Teaching *King Lear*: Metatheatre and the Absurd

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Today, engaging college students with Shakespeare is trickier than ever. One could compare it to the story of Sisyphus, endlessly pushing a boulder up a hill. In "You Don't Know Jack," Bruce Avery draws a painfully realistic picture of a disengaged student in a college introductory-level Shakespeare class: "Jack does not read much. He has watched plenty of television…He works more than twenty hours per week to pay his rising tuition, rent, car insurance, and gasoline bills. He is not an English major" (135). This description, while not encompassing all students, accurately portrays those who struggle to connect with Shakespeare and his world. In this essay, I propose a way to engage students with that world, and hopefully get them to understand, not only Shakespeare's theater, but also the plays and scenes in their own lives. My method is to approach Shakespeare through a metatheatrical lens that focuses on the plays-within-the-plays in the Bard's work. I propose how this theory can be applied to *King Lear* and the absurd, and roughly outline how a college introductory Shakespeare class may engage with these concepts.

My Approach

Since reading *Romeo and Juliet* in the ninth grade, I've been drawn to Shakespeare's sheer theatricality. With my experience in drama, it is easy for me to recognize that Shakespeare is certainly an expert in theatrical conventions and how they relate to humanity. "All the world's a stage," exclaims Jaques with a frown. "And all the men and women merely players" (*As You Like It* 2.7.139-40). The theatrical metaphors go on and on, creating a conversation that can be traced throughout Shakespeare's work. Adding to this conversation are the many other elements of theatricality within Shakespeare's plays, such as Viola in *Twelfth Night* pretending to be a man and Hamlet's Mousetrap play. Furthermore, outside of these rather obvious examples, are more implicit plays-within-the-plays. Shakespeare constructs subtle theatrical spaces where characters take on the role of dramatist or actor, and put on performances for audiences of their choosing. In his seminal book *Metatheatre*, Lionel Abel outlines how to approach the theatrical conventions within Shakespeare's plays. While he mainly focuses on *Hamlet* in his analysis, this essay will demonstrate how to approach *King Lear* through metatheatre and how a teacher may stir student engagement through this approach.

Abel, Metatheatre, and a bit of Hamlet

In *Hamlet*, Abel emphasizes that the characters are theatrical:

> Everyone has noticed that there is a play within a play…What has not been noticed, though, but becomes evident…is that there is hardly a scene in the whole work in which some character is not trying to dramatize another…Almost every important character acts at some moment like a playwright, employing a playwright's consciousness of drama to impose a certain posture or attitude on another (45-46)

Abel reveals the theatricality of *Hamlet* is not reserved to the mousetrap scene, but the entire show is filled characters acting as dramatists. He then presents scenes where characters try to

dramatize Hamlet . One of the best examples is his mother, Gertrude, who says, "Good Hamlet, cast thy knighted color off, / And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark" (1.2.68-9). Hamlet responds, "Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief, / That can denote me truly. These, indeed, seem; / For they are actions that a man might play; / But I have that within which passes show— / These but the trappings and the suits of woe" (1.2.82-5). Hamlet refuses to be dramatized by his mother and will not act in the way she desires. Abel goes on to explain how dramatization is not limited to Hamlet's mother. Claudius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and the Ghost are all trying to dramatize Hamlet. Conversely, Hamlet dramatizes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern into their own deaths. This tendency for Shakespeare's characters to dramatize one another is what creates the implicit plays-within-the-play, or metatheatre, in *Hamlet* and throughout his work.

The Theatrical Student

Returning to the discussion of "Jack", the disengaged student, Avery makes substantial comparisons to student life and theater. He starts by quoting Stephanie Olsen from "Teens and Media: A Full-Time Job" commenting, "This generation is unique…Teen life has become a theatrical, self-directed media production" (qtd. in 139). With this in mind, we must make students aware of the theatricality in their own lives, such as the characters they play (student, son/daughter, worker, etc.), the scenes they take part in (class presentations, job interviews, wedding toasts, etc.), and get them to contemplate the hardest question of all: What does it all mean? This is what *King Lear* is all about. After Gloucester's false suicide attempt, he and Edgar meet the mad Lear who tries to preach to them, saying, "When we are born we cry that we are come / To this great stage of fools" (4.6.183-4). In an attempt to understand this "great stage of fools" in *King Lear* and our own lives, we must turn to metatheatre and a study of the absurd.

