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CHAPTER ONE

Tales



YOU THINK I won't do it?

Bluffing is one way to commit yourself to something. Of all the bluffs in literature, the most devastatingly childish one occurs at the beginning of *King Lear*.

A king wishes to engineer something complicated involving his domain, his retirement, and his daughters, each in their turn. He bounds onto the stage and without delay sets this into motion. He asks his daughters to publicly profess their love, promising to divvy up his land accordingly. The two older daughters answer with gross flattery, the youngest with reticence. What happens next is what happens when the worst human beings are simply handed the keys to the city.

Something is amiss in Lear's division of the kingdom. Leave aside the practicality of the redistribution itself and, still, something is not right. The eldest daughter, Goneril, goes first; Lear gives her a third of the land. Then his second daughter, Regan, receives the second third. Finally we get to his third daughter, Cordelia, who answers his request to speak with "Nothing, my lord." *Nothing?* he asks. *Nothing*, she responds. *Nothing will*

come of nothing, he quips. Goneril and Regan digest the kingdom between them. Cordelia is exiled.

If Lear wished to base his rewards on their answers, he should have waited for everyone's response before making the assignments. Parceling out the kingdom one third at a time, rather than at the end, reveals the test to be an empty formality, a type of cheating. What tends to happen in these circumstances? What is the causal relationship between "the wish to obtain by one means what can only be had by another," as Blaise Pascal put it, and catastrophic, insatiable cruelty?¹ Within twenty-four hours, it seems, the kingdom is shoddily divided; his loyal servant, the Earl of Kent, exiled, his other servant, the Earl of Gloucester, tricked into grievous mistakes. Everything happens in what the King of France, a suitor for Cordelia and later her husband, calls "a trice of time." Lear had envisioned that in his retirement he would stay with Regan half the time, Goneril the other half. A few days later (certainly not much later) the two older daughters start to pare down his needs. Meanwhile, the Earl of Gloucester also wrongs his own child, Edgar, and effectively casts him into exile. It all happens in no time. Doors are closed on the elderly, leaving them exposed to the elements; the vulnerable become destitute and homeless; a faithful retainer is put in the stocks, his time there arbitrarily extended; an old man's eyes are clawed out, one after the other; a war is fought and quickly ended; a prisoner is spared too late, with no good reason for the delay. A few people devise some way to take someone down a peg, and keep going, because nothing intervenes.

The Romantic critic and poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge was the first to notice something wrong with the opening scene and put it in writing. We don't even need to get as far as the division of the kingdom! Just the first "four or five lines" of the play indicated that the division of the kingdom was "already determined and in all its particulars," a formality that had all of the subsequent tragedy coiled within it.

1. From *Pensées*, no. 151, trans. J. M. Cohen (Penguin Classics, 1961).

Even now I go over this knowledge talismanically, like the Chinese multiplication drills that I learned as a young child. Learning about *Lear*'s illogical setup marked the beginning of my literary-critical consciousness, and the beginning of my ability to process what had happened to my family and the grown-ups around me, the fact that something so large had happened at all. In paying just a little attention to the sequence of actions you could see what might be wrong.

People feel vindicated by the exposé of a pro forma. A test of worthiness has been conducted with the outcome determined in advance, a *fait accompli* that asks only for the ceremony of rubber-stamping. After all, you are calling bullshit when you say that the division of the kingdom is a done deal. Cordelia's refusal to play along speaks truth to one of the worst forms of power, a weak authority hiding a private purpose inside a public one. In Mandarin Chinese Cordelia's temperament might be called *zui ying*, "hard mouth," an image of an unbending will. In making the sounds *zui ying*, the palate is already preparing an invitation to cruelty.

Lear is bluffing, and when his bluff is called he has no choice but to follow through and bring about the worst possible outcome. If he can do it quickly and with force, he reduces the risk of losing face. And when face is still lost, he plays the only card he has left: *I'll make an example out of you. I'll make an example out of all of you*. Citizens of authoritarian regimes might accordingly identify with Cordelia's position. Indeed, who wouldn't identify with Cordelia? What could be more satisfying than to call such a bluff? This is tyrannical power that rewards the most mercenary and hyperbolic, power that puts a gag on those who would call it out. Silencing happens in many ways, but in *Lear* the gag is existential. For the two older daughters, the philosopher and critic Stanley Cavell observed, the task is simple enough; they need only pretend to love where they do not love. But Cordelia isn't simply being asked to say what's not true, what she does not feel. Cavell explains that it is actually worse

than this. For Cordelia, “to *pretend* to love where you really *do* love, is not obviously possible.”

