

Shakespeare's Legacy and Midwestern Theatre

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In this month's Midwest Literary Project programming, we are exploring the lasting legacy of Shakespeare and Jane Smiley's retelling of *King Lear* in her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *A Thousand Acres* (1991). We sat down to talk with Dr. Haidee Heaton and Dr. Emily Mayne about Shakespeare, Smiley, and the thriving Midwestern theatre scene.

Shakespeare remains perennially popular, hundreds of years after his plays were first written and performed. What do you think it is about Shakespeare that makes his work so timeless and enduring?

HEATON: From a performance standpoint, Shakespeare is inherently human even when the characters are mystical and otherworldly. Iambic pentameter is the most natural rhythm in poetry. It's a heartbeat rhythm that actors naturally feel when speaking and the voice follows that beat, finding when the line is incomplete, when the line pushes forward or ends. Now that is not to say that his dialogue should be spoken in the direct iamb (how awful and odd would THAT sound?), but the rhythm, stresses, syllables all guide the performance. Shakespeare gave actors everything needed to portray his characters and live his plots within the dialogue.

From a design perspective, the sky is the limit. There are beautiful Shakespearean productions that are simplistic and minimalist where the designers allow the actors to create the world with the dialogue. There are productions that are grandiose that reimagine the worlds, taking advantage of the generalized settings (home, interior, woods) and creating large, splendid playgrounds for performances. And there is everything in-between. Again, that dialogue guides the design and allows for human interpretation.

Ultimately, Shakespeare's work is grounded in base human desire, reaction, emotion, and action. Change the characters from kings and woodland fairies to modern-day college students and the intent and objectives remain the same. Each age is represented and each character has their own wins and losses. It is completely human.

MAYNE: One of the fascinating things about Shakespeare as an author and a playwright for me is that there are so many different answers to this question, rather than just one, because there are so many different ways to approach his work. First of all, from a performance standpoint, to build on Dr. Heaton's remarks, Shakespeare's plays are still performed because most of them make great theatre: they are remarkably well-constructed and can provide an extraordinary

dramatic experience which is by turns funny, moving, gripping, chilling, exciting, and more besides. I think that this experience is partly a result of the way that the plays are put together, and partly the result of Shakespeare's unique language. Like their effects on audiences more generally, the language of the plays is all sorts of different things: sublime, coarse, cruel, comic, disturbing, and more. Together these two parts create a unique theatrical experience.

And then there is the human perspective: many people have found in Shakespeare's plays an expression of human concerns and experience that feels familiar to them, which is why Shakespeare is often described as reflecting aspects of human nature and experience that are timeless and/or universal. What appeals to me, though, is the more ambiguous and incomplete elements of the plays—what Emma Smith has called their “permissive gappiness”—that makes them so available to readers and audiences, and for adaptation and re-imagination in so many different media and contexts. As Smith notes, we aren't told what characters look like; sometimes we have to infer motive or outcome or even meaning. That, in my view, is how the plays seem so timeless and able to reflect human concerns across the ages—because it is we who are filling in the gaps.

For me, Shakespeare's enduring appeal is something of a paradox. On the one hand, his plays seem to appeal to universal human values; on the other hand, those plays are endlessly re-imagined, re-adapted, and re-staged to explore the interests and concerns that other particular people and cultures have. There is a poem by Shakespeare's contemporary, the poet and playwright Ben Jonson (1572-1637) that speaks in a way to this conundrum. Jonson's poem was published in the First Folio of Shakespeare's plays in 1623, and, as we might expect, eulogizes Shakespeare as a poet and playwright. Jonson writes that Shakespeare is both “Soul of the age! / The applause, delight, the wonder of our Stage!”, superior to all the other English Renaissance writers, and yet *also* “not of an age but for all time”—he is both the essence of his time and yet also outside of or beyond it.

Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* is a 20th-century reworking of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. What is particularly fascinating or compelling about *King Lear*? What does it tell us about Shakespeare's time and the context of his writing and performance?

HEATON: For me, the most compelling parts of *King Lear* are how much that plot and those characters are so echoed in today's society. Family drama, aging, madness (or the supposition of madness), loyalty—all of that is still happening today and in those same contexts. Tune in to the news and you see children fighting over fortunes; siblings claiming mental duress and illness; parents feeling left out, alone, and abandoned; faithful relationships standing the test of time, being questioned, cherished, and dismissed. It is like Shakespeare just hopped in a time machine and saw what we as a human race have become. OR, more to the point, it shows just how little

we as humans have emotionally evolved. Not King Lear, but Shakespeare holds, “as ‘twere the mirror up to nature.” He’s a pretty cool dude.

