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**Macready's Triumph:  
The Restoration of *King Lear* to the British Stage**

**Emily Mullin**

2009–2010 Penn Humanities Forum  
Undergraduate Mellon Research Fellowship

### **Macready's Triumph: The Restoration of *King Lear* to the British Stage**

On the evening of January 25, 1838, at the Covent Garden Theatre in London, the curtain opened on the first performance of *King Lear* to restore Shakespeare's original story to the stage. For the first time in over 150 years, under the influence of the tragedian and manager William Charles Macready, the play ended tragically, included Shakespeare's Fool, and refrained from interjecting a romance between Cordelia and Edgar. This performance represents an essential moment in the study of Shakespearean criticism and understanding: until 1838 it was believed that *Lear* could not be represented onstage,<sup>1</sup> that "classical" performances in general were unprofitable,<sup>2</sup> and that the story of *Lear*, in particular, was distasteful to the public.<sup>3</sup> But, while it may appear that Macready's performance broke with all previous tradition, it was the culmination of previous scholarship and theatrical efforts that led it to be produced. That *Lear* was produced in 1838 contributed to its interpretation of the play.

Unfortunately, the 1838 production of *King Lear* has been undervalued by previous scholarship. The general consensus seems to be that while Macready's performance was groundbreaking enough to always deserve mention among the annals of Shakespearean performances, it was not so influential (or Macready so charismatic) to merit a particular interest of its own. Almost every general guide to *King Lear* mentions Macready at least in passing. *Columbia Critical Guides: King Lear* spends a portion of their chapter on Realism discussing the

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Lamb declared in 1811 that "Lear was essentially impossible to be represented onstage" quoted in *Columbia Critical Guides William Shakespeare: King Lear*, ed. Susan Bruce (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 56

<sup>2</sup> This is the main reason William Macready, as an actor, did not get along with Alfred Bunn. See Trewin, J.C. *Mr Macready: A Nineteenth-Century Tragedian and His Theatre*. (London: George G. Harrap & Co., 1955), p. 135

<sup>3</sup> Stone, George Winchester. "Garrick's *King Lear*: A Study in the Temper of the Eighteenth-Century Mind" *Studies in Philology* 45 (October 1964) p. 91

return of the fool as a precursor to realistic philosophy.<sup>4</sup> We find a brief analysis of the production in *Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving*, by George C.D. Odell, that commends it for its restoration of the original story. But, as one small description of many, Odell compresses it almost as much as possible, noting, “I need not weary the reader.”<sup>5</sup> More extensive analyses of Macready’s acting in *Lear* have been written in two different theses from the 1960s, inspired most likely by Peter Brook’s “modern” interpretation of the play. Both analyze Macready’s portrayal of Lear’s character extensively, within the context of his career as an actor.<sup>6</sup> The performance has been underestimated as well. J.S. Bratton, in his article “The Lear of Private Life” names Macready’s production as one of many Victorian productions that “contributed to [*Lear*’s] failure to take effect.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on King Lear*, skips the 1838 production entirely even though it names the 19<sup>th</sup> Century “The Return of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* to the Stage.”<sup>8</sup> Instead, during the section on Macready, it focuses on his 1834 performance of *Lear*, “the first London production... to restore *most* of Shakespeare’s text” [my emphasis].<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, the scholarship on the 1838 production of *Lear*, perhaps as a result of the lack of focus, has been characterized by a general lack of clarity. The lack of distinction between the 1838 and 1834 version that we find in *Routledge* pervades other editions as well; the introduction to the *Norton Critical Edition of King Lear* declares “it was not until 1834 that

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<sup>4</sup> *Columbia Critical Guides*, p. 83-89

<sup>5</sup> Odell, George C.D. *Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving, volume II*. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1920), p. 193-197

<sup>6</sup> Duclos, Albert Joseph. *Actors of King Lear: Their Eras and Interpretations*. Dissertation for the University of Maine (Orono: The University of Maine, 1965); Harris, Arthur John. *King Lear in the Theatre: A Study of the Play through the Performances of Kean, Macready, Irving, Gielgud, and Scofield*. Dissertation for Doctor of Philosophy. (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1966)

<sup>7</sup> Bratton, J.S. “The Lear of Private Life.” *Shakespeare at the Victorian Stage*. ed. Richard Foulkes. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) p. 131

<sup>8</sup> *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on King Lear*. ed. Grace Ippolo. (London: Routledge, 2003) p. 79-80.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

William Macready courageously returned the original play to the stage.”<sup>10</sup> In fact, as we will discuss, Macready’s 1834 production of *Lear* fell just short of the “original play” by not including the Fool. This lack of precision extends to the productions that preceded Macready as well, muddling our understanding of *Lear*’s production development and furthermore, our ability to understand how previous productions may have influenced Macready.

Without focusing precisely on Macready’s *Lear*, we cannot understand in what way it became a defining moment for Shakespeare’s play. Examining the 1838 production of *Lear* and situating it as precisely as possible in its theatrical, critical, and artistic context, reveals the way in which this context played a role in the artistic choices Macready made. By taking into account contemporary nineteenth-century scholarship on *King Lear* and learning from previous productions in its interpretation of the play, Macready’s performance unified two flanks that had been previously divided without apparent hope of reconciliation. Thus, the 1838 production of *King Lear* represents a vital moment in Shakespearean scholarship—the union, however brief, of the scholars and the theatre.



As each generation after Shakespeare added to the general interpretation surrounding *King Lear*, theatre in general became defined by the rapport between the theatre and its critics. Sometimes, the theatre became its own critic, which would happen continuously for *Lear*, as its interpretation became a conglomeration of theatrical and critical understanding. For *Lear*, perhaps the most brazen theatrical critique came in 1681 when Nathum Tate decided to rewrite the play almost entirely.

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<sup>10</sup> *King Lear: Norton Critical Edition*. ed. Grace Ioppolo. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008) p. xiii  
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Emily Mullin, College ‘11

Tate's "revision" of *Lear* was by no means an isolated incident of theatrical vandalism. During the Restoration, many of Shakespeare's plays were rewritten: the plots and language were simplified and condensed under the influence of Neo-Classical Rules. Tate's revision of *Lear* governed the production history of *Lear* for the next century—it was astoundingly popular, effectively replacing Shakespeare's text until Macready brought it back in 1838. The changes Tate made became points of debate for actors and critics, subsequently crystallizing the debate over *Lear*'s interpretation as the century progressed. Thus, the first step towards defining Shakespeare's *Lear* onstage became defying the previous interpretation that had dominated it for so long.

Tate's rendition was based on the principles of Neo-Classicism, specifically the Unities, as well as the predominating Augustan ideals of tragedy.<sup>11</sup> In terms of Neo-Classical rules, the Unity of Action concerned Tate the most. The lack of cohesion between the Lear and Gloucester stories spurred him to invent a romance between Edgar and Cordelia—of which he was immensely proud, lauding it specifically in his introduction to the play.<sup>12</sup> Bringing Edgar and Cordelia together unifies the two plots, creating a Unity of Action, what he terms "Regularity,"<sup>13</sup> not present in Shakespeare. The romance served Tate's other purposes as well—to create a *logical* tragedy in which the motivations of the characters became logical and even admirable.<sup>14</sup>

Tate was displeased by what he termed the "wanting... Probability" of *Lear*. Cordelia has no apparent motivation to not respond "appropriately" to her father, Edgar has no motivation to become Poor Tom of Bedlam, and Lear has no logical explanation for the love test and losing his temper the way he does. In an attempt to give Cordelia and Edgar explicit motivation for their

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<sup>11</sup> *Columbia Critical Guides*, p. 22-23

<sup>12</sup> Tate, Nathum. "The History of King Lear." *Five Restoration Adaptations of Shakespeare*. ed. Christopher Spencer. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965) p. 203

