Editing *King Lear*: A Director-Dramaturg Collaboration

By Alicia Kae Koger and David J. Pasto

*King Lear* is one of Shakespeare’s most complex tragedies. It blends the stories of King Lear and the Duke of Gloucester and their children into a seamless whole that examines family relationships as they are affected by the abuse of power, greed, madness, sacrifice and unselfish love. In preparing for Oklahoma City Theatre Company’s production of the play, director David Pasto and dramaturg Alicia Kae Koger approached the text with an awareness of the needs of the company, the actors and the audience.

Since nearly every contemporary production of Shakespeare involves some alterations to the standard printed text and *King Lear* is one of the bard’s longest plays, we needed to edit the script. This essay explains the production concept, outlines the principles we established for making decisions about edits and cuts, and gives examples of how these alternations affected the production. It demonstrates an approach to textual editing which can give guidance to directors and dramaturgs who feel daunted by the prospect of changing the words the greatest writer in the English language.

Oklahoma City Theatre Company’s production of *King Lear* played in April 2010 at City Space in the Civic Center Music Hall in Oklahoma City. In preparing the text, we believed that the size and intimacy of the space must be the most significant factor in determining the approach. City Space is an intimate thrust theatre with a stage area of 18’ x 18’. Ninety-nine seats surround the stage on three sides, with the front row less than three feet from the playing area. For downstage entrances at the left and right corners of the stage, actors use the same entrances as the audience. A false proscenium
creates an upstage façade and masks upstage entrances and exits. The backstage area has only seven feet from the back of the proscenium to the upstage wall. The configuration of the theatre would dictate the scale of the production and affect every choice made regarding editing.

How would we fit the play’s enormous emotions, sweeping scale, out-sized characters and baroque language into the tiny City Space? Dave conceived an approach that would focus primarily on the familial relationships and highlight the contrasts between siblings: the grasping and manipulative Goneril and Regan and their sister, the honest Cordelia in one family and the evil Edmund and his generous brother, Edgar, in the other. It would also emphasize the relationships between Lear and his loyal followers, Kent and the Fool, while showing the duped Gloucester entirely alone until Edgar saves him on his blind walk to Dover. Dave hoped that the close proximity of actors and audience would foster an emotional connection that might not occur in a larger space.

In narrowing the focus to the family and domestic realm, we could solve one of the major challenges the space posed: how to move all of Shakespeare’s characters around the stage. Standard editions of the play call for nineteen named characters plus three servants and numerous gentlemen and messengers, the Knights in Lear’s train, Officers, Soldiers, Captains and Attendants. Clearly it would be necessary to trim the number of characters while maintaining the major plot points. Dave’s decision to focus on familial and domestic matters allowed us to consider how we might reduce the cast. Many changes in the text related to the reduction of the military presence on stage. Our version acknowledged that Cordelia’s French Army returns to save her father but
foregrounded her personal concern for Lear’s safety rather than the political situation. Other changes limited the number of royal attendants, keeping attention on the main characters’ individual, personal struggles rather than their political power. By limiting the number of auxiliary characters, anonymous soldiers, messengers and gentlemen, we brought the domestic and familial issues into focus.

Our first significant decision was to reduce the number of Lear’s attendants at court and in later scenes. Kent has several interactions with “Gentlemen” which slow the play’s central action. Typically, these reveal information that is dramatized in previous or future scenes so we cut them all. Likewise, we reduced Cordelia’s army to one officer, who accompanied the Doctor in 4.4.

The Doctor plays a significant, if minor, role in the play’s action. During casting, Dave decided to cast a women in the role of the Doctor, suggesting she is a herbalist or natural healer rather than a modern physician. In 4.6, our Doctor delivered the Gentleman’s lines which reassure Lear of his royalty despite being a “sight most pitiful in the meanest wretch” (111). The doctor’s expanded character reinforced Cordelia’s benevolence and generosity toward Lear.

Related to these decisions was our desire to maintain the emotional force of the play’s action. With actors only a few feet from the audience, the potential for an immediate, visceral and personal connection existed. All soliloquies would be delivered directly to individual members of the audience and all the violence would need to be believable. The actors would need to use a naturalistic acting style while delivering the language directly and clearly. A major consideration for textual editing grew from this necessity. We would edit the text with the goals of clarity for the audience, speakability
for the actors, preservation of scansion, and maintenance of the play’s forward movement. We wanted to audience to leave the theatre understanding what they heard, believing what they saw, and feeling moved by the characters’ stories.