MAYNE: For me, *King Lear* is a deeply compelling play because of its portrayal of “unaccommodated man” as a “poor, bare, forked animal,” as Lear himself puts it, in a world in which the gods are silent. So many of the play’s characters undergo enormous suffering as they are stripped of everything that they know of themselves, and then forced to reckon with what remains, and with the question of whether anything remains at all: “who is it that can tell me who I am?”, asks Lear at another moment.

But this play also returns us to that other side of Shakespeare—the way in which his plays speak differently to different times and different places. It might seem difficult to believe, but in the later seventeenth century *King Lear* was regarded as terribly and unbearably sad—unperformable in its original form. An adaptation, *The History of King Lear*, by the poet Nahum Tate, which substituted a happy ending in which Lear and Cordelia survive, among other changes, became the standard version of the play on stage from 1681 until the 1830s. In the nineteenth century Shakespeare’s original text was staged again, but usually with the understanding that Lear’s death is redemptive, that he transcends the suffering that he experiences. In the twentieth century, however, both interpretation of the play and its staging radically change. Productions start to emphasize the bleakness of the play, and its dark, potentially nihilistic vision of human capability—especially after 1945. Far from being panned as unactable and horribly focused on suffering, as it was for much of its performance history, *King Lear* is now frequently performed and highly regarded for its ability to bear witness to human suffering and the cruelty of the world.

We don’t know the exact date of *King Lear*’s composition, though another play that was influential upon Shakespeare’s, *The True Chronicle History of King Leir*, was printed in 1605, and our *King Lear* was performed at the English royal court at Christmas in 1606, suggesting that it was composed in 1605-06. It’s likely that Jacobean audiences had as many different thoughts about the play as do modern viewers, but the play’s portrayal of kingship and inheritance would have resonated more directly with its original audience, since they lived in a monarchical state, ruled by James I. Lear’s division of his kingdom would probably have seemed shockingly inappropriate and possibly illegal to contemporary audiences, who had a sense of the realm being as indivisible as the king’s very body. Lear’s plan would have seemed especially inauspicious and doomed from the outset to its Jacobean audiences.

With *A Thousand Acres*, the story of *King Lear* is shifted to a Midwestern farm family. What elements of that retelling feel steadfastly Shakespearean and which of the elements allow us to see this familiar story in a new way?

MAYNE: What might strike readers most immediately about the relationship of *A Thousand Acres* to *King Lear* are the correspondences between the characters and the plots of the works. The scene is changed from an unspecified legendary ancient Britain to Zebulon County, Iowa, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but in each we have a patriarchal, land-owning father—King Lear and Larry Cook—and his three daughters—Regan and Rose, Goneril and Ginny, and Cordelia and Caroline—and a spiraling series of disasters precipitated by the old man's decision to divide his land between his daughters and their husbands, excepting Cordelia and Caroline, and their descents into erratic behavior. There are specific events in the novels that mirror events in the play, such as the storm scene in *King Lear*, when Lear rushes out into a storm after both Goneril and Regan tell him that he can only stay with them if he dismisses his retinue, which becomes an incident in *A Thousand Acres* in which Larry verbally abuses his daughters and then angrily leaves into a storm. Harold Clark, the Gloucester figure in *A Thousand Acres*, is blinded by a spray of ammonia from his tractor, and it is later revealed that Pete Lewis, the husband of Rose, had tampered with the tractor in an effort to revenge himself on Larry, while in *King Lear* Cornwall, Regan's husband, brutally blinds Gloucester directly and deliberately.

So in a sense there is something Shakespearean about the scaffolding of plot and character here. But in the novel these correspondences work until they suddenly don't. In Shakespeare's play pretty much everyone dies, and King Lear's death is a major concluding event of the play which is portrayed directly on stage and forms part of a shattering emotional climax, but Larry's death in *A Thousand Acres* is perfunctorily described and is not actually the conclusion of the novel. Unlike her Shakespearean analogue, Ginny does not die but leaves Zebulon County and her farm life. The book ends with an epilogue in which Ginny tells us about her life, lived partly in remorse, and the reminders that she carries of the other characters, all of whom are either dead or gone. There has been endless debate about whether there is anything redemptive or hopeful in *King Lear*, but *A Thousand Acres* permits Ginny to experience closure, if not quite redemption.