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Columbia Critical Guides*, p. 24

actions, he creates the love intrigue, which explains everything logically. Cordelia refuses to express her love to avoid marrying another man, and Edgar disguises himself to protect Cordelia.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, in order to explain Lear's temperament and later madness, Tate foreshadows it. Just before Lear's entrance, Kent, now Lear's "physician," exclaims "I grieve to see him with such wild starts of passion hourly seiz'd,/As it render Majesty beneath it self."<sup>16</sup> To which Gloucester replies, "Alas! 'tis the Infirmity of his Age,/Yet has his Temper ever been unfixt,/Chol'rick and suddain..."<sup>17</sup> Thus, Lear becomes incarnated not just as an old man, but as one whose temper has defined his character throughout his life, rendering his "majesty beneath its self."<sup>18</sup>

Tate's final change to the play, and perhaps the most substantial, was the ending. He dethroned the tragedy. Lear and Cordelia survive; the piece ends as a romance. The true ending of *King Lear* disturbs many, even today. Tate's discomfort with it can hardly be attributed to his ignorance. A.C. Bradley in his chef-d'oeuvre *Shakespearean Tragedy*, could barely reconcile himself to *Lear's* ending.<sup>19</sup> However, Tate's immediate motivation may be seen through a different understanding of the play than we may have of it today. Tate saw *Lear* as a play about redemption and filial tenderness, and for that reason, saw no necessity in a tragic ending.<sup>20</sup> In this story, the recognition scene, not the deaths of Lear and Cordelia, became the most important

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<sup>15</sup> The idea of using marriage as motivation in *Lear* is not unique to Tate. Prior to Shakespeare, the anonymous author of *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* (1593) was dissatisfied with the lack of motivation in the story. In this version of the play, Lear invents the love test in order to trick Cordelia into marrying the man he has chosen for her because she is adverse to marriage. While there is no current evidence to suggest that Tate was influenced by this version of *Lear*, it is certainly a notable coincidence. *The True Chronicle History of King Leir*. Tudor Facsimilie Texts, 1605. Digitized by Microsoft, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Tate, p. 208 lines 51-53

<sup>17</sup> Tate, p. 208 lines 54-55

<sup>18</sup> Tate, p. 208

<sup>19</sup> *Columbia Critical Guides*, p. 97

<sup>20</sup> Bratton, p.136

scene of the play. Thus, a tragedy would have been counterproductive to the moral he was trying to convey.

Making the play *moral* certainly fit within the context of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Joseph Donohue notes in *The Cambridge History of Theatre*, by the late 1600s, “a society and a theatrical audience were developing which increasingly looked to plays to set examples of refined, morally upright conduct.”<sup>21</sup> Critics and audiences met Tate’s alteration of the ending with approbation, and we might imagine that this *moral* ending stood in the way of *Lear*’s restoration to the stage simply because it was so satisfying. As late as 1774, after Garrick had begun to restore Shakespeare’s text to the play, William Richardson wrote, “[t]he morals of Shakespeare’s plays are, in general, extremely natural and just; yet, why must innocence unnecessarily suffer? Why must the hoary, the venerable Lear be brought with sorrow to the grave? Why must Cordelia perish by an untimely fate?”<sup>22</sup> Thus we can see to what extent almost a century later the audience and critics still approved of Tate’s interpretation.

Though the ending of *Lear* would inhibit its restoration during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, by 1742, David Garrick’s first performance of the play, progress began to be made towards putting Shakespeare back onstage. Garrick’s interpretation of *Lear* and his newfound respect for Shakespeare’s verse contributed to the growing understanding of the play that later inspired Macready to put *Lear* onstage.

The eminent tragedian of England between 1741 and 1776 defined *King Lear* for a generation. From the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century until Garrick’s debut in 1742, *Lear* was performed only 122 times. During Garrick’s nine years as manager of the Drury Lane theatre,

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<sup>21</sup> Donohue, Joseph. “Introduction to Part I 1660-1800” *The Cambridge History of British Theatre*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) p. 16-17.

<sup>22</sup> *Columbia Critical Guides* p. 25

*King Lear* was produced 83 times, and Garrick played in 78 of the performances.<sup>23</sup> Joseph Duclos notes in his thesis, “Garrick’s great success in the role assured the stage life of one of Shakespeare’s greatest plays.”<sup>24</sup>

Garrick’s performance as Lear set the tone for all performances to follow; even Macready considered Garrick’s Lear when he began to construct his own. Thus, in order to understand what *Lear* became in 1838, we should first examine what Lear was in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> Century.

Lear was Garrick’s “chef d’oeuvre.”<sup>25</sup> Garrick as Lear was “a little, old, white haired man, with spindle-shanks, a tottering gait, and great shoes upon his little feet.”<sup>26</sup> His personal take on the character demonstrates a remarkably unique understanding of the famous king:

Lear is certainly a weak man, it is part of his character—violent, old, and weakly fond of his daughters... his weakness proceeds from his age (four score & upwards) and such an old man full of affection, generosity, passion and what not meeting with what he thought an ungrateful return from his best beloved Cordelia, and afterwards real ingratitude from his daughters, an audience must feel his distresses and madness which is the consequences of them. Nor, I think I might go farther, and venture to say that had not the source of his unhappiness proceeded from good qualities carried to excess of folly, but from vices, I really think that the bad part of him would be forgotten in the space of an act, and the *distresses at his years* would become the objects of pity to an audience.<sup>27</sup>

Lear’s weakness, particularly in madness, was incarnated in Garrick’s physicality of him: “He had no sudden starts, no violent gesticulation; his movements were slow and feeble; misery was depicted in his countenance.”<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, Garrick developed this characterization through a fascinating association with those around him. Arthur Murphy, author of *The Life of David Garrick* (1801) explains,

He was used to tell how he acquired the hints that guided him when he began to study this great and difficult part. He was acquainted with a worthy man, who lived in Leman-street, Goodman’s Fields; this friend had an only daughter, about two years old. He stood at his dining-room window, fondling the child and dangling it in his arms, when it was

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<sup>23</sup> Duclos, p. 79

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 85

<sup>25</sup> Macklin quoted Duclos, p. 85

<sup>26</sup> Hill quoted in Duclos, p. 88

<sup>27</sup> Garrick’s Letter to Tighe June 1773 quoted in Stone, p. 102

<sup>28</sup> Murphy, *The Life of David Garrick*, 1801. Quoted in *Columbia Critical Guides*, p. 42.

his misfortune to drop the infant into a flagged area, and killed it on the spot. He remained at his window screaming in agonies of grief. The neighbors flocked to the house, took up the child, and delivered it dead to the unhappy father, who weepy bitterly, and filled the street with lamentations. He lost his senses, and from that moment never recovered his understanding.<sup>29</sup>

Garrick's model for Lear demonstrates that his conception of the character was based on pathos and passivism. Lear's madness comes out of extreme grief, and is manifested (as Garrick portrayed) by a slowing down of the mental processes, not frenzy.

At the beginning of his career, Garrick played Tate's Lear, though he later worked to restore more and more of Shakespeare's original text. He never reached the point, however, where he cut the love story between Edgar and Cordelia, the tragic ending, or added the Fool. His restorations remained purely textual and organizational, changing little of Tate's plot.

