Why Tragedy Need Not Always Be Sad:
William Shakespeare, *King Lear* (1605-06)

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1. What is different about Shakespeare’s Play?
2. A set of mirrors and contrasts
3. The Fool and the stage of life
4. Steps to the brink: *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*
5. Witnessing endurance
Anonymous: *The True Chronicle History of King LEIR, and his three daughters* (c. 1594, printed 1605)

Shakespeare: *True Chronicle Historie of the life and death of King LEAR and his three Daughters* (Quarto; 1608)

Shakespeare: *The Tragedie of King Lear* (First Folio, 1623)

Recommended edition:  
1. What is different about Shakespeare’s Play?

Geoffrey of Monmouth: *Historia regium Britannicae* (c. 1135)
Raphael Holinshed: *Chronicles* (1587)
Edmund Spenser: *The Faerie Queene* (1590-96), Book 2, Canto 10
Thomas Norton: *Gorboduc* (1561)
*The Mirror for Magistrates* (1559)

The final words of *Gorboduc*:

**EUBULUS**

... Of justice yet must God in fine restore This noble crown unto the lawful heir: For right will always live, and rise at length, But wrong can never take deep root to last.

The final words of *King Lear*:

**EDGAR**

The weight of this sad time we must obey, Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say. The oldest hath borne most; we that are young Shall never see so much, nor live so long.  

*Exeunt with a dead march.*
2. A set of mirrors and contrasts

1.1.48-53
LEAR

[...] Tell me, my daughters –
Since now we will divest us both of rule,
Interest of territory, cares of state –
Which of you shall we say doth love us most,
That we our largest bounty may extend
Where nature doth with merit challenge.

Greg Hicks as Lear in 1.1 (RSC Stratford 2010)
1.1.62
CORDELIA [aside]
What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent.

3.2.59-60
I am a man
More sinned against than sinning.

*Hamartia (error of judgment, tragic flaw)* in Aristotle, *Poetics* 13
2. A set of mirrors and contrasts

Evil daughters (Regan, Goneril) vs. good daughter (Cordelia)
Lear plot mirrored in Gloucester plot
Evil son (Edmund) vs. good son

3.6.105-07
EDGAR
How light and portable my pain seems now,
When that which makes me bend maked the King bow,
He childed as I fathered.

The King mirrored in the madman (Edgar in disguise) and the Fool
Seeing vs. blindness
The stage and the world

3.6.59-60
EDGAR [aside]
My tears begin to take his part so much
They mar my counterfeiting.
3. The Fool and the stage of life

*King Lear* 4.6.126-38

LEAR

[...]

Give me an ounce of civet [perfume], good apothecary, to sweeten my imagination. There’s money for thee.

GLOUCESTER       O, let me kiss that hand!

LEAR       Let me wipe it first, it smells of mortality.

GLOUCESTER

O ruined piece of nature, this great world
Shall so wear out to nought. Dost thou know me.

LEAR       I remember thine eyes well enough.

[...]

EDGAR [aside]

I would not take this from report: it is,
And my heart breaks at it.
3. The Fool and the stage of life

The Fool (Ian Hughes) in 1.4. in Adrian Noble’s production of 1993 (RSC Stratford)
1.4.96-144

FOOL  [to Kent] Sirrah, you were best take my coxcomb.
KENT  Why, fool?
FOOL  Why? for taking one's part that's out of favor. Nay, and thou canst not smile as the wind sits, thou'l catch cold shortly. There, take my coxcomb. Why, this fellow has banish'd two on's daughters, and did the third a blessing against his will – if thou follow him, thou must needs wear my coxcomb. [to Lear] How now, nuncle? Would I had two coxcombs and two daughters!
LEAR  Why, my boy?
FOOL  If I gave them all my living, I'd keep my coxcombs myself. There's mine, beg another of thy daughters.
LEAR  Take heed, sirrah – the whip.
KENT  This is nothing, Fool.
FOOL  Then 'tis like the breath of an unfee'd lawyer, you gave me nothing for't. Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle?
LEAR  Why, no, boy, nothing can be made out of nothing. 130
FOOL [To Kent.] Prithee tell him, so much the rent of his land comes to. He will not believe a fool.
LEAR  A bitter fool!
FOOL  Dost thou know the difference, my boy, between a bitter fool and a sweet one?
LEAR  No, lad, teach me.
FOOL  That lord that counsell'd thee to give away thy land, Come place him here by me; do thou for him stand.
      The sweet and bitter fool will presently appear,
      The one in motley here, the other found out there. 140
LEAR  Dost thou call me fool, boy?
FOOL  All thy other titles thou hast given away; that thou wast born with.
KENT  This is not altogether fool, my lord.
1.4.217-22