Playing for Power in *King Lear*

In *King Lear* the majority of scenes can be viewed as implicit plays-within-the-play, where power is won and lost. It starts with Lear when he calls upon each of his daughters to declare, or *act out*, their love for him for their portion of the kingdom. As king, Lear is the ultimate dramatist. He holds power over everyone and "imposes," to repeat Abel's words, "a certain posture or attitude" on his subjects. As Gonerill and Regan act out their love to Lear, his authority is affirmed, but when Cordelia refuses to be an actor, and recite the lines expected of her, Lear's authority as a dramatist is tested. Essentially, Cordelia chooses truth over illusion and rebels against Lear's play-within-the-play. She will not act or perform. This dialectic between the authoritarian dramatist and the rebellious actor is how the struggle for power is portrayed throughout the play.

The metatheatre in the *Lear* consists of struggles for power between the dramatist, who is the playwright and director, and the actors, who are expected to perform. Throughout these plays-within-the-play, actors rebel against their dramatists, causing reversals in power. Lear begins the play as the ultimate dramatist, ruling over his actors, but starts to lose control by the end of act 1, scene 1. Gonerill and Regan plot the overthrow of their father as if preparing for a performance. After commenting on the "unconstant starts" of their father's nature, Gonerill says to Regan, "Pray you, let us hit together, / If our father carry authority with such disposition as he bears, / this last surrender of his will but offend us" (1.1.302-4). We see the origin in the reversal of power beginning here. Soon, Lear will no longer be the dramatist, but an actor in his daughters' play.

Similar reversals of power happen between Gloucester and his sons. At the beginning of the play, Gloucester dramatizes roles for each. For Edmund, Gloucester gives the character of the "whoreson," which he's "often blushed to acknowledge," and Edgar is the son "by order of law." And even though Gloucester says he holds both "no dearer" in his mind, the distinctions between them sets the foundations for the play-within-the-play, in which Edmund outperforms his father and brother to gain power and become the dramatist. In 1.2, Edmund prepares his performance of betrayal. After explaining his plan, he says of Edgar, "Pat he comes, like the catastrophe of the old comedy. / My cue is villainous melancholy, with a sigh like Tom o' Bedlam" (1.2.33-4). These theatrical terms, "old comedy" and "cue," reaffirm the occurrence of metatheatre in this scene.

If we teach our students to recognize the plays-within-the-play in *King Lear*, and identify who the dramatists and actors are in those plays, we can lead them to understand the dialectic of power in the story, and, eventually, in their own lives. The modern student has felt the pressure to act a certain way from various dramatists. He or she may have dealt with an authoritarian instructor that imposed a servant-like role onto them, or have strict parents that tried to make him or her go into medical school even though they really wanted to go into graphic design. Once students recognize how power is imposed through performance, they will not only be able to analyze the metatheatre in Shakespeare, but also see how power is won and lost through the theatrics of daily life.

Cutting Deep—Metatheatre on Dover Cliff

When viewed through a metatheatrical lens, 4.6, the Dover Cliff scene is an implicit play-within-the-play that leaves the audience baffled at Edgar's lack of pity for his father. Leading up to this moment, Edgar has taken on the character of Poor Tom to evade capture by Gloucester and his men, and Gloucester has been blinded by Cornwall and Regan for his allegiance to Lear. Like Oedipus, Gloucester's blindness coincides with his enlightenment. After he's blinded, he realizes Edmund's plot, and the woe he's caused Edgar by believing Edmund's lies. Edgar, who listens in to his father's woes, does not reveal himself but instead stays in disguise. The scene ends with Gloucester hiring Poor Tom, to lead him to the Dover Cliff. In his instructions to the beggar, Gloucester says, "From that place / I shall no leading need" (4.1.78-9). Gloucester's intention is clear. He wishes to end his life and just needs someone to lead him in the right direction.