Is reasoning possible here? Cordelia cannot quite play along, either because she cannot grasp unreason when it comes so quickly, or because she doesn’t want to compromise her conscience, or because she doesn’t think it would work. Lear’s bald need is immature, as observed by the early-twentieth-century critic A. C. Bradley, who saw in Lear’s “mere form” “a childish scheme.” Cordelia so angers her father because she, as Bradley puts it, has “put him to open shame.” Moreover, Cordelia couldn’t take her own advice to “love, and be silent.” Forced to speak, she sees a chance to gently correct his mistake. *Look*, Cordelia says, *the math doesn’t check out*: “Why have my sisters husbands if they say they love you all? Haply when I shall wed that lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry half my love with him, half my care and duty.”

Using elementary logic, Cordelia has denied the tyrant his preferred mode of human interaction: a show of love unmarred by dissent, an acceptance of unreason without any balking. She who does not flatter the sovereign is an ancient type that appears across all cultures. In the Chinese world order, truth-telling and governance overlap in harm. Chinese tales, romances, tragedies, philosophies, and histories all tell us that the only end for such a character is a fate worse than death.



In the end, the forthright person-child-statesman can speak only of their love. In Chinese poetics, one’s country becomes the dearest of the dear, endangered by forces from without and within. One’s sovereign becomes the dearest of the dear, a person’s second heart. Around 290 BCE, near the end of the Warring States Period, a minister from Chu was banished to the North. The kingdom of Chu had survived three hundred years of warfare with neighboring states (in a region that would become the

northeast portion of China), but it would soon be crushed by the Qin. This minister, Qu Yuan, had seen it coming. He had been banished once before, a victim of court politics, under the rule of King Huai. He returns from his exile to serve King Huai's son, King Qingxiang. Again, his advice is unheeded, and his reputation slandered. Qu Yuan lived to see King Qingxiang perish in a foreign land as a starving prisoner—one of the most humiliating ends that could befall a sovereign. Qu Yuan knew he was living in the last light of his kingdom. The aptly named “Spring and Autumn” period of history would also now end. Twilight immediately followed new beginnings. New beginnings tumbled straight into twilight.

In the premature twilight of Qu Yuan's life, the kingdom of Qin set neighboring states against one another, and thus began the first dynasty of imperial China. Empire was nigh. With Qin unification would come new forms of brutality, standardization, and human control, as well as new forms of beauty, intelligence, and resplendence. For Qu Yuan, however, it was the end. Sometime after receiving news that the capital city had fallen, Qu Yuan drowned himself in the Miluo River, clutching a heavy stone. In his poem “Beset by Sorrow,” more popularly known as “Encountering Sorrow,” the first Chinese long poem on civic injustice and civic love, he writes:

The months and years wouldn't wait
Spring and autumn kept trading places
seeing plants and trees stripped bare
I feared my fair one's time was short²

“Fair one” refers to many things: his king, his son, his country, himself. The king “saw not my heart / deceived by slander he spurned me,” Qu Yuan laments. But the sovereign's misjudgment *still* does not cause total disillusionment. “Even dismembered,” he

2. This translation of Qu Yuan's *Li Sao* is provided by Red Pine in *A Shaman's Lament: Two Poems by Qu Yuan* (Gray Dog Press, 2001).

writes, “I could not change / for how could I forsake my heart?” How could you pretend to love when you really do love? How could you forsake your heart?



When everything is excessively performative, even love has to overperform just to be able to see itself, even cruelty has to overperform just to be able to see itself.

Obedying some merciless law of physics, Lear’s empty show balloons out and then caves inward. *You want to get real?* ask Goneril and Regan. *You want to get everything down to crude, quantifiable terms? Then let’s get really real. Let’s get really crude.* Lear has arranged to spend his retirement with these two, alternating between their estates. He thinks they’ve also agreed to the upkeep of a hundred soldiers for him. This retinue would help him pass the time but would also keep him from harm. Is that too much to ask? . . . Is it? For Lear it guarantees a modest amount of good company and protection. But one could also argue that a hundred people following you around to provide merriment, if nothing else, is just an empty form, a housekeeping burden. That’s how Goneril and Regan see it. A hundred rabblers to have to attend to in an already unwelcome parental stay? “Men so disordered, so debauched and bold, / That this their court, infected with their manners, / Shows like a riotous inn,” the daughters complain. A hundred people is too many, and so we wish “a little to disquantify your train,” Goneril says to Lear after he’s stayed with her awhile. Come to think of it, fifty people is too many. So is twenty-five. Come to think of it, what have you need of one? It is Regan who delivers this final blow. *You like empty form, my father?* Any last fig leaf of human dignity is just empty form. Being alive itself is just empty form.