The environment created for the action would be visually spare. The Romanesque costumes and the large group scene in 1.1 would suggest a sense of the power and grandeur Lear possesses at the beginning of the play. The set designer created a painted façade and added only the stocks, a cart and a chair to later scenes. This minimal use of scenic spectacle reinforced one of the primary themes: Lear’s loss of power, possessions, relationships and sanity as the play progresses. As Dave wrote in his Director’s Note,

Lear is stripped of his kingship, his role as father, and even his lodgings. He becomes what he terms “unaccommodated man;” that is, man without the accumulation of titles, roles, addresses, or even clothing. The realization that he is nothing but a two-legged animal drives him to insanity. Yet Lear needs to lose possessions, children, and even his wits in order to learn who he is without these outward shows.

Lear’s journey toward self-knowledge is accompanied by the loss of everything he once valued so few possessions were used on stage.

In addition, the costume designer’s choices helped to strengthen this theme visually. In the opening scene, Lear carried a staff while wearing a crown, shirt and leggings, tunic, cape and boots. Over the course of the action, his bulk and outer trappings were reduced. During the storm, he wore only his shirt, tunic, pants and boots. When he meets Edgar (as nearly-naked Tom-a-Bedlam) he says,
Why, thou wert better in thy grave than to answer with thy uncovered body this extremity of the skies. Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou owest the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool. . . . Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, Off you lending! Come unbutton here. *(Tearing off his clothes.)*

In the OCTC production, this moment was highlighted as the first time Lear expresses concern for another human being, especially one far below his social rank. By the time Lear reaches Dover, he has learned that appearances are often deceptive and tells the blinded Gloucester, “Look with thine ears: see how yond justice rails upon yond simple thief. Hark, in thine ear: change places; and, handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief? . . . Robes and furr’d gowns hide all.” On the Dover cliffs, Lear wore only a nightshirt, flowers and bare feet, a marked contrast to his props and layers of clothing in I, 1. Lear was literally stripped of his clothing in the course of the production to parallel his metaphorical stripping of social and familial roles.

*King Lear’s* length alone (nearly 28,000 words) makes it almost impossible to stage in an evening. Modern editions of the play are editors’ conflations of two different versions, the Quarto and the Folio. Because of uncertainties about the authorship of these versions, it is impossible to create a “definitive” text. Andrew Hartley, author of *The Shakespearean Dramaturg*, observes that “We have no copies of [Shakespeare’s] plays that represent either original authorial draft or the versions that served as the core of the first theatrical productions” (36). We needed to decide on a version that would become the basis of our production.
We began by reading the play in different contemporary editions including the Folger edition edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Westine and the Penguin edition by Alfred Harbage. Our base edition would be the on-line MIT version (http://shakespeare.mit.edu/lear/index.html) chosen by the Oklahoma City Theatre Company. This downloadable version helped to solve the practical problems of creating our own edition, but lacks the explanatory notes included in most printed versions.

The next step in our process was reading the play aloud. This took the better part of three days. As the director and dramaturg read, we consulted other editions for answers to every question we had about the text. We used the Folger and Penguin editions as well as the parallel text edition edited by Rene Weis. We also consulted *Shakespeare’s Words* by David and Ben Crystal, the *OED*, and *No Fear Shakespeare*. As we worked through the text, we kept separate notes on the changes, so we could compare them later. We did not cut any lines or words that we did not first understand. Our approach gave us confidence that our familiarity with the plot, characters and themes of the play were deepening and that we would be able to create a playable text by the time of auditions.

While Dave entered the changes to create our version, Kae worked on the glossary. Dave had observed that if the explanatory notes are not readily available to actors at rehearsal, they often won’t look them up after they leave. Kae had hoped to insert the glossary into the computerized text, but found the formatting issues too daunting. So the glossary listed the words in the order they appeared in the text by page number. The actors received copies of the glossary at the first rehearsal along with the script.
The most valuable result our reading the play aloud was insight into the themes and repeated motifs in the play. As with all of Shakespeare’s great works, there are many ways to interpret its ideas. Although *King Lear* is an epic tragedy, its themes are manifested in the personal and familial conflicts between parents and children and siblings. Identity, self-knowledge and compassion lie at the heart of the play. Dave wrote in the Director’s Note that this concerns “both knowing one’s self and recognizing others.” He continued: “Lear cannot properly distinguish which of his daughters truly loves him, and Gloucester is equally mistaken about which of his sons are loyal to him. Lear cannot recognize his friend Kent when he is disguised, as Gloucester cannot recognize his good son, Edgar, when he is disguised as Tom-a-Bedlam.” Lear and Gloucester cannot properly identify others, because they do not really know themselves. Regan notes in the opening scene that Lear “hath ever but slenderly known himself” (1.1.9). Both Lear and Gloucester think they are good judges of character but both are deceived by words and appearances.