George Stone attributes Garrick's conservatism on these points to be purely economic:

“[e]xamination of Garrick's entire connection with the versions of Shakespeare and Tate... demonstrates the dilemma of an eighteenth-century mind caught between an ideal liking for Shakespeare and a canny understanding of box-office appeal.”<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, Garrick's choice to retain the romance between Edgar and Cordelia was proven to be the wisest choice he could have made at the time. On February 20, 1768, George Colman, inspired by Garrick's restorations of Shakespeare, staged an alteration of *King Lear* omitting the romance, though it retained the happy ending and still excluded the Fool. The *Theatrical Review* declared, “[w]e think his having restored the original...is a circumstance not greatly in favour of humanity or delicacy of feeling, since it is now, rather too shocking to be bourne; and the rejecting of the Episode of the loves of Edgar and Cordelia, so happily conceived by Tate, has,

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Stone, p. 91.

beyond all doubt, greatly weakened the Piece.”<sup>31</sup> The critical outrage sunk Coleman’s piece into obscurity. Years later, Macready write, “I believe the elder Colman put out an alteration, but I question whether it was acted; certainly it did not hold its place on the stage.”<sup>32</sup> As Duclos observes, “Tate’s version still appealed to the decorum and sensibility of the eighteenth-century audience.” Thus, despite the progress made during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century in restoring Shakespeare’s text, with regard to *Lear*, it left much to be desired. However, off-stage, Shakespearean criticism was also progressing.

Because the stage version was so different from Shakespeare’s original, despite Garrick’s attempts to restore Shakespearean language, *Lear* criticism became bifurcated; off-stage, critics examined and praised the Shakespeare’s *Lear*, bringing forth theories and interpretations that would influence the theatre during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Despite the fact that Shakespeare’s original *Lear* was never performed onstage, beginning in 1709, the play enjoyed a reasonably popular reception in the multivolume editions of his plays that began to appear about every twenty years.<sup>33</sup> The age of Garrick issued in the age of theatre criticism,<sup>34</sup> so, by end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, critical interpretations of *Lear* were well on their way.

After Garrick’s retirement in 1776, the critics took center stage in *Lear*’s development. Because of King George III’s impending madness, from 1780 until 1820 *Lear* was rarely performed, and banned outright from 1810 until the king’s death in 1820. In some ways, this hiatus in stage production allowed Shakespeare’s *Lear* to gain ground against Tate’s version. But, between 1780 and the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, other factors had changed as well that may have

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Odell, George C.D. *Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving, Volume I*. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1920), p. 381.

<sup>32</sup> Macready quoted in *The King Lear: The New Valrriorum Edition*, eleventh edition (Toronto: General Publishing Company, 2000) p. 478

<sup>33</sup> *King Lear: Norton Critical Edition*, p. xii.

<sup>34</sup> Donohue, p. 30

predisposed the Regency era towards the darker, Shakespearean *King Lear*. Victor Hugo declared, “The nineteenth century has for its august mother the French Revolution... [it] has for family itself, and itself alone. It is characteristic of its revolutionary nature to dispense with ancestors.”<sup>35</sup> In the revolutionary spirit, then, theatre critics began to dispense with the regulations that had governed the theatre throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. The anathema against Tate only grew stronger, even to the point of critiquing Garrick himself for playing Tate’s version. Charles Lamb, the renowned Shakespearean scholar declared, “I am almost disposed to deny to Garrick the merit of being an admirer of Shakespeare. A true lover of his excellences he certainly was not—for any true lover of them have admitted into his matchless scenes such ribald trash as Tate... [has] foisted into the acting [play] of Shakespeare?”<sup>36</sup>

Psychology seemed to be a predominating interest of critics, particularly the episodes of Lear’s madness. The 1780s also saw the rise of interest in the character of the Fool, though within the context of examining Lear’s character.<sup>37</sup> Edward Capell mused in 1780, “The king’s tenderness for his fool... and that fool’s faithfulness and love of his master, and the great height’nings both of the daughters’ unnaturalness and (consequently) of this plays’ effect as a tragedy.”<sup>38</sup> In fact, the passion of the critics for the play’s psychological and philosophical depth led Charles Lamb to declare in 1812,

The Lear of Shakespeare cannot be acted. The contemptible machinery by which they mimic the storm which he goes out in, is not more inadequate to represent the horrors of the real elements, than any actor can be to represent Lear... Lear is essentially impossible to be represented on a stage.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Victor Hugo (1864) quoted in *Columbia Critical Guides*, p. 48

<sup>36</sup> Charles Lamb (1811) quoted in *Columbia Critical Guides*, p. 49

<sup>37</sup> *Columbia Critical Guides*, p. 1

<sup>38</sup> *Columbia* p. 38

<sup>39</sup> Lamb, Charles. “On the Tragedies of Shakespeare” *Bloom’s Shakespeare Through the Ages*. ed. Harold Bloom. (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008) p. 103-4

His opinion that *Lear* did not belong onstage would remain the popular critical opinion, and would be, perhaps, verified, by the subsequent productions of the play—all of which failed to meet the theatrical and intellectual demands.

When *King Lear* officially returned to the stage after King George III's death, Edmund Kean, the passionate, romantic star of the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century stage, resolved to step into Garrick's shoes as the man to take steps towards restoring the original story of *King Lear*. Though the first revival of the play, in 1820 was Tate's version, on February 10, 1823 Kean decided to play *Lear* with the restored tragic ending. Kean had evidently declared his intentions that the audience should "see him over the dead body of Cordelia" even before 1820; the theatre critic Hazlitt goes so far as to suggest that Kean's poor *Lear* in 1820 was acted "out of spite."<sup>40</sup> Kean's restoration of the ending was apparently a personal goal, though he restored little else in the play. The love-story between Edgar and Cordelia remained, and the Fool was still absent. The reviewer from the *John Bull* observed,

We were a good deal disappointed on visiting the theatre to find that no steps had been taken to knock away Tate's *plastering* and restore the original beautiful structure other than concerns the *last act*, and that all the mawkish love-scenes of the bungler were still suffered to encumber the splendid work of the bard.<sup>41</sup>

However, Kean's restoration of the ending was a tremendous step forward for the stage. As Odell notes, "in face of the accumulated opinion of the Eighteenth Century that the death of Lear and Cordelia on the stage 'would never do...' Kean proved that it would."<sup>42</sup> Kean's performance, regardless of its failings, moved the story of *King Lear* towards a full restoration. Furthermore, because Kean's *Lear* was the primary production on stage during Macready's early career, we may assume it had some degree of influence on him.

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<sup>40</sup> Hazlitt, *Hazlitt on Theatre*. ed. William Archer and Robert Lowe. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1895) p. 191

<sup>41</sup> John Bull from February 16, 1823 quoted in Odell, p. 156.

<sup>42</sup> Odell, p. 154

Unfortunately for Kean, despite his attempts at progress, the production itself seems to have been unsuccessful:

Nothing can be more judicious... than restoring the original of our immortal author, and we are quite sure that every man of taste will render thanks to Mr. Kean...but with all this feeling of our own we cannot conceal the fact, that, as a public performance, it was a decided failure.

Kean's figure and general appearance is likely to excite many feelings, but certainly not that of pity... at times the audience were almost in a titter.<sup>43</sup>

Kean's previous 1820 production of *Lear* had been deemed a "failure" as well by some of its more severe critics. Hazlitt condemned Kean's acting of *Lear*, "He did not go the right way about it. He was too violent at first, and too tame afterwards. He sank from unmixed rage to mere dotage... spoken in a fit of drunken choler."<sup>44</sup> Other critics took issue with his visionary scenic undertaking that did not go as planned.<sup>45</sup> Kean was determined to have a realistic storm inside the theatre. Kean envisioned a tempest driven by mechanical effects he had seen demonstrated at a mechanical exhibition in Spring Gardens. Though impractical, it was Kean's prima-donna determination saw the project through. The effect was elaborate: "The scenic trees were composed to distinct boughs which undulated in the wind, each leaf was a separate pendant rustling with the expressive sound of nature itself... by means of vari-coloured screens rotating rapidly before powerful lights, a queer combination of colours was thrown on the stage and on Kean's face."<sup>46</sup> Unfortunately, the storm was so accurate that according to the review in the *Times*, Kean "could scarcely be heard amid the confusion."<sup>47</sup> Whether or not Kean attempted a similar machine-operated storm in his 1823 production, we do not know. However, his passion for utilizing the latest technology in an attempt to reach the depth of *Lear* would be remembered by Macready fifteen years later. At the very least, Macready probably read the cautionary line in

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<sup>43</sup> John Bull from February 16, 1823 quoted in Odell, p. 156.

