Introduction

[As] to the propriety of meddling with masterpieces … All I can say is that the temptation to do it, and sometimes the circumstances which demand it, are irresistible.

George Bernard Shaw

Early in 1681, an actress playing Cordelia stepped out on a London stage to deliver a tour-de-force performance as the romantic lead in a new comedy, The History of King Lear. The fact that one of western literature’s most famous tragedies could dominate the English stage as a romantic comedy indicates the power of imagination and innovation to triumph over nostalgia and authenticity. This is the power of adaptation. But is the impulse to adapt consistent and quantifiable, or does it change over time? King Lear continues to be adapted today, but is it adapted in the same way for the same reasons that it was in 1681, or has the process of adaptation adapted itself over time?

In the wake of twentieth-century critical theory, western culture’s understanding of the transmission of its literary heritage has undergone a dramatic transformation as the fundamental ideas of ‘author’, ‘origin’ and ‘work’ are called into question. That same critical theory has called Shakespeare – the man and his plays – into question. Yet the study of adaptation lags behind. Too often critical theory has followed the tone of critical reception, dismissing Shakespeare adaptations as imitative and secondary if not downright second-rate; Nahum Tate’s adaptation of King Lear was famously described as an ‘execrable piece of dementation’ by H.N. Hudson, and Tom Stoppard’s farcical retelling of Hamlet was dismissed as ‘an off-putting piece of non-theatre’ by the Glasgow Herald.

Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that critical theory has tended to turn a blind eye on these ‘execrable’ and ‘off-putting’ plays. Most often work done on Shakespeare adaptation simply catalogues new plays alongside their sources, rather than studying the methodology behind them or the impulses that motivate them. Ruby Cohn’s seminal Modern Shakespeare Offshoots (1976) looks broadly at adaptations of Shakespeare into multiple media, as do Gary Taylor’s Reinventing Shakespeare (1990) and John Gross’s After Shakespeare (2002). Richard Burt’s encyclopedic Shakespeares After Shakespeare (2007) is a similarly exhaustive catalogue of adaptations of Shakespeare into fiction, film, stage, comic books and cartoons. Such cataloguing is a necessary step in the identification and documentation of adaptation – and pertinent certainly in light of our increased willingness to consider new media such as comic books and cartoons as vehicles for adaptation – but it tends to reinforce the perception of adaptations as corollaries...
of Shakespeare’s texts and limit their endlessly unravelling intertextuality. The very scope that makes these catalogues useful as references precludes them from examining the methodology of adaptation in any nuanced way.

In her groundbreaking book, *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), Linda Hutcheon uses the term ‘fidelity criticism’ to describe this abiding critical interest in how closely an adaptation follows its source.¹ As Hutcheon notes, this fixation on fidelity overprivileges the parent work, minimizes the instances of intertextuality in adaptation and precludes consideration of the adaptation as ‘its own palimpsestic thing’.² Julie Sanders is similarly suspicious of the derivative position fidelity criticism enforces on adaptation. In *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2006), she writes that the relationship between source and adaptation ‘is often viewed as linear and reductive; the [adaptation] is always in the secondary, belated position, and the discussion will therefore always be, to a certain extent, about difference, lack, or loss’.³ Because of this critical reliance on the notion of fidelity and its ‘linear epistemology’,⁴ plays like *Lear* (1971) by Edward Bond, *Seven Lears* (1989) by Howard Barker or *Lear’s Daughters* (1987) by the Women’s Theatre Group are most often mentioned as derivations of Shakespeare rather than as autonomous works or characteristic examples of a unique twentieth-century genre. Without dismissing the foundational role that cataloguing and fidelity criticism have played in the establishment of adaptation studies, this book suggests that it is now time to stop cataloguing, to stop worrying about fidelity and to stop considering adaptations as off-putting pieces of non-theatre.