What happened in China in the long twentieth century to millions, then to more than a billion people, resembled *Lear's* imagined and actual worlds: a plague, a regime change, political paranoia, persecutions that were religious and theatrical in nature. These particular catastrophes begin in vicious formality and its multiplying effects.

In the course of the twentieth century, Mao Zedong, chairman of the Communist Party of China who led the People's Republic from its establishment in 1949 to his death in 1976, became increasingly paranoid about his own party cadres, and so intensified his internal purges by intensifying nationwide purges. Purges became increasingly theatrical over the three decades of Communist rule, culminating in the hysterically cathartic show trial of the Gang of Four, the Communist Party officials retroactively deemed most responsible for the horrors of the Cultural Revolution. Drop in here and you will find my paternal grandfather, a loyal party member who in the mid-1950s oversaw several units of his county's transportation bureau, a small job in an insignificant town. Because he was a hardworking bureaucrat and came from the "lower-middle peasant" class, this grandfather avoided most of the atrocities of the 1940s and '50s, except a touch of famine. In 1961, however, the party split into two factions. China enacted a new round of purges and the revolution came for him.

Even the nature of one's employment became creative inspiration for cruelty. Members of the transportation bureau, openly accused of fidelity to the state's persona non grata at the time, were denounced and then made to crawl along the newly tarred roads that they themselves had built only a few years after purging their previous higher-ups. My grandfather crawled from the entrance of the bureau office all the way to the East Gate of the old city wall. They crawled in a line for eight hours.

Later that year, my grandfather was directed to stand at the far side of the proscenium in a denunciation ceremony, a weekly ritual in which hundreds and sometimes thousands of people gathered to watch newly identified enemies of the party apologize

and receive verbal and physical assaults. My grandfather stood almost offstage, and so missed the worst assaults because of an arbitrary stage direction. The official who stood at the center of the stage that day died from the proceedings, his body left onstage. Mao had set a number a decade earlier for how many people ought to die from these purges. It was rather poetic: it should be one in every thousand. In 1961 that meant 660,000 people.



I was born into the tail end of this history. In the early nineties, just before I immigrated with my family to the United States, the kindergarten teachers in the school I attended had devised a system of punishment and reward involving the production of red construction-paper socks. Each student had their own sock—there were around forty of us in the class—and altogether they took up an entire classroom wall. Props in a moral credit system, these socks were made to hold small, red tissue-paper flowers made by the students themselves. Visually, this system merged the “big red flowers” pinned to the chests of socialist heroes of the previous generation and, prior to that, to Chinese bridegrooms, with the novelty of Christmas and other European paraphernalia that Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms had brought to China. Our teachers allowed us to pin one flower to our sock every time we did something commendable or correct. It was always a joy to see one’s sock spilling over with flowers.

Our social and moral credit system was a routine performed every few hours or so, and every child could keep track of every other child’s status in the classroom. Demerits and capers deducted flowers from one’s sock. My flowers got put up quickly, and they came down quickly. When they were plucked—and this was always an unbearable humiliation—the teacher would ask the class president to do it in front of everyone, dropping the flower ceremoniously into the rubbish bin.

By the time I left for the United States at the age of six and a half, I had been twice demoted—from class leader (*ban zhang*) to vice class leader (*fu ban zhang*) to nobody—my red stocking nearly empty despite several successful campaigns for status rehabilitation. My last memory of these efforts are from the celebrations the school held on June 1, 1992, International Children’s Day. When the day arrived all the boys and girls in school lined up to be painted with the same makeup: a red dot on forehead, red cheeks and lips. Each child received a tambourine, fan, and waist drum. Officials from the Hangzhou traffic ministry visited our school and a male classmate and I were selected to present the “dear leaders” (*qin ai de lingdao*) with red tissue-paper flowers the size of our heads. Taught exactly what to say, we took turns, two phrases each, demonstratively shooting our palms up at each crescendo.