<sup>44</sup> Hazlitt, p. 193.

<sup>45</sup> Odell, p.165

<sup>46</sup> Raymond quoted in Odell, p. 165

<sup>47</sup> *Times* of April 25, 1820 quoted in Odell, p. 165

the Times Review, “[Kean] should have recollected that it is the bending of Lear’s mind under his wrongs that is the object of interest, and not that of a forest beneath the hurricane.”<sup>48</sup>

Kean’s failings at *King Lear* only seemed to verify Charles Lamb’s definitive statement that *Lear* cannot be acted. Since Garrick, the gap between critics and the stage had only widened. *Lear* had become literary property. Chances are, Kean’s 1823 performance suffered in the reviews not only because of its actual shortcomings but also because of its failure to restore the entirety of the tragedy. While the economical theatre was not prepared to make that leap, the literary theatre critics were. While the theatre refused to restore Shakespeare’s original to the stage, the only way to experience *King Lear* was to read it. Keats’ poem “On sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again” demonstrates to what extent *Lear* had become a solitary, literary experience during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Lamb, too, asserts that only through reading *Lear* will we experience the play: “On the stage we see nothing but corporal infirmities and weakness, the impotence of rage; while we read it, we see not Lear, but we are Lear.”<sup>49</sup>

Given this split between *Lear*’s life as a literary work and theatrical piece, Macready was the ideal actor to unify the two worlds. Although an actor, Macready was also a deeply intellectual literary man. Thus, Charles Lamb’s accusation was addressed by perhaps the only theatrical person capable of doing justice to Shakespeare’s *Lear* onstage: “[a] man who passed his life at odds with the profession he led.”<sup>50</sup> Unlike Garrick, Macready cared more for the theatre as an entity than his own popularity. J.C. Trewin romanticizes in his biography of Macready, “[m]orose, he was the high master of his art; glumly, he saved the theatre.”<sup>51</sup> Although, by this time, as we’ve seen the climate of London had changed—a restoration of

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> *The Journal of William Charles Macready 1832-1851*, ed. J.C. Trewin. (London: Longmans, Green and Co Ltd, 1967) p. xv

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

Shakespeare's *King Lear* was daring, but not necessarily unthinkable. The danger was not so much in doing it, but in not doing it right, as Kean found.

Macready spent his entire life working to elevate the theatre. He explains, "My motives were not altogether mercenary. They were in fact not so. Among my motives the primary one was the wish to elevate my art and to establish an asylum for it."<sup>52</sup> The lack of financial motives gave Macready a freedom that Garrick never had—he could challenge the status quo of the theatre. In doing so, he hoped "to establish a theatre in regard to decorum and taste, worthy of our country, and have in it the plays of our divine Shakespeare, fitly illustrated..."<sup>53</sup> Macready elevated "divine" Shakespeare beyond the pedestal Garrick had placed him on. In a sense, his desire to refine Shakespeare made him more of a Shakespearean critic than a man of the theatre. He detested the rewrites and any attempt to "improve" Shakespeare, particularly when the changes were made by managers in order to make a profit. In 1836, Macready went so far as to attack his manager, Alfred Bunn, for forcing him to play in a truncated version of *Richard III* that ended at Act III. After this episode, which banned him from the Drury Lane Theatre, Macready found that he would be forever dissatisfied with his profession unless he were in control of his own productions.

As an actor, Macready applied his intellectual appreciation of Shakespeare to his credit. He studied his parts intensely and would spend hours simply reading the plays he would be performing. George Vanderhoff, a fellow actor, described him as merging the two styles of the actors that preceded him, Kemble, a studious actor who specialized in elocution, and the passionate Kean: "[h]e tried to blend the classic art of the one with the impulsive intensity of the other; and he overlaid both with an outer-plating of his own, highly artificial and elaborately

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<sup>52</sup> *Macready's Reminiscences, and Selections from his Diaries and Letters Volume II*. ed. Sir Frederick Pollock (London: Macmillan and Co, 1875), p. 114

<sup>53</sup> Pollock, p. 370

formal.”<sup>54</sup> His friends noted that his study allowed him to be “natural, classical, or romantic, according to the part he sustained.”<sup>55</sup> As manager of Covent Garden, he often angered fellow actors by requiring them to rehearse rigorously daily.<sup>56</sup> In his youth, his fellow actors ridiculed him for “acting” during rehearsals that were generally little more than walk-throughs.<sup>57</sup> His own perspective explains his rigorous attention to studying his roles: “I do not feel that I have the talent to recall attention to an art from which amusement can be drawn but by an exertion of the intellect.”<sup>58</sup> In fact, the first chance he had to play *Lear*, in 1820 (a feeble attempt to challenge Kean’s first revival), he turned down because he believed he would not be able to study *Lear* adequately in just a few weeks. Instead, he appeared as Edmund.<sup>59</sup>

After turning down the opportunity in 1820, Macready first appeared as *Lear* in London during the 1834 production at Drury Lane. Trewin describes the performance as “a fairly reasonable version, for though the Fool was still un-restored, he had managed to lop most of Tate’s foolishness, and Shakespeare’s last act was played as it had been a decade before in the Kean-and-Elliston revival.”<sup>60</sup> In fact, it would not be outrageous to assume that Macready had been directly influenced by Kean’s revival of Shakespeare’s tragic last act, particularly given his interest in restoring Shakespeare’s plays. Thus, we see here, the second step towards a complete restoration of Shakespeare’s *Lear*, the love story has finally been cut, and only the Fool remains to be restored—though that omission alone left leaves a considerable amount of text un-spoken onstage. Why Macready stopped closer to Kean’s revival of the last act, instead of striving for a complete restoration at this point in his career is unclear. Certainly, a complete revival was risky;

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<sup>54</sup> George Vanderhoff, quoted in Duclos p.113

<sup>55</sup> French critic quoted by Lady Pollock, *Macready as I Knew Him*. (London: Remington and Co., 1885) p. 101-2

<sup>56</sup> *Journals*, p. xxi

<sup>57</sup> Duclos, p. 116.

<sup>58</sup> *Journals*, p.13

<sup>59</sup> Trewin, p. 60

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, p.103

even when he added the Fool back into the play Macready had doubts about his choice. Harris notes in his thesis that Macready originally believed the Fool to be impossible to restore.<sup>61</sup> It's possible that in this version, he simply chose not to attempt what he deemed impossible.

However, in his diaries, when he writes about his trepidations concerning the Fool, he makes no mention about deciding not to include him in the earlier production. Equally likely, is that in 1834, Macready simply did not have the power to make a decision of that magnitude without the approval of his manager. He was still merely an actor under the thumb of the manager of Drury Lane. As Trewin puts it, "[he] had reached the leadership of the stage only to run up against the unyielding fancy waistcoat of Mr. Bunn."<sup>62</sup> Given that that Fool could be considered the most risky element of Shakespeare's *Lear* to restore (Macready would believe so as well in 1838) the economical Mr. Bunn would doubtless not approve of his appearance in the piece. Certainly, Macready's own lack of influence over productions, specifically his inability to curb cuts to Shakespeare's work, eventually contributed to his decision to become the manager of Covent Garden, and it is not impossible that this fact also led to the omission of the Fool in the 1834 restoration.

