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Book Review

Bradley, Lynne. *Adapting King Lear for the Stage*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010. 274 pp.
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In *Adapting King Lear for the Stage*, Lynne Bradley stands up for the bastards of literature: adaptations. Bradley suggests "it is now time to stop cataloguing, to stop worrying about fidelity and to stop considering adaptations as off-putting pieces of non-theatre" (2). She wishes to move beyond approaches that simply tabulate adaptations of Shakespeare plays, focus narrowly on their conformity to the Shakespearean text, or dismiss them as dilutions of Shakespeare's art. Her approach is to follow adaptations of a single play—*King Lear*—from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries, investigating how adaptations of the play have themselves adapted over time in response to changing cultural exigencies.

Bradley offers her own commonsensical definition of Shakespearean adaptations as "works in which the author makes an explicit connection to a play by Shakespeare" and "invites a particular response from the audience to compare the adaptation to their memories of the original" (4). She criticizes previous historians and theorists of adaptation, including Linda Hutcheon, Julie Sanders, and Gary Taylor for what she sees as their tendency to conceive adaptations as either primarily nostalgic or primarily iconoclastic in their stances to the original text. According to Bradley, a binary approach works well for pre-twentieth century adaptations of Shakespeare but is inadequate for considering twentieth-century adaptations, in which adaptors show their awareness of both the centrality of Shakespeare to literary and cultural authority and of the contingency of this centrality on particular historical and social circumstances. "As playwrights in the twentieth century articulate a more complicated relationship with Shakespeare," Bradley argues "they begin to express an awareness of both their debt to him and their difference from him" (6–7).

Bradley begins by considering *King Lear* itself as an adaptation of previous texts, summarizing previous critical work on the probable sources for the play. She also considers

the evidence that the Folio's *The Tragedy of King Lear* may be Shakespeare's own rewriting of the play represented in the 1608 Quarto as *The History of King Lear*, although she argues that if this is indeed so then Shakespeare was only revising his play and not adapting it. This distinction between revision and adaptation seems unconvincing since it rests on a rather arbitrary assumption that adaptation is something that only takes place between different authors.

The first chapter discusses pre-twentieth century adaptations of *King Lear*. This chapter charts a shift from Nahum Tate's "oppositional" adaptation of *King Lear* in the late seventeenth century to Garrick's "nostalgic" eighteenth-century staging of the play. Bradley discusses Tate's *King Lear* of 1681, which cuts out the Fool, gives the play a happy ending, and rewrites and replaces much of the original text. Bradley uses Tate's play as an example of a purely "oppositional" adaptation, though this seems somewhat surprising given Tate's own preface in which he wrote that Shakespeare's play seemed to him "a heap of jewels unstrung and unpolished, yet so dazzling in their disorder that I soon perceived I had seized a treasure." Tate's play also challenges a key plank of Bradley's definition of adaptation as a work that invites audiences to compare their memories of the original to the new version. For, as Bradley herself notes, William Davenant's post-Restoration productions of Shakespeare's plays attracted little interest from theatergoers. For audiences from the late seventeenth through to the early nineteenth century, it was Tate's *History of King Lear* (1683) "Reviv'd with Alterations" as the first edition's title page puts it, that was the more familiar version of the play. Even David Garrick's stagings of *King Lear*, which restored some of Shakespeare's original text, were, as Bradley acknowledges, more adaptations of Tate than of Shakespeare. Even at a time when Shakespeare was entering the canon in the eighteenth century and Shakespeare editing was putting a premium on textual fidelity to the original text(s), theatrical Cordelias still managed to survive to the end. Bradley also labels Shakespeare burlesques of the early nineteenth century as "nostalgic" because they satirize not Shakespeare's plays themselves but conventional staging of his plays and rely on the audience's awareness of a gap between the original text and its contemporary productions. Here again I think Bradley's assumption that pre-twentieth century adaptations are either oppositional or nostalgic also flattens out the actual history of Shakespearean adaptation since it rules out any possibility that the satirical energies of burlesque could have extended to the "original Shakespeare" as well.

In chapter two Bradley argues convincingly that the character-criticism of Shakespeare associated with A.C. Bradley influenced twentieth-century adaptations of Shakespeare. Character critics gave a theoretical rationale for adaptations that extended the lives of Shakespearean characters outside the limits of the original plays. Bradley's case in point is Gordon Bottomley's *King Lear's Wife* (1913), which would perhaps more accurately be described as a prequel than an adaptation, since it imagines events before the time of Shakespeare's play. Bradley also considers how Maurice Baring's *Dead Letters* (1910) and Tom Stoppard's reimagining of *Hamlet* in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966)

extend character criticism's technique of treating Shakespearean characters as independent persons while at the same time putting the practice under satirical scrutiny. Bradley reads Edward Bond's *Lear* (1971) as a distinctively modern adaptation that combines both admiration and iconoclasm which "drags Shakespeare's masterpiece into the twentieth century and challenges audiences to see its relevance in the modern world" (123). Like Shakespeare's earlier adaptors, Bond dramatically alters Shakespeare's ending. He has a contrite Lear shot dead while furtively hacking at the wall dividing his lands from Cornwall and Albany that he had ordered to be built before his deposition at the hands of his daughters. Bradley sees the new ending as a salutary change that sees *Lear* taking responsibility for changing the oppressive social order he has helped to construct. Through the altered ending, Bradley writes, "Bond does not merely theorize change, he advocates direct action and practical solutions within concrete social realities" (127). Of course the ending, with its echoes of Humpty Dumpty, might also be read as a scene of Beckettian futility. Bradley goes on to read Howard Barker's *Seven Lears* (1989) as a modern oppositional adaptation, that intentionally disintegrates the plot, characters, and language of Shakespeare's play, allowing "audiences to experience the story for the first time all over again" (169).

Bradley's final chapter, which surveys modern feminist adaptations of *King Lear*, argues that these versions avoid the literal and symbolic violence that characterizes adaptations of the play by male authors. Like chapter two with its argument for the influence of character criticism on twentieth-century adaptations of *King Lear*, this chapter discusses the influence of feminist literary criticism and theory on late twentieth-century feminist adaptations of Shakespeare, giving central attention to the Women's Theatre Group's *Lear's Daughters* (1987).

Bradley's book joins a significant current in literary criticism that has turned to adaptations as culturally rich texts in their own right, whose recent exponents include Coppélia Kahn in *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation* (2009). Bradley's ambition is to develop a historical model for Shakespeare adaptation from the seventeenth century up to the end of the twentieth century. Unfortunately the model she offers in her book is too limiting. A shift from a "simplicity" of adaptation in which productions are either idolatrous or iconoclastic to a twentieth-century "complexity" of posture is not adequate to the history of *King Lear* stage adaptations, much less adaptations of the Shakespearean corpus as a whole. But Bradley's book usefully points critics towards the need for a genuinely historical account of Shakespearean adaptation over the last four centuries.

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