Two years later, in a faraway region of China, more than three hundred people, most of them young children, died in a school fire. Over a hundred more suffered various degrees of burns. Our family had already migrated to the United States and would learn this news many years later, thinking it happened much more recently than it did. In Xinjiang, the once semiautonomous Uighur-populated region of China, the elementary school students had gathered to welcome top-level officials from the party with song and dance. They performed in the Friendship Theater, a questionable Soviet construction whose auditorium was outfitted in unsafe flammable fabrics and plastic upholstery. When the thirteen curtains on the stage went up in flames, the auditorium swelled with the toxic fumes of melting synthetic fibers. Seats caught fire and melted skin off. As the fire wrapped around the theater the children were told to stay still in their seats to “allow leaders to exit first.”

Things that were wrong happened at the same time, in the same space, as things that were very right and getting better by the minute. If anything, we sensed that 1990s China was rounding up great joys, just for us, and that such tragedies as school

fires and construction failures would soon become a thing of the past. The country of my early childhood had gotten over Maoism, finally, and had not yet reached that point where a vast wealth gap created irreparably distorted realities. People gathered in a relative's apartment around a watermelon and a television program. We were so greatly attached to each other, so enamored of the way each person laughed, and we made mental notes never to forget it. I first encountered the tale of *Lear* at the seeming end of its possible relevance to my own life. China—cities like Hangzhou in particular—was restoring itself to order, slowly reversing the previous decades' descent into disorder, reversing the mechanisms by which cruelties compounded.

Tales come in handy when your frames of reference are shifting, as mine were. You know that injury is inevitable, and that complaining about everything achieves nothing. And yet, still—the child wants to be sure of right and wrong, and the right time to speak that knowledge and the right time to keep silent. She understands that things sometimes have to be done for form's sake, and concessions made for love's sake. She cannot be certain at any moment whether she lives in a perfect society or a terribly broken one. What's more, because large and severe human-made calamities in this society began in theater and ended in theater, she cannot be sure what is real and what is provisional, what is a short- or long-term act.



I've wondered since early childhood why communication, even between loved ones, looks like platitudinous pandering, deemed worthless by the parties involved unless it is performed in a public forum, where everybody can see. Phone in hand, kinfolk compete with each other for "likes" and ask others point blank why their likes have not come in. Hundreds of people in rows all clapping at the same time, bouquets and pictures with VIPs, accolades written out on red banners held by pretty children.

Why was empty speechifying and flattery—*pai ma pi* 拍马屁—a part of every event? How did we get here? What were the steps? Aren't you curious, reading *Lear*, why anyone would act this way, shooting themselves in the foot, guaranteeing that they won't be taken seriously by those they most adore?

Even without any literary-critical intervention, *Lear* will feel familiar to the average Chinese person. You have extreme loyalty contrasted with extreme treachery, a great risk for any literature that would wish to avoid the obviously good or obviously evil. You have a dry run at communism—a division of land and resources blind to merit—that is glitchy and soon becomes catastrophic. You have the gruesome collapse of law and order that happens when a wounded paternal authority doesn't give himself a face-saving exit.

You have the severance of the natural bonds between civil servants and their lieges, between kith and kin. You have the gendered burden of caring for aging parents that cannot be outsourced, and the magnification of the consequences of ungrateful children and irresponsible parents. How many times have Chinese children heard the Chinese equivalent of “How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is / To have a thankless child!,” or versions of the even more severe curse that *Lear* brings on his daughters?

If she [the thankless child] must teem, Create her child of spleen; that it may live, And be a thwart disnatured torment to her! Let it stamp wrinkles in her brow of youth; With cadent tears fret channels in her cheeks; Turn all her mother's pains and benefits, To laughter and contempt.
(1.4.295–300)

Every day, amid joy and goodness, impotent anger and panic surged in the corridors of hospitals, schools, governmental facilities, and on the streets, in broad daylight. Almost every day I heard the Chinese equivalent of “That all the world shall—I will do such things,—What they are, yet I know not: but they shall

be / The terrors of the earth.” Children were struck dumb by the violent sounds made by family members, by the velocity of their spittle and tears. People making terrible scenes structured the rhythms of childhood.