LEAR

Does any here know me? This is not Lear.
Does Lear walk thus, speak thus? Where are his eyes?
Either his notion weakens, his discernings
Are lethargied – Ha! waking? 'Tis not so.
Who is it that can tell me who I am?

FOOL

Lear’s shadow.
3. The Fool and the stage of life

Will Sommers (died 1560)

Richard Tarlton (1530-88)

Engraving by Francis Delaram
c. 1615-24

c. 1580s
3. The Fool and the stage of life

Robert Armin (c. 1563-1615)

William Kempe (died c. 1603)

Erasmus, *Laus Stultitiae* (1511), trans. by Sir Thomas Chaloner as *The Praise of Folie* (1549)
3. The Fool and the stage of life

4.6.172-83:
LEAR

If thou wilt weep my fortunes, take my eyes.  
I know thee well enough, thy name is Gloucester.  
Thou must be patient.

...  
When we are born we cry that we are come  
To this great stage of fools. This a good block:  
It were a delicate strategem to shoe  
A troop of horse with felt: I’ll put it in proof  
And when I have stolen upon these son-in-laws,  
Then kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!

4.6.186-87:
LEAR

The natural fool of fortune.
Charles Lamb (1810): “To see Lear acted has nothing in it but what is painful and disgusting”
(Quoted from Ferrell 2011, 98)
4.6

Enter Gloucester and Edgar [in peasant’s clothing and with a staff].

GLOUCESTER
   When shall I come to the top of that same hill?
EDGAR
   You do climb up it now. Look how we labour.
GLOUCESTER
   Methinks the ground is even.
EDGAR
   Horrible steep.
   Hark, do you hear the sea?
GLOUCESTER
   No, truly.
EDGAR
   Why then your other senses grow imperfect
   By your eyes' anguish.
GLOUCESTER
   So may it be indeed.
   Methinks thy voice is altered, and thou speak'st
   In better phrase and matter than thou didst.
EDGAR
   Y' are much deceiv'd. In nothing am I chang'd
   But in my garments.
GLOUCESTER
   Methinks y' are better spoken.
4. Steps to the brink: peripeteia and anagnorisis

EDGAR
Come on, sir, here's the place; stand still. How fearful
And dizzy 'tis, to cast one's eyes so low!
The crows and choughs that wing the midway air
Show scarce so gross as beetles. Half way down
Hangs one that gathers samphire, dreadful trade;
Methinks he seems no bigger than his head.
The fishermen that walk upon the beach
Appear like mice; and yond tall anchoring bark,
Diminish'd to her cock; her cock, a buoy
Almost too small for sight. The murmuring surge,
That on th'unnumbered idle pebble chafes,
Cannot be heard so high. I'll look no more,
Lest my brain turn, and the deficient sight
Topple down headlong.

GLOUCESTER       Set me where you stand.
EDGAR
      Give me your hand. You are now within a foot
      Of th'extreme verge. For all beneath the moon
      Would I not leap upright.
4. Steps to the brink: peripeteia and anagnorisis

GLOUCESTER
Let go my hand.
Here, friend, 's another purse; in it a jewel
Well worth a poor man's taking. Fairies and gods
Prosper it with thee! Go thou further off:
Bid me farewell, and let me hear thee going.

EDGAR
Now fare ye well, good sir.

GLOUCESTER
With all my heart.

EDGAR [aside]
Why I do trifle thus with his despair
Is done to cure it.

GLOU.
O you mighty gods!
This world I do renounce, and in your sights
Shake patiently my great affliction off.
If I could bear it longer, and not fall
To quarrel with your great opposeless wills,
My snuff and loathed part of nature should
Burn itself out. If Edgar live, O bless him!
Now, fellow, fare thee well.