The popularity of twentieth-century Shakespeare adaptations suggest that this is a thriving and autonomous genre whose complexity mirrors the deep ambivalence western culture feels about Shakespeare in this particular historical moment. ‘Adaptation has run amok’, writes Hutcheon,⁵ noting both the abundance and the abandon of the genre. Yet no study has been done on the evolution of adaptation, how these modern works differ in kind and motivation from earlier works. This critical oversight is exacerbated by the fact that theoretical models of adaptation tend to view the genre as static, and tend to describe it in simplified dichotomous terms in which a playwright either collaborates with Shakespeare or replaces him. These models may be adequate for early adaptations but they limit and oversimplify the complex interactions displayed in twentieth-century adaptations of Shakespeare, which neither collaborate wholly with Shakespeare nor reject him entirely. It is this complexity and ambivalence that distinguishes these adaptations from earlier works and which needs to be studied.

To begin the process of theorizing modern adaptation, this book looks first at adaptations from a historical perspective to determine the extent to which

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² Ibid., p. 9.
⁵ Hutcheon, *Adaptation*, p. 10.
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twentieth-century works differ from their predecessors. Examining Nahum Tate’s *History of King Lear* (1681), adaptations by David Garrick in the mid-eighteenth century and Shakespeare burlesques of the nineteenth century, I will consider how and why these works alter Shakespeare’s original play. Within this historical framework, I will deploy traditional models of adaptation in a more accurate way that acknowledges the historical differences in adaptive practices and recognizes that early adaptations may be modelled differently than modern adaptations. Subsequent chapters will compare the early works of Tate and Garrick to twentieth-century adaptations by Gordon Bottomley, Edward Bond, Howard Barker and the Women’s Theatre Group, to assess how and why modern adaptations differ from their predecessors. Because these modern works articulate a more complicated relationship with Shakespeare, they often contradict traditional models of adaptation. In each case I will consider how traditional models fall short in describing these works, and develop a new model that acknowledges twentieth-century adaptation as a unique genre.

An indicator of the paucity of critical work done on adaptation is the absence of any workable definition of the term ‘adaptation’. In contrast to other genres – satire, parody, burlesque – adaptation lacks a definition that is universally acknowledged or generally used. Instead, there is a plethora of terms used to describe the variously related processes of appropriation, burlesque and parody. Ruby Cohn refers to adaptations as ‘offshoots’, Charles Marowitz to ‘transmutations’ and Richard Proudfoot to ‘re-writing, or revisions, or appropriations, or adumbrations’ which he uses synonymously. Even more strange are critics who coin new terms to avoid having to define adaptation: Robert Brustein uses ‘theatrical parasites’ and William E. Gruber ‘colloidal suspension’. In the introduction to their anthology, *Adaptations of Shakespeare*, Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier engage in a lively analysis of ‘The Problem of Naming’, admitting at last to using adaptation as a default term, ‘the word in most common usage and therefore capable of minimizing confusion’. They conclude by defining adaptations for the purpose of their study as ‘works which, through verbal and theatrical devices, radically alter the shape and significance of another work so as to invoke that work and yet be different from it – so that any adaptation is, and is not, Shakespeare’. Hutcheon places a similar emphasis on an adaptation being both the same and not the same as the

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11 Ibid., p. 4.
source work, defining it as a form of ‘repetition without replication’\textsuperscript{12} or ‘repetition with variation’.\textsuperscript{13} Fischlin and Fortier’s, and Hutcheon’s explications are useful insofar as they initiate the process of defining adaptation; still, their definitions remain vague.

To use the term adaptation with any degree of precision requires further refinement and distinction, both in terms of what the adaptation refers back to or changes in Shakespeare, and in terms of how the author intends the adaptation to work. Used in this book, the term Shakespeare adaptation refers specifically to works in which the author makes an explicit connection to a play by Shakespeare, whether in terms of narrative, character, title, language, or issues that invites a particular response from the audience to compare the adaptation to their memories of the original. Foundational to this definition is the explicit nature of the connection to Shakespeare and what Hutcheon would call the work’s ‘deliberate’ and ‘announced’ difference:\textsuperscript{14} both the reference to the original and the divergence from that original are readily observable and clearly expressed. This distinction eliminates from adaptation studies a vast body of work that refers obliquely to Shakespeare, such as John Keats’s sonnet ‘On sitting down to read King Lear’, and distinguishes adaptation from the more general interplay of references delineated in Julia Kristeva’s theories of intertextuality. As Julie Sanders notes in Adaptation and Appropriation (2006), adaptation is a more ‘sustained engagement with a single text or source than the more glancing act of allusion or quotation, even citation, allows’.\textsuperscript{15}