I think that it is with Ginny and Rose that *A Thousand Acres* is most different from *King Lear*. The novel focuses on their experiences and understanding of their terrifying father, while Goneril and Reagan are significantly less central characters in *King Lear*. *A Thousand Acres* is narrated by Ginny, which shapes our understanding of events and other characters as we and Ginny encounter them, and one of the central revelations of the novel is the sexual abuse that Ginny comes to realize that both she and Rose suffered as girls the hands of their father. I think that with these features, the novel is responding to several "gaps" in Shakespeare's play—the question of why Goneril and Regan are so reluctant to host their father following the land transfer, and the origins of Lear's disturbing misogyny and cruelty towards his daughters—and in filling them, it allows both Regan and Goneril more compassionate outcomes than the mere deaths that they receive in *King Lear*.

Plays are designed to be performed and experienced live. In what ways is the experience of reading a play (or Smiley's novel) different from seeing a live theatre performance? Have you seen any particularly memorable or innovative performances of *King Lear* (or other Shakespeare)?

HEATON: For me, reading a play allows my imagination to run wild. I don't have to consider anyone else's creativity or opinion aside from the given circumstances. I can decide what the forest looks like and how bright Othello's bedroom is in that fateful Othello/Desdemona scene. When you see a live performance, you need to have that willing suspension of disbelief. You are telling me the forest is made up of gumdrops? Okay, here we go. I'll believe your gumdrop forest for the next two hours.

Watching a performance is allowing a company's interpretations to influence how you live in the world of the play from beginning to end. Both reading and watching can be extremely freeing as an artist—allowing oneself to create entirely and allowing oneself to relent, relax, and experience an old favorite from a new perspective.

I have performed in some fun, off-the-wall productions. As Olivia in *Twelfth Night*, I moved through a world where all objects were reminiscent of a fish tank, all neons, wavy castle shapes, and bubble motifs everywhere. As a witch in *Macbeth* I was on a bare stage with nothing but my acting partners and a spotlight. Everything was harsh and overwhelmingly bright or dark.

Peter Brook's 1960s version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a mainstay in studying "modern" Shakespeare and how imagination can reinvent the text. Brook's *King Lear* film is bare and ugly and raw, which is everything I love about those *King Lear* characters.

MAYNE: It has been quite a number of years since I have had the opportunity to watch a performance of *King Lear*, but one production that I particularly recall was at the Donmar Warehouse in London in 2011 (dir. Michael Grandage), with Lear played by Derek Jacobi. This production was quite different to previous *Lears* I had seen, not only because it was fairly minimalist in its staging and set design, but also because it had a completely different noise range, for want of a better word. Sometimes productions of *King Lear* mirror the epic scale of the suffering it depicts with epic sounds, both in terms of sound effects and soundscapes and with actors shouting or becoming bombastic—particularly in the storm scene (Act 3, Scene 2). However, this production was much *quieter*, with characters' voices, often whispering, the main sounds, with Jacobi first among them. The result was an incredibly moving *King Lear* of remarkable intimacy. I was quite young when I saw the production, and I don't think I fully appreciated it.

The other, rather different production that comes to mind is a performance of *Henry IV, Part 1*, which I saw at Shakespeare's Globe in 2008 (dir. Dominic Dromgoole). This was a fast-moving and high-energy production that brought the humour of the play to life and into the present, with a particularly charismatic Roger Allam as Falstaff and Jamie Parker as Prince Hal. I remember looking around the Globe during the performance and noting that the audience—which was, as always in the Globe, a mixture of Londoners, children, and people from all over the world visiting London—was completely rapt, and thinking that it was remarkable that this play and production could have that effect on such a range of different people. But when done well, Shakespeare's works really can.

Through theatre performance, actors embody and take ownership of stories and experiences that can be quite different from their own. How do you think that experience allows for a deeper understanding of stories that might otherwise feel quite removed from our own time and place?

HEATON: It is diabolically fun to live in another person's life and decide how they might react and listen in the moment. However, at the heart of all characterization is human emotion and motivation. So what if I have never experienced or felt the same grief my character feels when they lose their business to a fire? I HAVE felt loss and love, and grief is a feeling of losing that which we love. Even though I have never had that particular experience, I can use my understanding to live my character's life. An actor's job is to understand, to empathize with their character. Find something beautiful in their character and love that quality no matter how awful or good their character might be during the course of the play's action. When we as actors learn to feel that appreciation and empathy, we can settle into the lives of our characters, no matter the time or place. And that removal from our own time and place then becomes a playground for the actor where imagination can run wild, while grounded in the character's choices and actions. Just like kids enjoy playing superheroes in realities they will never experience, actors enjoy a good time/place move as well. We can't live in Shakespeare's England but we sure can pretend we do because we have been given permission.

