooklyn high school teacher of literature to compose “the missing soliloquy or speech” in one of the Shakespeare plays that our class was studying, I chose Polonius’s missing death aria: his grand *Alas I am slain!* opportunity to make one last spectacle of himself—and also a chance to affirm that *none* of us deserves neglect as we gasp for our final breath. We may grant (as Aristotle tried to set in stone) that the structural bedrock of “tragedy” is societal hierarchy, but we are amiss if we overlook that hierarchy’s consequences and costs.

Among our theatrical giants, Shakespeare is hardly alone when he counts on successive generations and cultures to look the other way in the face of atrocity. Aristotle’s own most revered “tragedy,” *Oedipus Rex*, relies on our seeing the significance of an irritated Oedipus who slays a stranger at a crossroads exclusively in terms of that stranger turning out to be Oedipus’s father, King Laius: We are lured to prioritize kinship, not humanity.

Brought up, like the majority of my educated peers, not to shout “THE EMPEROR’S NAKED!” in a crowded theatre, yet also brought up to defend the underdog, the victimized, and the outcast, (to cherish Cinderella over her nasty step-relatives), it still took me far longer than I would wish to spot the voiceless in a crowd and to speak on their behalf. Yet the slow pace of consciousness finding its tongue is ultimately combustive.

Among Shakespeare’s horror show of dismissed key characters, I feel especially heart-wrenching the plight of Cordelia. In my teens—why did I wait?—I could already have given beloved Cordelia her chance to impart what she experiences when both Shakespeare and King Lear kick her out of the crucial mid-section of *King Lear*. Instead, I allowed my unacted-upon compassion and dismay to fester for decades; namely, that Cordelia is deprived of the role that, in Shakespeare’s far more gripping *King Lear* subplot, he grants to Edgar. As King Lear’s expansive trauma deepens, I hit the glass wall on my attempts to see through Shakespeare’s eyes; I cannot find Kent anywhere near as compelling a parallel for Edgar’s “Mad Tom” in Edgar’s helpless disguised devotion to his tortured father as Cordelia remarkably could have striven to be for hers.



Hero Hendrick-Baker (detail) in *Cordelia Lear*. Dir. James Barry, 2022.

Indebted to my research for a soon to be published essay on how select plays divergently portray traumatic experience, I've become increasingly intrigued by what, after its situational onset, overrides or obscures the whirlwind of trauma on stage. Cordelia's prime qualities as a good, earnest, forgiving daughter overshadow the struggle and strategy needed by any of us who are destructively misunderstood by a supremely loved and looming figure in our lives.

Such were concerns throbbing within me when, in June 2021, at a Mystic, Connecticut rendezvous with aforementioned catalyts, Susan Yankowitz and Herb Leibowitz, these two breeders of mischief, with my wife cheering them on, threw down their merry gauntlet: "After all these years of your quarrel with Shakespeare, it's time you detailed for us what you hate about his plays." (They knew I adored his sonnets.)

Over our seaside dinner, I accepted their challenge and I launched into what turned out to be a ninety-minute, oft-counteracted run-down of the Bard's "top misses," something akin to my earlier boxing-ring match with Tina Packer. Age may gentle our minds, in multiple senses: This time round, the seething perceptions of my earlier years, without diminished worth, had acquired a contrapuntal esprit. In volleying back against Susan and Herb's defense of an author I (now more than ever) enjoy seeing defended, I surprised myself in experiencing the feel and fun of throwing mud pies at Shakespeare with playground playmates. I'd retained the still simmering points, but not the heat, of my long-held antipathy.

That summer, after more than two semesters of Covid-era caution

in teaching my Smith College classes via Zoom, I faced the prospect of my writing projects within the summer of 2021 with an unaccustomed degree of exhaustion, as I confronted a more scattered than usual schedule of new-play-development commitments, working, as I was, as dramaturg for multiple theatre company playwrights in NYC and Birmingham, Alabama. Prior to the pandemic, my summer affiliations had been equally busy but more compact, with live-performance new play festivals and in-residence writer retreats. With the solid purpose and shape of her research-already-at-midpoint writing ventures, my wife Joyce offered excellent morning counsel for my anxiety: “Why not a briefer project for now, rather than the panoramic play you feel unready to tackle? What about writing a short-story based on that back-and-forth you had with Susan and Herb?” A sheer button-press and the light blazes. Cordelia Lear joins us at breakfast, springing forth like the genie in Aladdin’s lamp.

I recognized immediately what I wanted, foremost: that Cordelia speak to me. I wanted to hear her account of her childhood travails, even if elements in it differed from Shakespeare’s set-up. After all, only she herself knew what went on inside her and within the world she inhabited. Without overtly complaining about Shakespeare, Cordelia made clear that this writer was merely a nearby neighbor, thriving on castle gossip about her and her family that he chose for profit to spread. Shakespeare had made her older and married. Imagine that. When Mr. Shakespeare, from his cabin window, sees her fleeing from her father’s castle in a storm, she is half-glad he doesn’t rush out to help her. Distraught she doubtless is, but she needs the compassion of more caring and empathic friends. And if she ever gets through the disaster that’s befallen her, it will hardly be incumbent upon her to forgive its source, even if it’s true that her father meets his comeuppance in spades.

In sum, thank you Kiki Smith and Tina Packer, thank you Susan Yankowitz and Herb Leibowitz, thank you Joyce. And thank you Tanya Fernando and Jim Hicks and Q.M. Zhang and Dominic Taylor for giving fourteen-year-old Cordelia Lear shelter from the storm (as Bob Dylan, our era’s more contested Shakespearean idol, once crooned). Especially if Cordelia has remained too upset and shy to come to your door . . . or even yet to realize she has a voice.

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