Act 4, scene 6, opens with Poor Tom trying to convince Gloucester that they're moving up a hill toward the precipice of the Dover Cliff. Edgar is putting on a performance for his father. He's creating an illusion for the old man, and directing him through it. Soon, Edgar's performance starts to falter, when Gloucester says, "Methinks thy voice is altered, and thou speak'st in better phrase and matter than thou didst," remarks Gloucester (4.6.7-8). "Y'are much deceived," replies Edgar. "In nothing am I changed / But in my garments" (4.6.9). Gloucester critiques Edgar's performance much like an audience member might criticize an actor's voice on the stage. In the end, like any good dramatist, Edgar convinces his father that they are on the edge of Dover Cliff through his use of language:

> 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. Halway down
> Hangs one that gathers sampire—dreadful trade!

> Methinks he seems no bigger than his head.
> The fishermen that walk upon the beach
> Appear like mice, and yon tall anchoring bark
> Diminished to her cock; her cock, a buoy
> Almost too high for sight. (4.6.11-20)

The art and skill with which Edgar sets this scene can only be described as a master dramatist at work. Through the use of language, he turns flat ground into the edge of an amazingly high cliff. And his speech is enough to convince Gloucester that the illusion is real, even though all of his senses are telling him it is false. Eventually, he tries to jump.

This is every dramatist's goal, to make his or her audience think that the action on the stage is real. Through this deception, a dramatist is able to capture his audience and make them feel what the characters' emotions. By acting as both dramatist and actor, Edgar leads his father through this illusion to create a catharsis in the suicidal man. Just before he leaves Gloucester to "jump," Edgar says to himself and to the audience, "Why I do trifle thus with his despair / Is done to cure it" (4.6.33-4). The metatheatrical performance is supposed to be, in Edgar's mind, therapeutic. Stephen Orgel discusses this in his article "Shakespeare Imagines a Theater" when he claims, "Edgar's curative theatrical lies have their roots in Aristotelian catharsis: a medical metaphor described the operation of theater, it purged, and thereby healed, through pity and terror" (557). The difficult part about Orgel's theory is that while Edgar's strange treatment works on his father at first, it later proves to be too much for Gloucester to bear. In 5.3, after Edgar recalls the story of revealing the truth to his father, he says the shock of it gave Gloucester a heart attack. Therefore, Edgar's "cure" only delays his father's death.

We must examine why Edgar makes the choice to trick his father into committing a false suicide. I've already stated that he puts on this play-within-the-play for Gloucester to "cure" him of his suicidal thoughts, but it's obvious that Edgar's actions here are questionable. Why doesn't he reveal himself to his father? No one can say with certainty, but I think one way to explore this concept is through the philosophy of the absurd.

Jumping the Gap—From Metatheatre to the Absurd

The title of the last chapter of Abel's book is "The Theatre and the 'Absurd'". The quotations show Abel's scathing view of scholars who promote the absurd in theater. He takes special care to attack those who think this philosophy exists in Shakespeare's work. "But was there always a Theatre of the Absurd?" questions Abel. "I claim there was not and that there is no such thing now" (141). However, I disagree with Abel and maintain that through the absurd that we can come to a better understanding of *King Lear*.

The restrictions of space don't permit me to develop an all-encompassing definition of the absurd in this essay; however, in his article "Tragic Absurdity," Jeffrey Sobosan says, "Our lives are so important to us that we have trouble accepting the possibility that they may not be equally significant to some higher Being" (181). In other words, we as humans spend a lot of time trying to make meaning out of our lives by believing in God. Sobosan adds, "Much of Shakespeare's tragedy is also based on man's reckoning of the absurd" (182). This is what *King Lear* about. It's when our God fails us and we perceive the absurdity of life.

As stated earlier, both Lear and Gloucester are dramatists. At the beginning of the play they are in charge of their cast of actors, but that power soon slips away when their children

usurp them. Each must face a life devoid of a loving God. In contemplating his state in 4.1, Gloucester laments, "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; / They kill us for their sport" (4.1.38-9). And in 4.6 Lear refers to the futility of religion when he says, "There thou mightst behold the great image of authority: a dog's obeyed in office" (4.6.158-9). Both passages show the crises these characters are undergoing with their belief in God. Their solutions? For Lear, it is madness. For Gloucester, it is suicide.