In its vehemence, *Lear* gives us a modern and feudal dystopia more Taoist and Confucian than anything else I’ve read in the Western canon. Every circle of relations, from the personal to the cosmic, has been disordered. Things are wrong between husband and wife, sisters, brothers, fathers and daughters, fathers and sons, kings and courtiers, masters and servants, the people and the land, the land and the elements, words and the words right after them. *Lear* is the only Shakespeare tragedy to have a subplot, in the story of Gloucester and his sons, that mirrors the main plot so closely. The Earl of Gloucester, like Lear in age and rough size, has two sons, and he too cannot see correctly who is true, who is false. *Lear* gives you doppelgängers at the level of characters, phrases, and things even more abstract than these . . . and they are all wrong between and within themselves and can’t even help each other. Gloucester’s tale, for example, doesn’t make Lear’s any easier to understand or avoid.

Lear reads like a Christian allegory *and* a Confucian morality test: Christian allegory, in the sense that it is designed to make you learn what hope is, what despair is, and the basic characters and tropes that will appear on your way. The play does depict what can only seem like evidence of God’s abandonment of humans, just as critics say, though I do not believe it ends in nihilism. Its human sacrifices straddle the primitive and the modern world, sacrifices like Christ’s, whose point, whose effectiveness, is not easily comprehended. *Lear* scans like a Confucian morality test because it cares so much about the actual best and the actual worst, about right and wrong, true and false. A popular view of Confucianism, when it is not appearing in fortune cookies, is that it codifies fawning traditionalism and biological conservatism: husbands and wives must look like this, families must look

like this, master and servant must look like this. I don't know if Confucianism is conservative or liberal, if it is a philosophy, religion, or a cultural tradition, but I do know that *Lear* offers a solid example of something that *activates* its spidey senses: we know that parents mistreat children and children mistreat parents and that things are bad when kings are bad . . . but where does one first notice that something is wrong, and that this is a wrong that is difficult to correct? How do you know something's wrong in the first place? Is it normal disorder or not? Sometimes it's hard to know things are wrong when your whole world is just starting to move into or out of disorder, and also just because there are so many confusing signals at any time.



I first came upon the story of *Lear* through a back channel. At the end of the nineteenth century, *Lear* arrived in China as a children's story in Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales of Shakespeare*, translated in 1904 into classical Chinese by the scholar-poets Lin Shu and Wei Yi. The translators gave the Shakespeare plays intensely cryptic names, and *King Lear* was retitled *Nü Bian*, which might be translated as "A Regime Change Caused by Daughters/Women," "The Daughter's Coup," "The Mutability of Women," or, even more darkly, "Women Causing Things to Change, to Turn (Against)."

Like anything else, Shakespeare was altered when it arrived in China. The first Chinese *Lear* left out critical sequences, for example. Mary and Charles Lamb's abridgment still preserved the illogical division of the kingdom into equal thirds one third at the time, but Lin Shu and Wei Yi's did not. *Lear* had to wait almost forty years to appear in Chinese in a less condensed form. In 1941, poet-critic Sun Dayu made a capable and fastidious translation of the play that is still considered the gold standard. He would become one of the most famous "Rightists" targeted in the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957, one of many Maoist purges.

The vice president of Fudan University and fifteen other academics turned him in. Sun was sentenced to six years of imprisonment by the Shanghai People's Court.

Lear was also one of four Shakespeare plays translated by the scholar Zhu Shenghao in 1943, waiting out the war with Japan in his hometown of Jiaxing, his health rapidly deteriorating. Six years earlier Zhu narrowly escaped Japanese-occupied Shanghai with his Oxford edition of the *Complete Shakespeare*, determined to complete his translation of thirty plays amid the escalating atrocities by the Japanese imperial army.³ Many of his translation drafts were lost in the bombardments, and he had to begin again from scratch. In the summer of 1944, Japanese forces destroyed the Suzhou-Jiaying railway and pushed nearer his hometown. Zhu died in the winter of 1944 at the age of thirty-two in a besieged city.

But none of the earlier extant translations mattered to the general public in 1989. Whatever they added or left out, whatever they wished for and feared, these translations had not been available to most people for a very long time. The literary critic and scholar Liang Shiqiu had translated a fuller version of *Lear* as early as 1936, but its debut in China was delayed till 1996, four years after our family had already left the country. Tense relations between China and Taiwan, where Liang had emigrated, caused the final delay. Before that, for an inordinately long period of time, the country had sealed its borders, closed its doors, and nothing could be seen anymore, or seen for what it was.

