



**GLOBE
EDUCATION**

LAUGHTER IN KING LEAR

KING LEAR (2008)

Can we laugh at King Lear? Even in Shakespeare's greatest tragedies there are moments of comedy – and never more than in King Lear, writes Dr. Farah Karim-Cooper.

At what point in one of Shakespeare's darkest tragedies could we possibly feel the compulsion to laugh? If tragedy is, as the critic Claire McEachern has described it, 'an intense exploration of suffering and evil', what role can laughter play in such explorations? The answer to these questions depends largely upon how we define laughter and where we identify its sources.

Laughter to the Ancient Greeks was viewed as an expression of derision or scorn; Aristotle saw it as a sign of our humanity, observing that human beings are the only mortal creatures who laugh, but found that laughter was more often than not a pronounced expression of contempt. Democritus, the 'laughing philosopher', noted that laughter was related to ridicule and that making jokes was one way of responding to deformity and hideousness.

Renaissance writers took up this theme and well into the 17th century, contempt, derision, scorn, mockery, ridicule, and folly were hypothesised as sources of laughter. During this period, it was recommended among clerics that sermons should not induce people to laughter, while several anti-theatrical writers worried about the production of immoderate laughter among playhouse audiences. The philosopher Thomas Hobbes noted that 'men laugh at mischances and indecencies, wherein there lieth not wit or jest at all. . . also men laugh at the infirmities of others, by comparison wherewith their own abilities are set off'. The provocation to laughter, in other words, is not always grounded in witty jokes or banter, but also arises from the superiority that we perceive in ourselves.

The 17th-century writer and cleric Robert Burton explored laughter's relationship to melancholy and the physical expression common to both sadness and happiness: tears. Both laughter and crying were considered convulsive manifestations of the passions of the soul, which required release. Twentieth-century relief theory developed further the relationship between extreme emotion and laughter. Freud suggested that laughing was fundamentally a release of psychic frustration or nervous energy.

Shakespeare and his contemporaries recognised that there are different reasons for laughter which both comedies and tragedies are able to provoke. By on the one hand writing comedies that suggest tragic consequences, such as *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Twelfth Night* and *Measure for Measure* and on the other tragedies that contain moments of revelry, witty banter or delight such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet* and *Othello*, Shakespeare blurs the boundaries between the comic and tragic. For centuries writers debated the appropriateness of comedic interjections in tragedy, many attempting to deny the natural fluidity between these genres. In *The Art of English Poesy*, George Puttenham differentiates

between 'those comical poets' and 'poets tragical', who 'meddled not with so base matters', but that 'set forth the doleful falls of unfortunate and afflicted princes'.

Some of the comedic resonances in *Lear* lie in the play's kinship to festive comedy. In this genre Shakespeare's characters are plunged into a natural landscape where social structures have been turned upside down, as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. When King Lear is out in the storm battling the elements he becomes a parodic figure invoking the lord-of-misrule tradition. This figure presides over the revels, partakes in mock-battles, but is subject to banishment or mock 'execution' at the end of the revels. He may be a ridiculous figure, one who, under normal circumstances, could never conceivably be a king. The fool, conversely, becomes a wise man, one who jests, commenting wittily on the absurdity and folly of the acting lord.

By exploring this festive tradition, Shakespeare creates a context for the range of laughter that productions of *Lear* might provoke. *Lear* incorporates comedic exchanges, witty insults, beatings (Oswald's counterparts range from the Dromios in *The Comedy of Errors* to Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*), and finally, madness, which during the Renaissance period was believed to induce laughter as well as pity. The very appearance of Edgar as Mad Tom O'Bedlam may have been funny to a Jacobean audience familiar with the social archetype that Mad Tom represents, particularly if he was dressed in rags or patches, was feigning madness and perhaps brandishing a stick with bacon on the end, as contemporary ballads suggested.

Perhaps, too, the play requires its audience to laugh, sometimes jocosely at intended comedic situations and wit, such as the exchange between Lear and Oswald in Act 1:

LEAR Who am I sir?

OSWALD My Lady's father.

LEAR 'My Lady's father!' my Lord's knave; you whoreson dog! you slave! you cur!

OSWALD I am none of these, my Lord; I beseech your pardon.

LEAR Do you bandy looks with me, you rascal? [Striking him.]

OSWALD I'll not be stricken, my Lord.

KENT Nor tripp'd neither, you base foot-ball player. [Tripping up his heels.]

At other times we may want to laugh derisively at folly, villainy or vice, and perhaps even pityingly, to release the 'passions of the soul' stirred by the pain of loss. It has long been acknowledged that comic relief is an important coping mechanism and one that Shakespeare provides us with in *Lear* so that we are better able to face the terrible suffering the play dramatises. Audiences seek such moments of release to enable the cathartic purgations that Aristotle had determined were essential to human health.

The architecture of Renaissance playhouses created an environment that was conducive to paroxysms of laughter. The anti-theatrical writer Stephen Gosson exhorted spectators in 1579 to 'beware of those places [i.e. theatres] which in sorrow cheer you, and beguile you in mirth', while the puritan Philip Stubbes warns potential spectators that in the playhouses they will learn how to 'jest, laugh and flear, to grin, to nod and mow [that is, to deride or mock]'. The phenomenon of immoderate, collective laughter, which many anti-theatrical writers worried about, was perhaps due to the proximity of playgoers to each other, their visibility and the performative potential of laughter itself. It has been proven that laughter, like yawning, triggers chemical responses in others and is therefore contagious. Given the architecture of the new Globe Theatre, it is likely that these conditions contribute to the seemingly hyperbolic laughter productions here tend to evoke.

It is important to remember, though, that a tragedy in the Elizabethan and Jacobean amphitheatres was not necessarily an austere event, and it may be that Shakespeare's popularity during his own time was due in some measure to his ability to delight and harrow his audience within the same 'two hours traffic' on the stage.