Also critical to this definition is the fact that Shakespeare adaptations refer to Shakespeare’s works, not to his biography. Despite the growing number of works that portray characterizations of Shakespeare – from Charles Gildon’s Beauty, the Best Advocate (1699) to Edward Bond’s Bingo (1974), Timothy Findley’s Elizabeth Rex (2001) and Tom Stoppard’s Shakespeare in Love (1998) – writing an original work about Shakespeare’s life reflects a very different process than adapting his plays.

If there is a paucity of definitional work done on adaptation, it is matched by a lack of theoretical work, particularly regarding how adaptations function in relation to their source works. Critical consensus holds that adaptations function in one of two ways, either as a collaborative process that celebrates the original author or as a destructive process that effects the author’s replacement: Gary Taylor refers to the ‘twin imperatives’ of authenticity and novelty that motivate our interactions with Shakespeare;\textsuperscript{16} Peter Erickson describes adaptation as either conciliatory or

\textsuperscript{12} Hutcheon, Adaptation, p. xvi.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p. 4.
\textsuperscript{14} Hutcheon, Adaptation, p. xiv.
\textsuperscript{15} Sanders, Adaptation, p. 4.
oppositional; Sanders writes that adaptations are either honorific or iconoclastic; and Susan Bennett contrasts the collaborative term ‘nostalgia’ with the destructive term ‘creative vandalism’. Fischlin and Fortier similarly represent adaptation in dichotomous terms. ‘Adaptors of Shakespeare’, they write, ‘undertake a number of responses to Shakespeare’s canonical status: some seek to supplant it or overthrow; others borrow from Shakespeare’s status to give resonance to their own efforts’. Hutcheon also identifies similarly polarized responses, writing that ‘adaptations of Shakespeare […] may be intended as tributes or as a way to supplant canonical cultural authority’. These models suggest that there are two distinct types of adaptation that function differently from each other. It is worth exploring these disjunctive terms to understand how adaptation is thought to have worked.

In *Performing Nostalgia*, Bennett explores how some adaptations function nostalgically. These works create community in the audience, reinforce literary tradition, and collaborate with and celebrate the original author. They seek to evoke common literary experiences and unite audiences in the recollection of a shared past and common culture. When an audience sees a Shakespeare burlesque, for example, it coalesces into a community of people who ‘get’ the play because they have likely all seen *King Lear*. The adaptation reminds them of their shared culture, a culture in which Shakespeare and his characters are well known; it unites them as a community of people with common literary traditions. Moreover, because the burlesque relies on *King Lear* to enhance its meaning, the adaptation reinforces the value of literary heritage: the value of Shakespeare’s play is increased as it becomes a means for understanding other works. Burlesques thus collaborate with Shakespeare to create meaning, and reiterate Shakespeare’s value.

In contrast to nostalgic adaptations, Bennett describes adaptations that function oppositionally. For this, she recalls Jonathan Dollimore’s use of the term ‘creative vandalism’ from the programme notes to Barker’s *Women Beware Women* performed at the Royal Court in 1986. Creative vandalism is consistent with Erickson’s sense of adaptations functioning in the oppositional mode. These adaptations do not create community but shatter it. Instead of appealing to a common literary heritage, they destroy that heritage and focus on what makes audiences different from the past and each other. Instead of celebrating Shakespeare and collaborating with him to add value to the original work, oppositional adaptations ‘take up a deliberately antagonistic relationship to their source’. By writing in the gaps and margins of the original, they disrupt both the coherence and the integrity of Shakespeare’s work. They suggest alternatives, point out inadequacies, advocate replacement. Often they represent what has been cut out or excluded from the original.