In "The Myth of Sisyphus," Albert Camus explores the absurd through a discussion of suicide. He describes it as a person's reaction when overwhelmed by the absurdity of life:

> In a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. (6)

The absurd is an awakening to the reality that our world isn't governed by reason. The daily theater of our lives, the monotonous schedule of work or school, is just an illusion we use to distract ourselves from the absurd. As stated earlier, after Gloucester is blinded, he has an Oedipus-like enlightenment in which he can "see" Edmund's treachery and his mistake in convicting Edgar without evidence. This enlightenment is his encounter with the absurd. Therefore, it is easy to see Gloucester as metaphorically blind to his surroundings before he's actually blinded by Cornwall and Regan. Camus states that we all blind ourselves to the absurd:

> In Italian museums are sometimes found little painted screens that the priest used to hold in front of the face of condemned men to hide the scaffold from them. The leap in all its forms, rushing into the divine or the eternal, surrendering to the illusions of the everyday or of the idea—all these screens hide the absurd. (91)

In the end, Camus states that we shouldn't give in to suicide: "Even within the limits of nihilism it is possible to keep the means to proceed beyond nihilism…Although 'The Myth of Sisyphus' poses mortal problems, it sums itself up for me as a lucid invitation to live and to create, in the midst of the desert" (v). And it is here, in man's struggle with the absurd world, where art (including theater) is how we survive.

Edgar's performance in 4.6 serves as a screen from the absurd for Gloucester. With the illusion that he's survived his own attempted suicide, the father continues to live until 5.3 when his heart simply gives out on him. This is the relationship between metatheatre and the absurd in *King Lear*. The plays-within-the-play distracts the characters from the absurdity of life and allow them to keep struggling until it is too late. In order to engage with the play, students must recognize that the absurd is not only present in *Lear* but in their own lives. One of the aspects of college life that often gets overlooked is the purpose of getting an education. Students must question if they're just going to college to get a degree or is there a deeper meaning behind their actions. Why engage in the theater of life? Is it just a distraction from the absurd, or is there something more substantial that we're seeking? By grappling with these questions, student will enter the discourse regarding metatheatre and the absurd, while also interrogating their personal motivations.

From Theory to Practice—Metatheatre and the Absurd in the Classroom

While the analytical approach discussed so far may run the risk of appearing too complicated for introductory college students, a basic knowledge in theatrical conventions, and the theories of Abel and Camus, will provide the foundation needed in order for students to illuminate the text. To do this, I propose a rough outline for a college introductory Shakespeare course that includes methods for teaching theatrical conventions, a list of suggested plays conducive to metatheatrical analysis, and activities for approaching metatheatre and the absurd in *King Lear*.

The first two or three weeks of this course are devoted to initiating students in the conventions of theater. Instead of treating Shakespeare's work as literature cut off from the stage, the instructor reveals that Shakespeare is meant to be performed. Taking the class to watch a production of Shakespeare at the local theater, will show them how the action of a play is staged and reveal the differences between dramatist, actor, and audience. This lesson should also include a wide range of theatrical vocabulary (such as staging, cues, costumes etc.). Additionally, exposing students to Michael Bogdanovich's film-version of *Noises Off* (a play about performing a play) will acclimate students to theatrical language and the process of rehearsal. With this awareness of theatrical conventions, students will have an easier time locating the plays-within-the-plays in Shakespeare.

Tackling *King Lear* with a developed understanding of metatheatre, and a basic comprehension of the absurd, is the end goal for this course. In preparation, the instructor begins with exposing students to less difficult plays for recognizing and analyzing metatheatre and gradually moves up to *King Lear*. After students gain a basic understanding of how theatrical productions work, the instructor introduces the metatheatrical lens by presenting Abel's theories regarding the play-within-the-play and the dialectic between the dramatist and actor. Since students will already know most of the vocabulary involved with Abel's theories, they will be prepared to start applying the metatheatrical lens to such works as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Love's Labours Lost*, where the plays-within-the-plays are explicit and easier to discuss. After finishing these plays, students will move on to more advanced metatheatrical texts, where the plays-within-the-plays are implicit. Here's a list of the more advanced plays in no particular order: *Hamlet*, *Henry IV part 1*, *Twelfth Night*, *Richard III*, *As You Like It*, *The Tempest*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Othello*. With each new play, the students' approach to finding and analyzing the metatheatre of Shakespeare's work will become more refined, which will give students a solid foundation for approaching *King Lear* and, eventually, turning the lens away from the text and onto themselves.