Another pattern we noticed was the repetition of the word “nothing.” This emphasis on emptiness and negation even appears in Lear’s final line, “Never, never, never, never, never” (5.3.138). We edited the script to retain as many of these references as possible.

The remainder of the cutting and revisions were based on three principles: clarity, directness and emotional force. We wanted the language and the action of the play to be clear so that audience members would not be distracted by unfamiliar words and references which could take them out of the play.
We recognized that directness is not necessarily a universal value in Shakespeare’s plays. In *Macbeth*, for example, equivocation is at the heart of the action. Likewise many of the characters in *King Lear* are written in deliberately circuitous language that serves plotting or character development. Edmund, for example, frequently speaks with double meanings which he shades to influence his father’s perception of Edgar. Lear’s language in Acts 3 and 4 is often indirect, reflecting his broken state of mind. In disguise as poor Tom, Edgar wildly raves about spirits and goblins, making little sense to anyone on or offstage.

Nevertheless, we did make cuts which facilitated directness rather than obscurity or ambiguity. These edits (indicated below in brackets [ ]) frequently served the purpose of enhancing a line or speech’s emotional power. The following example from 1.1 illustrates this.

**KING 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.] Goneril

Our eldest-born, speak first. (1.1.3)

Since Lear has already said that he has divided his kingdom and intends to “shake all cares and business from our age” (1.1.2), it is not necessary to repeat it. The change emphasizes the play’s crucial inciting incident “Which of you shall we say doth love us
most” and places the political question in a personal context. It clarifies that Lear is establishing a contest between the sisters. These edited lines highlight the sisters’ stakes in the matter as one of the driving forces in the play.

Another cut to eliminate an obscure reference demonstrates this principle. Later in 1.1, Lear reacts to Cordelia’s truthful assessment of her love:

KING LEAR

Let it be so; thy truth, then be thy dower:
For, by the sacred radiance of the sun,
The mysteries of Hecate, and the night;
By all the operation of the orbs
From whom we do exist, and cease to be:
Here I disclaim all my paternal care,
Propinquity and property of blood,
And as a stranger to my heart and me
Hold thee, from this, forever. [The Barbarous Scythian,
Or he that makes his generation messes
To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom
Be as well neighbour’d, pitied, and relieved,
As thou my sometime daughter.] (1.1.5)

Cutting the last five and a half lines allowed the speech to climax on the direct threat to denounce Cordelia forever, rather than an obscure allusion to an ancient savage tribe and a relatively weak reference to “my sometime daughter.”
Some cuts or revisions for clarity targeted archaic or ambiguous language. In Goneril’s 1.4 speech ordering Lear to dismiss his retinue, several individual words posed barriers to understanding. We made three substitutions (below in bold): “debauched” for “deboshed,” “remain” for “depend,” and “bfit” for “besort.” “A little to disquainty your train” posed a greater challenge, since it scans perfectly in iambic pentameter but employs an inverted word order as well as the archaic “disquainty.” Our solution: “To cut in half your train of followers,” while lacking Shakespeare’s poetry, maintains the line’s rhythm and clarifies Goneril’s outrageous demand. We clarified this line because the rest of Lear’s decisions stem from Goneril’s order to cut his train in half. The speech’s last line “And know themselves and you” weakens its power; since it does not scan, we decided to cut it as well.

GONERIL

[This admiration, sir, is much o’ the savour
Of other your new pranks.] I do beseech you
To understand my purposes aright:
As you are old and reverend, you should be wise.
Here do you keep a hundred knights and squires:
Men so disorder’d, so [deboshed] debauched and bold
That this our court, infected with their manners,
Shows like a riotous inn: epicurism and lust
Make it more like a tavern or a brothel
Than a graced palace. The shame itself doth speak
For instant remedy: be then desired
By her, that will take the thing she begs,

[A little to disquantity your train;]

**To cut in half your train of followers**

And the remainder, that shall still [depend] **remain**,

To be such men as may [besort] **bfit** your age

[And know themselves and you]. (31)