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17 Sanders, *Adaptation*, p. 46.
19 Fischlin and Fortier, p. 6.
21 Susan Bennett, p. 1.
These traditional models of adaptation work well with earlier works, but they begin to break down when applied to later adaptations that express more complicated and problematic positions towards literature and society. The argument that nostalgic adaptations create a sense of community is particularly unsustainable in a postmodern environment of diversity. Bennett acknowledges this flaw, citing Fred Davis (from *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*), who argues that nostalgia may create a sense of community by promoting a shared past, but that it does so by effacing ‘divisive positionalities’ such as class, race and gender. Davis warns that nostalgia, when experienced collectively, ‘can promote a false and likely dangerous sense of “we”’. Moreover, by focusing exclusively on the collaborative aspects of adaptation, a nostalgic interpretation disregards the extent to which an adaptation *alters* its source work. Adaptation necessarily implies that something is excised or changed, which in turn implies a necessary writing against (read rejection) of the original work or author. Fischlin and Fortier concur. ‘Adaptation features a specific and explicit form of criticism’, they write, ‘a marked change from Shakespeare’s original cannot help but indicate a critical difference’. No adaptation can be purely celebratory or collaborative, but fundamentally entails the alteration and rejection of the original work. A nostalgic reading of adaptation as a collaborative, community-forming experience is an interpretive oversimplification. Yet an exclusively oppositional interpretation of adaptation is equally flawed. Where the nostalgic view effaced the extent to which the adaptation altered the source text by focusing primarily on collaboration with Shakespeare, the oppositional view tends to efface the extent to which adaptation borrows from its source: it discounts the collaboration with Shakespeare. What these either/or interpretations fail to recognize is that rewriting encompasses both collaboration and replacement.

To understand why the nature of adaptation has changed, it is helpful to consider what has changed in the adaptor’s relationship to Shakespeare. Before the twentieth century, playwrights tended to focus either on their outright differences from Shakespeare (as Tate did in the late seventeenth century) or, in the wake of bardolatry, on their debt to Shakespeare (as Garrick did in the mid-eighteenth century). As the twentieth century progressed, relationships to Shakespeare became more complicated as playwrights’ own positionalities become more complicated. Fischlin and Fortier write that critical theory took hold in the twentieth century in academic institutions, such that issues of ‘text and source, text and context, authorship, originality, interpretation, and the production of meaning’ altered our relationship to literature. While Shakespeare is still recognized as a core of western literary heritage, he has become more and more identified as a product of a particular age, class, race, nationality and gender. As playwrights in the twentieth century articulate a more complicated relationship with Shakespeare, they begin

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22 Qtd. Susan Bennett, p. 5.
23 Fischlin and Fortier, p. 8.
to express an awareness of both their debt to him and their difference from him. Their interactions with Shakespeare reflect a need to acknowledge him and to write against those positions he is seen to represent.

These interactions must be balanced carefully in order for playwrights to participate in their literary heritage and distinguish their own positionalities in contradistinction to Shakespeare’s. Rather than simplify these interactions by reading them as monovalent gestures, critics need a new model that more accurately reflects the richness of these modern works. The work of Marianne Novy, Erickson and Bennett needs to be extended and modern adaptations understood as anxious intersections of collaboration and rejection through which playwrights both acknowledge their dependence on literary tradition and distinguish themselves as relevant modern authors. Within this model, adaptation is theorized as a complex double gesture that celebrates Shakespeare and rejects him at the same time. It constitutes both a figurative collaboration with the author – in which the old text adds meaning to the new text, and the new text adds meaning to the old – as well as a deliberate rejection of the author, an assertion that original meaning is either irretrievably lost to us or no longer desirable. This model encompasses both the nostalgic and oppositional impulses and recognizes that a literary work can both be motivated and function in self-contradictory ways. Because of its inherent duality, modern adaptation allows us, as playwrights, readers and audiences, to interact with Shakespeare in a unique way: it allows us to acknowledge our debt to Shakespeare without being derivative or compromising our own modern beliefs. At the same time, it allows us to author and experience new works and new ideas that express twentieth- and twenty-first-century concerns without severing all ties to the cultural traditions that underlie our society.