On September 30, 1837, Macready opened his first performance as manager of the Covent Garden Theatre in London. In a public address to the house he announced that the "decline of drama, as a branch of English literature [is] a matter of public notoriety; that [he] hoped to advanced it as a branch of national literature and art."<sup>63</sup> Not far away, Alfred Bunn, now Macready's rival, retorted publically that classical plays have always shown heavy losses and contemporary plays heavy gains, so "the public had what it wanted."<sup>64</sup> Throughout the

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<sup>61</sup> Harris, p. 196

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p. 135

season, the two theatres competed publically for audiences; the common rivalry between theatres only spurred by the ideological and personal differences between the two managers. But, by January 1837, it seemed like Bunn was right— Macready announced that Covent Garden had lost £ 3,000. In a daring, and perhaps reckless, decision to try and recuperate losses and jump-start the season in the New Year, Macready announced that he would restore *King Lear* to the stage, “as Shakespeare wrote it, with the character of the Fool, and without the silly manipulation...that had so long disgraced the stage”<sup>65</sup> Thus, *King Lear* became a last hope for Macready’s determined scheme to elevate the theatre and restore Shakespeare to its rightful place on the English stage.



The artistic choices that went into the 1838 production of *King Lear* deserve attention as a way of defining in what way this performance was a keystone moment in *Lear’s* production history. The sheer fact that Macready stuck to Shakespeare’s original plot as much as possible (despite rather judicious textual cuts), removed the love-story and restored the Fool, singles this performance out. But the production itself—Macready’s interpretation of Lear’s character, the illustration of the Fool, and the set design—distinguishes the 1838 *King Lear* as a defining moment that changed the course of the play’s production history. Through the artistic choices made, the performance was able to comment on the contemporary artistic theory, while at the same time define and develop its own critical interpretation of the play.

In the character of Lear, Macready utilized every resource available. Perhaps because, as J.S. Bratton observed, “*King Lear* was very important to him as a symbol of what Shakespeare should be, as opposed to what the theatre had made of the Bard.”<sup>66</sup> In this light, we cannot be

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<sup>65</sup> Trewin, p. 139

<sup>66</sup> Bratton, J.S. “The Lear of Private Life.” p. 128

surprised that Macready turned down his first opportunity to play Lear because he could not be sufficiently prepared in a few weeks. His development of the character relied on all of the intellectual and critical resources we have already discussed as characteristic to Macready. As a result, his Lear never fell into the trap of which Hazlitt accused Kean that “he was too violent at first and too tame afterwards. He sank from unmixed rage to mere dotage.”<sup>67</sup>

Rather than take on the part of Lear on the fit of inspiration, Macready spent a tremendous amount of time studying the part and envisioning its representation onstage.<sup>68</sup> The final product, described by Lady Pollock, shows a great deal of self-control and character analysis:

It developed the insanity of the persecuted old king very gradually; it retained the peculiar character of age...when the passage from a healthy understanding to a disordered one is hastened by any additional weakening of the physical powers. Lear's overwhelming passion in his worn-out frame produced this change.<sup>69</sup>

The *development* that Lady Pollock highlights demonstrates Macready's careful analysis of his part. Macready explains further how he paid attention to his acting, “I was most attentive to... letting the passion rather than the lungs awake the audience.”<sup>70</sup> Both Lady Pollock and Macready mention Lear's passion, an element of the performance that distinguished it from the precedents.

Unlike other portrayals of Lear, Macready's does not begin as a senile old man or a weakened monarch, but as a strong vigorous king whose “overwhelming passion in his worn-out frame...[hastened] the passage from a healthy understanding to a disordered one.” In Macready's interpretation, Lear's passion, insupportable in his old age, causes his madness. Macready, writing to a friend, explains his understanding of Lear, and sheds light on his portrayal of the character:

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<sup>67</sup> Hazlitt, p. 193

<sup>68</sup> Hardy, p. 182. Hardy observes that Macready worked on *Lear* fairly consistently from 1820 until 1838.

<sup>69</sup> Lady Pollock, p. 105

<sup>70</sup> Macready quoted in Duclos, p. 121

Most actors, Garrick, Kemble and Kean among others, seemed to have based their conception of the character on the infirmity usually associated with ‘four score and upwards,’ and have represented the feebleness instead of the vigour of old age. But Lear’s was in truth a ‘lusty winter:’ his language never betrays imbecility of mind or body. He confers his kingdom indeed on ‘younger strengths:’ but there is still sufficient invigorating him [sic] to allow him to ride, to hunt, to run wildly through the fury of the storm, to slay the ruffian who murdered his Cordelia, and to bear about her dead body in his arms... Indeed the towering rage of thought with which his mind dilates identifying the heavens themselves with his griefs, and the power of conceiving such vast imaginings, would seem incompatible with a tottering, trembling frame, and betoken rather one of ‘mighty bone and bold emprise,’ in the outward bearing of a grand old man.”<sup>71</sup>

The passion and vigor Macready found in Lear, contrary to other representations, not only redefined the character for the 19<sup>th</sup> Century audience, but also suggested a different interpretation of the play. Macready conceived of Lear as a king, accustomed to having his wishes followed, accustomed to being always thought of as vigorous.

Macready’s acting particularly touched Charles Dickens. In his review of the performance he noted how Macready showed Lear’s regret of his actions through his regal demeanor: “Mr. Macready’s manner of turning off... with an expression of half impatience, half ill repressed emotion—‘No more of that, I *have noted it well*’—was inexpressibly touching. We saw him, in the secret corner of his heart, still clinging to the memory of her who was used to be his best object, the argument of his praise, balm of his age, ‘most best, most dearest.’”<sup>72</sup>

Macready’s reading of Lear’s line, emphasized by Dickens’ italics illustrates Lear’s custom for giving orders. Even his action onstage, “turning off,” though it also serves the purpose of isolating him with his emotions, serves to dismiss the soldier who delivered the unwelcome news. At the same time, Dickens emphasizes that in this production of *King Lear*, by Act I scene IV (the scene Dickens describes), Lear regrets his actions.

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<sup>71</sup> *Routledge Literary Sourcebook*, p. 79-80

<sup>72</sup> Dickens, Charles. “The Restoration of *King Lear*” *Miscellaneous Papers, Volume I*. (London: Chapman & Hall, Ltd, 1911) p. 79

In *Lear*, as Lady Pollock observed, Macready created a character whose self-conception does not match the reality. His body cannot support his passion. We might see in Macready's interpretation that Lear's giant mistake—disinheriting Cordelia—does not stem from his senility (even passionate), but from his “outward bearing of a grand old man.” In Lear's vigorousness, Macready has given him a tragic flaw—almost as if he is borrowing from classical theatre tradition. Perhaps this is what he is referring to when he writes in his diary after rehearsals that his version of *Lear* is “very striking” to a “classic eye.”<sup>73</sup> Making Lear vigorous makes him conscious of his errors; it means that he can regret them.

We may better understand Macready's interpretation of *Lear* by understanding the critical context he was working in. In addition to the actors who conceived weak *Lears*, each of the critics had their own interpretations of Lear's character, many of which Macready probably read during his study of the play.<sup>74</sup> Hazlitt's observations on *Lear*, from *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* written in 1817, demonstrate what Macready was most likely *not* aiming for in his interpretation: “It is [Lear's] rash haste, his violent impetuosity, his blindness to everything but the dictates of his passions or affections, that produces all his misfortunes, that aggravates his impatience of them, that enforces our pity for him.”<sup>75</sup> Of Hazlitt's observations Macready wrote, “What conceited trash that man has thought to pass upon the public.”<sup>76</sup> Hazlitt characterizes Lear as a child, or perhaps more appropriately, as a selfish, senile old man who is unable to see anything but than his own wants or needs. Hazlitt's pity of Lear is “enforced,” perhaps because when someone is as old and temperamental as he envisions Lear, they must be pitied and can no longer be held accountable for their actions.