Another Goneril speech provides an example of our attempts to clarify Shakespeare’s dense and multi-layered language. Goneril has just learned that Cornwall’s death has made Regan a widow. She articulates her mixed feelings through antithesis,

*(Aside)* One way I like this well;

But being widow and my Gloucester with her,

May all the building in my fancy pluck

Upon my hateful life: another way,

The news is not so tart.—I’ll read, and answer. (4.2.96)

To understand this speech, we consulted the notes of various editions. The Folger edition says the third line means: “pull down the dreams I have constructed” (182). The Longman Parallel Text edition explicates “building on my fancy” as “castles in the air; lit. ‘the edifice erected on my dreams (of marrying Edmund)’” (228). “Pluck upon my hateful life” might mean “pull down about my detested life (as Albany’s wife, while Regan is married to Edmund)” (228). None of these sources explained the convoluted speech as a whole. Only the editors of *No Fear Shakespeare*’s provided a clear explanation.
In a way I’m glad to hear that Cornwall is dead. But on the other hand Edmund is traveling with Regan, who is now a widow. If something happens between them on the road, it would shatter my hopes of having Edmund for myself and escaping this hateful life. Still, there are benefits to having Cornwall out of the way. (215)

This is a large number of ideas to be conveyed in a four-line speech. Our first revision read like this:

(Aside) One way I like this well;
But being widow, and my Edmund with her,
My sister may yet shatter my dreams
Of escaping my hateful life.—I’ll read, and answer. (4.2.96)

This version eliminates Goneril’s second thought—that Cornwall’s death may advance her cause. But it clarifies the references to Regan (my sister) and Edmund (Gloucester) while maintaining the idea pulling down an edifice with the verb “shatter.” The final revision restored the word “fancy” and replaced the gerund form of “escape” with the more active infinitive form:

(Aside) One way I like this well;
But being widow, and my Edmund with her,
My sister may yet shatter my fancy
To escape my hateful life.—I’ll read and answer.

This adaptation sacrifices Shakespeare’s opaque imagery for clarity of emotion for the actor and intelligibility for the audience.

One linguistic pattern that becomes clear in reading King Lear is Shakespeare’s use of lists to emphasize points. Lear, Kent, and Edgar each have several speeches which
manifest this pattern. They emphasize the baroque grandeur of the play with its almost superhuman passions and outsized characters. Yet a director and dramaturg whose goals are to reduce the play’s running time while intensifying emotion and streamlining the action may find these passages frustrating. Kent’s insults of Goneril’s steward Oswald provide a good example. Kent answers Oswald’s “What dost thou know me for?”

A knave; a rascal; an eater of broken meats; a base, proud, shallow, beggarly, [three-suited,] hundred-pound, filthy [worsted-stocking] knave; a lily-liveried, action taking, whoreson, glass-gazing, superserviceable, [finical] rogue; [one-trunk-inheriting] slave; one that wouldst be a bawd [in way of good service], and art nothing but the composition of a knave, beggar, coward, pander, and the son and heir of a mongrel bitch; one whom I will beat into clamorous whining if thou deny’st the least syllable of thy addition. (2.2.44)

The key to this speech lies in its hilarious excess: how many insults can Kent fling at Oswald before the coward reacts? How many different synonyms for “knave” can Kent conjure? As the words pile up, so does the audience’s amusement. The speech contains several period references that would be obscure to a modern audience; our cuts are indicated in brackets above. By selectively cutting these adjectives, we reduced the length of Kent’s speech while retaining its baroque comic force.

Lear uses excessive verbiage to exercise his power through his ability to command the language. His rejection of Cordelia, banishment of Kent and his curses on Goneril and Regan demonstrate Shakespeare’s technique well. We cut very little of his responses to Cordelia and Kent’s honesty in Act 1, establishing his irrational
temperament. In 1.4, however, we reduced the number of lines in Lear’s response to Goneril’s demands by about half. The brackets below indicate the cuts:

    It may be so, my lord.
    Hear, nature, hear; dear goddess, hear!
    Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend
    To make this creature fruitful!
    Into her womb convey sterility!
    Dry up in her the organs of increase;
    And from her [derogate] **dishonored** body never spring
    A babe to honour her! If she 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;] that she may feel
    How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
    To have a thankless child! Away, away! (1.4.32)

Although the excess of Lear’s emotion is curtailed by these and similar cuts in other speeches, we felt that streamlining them served the production’s goals.