The course culminates with an in-depth study of *King Lear* using an activity that requires students to gain some first-hand experience in a theatrical production. The class forms groups of students that will produce a scene from *King Lear*. One student will be the dramatist and the rest are actors. The instructions for the assignment make it clear that the dramatist possesses all of the power over the actors and has the responsibility for running the show. First, there's an audition process where the actors read for various roles and the dramatist makes the ultimate decision regarding who plays what character in the scene. Second, the scene is staged. In other words, the dramatist makes it clear what emotions should be present in the scene and gives the actors their blocking (directions on where to move on the stage). Third, there's a rehearsal process where the scene is performed a number of times, the dramatist giving his cast of actors notes on how their performances could be improved. Finally, the scene is presented to the class.

At the end, it is essential for students to write a reflection on the dynamics they noticed

taking place between the dramatist and the actors in their group. The following prompts are meant to spur in-depth student responses: How did it feel to have someone telling you where to stand and what to do? Did you ever feel like disobeying the dramatist's instructions? How would you characterize the relationship between you and the dramatist? As the dramatist, how did it feel to be in charge of the actors? Once students describe and reflect on their experiences during the performance activity, the instructor asks them to explore where they've experienced similar dynamics in their everyday lives: Describe a time when you rebelled against your parents or an authority figure. How did you do it and why? What are the different roles you play in life (such as being a son or daughter)? Describe the expectations of those roles, and who sets those expectations. In pairing these writing prompts, the instructor reveals the connection between the power dynamics that happen in theater and the similar dynamics that take place in student's everyday lives.

The final project of the course is a writing assignment that asks students to apply the metatheatrical lens and the theory of the absurd to a scene from *King Lear*, while also comparing how they see similar dynamics happening in their own lives. The first section of the instructor's writing prompt asks students to locate an implicit play-within-the-play in *King Lear*, define which characters are the dramatists and the actors, and what plays for power or theatrical dynamics are taking place. This section should not be too difficult for the students since they have already explored Shakespeare's work using the metatheatrical lens over a variety of plays throughout the semester.

The next section of the final writing prompt asks to students to argue how the metatheatre they've identified in the play relates to the central theme of the absurd. The students will already possess an awareness of the absurd's central place in *King Lear* from the instructor conducting in-class presentations and activities on its influence earlier in the unit. The presentations will show how the story of Sisyphus endlessly struggling to roll a boulder up a hill relates to the characters' struggles in *Lear*. Students will be asked to read selections from Camus's "The Myth of Sisyphus" and make connections between Camus's theories regarding how we distract ourselves from the absurd and how this relates to metatheatre. Therefore, students will have a basic understanding of the absurd when asked to make an argument concerning its relation to metatheatre in the final writing prompt.

In the third section of the prompt, the instructor asks students to take what they've learned about metatheatre and the absurd and apply it to their own lives. Students will already have some experience doing this in their reflection on the class performance activity. However, now they are required to go into more detail regarding how the theater in Shakespeare's play relates to the theater in their lives. They must describe a scene from life where they were either a dramatist or an actor, and how their role got reversed through a change in the theatrical dynamics. The students must end with a discussion on whether or not they believe theater, both onstage and in everyday life, is a way of coping with the absurd. If they don't believe it is, they must then argue what they perceive the function of theater to be. By responding to this final writing prompt, the students will not only demonstrate the influence of metatheatre and the absurd in *Lear*, but they will show how theater and Shakespeare are inevitable parts of everyday life.

While the average college introductory-level students may not think Shakespeare is relatable to their modern times, approaching the plays through a metatheatrical lens reveals that the Bard's work is alive in the scenes they act out on a daily basis. Just as Shakespeare's characters play for power by taking on the roles of the dramatist or the actor, so do students in

their job interviews, romantic dates, conflicts with roommates, and so on. Additionally, just as Shakespeare's characters must struggle with the absurd, so must students question the motivation behind their struggles to keep striving for their personal goals in life. This approach exposes the humanity at the heart of Shakespeare's work and makes his claim that "all the world's a stage" reverberate in the mind long after the actors have taken their final bows.

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