In 1989, I was a child in a world that was just beginning to reintroduce foreign reading materials into anthologies that you could actually buy in a bookstore. These anthologies were expensive, not affordable to us. My mother earned eighty yuan

3. In 1954, thirty-one of his translated Shakespearean plays were published together by the People's Literature Publishing House (*Renmin wenxue chubanshe*); twenty-seven of them had been published elsewhere before the founding of the People's Republic of China. It was not until 1978 that Zhu's completed texts were finally published in Beijing.

a month. An eight-volume edition of *Children's World Classics* printed on cheap paper was still four hundred yuan. Prices made no sense. Earnings made no sense. Anyway, this is how I finally got hold of *Lear*:

I remember that year there was a citywide search for the most gifted child, the beginnings of marketing campaigns for educational programs. First prize was a life-size stuffed animal, which no one in China had seen before. Second prize was this set of *Children's World Classics*. My school nominated preschoolers and kindergarteners, and parents tried to see to it that the winner would be their child. Contest officials parsed hundreds of thousands of voices looking for a kind of “child’s sound,” or *tong shen*, that could shift the sound of the country from the agitprop of yesteryear to the new genre of “sweepstakes.” My mother also worked hard to get me into the first round, worried I would be ineligible for things, like an older sibling in charge of a seemingly precocious, but in fact terribly slow, child. Bad things happened all the time in those days to those slow on the uptake, and opportunities were lost at the last minute because of some obscure disqualification that nothing could gainsay. People hardly went through the day without waiting to hear about some exception being made or the words “I’ll see what I can do for you,” caught up as we all were in an anxious economy of favors given and exceptions made by mere public functionaries. Energies were focused most intensely on getting children whose parents were once in political disfavor readmitted into schools; procuring television sets from relatives who were lucky enough to be assigned to work in the television factories; and devising various ways to outmaneuver the ironclad, USSR-inspired residence registration systems to transfer residencies from rural China, where many families had been sent, back to the cities.

After a month of dreaming and yearning, I found myself eliminated in the first round of the contest. A box of blocks was dumped on the table in front of me, with instructions to put the blocks back in the box. I thought they meant I had to arrange the

blocks exactly as before, and ran out of time. *Lear* came to me anyway, because some uncle or uncle of an uncle knew someone in the educational publishing bureau, and my mother groveled or almost groveled. In any case, the books were mine. Stories in these volumes included “Bluebeard,” “Aladdin and His Magic Lamp,” and “The Little Mermaid,” and I loved them so much, and read again and again how characters come to harm and get out of it. As a children’s tale, *Lear* found good company with the many other good stories in my mother’s repertoire: “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves,” “Rikki Tikki Tavi,” “Scholar Dong Guo and the Wolf,” “The Orphan of Zhao.” Many dealt in what Bradley called “tragic effects of ingratitude,” a problem that stalks all storied versions of Chinese history, and it is unclear what kind of justice should be served except death.



Lear’s fairy-tale formula begins with choosing among three things: three sisters need husbands, and one draws envy from the others for being judged wiser and fairer. Nested in the story of Cordelia’s rescue by the King of France after her rejection by the Duke of Burgundy are all the daughters of children’s tales who need to be married off. Cordelia gathers in herself all the modest true princesses who outshine their ugly sisters in her faithfulness to the father, and faithfulness in general. Driving each of these tropes is the ancient problem of daughters and what they will or won’t do. Such a lesson comes across clearly in the anonymous play performed in the 1590s called *The True Chronicle History of King Leir, and his three daughters, Gonoril, Ragan, and Cordella*, published in the Stationer’s Register shortly before Shakespeare’s *Lear*. In this 1605 *Leir*, quite good in its own right, the division of the kingdom begins as a clear-cut stratagem meant to solve the problem of marrying off a choosy daughter.

Morphological readings of *Lear*—asking after the other fairy tales that are embedded in it—can reveal the practical harms

involved in choosing among and for women. There are many such readings—*Lear* as a version of Cinderella, or of the Judgment of Paris, for example—but it was Sigmund Freud, taking this approach to *Lear*, who characteristically arrived at the most extreme conclusion. According to Freud, Lear steps into a time-honored tradition of choosing among three women. Only here, there is no choice at all. In choosing among them, Lear chooses death.

Freud's reading doesn't make sense at first, or at all, but one can appreciate his severity. In so many words he's telling us that the play is a blind alley. In his own way, Freud was treating the play as a study in false choice: What's the point of pretending that choosing matters? In choosing anything, Lear effectively chooses death. He needs to die—the rest is just details.