The most baffling language in *King Lear* belongs to Edgar in his disguise as Tom-a-Bedlam. In order to create an alternate identity that will protect him, Edgar chooses a “character” which is as far from his true status as possible. Every word that Tom speaks
is chosen by Edgar for a reason. When he first meets Lear and the Fool on the heath (3.4), he describes his outcast state in great detail, evoking sympathy from the previously impervious Lear. He also invokes unseen devils who supposedly torture him thus frightening Fool and Kent. He recites nonsense verses including the familiar “Fie, Fo, and Fum/I smell the blood of a British man” (3.4.77). The maintenance of his “character” becomes more vital when his father enters. An editor must carefully examine the meaning of Edgar’s nonsense lines before cutting them. We decided to cut most of his references to spirits, since the names would be unfamiliar to the OCTC audience. In addition, we excised his long speech in response to Lear’s query, “What hast thou been?” which helped to move the scene more directly toward Lear’s lines about “unaccommodated” man, its emotional center.

Like Tom’s language, the Fool’s exchanges with Lear pose an editing challenge. The Fool serves as Lear’s primary foil, demonstrating the King’s folly with witty observations and subversive suggestions. He provides an objective mirror which the audience uses to judge Lear’s actions. Because of this, he is central to the play’s thematic core. His clever puns and pithy phrases help the audience to understand Lear’s journey in Acts 2 and 3, so cuts must be made judiciously.

Upon his entrance in 1.4, the Fool immediately teases out the foolishness of Lear’s actions. In the editing process, we clarified some of this language but cut little. The scene evokes one of our production’s prominent themes: the diminishment of mighty men to “nothing.” The concept is first introduced in 1.1 when Lear warns Cordelia: “Nothing will come of nothing” (4). Shakespeare develops it further in this exchange:
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?

KING LEAR

Why, no, boy; nothing can be made out of nothing. (27)

The Fool’s next line to Kent is “Prithee, tell him, so much the rent of his land come to: he will not believe a fool.” We clarified the Fool’s point by deleting “so much” and inserting the word “nothing.” “Prithee, tell him the rent of his land comes to nothing; he will not believe a fool.” The fifth repetition of this significant word is in keeping with Shakespeare’s strategy of repetition. Similar cuts in other speeches made the Fool effective for modern audiences by retaining his wit and clarifying his irony. The audience found this Fool genuinely funny, as he rarely is in most productions of King Lear.

The Fool’s actions during the storm scenes in Act 3, heighten the poignancy of Lear’s condition. His clever witticisms also provide a contrast to Lear’s growing insanity. In a production which relied solely on simple lighting and sound effects to establish the danger of the storm, it was a important to make the dialogue intelligible, so we cut several of the Fool’s interjections. Another change was guided by a comparison of the Folio and Quarto editions. The Fool’s fourteen-line speech “This is a brave night to cool a courtesan. . . .” (68) does not appear in the Quarto so we ended the scene with the exit of Kent, Lear and the Fool.
Length is always an issue in productions of *King Lear*, especially since the conflated modern editions include most of the lines from both the Quarto and the Folio. The on-line MIT text’s word count is 27,627. Using the method of calculation described by Hartley, the average rate of delivery for a Shakespearean play is 130 words per minute.3 This indicates that an uncut version would run about three hours and thirty minutes. Most contemporary productions aim for two hours and thirty minutes (Hartley 89) and we hoped to achieve this. None of the changes were based solely on time, but the application of our central principles yielded a version that was about 30% shorter. With two ten-minute intermissions, our *King Lear* lasted two hours and forty-four minutes.

The placement of intermission breaks is vital to the play’s structure and its reception by an audience. Directors and dramaturgs must ask where they should occur and how many should there be. Our original intent had been to have one intermission which occurred after 3.7, ending with the blinding of Gloucester. This point of high tension seemed to be the logical place to pause. During the final week of rehearsal, we realized that this choice made the first half last almost one hour and forty-five minutes, too long to sustain even the most dedicated audience’s attention. We decided to add an earlier break, at the end of Act 2, which ends when Lear rushes madly into the storm. Then the production’s “second act” would be the entirety of the MIT edition’s Act 3, running about thirty minutes. The final “act” would encompass Acts 4 and 5. We believed that the extra time (two ten-minute breaks instead of one fifteen-minute one) was worth the increased engagement of a rested audience. During the run we noticed that most audience members remained in their seats during second break and it could have been shortened to five minutes without inconvenience. We never considered returning to
the single intermission idea, because the break after 3.7 was necessary for cleaning up the stage blood after Gloucester’s blinding.