He falls.
EDGAR  Gone, sir; farewell!
    [aside] And yet I know not how conceit may rob
    The treasury of life when life itself
    Yields to the theft. Had he been where he thought,
    By this had thought been past. [to Gloucester] Alive or dead? Ho, you, sir! Friend, hear you, sir! Speak! –
    [aside] Thus might he pass indeed; yet he revives. –
    What are you, sir?
GLOUCESTER
    Away, and let me die.
EDGAR
    Hadst thou been aught but goss'mer, feathers, air
    So many fathom down precipitating,
    Thou'dst shivered like an egg; but thou dost breathe,
    Hast heavy substance, bleed'st not, speak'st, art sound.
    Ten masts at each make not the altitude
    Which thou hast perpendicularly fell.
    Thy life's a miracle. Speak yet again.
GLOUCESTER  But have I fall'n, or no?
EDGAR
    From the dread summit of this chalky bourn.
    Look up a-height, the shrill-gorged lark so far
    Cannot be seen or heard. Do but look up.
GLOUCESTER
    Alack, I have no eyes.
Is wretchedness deprived that benefit,
To end itself by death? 'Twas yet some comfort,
When misery could beguile the tyrant's rage,
And frustrate his proud will.

EDGAR Give me your arm.
Up – so. How is't? Feel you your legs? You stand.

GLOUCESTER Too well, too well.

EDGAR This is above all strangeness.
Upon the crown o' the cliff, what thing was that
Which parted from you?

GLOUCESTER A poor unfortunate beggar.

EDGAR As I stood here below, methought his eyes
Were two full moons. He had a thousand noses,
Horns whelked and waved like the enraged sea.
It was some fiend; therefore, thou happy father,
Think that the clearest gods, who make them honours
Of men's impossibilities, have preserved thee.
4. Steps to the brink: peripeteia and anagnorisis

GLOUCESTER
    I do remember now. Henceforth I'll bear
    Affliction till it do cry out itself
    'Enough, enough' and die. That thing you speak of,
    I took it for a man. Often 'twould say,
    'The fiend, the fiend'; he led me to that place.

EDGAR
    Bear free and patient thoughts.

Enter Lear [mad, crowned with weeds and flowers].

But who comes here?

The safer sense will ne'er accommodate
    His master thus.

LEAR No, they cannot touch me for coining, I am the King himself.

EDGAR O thou side-piercing sight!
4. Steps to the brink: peripeteia and anagnorisis

Peter Brook’s 1971 film version (Paul Scofield, Alan Webb, Robert Lloyd)
5.3.194-199:
EDGAR:

... 
I asked his blessing and from first to last 
Told him our pilgrimage. But his flawed heart, 
Alack, too weak the conflict to support,  
'Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief, 
Burst smilingly. 
EDMUND This speech of yours hath moved me, 
And shall perchance do good;
3.4.28-36
LEAR […]
Poor naked wretches, whereso’er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta’en
Too little thought of this. Take physic, pomp,
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
And show the heavens more just.
3.4.99-107
LEAR [to Edgar as Poor Tom]
Why, thou wert better in a grave than to answer with thy uncovered body this extremity of the skies. Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou ow’st the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha? Here’s three on’s us are sophisticated; thou art the thing itself. Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings: come, unbutton here.
Sir John Davies: *Nosce Teipsum* (1599):

And, to conclude, I know myself a MAN, which is a *proud*, and yet a *wretched* thing.

Source: http://www.luminarium.org/renlit/humane.htm
5.2.9-11:
EDGAR
What in ill thoughts again? Men must endure
Their going hence even as their coming hither.
Ripeness is all. Come on.

5.3.194-199:
EDGAR
[...]
I asked his blessing and from first to last
Told him our pilgrimage. But his flawed heart,
Alack, too weak the conflict to support,
’Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief,
Burst smilingly.
EDMUND This speech of yours hath moved me,
And shall perchance do good;
5.3.304-10
LEAR
And my poor fool is hanged. No, no, no life!
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life
And you no breath at all? O thou‘lt come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never.
Pray you undo this button. Thank you, sir.
O, o, o, o.
Do you see this? Look on her: look, her lips,
Look there, look there! He dies. [F only]