For a long time readers and audiences considered *Lear* one of Shakespeare's cruelest stories, unsuited to be staged. From the late seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, only an adaptation of *Lear* by the Irish poet and dramatist Nahum Tate was performed in the United Kingdom, a version that revised almost every part of the play. In his version, Cordelia welcomes her disinheritance because she is secretly in love with Edgar, Gloucester's legitimate son, and she sticks around after the division of the kingdom to help and protect her father. The people of England are disgusted enough to move to depose Goneril and Regan and restore Lear as king. He heroically saves Cordelia from murder, makes her queen, and retires as a hoary elder. Something about Shakespeare's *Lear* so disturbed Tate that he felt he had to fundamentally alter the *tale*.



When do you first sense that something is off in *King Lear*? Once you've encountered the actual play, and not just the tale, look at how it really begins. Before anything else has happened

we are in the wrong, already confused in our judgment about someone else's judgment, and other people's worth.

KENT: I thought the King had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall.

GLOUCESTER: It did always seem to us, but now in the division of the kingdom it appears not which of the Dukes he values most; for qualities are so weighed that curiosity in neither can make choice of either's moiety.
(1.1.1–6)⁴

Later we will learn how frightening it is that the courtiers cannot tell who the king favors more, Albany or Cornwall. As if they could be indistinguishable, Albany and Cornwall! Albany might be closer to a Cornwall than to a Kent, but that's still a handsome distance away. Evaluation is severely off in this kingdom, and we need to figure out why.

Lear begins not with the division of the kingdom, then, but with this little interlude of wronging and being wrong. We learn right away that Gloucester is the type to belittle a grown child in front of another person for the sake of a crude locker-room boast, one of those character weaknesses that children most despise in their parents. Even accounting for historical attitudes toward illegitimate children, his performance is despicable. "Is not this your son, my lord?" Kent asks when, just a second later, they run into Gloucester's illegitimate son, Edmund. Hearing Gloucester's immediately deprecating remarks about Edmund and not comprehending, Kent says, "I cannot conceive you." Gloucester thereupon immediately puns on "conceive" to boast about his whoring. "Do you smell a fault?" Gloucester asks at the end of his little riddle about Edmund's conception, smug in his cleverness.

It looks like Shakespeare is stalling—Get on with the business of the division of the kingdom, already!—but he is in fact

4. This is the gloss given in the Norton edition: "that careful scrutiny of both parts cannot determine which portion is preferable."

rushing. He needs to show you something, quickly, in a tempo that Coleridge described as “combin[ing] length with rapidity.” Shakespeare is rushing and stalling at the same time.

Shakespeare wrote this play during one of many severe plagues and equally severe quarantines between the death of Queen Elizabeth and the accession of James I. The young were being picked off; London teemed and was barren. Plague is only directly referenced twice in *Lear*, but the plague’s superstitious link to evil is relevant here. Literal contagion also helps formalize the law of guilt by association. Plague outbreaks practically consumed the first decade of the century (1603–4, 1606, and 1608–9). Ordinary people joined in the business of scientific monitoring, community organization, and innovative health policies, as well as paranoia, mutual recrimination, and abandonment.

England was also experiencing a kind of cultural revolution whose crucibles and depths are largely known to Americans only in the form of seventeenth-century witch hunts. Theaters in London were shuttered more than half the time, and when they reopened players and playwrights walked on eggshells. Other immediate prehistory includes the forced sanitizing of Shakespeare’s and other playwrights’ previous works, the persecution of Catholics, and the dragnetting of the conspirators behind the Gunpowder Plot. Sycophantic court masques were being rolled out every week for James I, and they competed with Shakespeare’s works.

From this background Shakespeare made a selection for the opening of the play—the minimal amount of information you need to know to be sufficiently afraid of what comes next. Of all his tragedies, *Lear* has the scariest opening, more so even than the beginning of *Julius Caesar* in which the enforcement of a curfew presages totalitarianism (“Hence, home, you idle creatures, get you home! . . . Speak, what trade are thou?”).

Shakespeare is cramming information into these first lines of *Lear*. He is trying to give you a *quick* glimpse of how

misjudgment of character and boastful fun at your child's expense figures in the tragedy to come. You can *already* hear it in the idle chatter of the elites, its putative representatives, that something is really off in this realm.