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<sup>73</sup> *Journals*, 113.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, p. 13 and p. 249

<sup>75</sup> Hazlitt quoted in *Columbia Critical Guides*, p. 76

<sup>76</sup> *Journals*, p. 13

On the other hand, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a Shakespearean critic Macready respected, conceived of Lear very differently. Lady Pollock tells us that Macready attended all of Coleridge's lectures of Shakespeare, so we can assume Macready would have been familiar with Coleridge's opinions on Lear.<sup>77</sup> Coleridge's analysis forgives more than Hazlitt's, reveling less in Lear's senility and more in his humanity. He blames Lear's misfortunes on "the strange yet by no means unnatural, mixture of selfishness, sensibility, and habit of feeling derived from and fostered by the particular rank and usages of the individual"<sup>78</sup> He does not shy away from addressing old age, either: "[i]n Lear, old age is itself a character, its natural imperfections being increased by lifelong habits of receiving a prompt obedience."<sup>79</sup> Macready's portrayal of Lear embodies these two descriptions fairly closely. Macready mentioned Lear's "outward bearing of a grand old man,"<sup>80</sup> which mimics Coleridge's conviction of rank, and perhaps selfishness as well. Lear's habit of giving orders highlights his "lifelong habit of receiving a prompt obedience," and Dickens' description of Lear clinging to the memory of Cordelia touches the sensibility mentioned by Coleridge. Thus, by creating a "vigorous" Lear, Macready situated his production among the ranks of Shakespearean critics. His conception of Lear became a unique interpretation that participated in the contemporary discussion surrounding Lear's character.

Macready's incarnation of Lear was certainly not the only innovation he brought to *King Lear* onstage. His most notable contribution to the play was the restoration of the Fool, brought back for the first time since Tate. The characterization of the Fool in Macready's performance clearly demonstrates the way in which this production of *King Lear* fit into the contemporary

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<sup>77</sup> Lady Pollock, p. 23

<sup>78</sup> Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Coleridge's Criticism of Shakespeare*. ed. R.A. Foakes. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989) p. 95

<sup>79</sup> Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Notes and Lectures upon Shakespeare Vol. 1* ed. Mrs. H.N. Coleridge (London: William Pickering, p. 1849) p. 199

<sup>80</sup> *Routledge Literary Sourcebook*, p. 80

conception of the play. The Fool, although a new addition, enabled the play to adhere to tradition while at the same time incorporate the new character of Lear that Macready had developed.

Putting the Fool back into the performance of *Lear* was the last element of the play that had to be restored by the time Macready came to the play in 1838. It took a daring tragedian with more concern for theatrical integrity than box-office results to restore him. The Fool had remained excluded from *Lear* for such a length of time for a variety of reasons.

The neo-classical rules that governed Tate demanded the elimination of the Fool in the name of purifying the tragedy. While some of the stringent neo-classical ideals such as Unity of Place and Time came to be questioned in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century, this particular rule, a part of Unity of Action, was still upheld. In the advertisement for his 1768 performance, George Coleman wrote, “I had once some idea of retaining *the Fool*, but after the most serious consideration I was convinced that such a character in a Tragedy would not be endured on the modern stage”<sup>81</sup> Writing in his journal after the first rehearsal of *King Lear* in 1838, Macready expressed similar hesitations with regard to the character of the Fool: “My opinion of the introduction of the Fool is that, like many such terrible contrasts in poetry and painting, in acting representation it will fail of effect; it will either weary and annoy or distract the spectators. I have no hope of it and think that at the last we shall be obliged to dispense with it.”<sup>82</sup> Thus, he illustrates the continuing discomfort with the Fool in 19<sup>th</sup> Century aesthetics. Of course, Macready wrote this after a rehearsal that seemed to have been, judging by his journal entry, very discouraging. A few days later, instead of cutting the Fool, he cut the actor who played the Fool. Thus, we can see Macready, during the process of rehearsals, striving to find a balance

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<sup>81</sup> Odell, p. 380

<sup>82</sup> *Journals*, p. 112

between what he saw as theatrical integrity in the restoration of Shakespeare and character of the Fool whom he did not believe could be restored.

In order to realize his vision of the Fool (and consequentially *King Lear* as a whole) Macready made an unpredictable choice—he cast a woman in the part. He had originally cast Drinkwater Meadows, “a capable, routine actor,” according to Trewin.<sup>83</sup> The second day of rehearsal Meadows was out, having inspired Macready’s belief that the part could not be acted, and Priscilla Horton was in. His decision to cast Priscilla Horton after so few rehearsals shows us Macready’s clear vision of the Fool, and his intentions for *Lear*. He uses the Fool as a comparison to Cordelia in order to heighten the pathos and family drama.



While Macready complained about Meadows, he explained his vision: “a sort of fragile, hectic, beautiful-faced, half-idiot-looking boy.”<sup>84</sup> His friend and fellow actor Bartley suggested that a woman should play the role and Macready “caught at the idea and instantly exclaimed: ‘Miss P. Horton is the very person.’ [He] was delighted at the thought.”<sup>85</sup> Macready’s delight tells us that Priscilla Horton brought very

particular characteristics to her role as the Fool. She was not, in fact, just any actress: renown for her agile dancing and contralto singing voice she was also very young—she had just turned

<sup>83</sup> Trewin, p. 139

<sup>84</sup> *Journals*, 112

<sup>85</sup> *Journals*, 113

twenty two days before rehearsals began. She would later be most remembered for playing Ariel in Macready's *Tempest*. In the drawing of Priscilla as Ariel, we have an image of what Macready's Fool would have been—slender, “fragile,” and certainly, “beautiful-faced.” A review of Priscilla's performance noted, “Her ‘poor fool and knave’ is perhaps not that of Shakespeare... Still hers is a most pleasing performance, giving evidence of deep feelings; and she trills forth the snatches of song with the mingled archness and pathos of their own exquisite simplicity.”<sup>86</sup> Dickens was also quite struck by her performance, declaring it, “as exquisite a performance as the stage has ever boasted.”<sup>87</sup> Today, not many would term the Fool “exquisite.” The phrase seems to be a clue as to what her Fool might have been like—perhaps closer to a witty Ariel than a plainspoken Falstaff.

In casting the Fool as a beautiful girl, Macready's interpretation contrasts significantly with later interpretations of the Fool that are harsher towards his role in the play. In the twentieth century, Peter Brook even went so far as to give the Fool partial responsibility for Lear's madness: “on some level of purposiveness, however repressed, the Fool does labor to destroy Lear's sanity.”<sup>88</sup> Instead, Macready's Fool is meant, in the spirit of contemporary criticism, as a contrast to Lear. And furthermore, the Fool's femininity may have been meant to reference Cordelia and thus heighten the pathos of the family tragedy.

Charles Dickens attests in his review of Macready's *Lear*, “[the Fool] is interwoven with Lear, he is the link that still associates him with Cordelia's love, and the presence of the regal estate he has surrendered.”<sup>89</sup> Dickens, much enamored with the return of the Fool, observes that in this performance, Lear's attachment to the Fool appears deeper than the average relationship

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<sup>86</sup> John Bull Review quoted in Odell, p. 195

<sup>87</sup> Dickens, p. 81

<sup>88</sup> Brooks, p. 313

<sup>89</sup> Dickens, p. 78

between a king and his vassal. When Lear demands his Fool, he is told, “Since my young lady’s going into France, sir, the fool hath much pined away.” Macready’s reaction to this line, his “manner of turning off...—‘No more of that, I *have noted it well*’”<sup>90</sup> highlights his unspoken regret for Cordelia, but Dickens also continues to describe the scene, noting his affection for the Fool: “[i]n the same noble and affecting spirit was his manner of fondling the Fool when he sees him first, and asks him with earnest care, ‘How now, my pretty knave? *How dost thou?*’ Can there be a doubt, after this, that his love for the Fool is associated with Cordelia?”<sup>91</sup> Dickens’ punctuation of Macready’s line most likely represents the way Macready actually spoke. In the play itself, the line is written, “How now, my pretty knave, how dost thou?”<sup>92</sup> The extra question mark that Dickens adds suggests that Macready actually paused as if he were asking a true question, instead of treating “How now, my pretty knave” as a greeting. The italics Dickens adds to “*How dost thou?*” further suggest that Macready slowed down, taking the time to emphasize his question. In this performance, Lear’s line is not merely a friendly “how is it going?” but an inquisitive “*How are you doing?*” When we remember that a delicate twenty-year-old girl plays the Fool, the connection between the Fool and Cordelia becomes even stronger. Macready’s careful “*How dost thou?*” takes on the tone of a worried father who has heard his child is sick.