The resolution of family conflicts among Edmund and Edgar, Goneril and Regan, and Albany and Goneril in 5.3 is surely among the most confusing and convoluted sections of the play. Just as the tensions are rising Shakespeare’s language becomes more imprecise as the characters volley for power. When Albany tells Edmund, “I hold you but a subject of this war,” he means “I hold you but my subject in this war” (126). After an exchange of innuendos between Goneril and Regan, Albany tells his wife, “The let alone lies not in your good will.” We changed this to “That decision is not yours to make” (127). Albany arrests Edmund, challenges him and Edmund accepts the challenge. This leads Albany to summon Edgar who has promised to “produce a champion that will prove” Edmund’s villainy (5.3.122). Edgar’s proclamation of his brother’s treachery and Edmund’s decision not to inquire about his challenger’s identity were trimmed to their essence. The build-up to the penultimate event must move rapidly. The duel communicated viscerally the anger and violence that Shakespeare’s words convey. After Edmund falls, the play’s forward momentum must be sustained until Lear enters. This led us to excise much of Edgar’s tale about his encounter with Gloucester (which the audience has witnessed) and move quickly through the announcement of the sisters’ deaths. Lear’s entrance carrying Cordelia is the play’s climax which must command the audience’s complete engagement. We trimmed Lear’s exchanges with Kent to emphasize the king’s sudden recognition of his faithful follower and made the announcement of Edmund’s death “a trifle,” as Albany describes it. Lear’s last line before his death was “Never, never, never, never, never” (5.3.138).
For decades, scholars have debated about the speaker of the last lines of *King Lear*:

> 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. (5.3.139)

The Quarto edition assigns it to Albany, the Folio to Edgar. The choice would have an impact on the audience’s perception of the denouement because, as Weis writes, “the speaker assumes the mantle of the ultimate moral authority in the play” (8). He points out that some scholars argue for Albany since he is the victor in the war and the most politically powerful character remaining on stage. But Edgar is the living character who has suffered the most, from his betrayal and banishment to his harrowing experience of madness with Lear to the rescue and death of his father. The audience has followed his personal trials and watched him learn from them. Edgar opens OCTC’s Act 3 with a recognition of his own condition and mankind’s, “To be worst/the lowest and most dejected thing of fortune/Stands still in hopefulness” (4.1.55). At the end of the play, after seven deaths, only Edgar has experienced the loss of family trust that results from betrayal, greed and jealousy. Only he has lived as a mad beggar, “unaccommodated man,” and gained wisdom from it. He comes to a self-knowledge that eluded his father and King Lear until just before their deaths. He ends the play, not in political triumph, but with an assertion of candid honesty and respect for the suffering of his elders. His speech brings the play’s finale back to our central themes of nothingness, family conflict and the acquisition of self knowledge.
Ultimately the test of the success of editing *King Lear* lies with the audience’s response. Hartley argues that the meaning of a theatrical experience “is constructed by the audience as they watch. . .” (31) but points out that that response is nearly impossible to quantify. In editing the text, we hoped to create a script that would be clear to a contemporary audience, sustain their attention and engage them emotionally. One way we judged our success was by observing the audience’s tracking of Lear’s emotional journey. They appreciated the Fool’s ironic humor as he commented upon his master’s decline. They understood Lear’s folly as well as his tragedy, reacting with both laughter and tears to his meetings with Gloucester and Cordelia in 4.6 and 4.7. They paid close attention to the fight between Edgar and Edmund, gasping at particular thrusts and parries. We even saw tears in the lobby at the end of the play, a sign that some felt intensely about the story they had witnessed. Although the director and dramaturg can no longer be objective about their work at the end of the show, we felt our audience had experienced a *King Lear* that spoke to them thematically and emotionally, giving them a memorable evening of Shakespeare.
Notes

1. Act 3.4.75 of the MIT online edition of *King Lear*. Because the MIT edition does not use line numbers, we use page numbers in our citations. Our version of this line contains a minor cut which curtails one of Lear’s long lists. Subsequent references to specific lines will appear in the text.

2. Act 4.6.109. The quotation contains a cut which eliminates some of Lear’s ravings and emphasizes the theme of “unaccommodated man.”

3. Hartley 113. This approach was suggested by Scott Kaiser of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, see note p. 219.
Works Consulted


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