My hometown, Hangzhou, and the nearby city of Suzhou are known all over China and the world as “paradise on earth,” an epithet that predates any modern tourism marketing blitz. Night stalls were busy with commerce, and well-made folk crafts could still earn people a living, or at least allow them to scrape by. Lives were lived amid the scenic, much of which remained sequestered in secrecy despite the city's throngs of visitors from all over China.

You weren't inside a painting, exactly, but you weren't too far from it, either, and the thoroughfares of the traditional arts flourished and also let in a permissible amount of commercial items and fakery, because people had to live. Every few hours you received signs from your surroundings that you were in a wronged society, its priorities in the wrong order, but it was also so pleasurable to be alive.

I was born in the middle of a period in China called *Gai Ge Kai Fang* 改革开放, the “Reform and Opening-up.” Eight years earlier, in 1977, college entrance examinations were restored, and Deng Xiaoping implemented *baluan fanzheng* 拨乱反正 (“to pull out the chaos and return things to order”). Economic liberalization hit breakneck speed. Meanwhile, most Chinese people still had Soviet hearts—a heartbreaking sensitivity to cruelty, the ability to inflict it en masse for conformity and for a cause. My mother used to sing Chinese versions of old Soviet and partisan songs like “Evenings in the Outskirts of Moscow” or “Ciao Bella,” or hum the theme music from *Walter Saves Sarajevo* or *Here, the Dawn Is Quiet*. Other Soviet-era leftovers included grueling youth calisthenics classes and residual programs of rationing

(commodities, then electronics). You could still feel the state apparatuses everywhere, in the assigned jobs, the struggles of the *hukou* system (residency quotas that acted as controls on mobility).

For a few years my mother and I lived in a housing complex called a *tongzilou* on Qingnian Lu, “the avenue of the youth.” The perpetually waterlogged buildings were barracks-like constructions modeled on dormitories for factory workers, a step above tenement housing. Individual units opened onto a dark, narrow balcony which overlooked a concrete courtyard and doubled as the thoroughfare. From its ledge every family rigged their own drying systems, the bamboo poles subtending each other underneath the undergarments and bedspreads. You cooked your meals on the shared stove in this thoroughfare, worried your coal, butchered your small animals. Every once in a long while someone would bring back a soft-shelled turtle and make quick work of it. Everyone got to enjoy the delicious, savory smell for days, like something you could hold in your fist. In the stairwell someone kept chickens, even though it was against the rules, and we’d have chickens and sometimes eggs to eat, until a city ordinance against such practices legislated resentful neighbors to round up the birds in the courtyard, where they were beaten to death with canes.

China was developing rapidly, and this was a good-enough rhythm, a good-enough pace. We honestly didn’t know what kind of a world this was. Were we a generation before the opening act of *King Lear*, or a generation after? How far were we in measured meters from the play’s opening lines? One can use a simple measure. If a piece of world literature can come to a child in affordable codex form, that means that things are still okay.



The beginning of *Lear* tells you where to look for the first signs of wrongness in that kind of world, gives you a real taste of how

hard it is to remember what is happening and what has happened. Tales stick to the most important parts, knowing that important details are left out. The tale of *King Lear* is scary, and it's scary in a particular way. What happens to Gloucester's eyes is scary, as is what happens to Lear and Cordelia, as is the Fool's final announcement to "go to bed at noon" after going with his master such a long way. But I mean that it is scary for the mind, too, a hard tale to remember. As the child moves from tale to the play, she realizes how many crucial details there are. Even seasoned readers have trouble with it. Who is Curan? Whose letter first brings news of trouble between Albany and Cornwall? The play refers to seven different letters: What is the content of those letters? How large *is* the French troop that allows Cordelia to be captured? Is it a very large contingent or a pathetic, dozen-man operation? How much co-plotting between Lear loyalists and France, the crime of which Gloucester is accused and that costs him his eyes, could there really have been? Everyone famously goes to Dover, but are they anywhere near Dover or does most of the action take place a league or even just a few furlongs out from the castles? Where are the sympathetic "well-armed friends" who live in Dover, or was that just an empty "boast," as Goneril's servant, Oswald, maliciously suggests? What does happen in this play? No matter how old the reader or playgoer, their memory of what has immediately happened seems to falter, then fail.

Lear triggers other difficulties with memory. My mother and I talk about memories, argue over just-happened events. Between us we have forgotten stretches of years. I have tried to go over it, step by step, but it's like dragging furniture through water. Viciousness and extreme love both cause senescence, and I take this to be the first of many kindly lessons in *King Lear*.

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