Samuel Coleridge observed of this scene, “the Fool [is] no comic buffoon to make the groundling laugh...Accordingly, he is *prepared* for—brought into living connection with the pathos of the play, with the sufferings...”<sup>93</sup> Perhaps Macready agreed with Coleridge, and subsequently his interpretation of this scene was, (at least in part) played with the intention of drawing the Fool further into the pathos of the play. Coleridge later speaks of the way in which

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid, p. 79

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> *King Lear: Norton Critical Edition*, p. 23, I.iv.88

<sup>93</sup> Coleridge, *Coleridge’s Criticisms of Shakespeare*, p. 99

the Fool heightens the emotions of the play, “the contrast of the Fool wonderfully heightens the colouring of some of the most painful situations,”<sup>94</sup> which Macready seems to take into account in his construction of the Fool.

Macready uses the visual image of the Fool as a young woman to strengthen the pathos of the play. Given that Macready portrays Lear as conscious and regretful of his actions towards Cordelia as early as the Fool’s first entrance, Priscilla Horton’s physical resemblance to his youthful daughter would heighten the pathos of Lear’s compassion. The actress who played Cordelia, Helen Faucit, was just twenty-one at the time of production, and we can see in the illustration that she had the same slender, “fragile,” structure and delicate features. Thus, in



playing Lear as caring for the Fool, as opposed to being “[blind] to everything but the dictates of his passions or affections”<sup>95</sup> as Hazlitt believed, Macready demonstrates that Lear, though passionate, retains a consciousness of others’ feelings.

Furthermore, in heightening the resemblance onstage between the Fool and Cordelia and in creating an affiliation between the two characters in Lear’s mind, Macready heightens the family drama of *King Lear*. According to J.S. Bratton, “the essential *Lear* [of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century] is a tale

<sup>94</sup> Coleridge, *Notes and Lectures upon Shakespeare Vol. 1*, p. 200-1

<sup>95</sup> Hazlitt quoted in *Columbia Critical Guides*, p. 76

of ‘filial tenderness and parental suffering.’”<sup>96</sup> Bratton blames this interpretation for the “Victorian failure to come to grips with *King Lear*;<sup>97</sup> when the heart of the piece is Lear’s parental anguish, then the resolution of the play becomes the recognition scene, and theatrical intuition says to end the play happily, as Tate, Garrick, and many others did.

Perhaps in other interpretations it may be true that the interest in familial tenderness prevents the audience from appreciating the play, but in Macready’s *Lear*, Lear’s ‘parental suffering’ may have increased the public’s ability to relate to the story. As we have examined, Macready’s conception of Lear’s character was not the weak, unhappy father of previous performances. Instead, he embodied the grandeur of a king—he gives orders and expects to be obeyed. His role as a father, then, becomes just one aspect of his character, not its entirety. The Fool allowed Macready to stray from the familiar conception of Lear as a “weakly fond of his daughters,”<sup>98</sup> while still illustrating Lear’s affection for Cordelia. Through the Fool, the public was able to recognize the Lear they understood from the past, and yet at the same time, learn that the pathos they recognized was heightened in a different, stronger, more regal Lear.

Our final analysis of the 1838 *King Lear* examines Macready’s choices in scenery. Macready’s detailed representations of Shakespeare’s plays proved not only memorable, but defined a new style for Shakespeare. It was, in fact, something very close to what Kean had attempted almost two decades before, except Macready insisted against “[having] the magnificence without the tragedy and the poet...swallowed up in display”<sup>99</sup> Years later, at Macready’s retirement dinner, his friends would remember his legacy as “that brief but glorious time when...by a union of all kindred arts, and the exercise of a taste that was at once gorgeous

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<sup>96</sup> Bratton quoting actor Junius Brutus Booth’s observations on *Lear*, p.132

<sup>97</sup> Bratton, p.131

<sup>98</sup> Garrick’s Letter to Tighe (June 1773) quoted in Stone, p. 102

<sup>99</sup> Macready quoted by Lady Pollock, p. 84

and severe, we saw the genius of Shakespeare properly embodied upon our stage.”<sup>100</sup> *Lear* was one of Macready’s first Shakespearean revivals, and certainly his first big critical success. The scenery, according to the reviews, played no small role in this:

From beginning to end, the scenery of the piece, most of it new, corresponds with the period, and with the circumstances of the text. The castles are heavy, somber, solid; their halls adorned with trophies of the chase and instruments of war; druid circles rise in spectral loneliness out of the heath; and the “dreadful pothor” of the elements is kept up with a verisimilitude which beggars all that we have hitherto seen attempted. Forked lightnings, now vividly illumine the broad horizon, now faintly coruscating in small serpent folds, play in the distance; the sheeted element sweeps over the foreground, and then leaves it in pitchy darkness; and wind and rain howl and rush in ‘tyranny of the open night.’<sup>101</sup>

In this description, we find elements that draw on Kean’s technology—the use of lighting, though Kean relied on “vari-coloured screens rotating rapidly before powerful lights,” and the vastness of nature presented onstage. We also see that Macready seems to have made the most of the technology available to him in the same way Kean did. However, as the author of the review notes, Macready’s representation, “beggars all that we have hitherto seen attempted.” Even Macready, in a rare moment of personal pride termed the scenery “very striking.”<sup>102</sup>

Unlike Kean, who was most interested in the possibility of spectacle, Macready’s intention was “to give Shakespeare all his attributes, to enrich his poetry with scenes worthy of its interpretation, to give his tragedies their due magnificence.”<sup>103</sup> Perhaps the reason the scenery in 1838 was such a success was that Macready only intended it to complement the play, never to stand on its own.

*Lear* adheres to historical realism in a way the 19<sup>th</sup> Century had rarely seen before. Judging by the scenic description, Macready staged the play as a historical piece in Saxon

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<sup>100</sup> Pollock, p. 377

<sup>101</sup> *John Bull review* quoted in Odell, p. 210-211

<sup>102</sup> *Journals*, p.112-113

<sup>103</sup> Macready quoted by Lady Pollock, p. 83

England, like all previous renditions.<sup>104</sup> His attention to detail—the lightning that splits the sky, the sheeted element, the trophies and instruments of war, and the reviewer notes later that the soldiers of Lear are costumed differently than the others—show a commitment to faithful representation beyond Garrick’s Shakespearean costuming and proportional backdrops. It almost reminds us of Kean’s determination to have every individual leaf move during the storm scene. The difference is, in Macready’s production, the purpose is historical realism. However, this realism is so carefully conceptualized, it progresses into the realm of art. Christopher Baugh notes in “Stage Design from Loughterbourg to Poel,” “paradoxically, the urge was, on the one hand, for greater reality, yet at the same time, it was reality composed and structured as pictorial art.”<sup>105</sup> We might see Macready as borrowing from the aesthetics of the picturesque, as well as the historical costuming of Saxon England.