There is a thriving theatre community in the Midwest. Are there any theatre characteristics that you would argue are uniquely Midwestern? How important and impactful is the role of theatre in the region?

HEATON: Well, we have that midwestern politeness thing going for us. I would argue that we are open and forgiving and patient in our theatre making, quite possibly because there are areas like Canton, MO where live theatre isn't part of the day-to-day in our community. We don't necessarily have to compete and produce theatre experiences every so many days to keep up with other companies, at least in our more rural midwestern areas.

Our Midwestern area has some amazing theatre. At the college level, theatre is flourishing! We have strong smaller, liberal arts programs and larger state university programs, and each has something valuable to offer. One of the things I love about experiencing Midwest theatre is the American College Theatre Festival. Our Midwest region is officially ACTF Region 5 - Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa, Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota. Each year we have a regional festival where all of the theatre programs come together to celebrate our students' work in all areas of theatre. It is a breath of fresh air for our students to experience works and interpretations from different area programs and learn from those artists. Our Region 5 is tremendously giving and loving with our students, and I think that is a good portion of how our Midwestern roots affect our educational programs.

In our Canton community, our Theatre Department at Culver-Stockton College is some of the first and/or only theatre that individuals in our area will see. We offer a variety of theatrical experiences for our students and audiences and each year we choose material that is different from the last show and the last season. For example, this year we are producing *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, *10-Minute Student Written Plays* (from my playwriting class last semester), *Servant of Two Masters*, and *Cabaret*. We are touching on the golden age of musical theatre, new voices in storytelling, *commedia del arte*, and metatheatrical, more politicized musical theatre of the 1960s. We don't shy away from content and we allow our students to work with content that they have not experienced before, so that they can approach that kind of material (sometimes more "adult" in nature) in a professional setting with grace and artistic integrity. We work to make our students employable with the soft skills all professions desire, as well as encouraging artistic, individualized, and creative minds.

If I might brag on our students a bit, they have flourished at ACTF Region 5. They are getting wonderful internship opportunities, are invited to study film in LA, make graduate school contacts and receive offers for assistantships, etc. They are really holding their own and I am so very proud of the work they do both at ACTF and in our program! My colleague David Lane and I travel around Region 5 responding to other productions and are able to learn from other Midwest schools, and I have the honor of serving the region as Co-Vice Chair. This volunteer organization has served us well!

Is there anything about Midwestern theatre traditions and communities that you think people would be surprised to learn?

HEATON: I would echo my last statements in #6. We don't shy away from material that some might (stereotypically) feel is Midwestern. We embrace all material and foster appreciation and understanding of all genres and tales. And I think Shakespeare does the same, which is why, going back to the earlier questions, his work is still so powerful today. No topic is off the table, nothing is objectionable. Everything is human and deserves honest portrayal and empathetic

storytelling. Our Midwestern communities are nice, polite, and accommodating, yes, but we are not all wallflowers or stereotypical “Bible-Belt” conservatives. We question, we assess, and we create some very innovative and forward thinking/envelope pushing art around here. We don’t do this because we want to upset or make people uncomfortable, we do this to provoke conversation and thought. Art is here to make people think, form an opinion, stick to their guns about their ideals, challenge their beliefs. If someone walks away from art and is still thinking about it an hour, even days later, whether that thought is positive or negative, then that art has made a difference in humanity.

What do you see as the role or importance of the humanities in our contemporary society?

HEATON: Humanities are everything. It is there in the name: human. We teach abstract, creative, critical, historical, empathetic problem solving. We teach soft skills: meeting deadlines, showing up prepared, organization, communication skills both oral and written, listening, conflict resolution, collaboration, time management, and empathy. These soft skills are what employers want and need in every field. These soft skills are also what humanity needs in a time where AI, social media, and Google are removing those human connections. I am just as guilty as the next person when it comes to technology, I am not fancying myself above it all. I have to check myself just like everyone else. But oh, how I do love human interaction when I can share the same space as others and collaborate to make something beautiful. It is an honor and a privilege to be so ensconced in the Arts and Humanities.

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