The scenic representation of *Lear*, so carefully planned and designed by Macready, can be seen as a representation of his aesthetic conceptualization of Shakespeare. In a way, it comes as a visual defiance of Lamb’s declaration “Shakespeare cannot be acted.”<sup>106</sup> Macready has created a play in which the images onstage were meant to complement the magnificence of the language. Lamb complained, “[t]he play is beyond all art, as the tamperings with it show:… It must have love-scenes, and a happy-ending… Tate has put his hook in the nostrils of this Leviathan, for Garrick and his followers, the showmen of the scene, to draw the mighty beast about more easily.”<sup>107</sup> Macready removed the “tamperings,” so he must prove that the play is not “beyond all art” as well. And, we must remember, one of Lamb’s main objections of *Lear* onstage was scenic: “The contemptible machinery by which they mimic the storm which he goes

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<sup>104</sup> Bratton, p. 127

<sup>105</sup> Baugh, Christopher. “Stage Design from Loughterbourg to Poel” *The Cambridge History of British Theatre*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) p. 318

<sup>106</sup> Lamb quoted in Brooks, p. 103-4

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

out in is...inadequate to represent the horrors of the real elements...”<sup>108</sup> During Macready’s time, the art of theatre lay in the trappings—the ability to capture reality effectively and demonstrate the ideal of verisimilitude. In *Lear*, perhaps Macready’s most significant contribution was simply proving that it could be done.

The 1838 performance of *Lear* was extraordinarily well received. The play revived the hopes of Covent Garden Theatre, and Macready’s ambitions for Shakespearean restorations, capturing the praise of the critics for the entire season.<sup>109</sup> Though, of course, Macready’s performance, like all performances, had its critics, most of whom complained of Macready’s gradual development of *Lear*’s character and his pathos.<sup>110</sup> Generally, reviews were favorable. The substantial *John Bull* review declared, “[*King Lear* was] commenced with such taste, and so admirably carried into effect by the manager of this theatre. Mr. Macready deserves, and will obtain, the deep respect and gratitude, not only of the playgoing but of the literary world, for his earnest and well-directed zeal to do honour to our nation’s chieftest intellectual pride.”<sup>111</sup> Dickens echoed the respect of the anonymous reviewer: “We never saw any tragedy, in so far as we could judge, affect an audience more deeply than the manner of the whole management of this tragedy of *Lear*. It was, indeed, a triumph for the stage, in an assertion of its highest uses.”<sup>112</sup> Macready himself noted after opening night, “the impression created by *King Lear* seemed to be wide and strong.”<sup>113</sup> As far as he was concerned, he was absolutely correct. His *Lear* would be remembered as “one of [his] greatest performances and was perhaps of all the most universally

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Odell, p. 194

<sup>110</sup> Harris, p. 218

<sup>111</sup> *John Bull review* quoted in Odell, p. 194

<sup>112</sup> Dickens, p. 81

<sup>113</sup> *Journals*, p. 114

admired; its effect upon an audience was immense.”<sup>114</sup> Subsequently, he continued to play Lear for the rest of his career with great success.

As for its effect on the later productions of *King Lear*, Dickens proudly asserts, “Mr. Macready’s success has banished that disgrace [Tate] from the stage for ever.”<sup>115</sup> Odell, writing in 1920 and looking back on the century agrees, “with this production the ghost of Nathum Tate—so far as England, if not America, was concerned—was laid forever” (197). Indeed, when Macready went to see Edwin Forest’s *Lear* in Philadelphia in 1843, it was Tate’s version onstage. We do know, however, that by 1865 the Charles Keans had brought Shakespeare’s original *Lear* to America, with Mrs. Charles Kean playing the Fool to her husband’s Lear.<sup>116</sup>

The generations that followed strove to follow Macready’s example, criticize him, and improve upon the model he provided. In 1845, Samuel Phelps brought a version of *Lear* to the stage that was lauded by critics as the most faithful yet:

We...welcomed Mr. Macready’s revived version of King Lear; but nevertheless, regretted the dislocation of some of the scenes, and the injurious falling of the curtain at the end of the first act on Lear’s curse. We have lived to see all this effectually reformed. King Lear as now performed at this theatre follows the text and order of Shakespeare’s scenes, with some few inevitable omissions, but with no alterations The scene, hitherto omitted, between the King and the Fool, which closes the first act, excels in pathos...The tragedy is, of course, in its restored state, long; but there is a felt progression in it which interests the spectator<sup>117</sup>

The critic notes that the tragedy restored is long, the most likely reason for many of Macready’s judicious cuts, but also that Phelps has refrained from making any of the alterations (in scenic order) that Macready deemed necessary. Perhaps in another desire to be more faithful to the text, Phelp’s Fool was played by a man. Furthermore, Phelps’ production concentrated primarily on

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<sup>114</sup> Lady Pollock, p. 104

<sup>115</sup> Dickens, p. 78

<sup>116</sup> Duclos, p. 121

<sup>117</sup> *The Athenaeum Review* quoted in Odell, p. 273

the textual restoration, paying less attention to the scenery than other productions of the period.<sup>118</sup>

On the other hand, Charles Kean's production of *King Lear* thirteen years after Phelps centered almost entirely around the scenery, taking Macready's concept of historical realism to the next level. After competing against Macready rather ineffectually at Drury Lane during the Covent Garden restoration of *Lear*, by 1858 it was Kean's turn to bring *Lear* to the stage, and he chose to honor Macready's original text, instead of using Phelps' more faithful Shakespearean version. Many of Kean's choices in *Lear*, including several cuts à la Macready, were made in light of his aesthetic values which advanced his version of historical realism. Kean continued the trend started by Macready at the Covent Garden theatre: "[t]o Macready in the 1830s and 1840s and especially to Charles Kean in his management of the Princess's from 1851 to 1859, the solution was to apply more 'archaeological' and historical research, employ more scenic artists and to lavish more money and detailed management upon productions."<sup>119</sup> Furthermore, Charles Kean wasn't just creating scenery for its own sake. Like Macready, he strove to advance the reputation of the theatre: "Kean trusted this diligence and hard work to achieve the respectability that he hoped would lead to the establishment of a national theatre to parallel the National Gallery of Art."<sup>120</sup> Thus, in the decades to follow, the values first espoused by Macready in *King Lear* came to be embraced and advanced by the 19<sup>th</sup> Century stage.

In 1838, William Macready's *King Lear* set the foundation for centuries of *Lear* exploration. His production built upon the innovations and interpretations of Tate, Garrick, and Kean, as well as the multitude of Shakespearean critics who first began to ask questions about

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<sup>118</sup> Odell, p. 273

<sup>119</sup> Baugh, p. 319

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

Shakespeare's original *Lear*. Macready's performance represents a huge advancement in Shakespearean scholarship—the unification of the scholars and the theatrical community, two groups that had up until that point been divided by differences over Shakespeare's text. Macready's ability to comment on the current opinions circulating about *Lear* established the play as piece to be respected onstage as well as off. In doing so, he was not only commenting on the contemporary criticism, but also contributing to it. The 1838 *King Lear* made decisions about the play that a scholarly written opinion simply could not: in the performance, the way in which Shakespeare's lines are read take on the importance of illuminating Lear's character; the actor (in this case, actress) chosen to play the Fool determines the audience's perception of the role; the authenticity of the scenery and the mechanics of the storm scene complemented the text, illuminating the story for the audience in a completely unique fashion. Macready was able to envision Lear as more than a feeble old man—as a vigorous King in “lusty winter.”<sup>121</sup> He recognized the importance of restoring the Fool, and how the Fool could be used to enrich the performance; he strove to visually to “do justice” to Shakespeare's text onstage. In *King Lear*, Macready finally gave the public a glimpse of what the play could look like. We cannot say definitively that without Macready we would never have discovered the magnificence of Lear onstage, but we certainly would have discovered him very differently, and probably at a later date. It took a particular type of actor to combine the criticism and scholarship of Shakespeare and represent it onstage. Thus, perhaps we might say that Macready's greatest triumph in doing *King Lear* was simply defying the most critical scholars and most conservative theatre managers by proving without a doubt that the play *could* be performed onstage, and *would* continue to be performed, so long as there were men brave enough to tackle the part and audiences willing to spend a night at the theatre.

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<sup>121</sup> *Routledge Literary Sourcebook*, p. 79-80