My focus in this book concerns how this unique double gesture plays out in theatrical adaptations of Shakespeare. Studies of film adaptations of Shakespeare have become common but their focus tends to be more on film theory than the theoretics of adaptation. Moreover, in film adaptations, the adaptive process is less visible, tangled up as it is by the intermediality of the process; the necessity of translating from one medium or sign system into another distracts from the purity of the adaptive gesture. A similar problem overshadows studies of Shakespeare adaptation into fiction. While I will briefly consider Maurice Baring’s Dead Letters (1910) and Jane Smiley’s A Thousand Acres (1991), my interest in these intermedial adaptations is tangential since they can only ever draw attention to adaptation as a corollary of translation. By focusing on theatrical adaptations, I hope to examine adaptation in its most straightforward manifestation, intramedially, as it were, from drama to drama. To maintain this clarity of focus, I will further limit my primary study to theatrical adaptations of King Lear. Tracing adaptation as it is practiced on one particular work creates consistency of focus around the methodology of adaptation, and eliminates the inevitable variables that would arise from studying multiple original texts.

King Lear is an obvious text for a study on adaptation. From the seventeenth to the twentieth century adaptations of King Lear have dominated and dogged the
stage, providing a unique opportunity to study shifts in the nature of adaptation over time. The particular wealth of twentieth-century adaptations further allows for in-depth analysis of modern adaptation: how and why it differs from earlier approaches and why traditional models of adaptation, models that work well for earlier works, begin to break down when applied to works in the twentieth century. Comparing and contrasting modern adaptations of *King Lear* maintains the focus on methodology that will enable the extension of traditional models for adaptation into more apt modern schematics. While the history of *King Lear* is characteristic of the overall process of adapting Shakespeare, it also offers a unique opportunity to look at Shakespeare’s own practice of adaptation. The disarming existence of multiple original texts of *King Lear* (as explored in the revisionist work of Michael Warren, Steven Urkowitz, Gary Taylor and Stanley Wells) raises the possibility that Shakespeare not only adapted the work of his predecessors but his own work as well, creating an unusually fruitful starting point for the study of adaptation.

To initiate this discussion, my introduction will try to pin down exactly what we mean by *King Lear* by examining the origins of the story in myth, performance and text. We must first dispense with the notion that Shakespeare’s *Lear* is the apogee: either the culmination of a series of primitive *Lear*-related discourses or the inception of the *Lear* story as we know it today. Briefly, then, and with a view to Shakespeare’s own adaptive process, my introduction will examine the various sources of Shakespeare’s *Lears* from the first written narrative in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain* (c.1136), through John Higgins’s *The Mirror for Magistrates* (1574), Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles* (1577), Philip Sidney’s old and new *Arcadias* (1590) and the anonymous 1605 play *Leir*. I will briefly consider the work of Michael Warren and Steven Urkowitz to examine the revisionist argument that Shakespeare might have significantly altered his own work from quarto to folio texts. The purpose of this discussion is quite specifically to do away with any notion of a single original Shakespearean *Lear* text, and to discriminate, within the plurality of *Lear*-narratives, the text or concept referred back to when writers adapt *King Lear*.

Moving away from the study of source works in my introduction, Chapter 1 will focus on Nahum Tate’s *History of King Lear* (1681) with the intention of locating adaptations and models of adaptation within their appropriate historical contexts. Written in a unique period in Shakespeare’s after-life when he had little value as a playwright, Tate’s adaptation is more a response to technical innovations, new aesthetic standards and evolving social forces than a desire to collaborate with a formative playwright. It is an excellent example of oppositional adaptation as theorized by Bennett and Erickson. Unlike later adaptations, Tate’s play does not rely on the audience’s recollection of the original or on a shared literary heritage to give it meaning: an understanding of Shakespeare does nothing to enhance Tate’s *King Lear*. Rather, Tate replaces that heritage with something new and different. His adaptation seeks to transform Shakespeare, replacing an inadequate and outdated tragedy with a more contemporary romantic comedy. As an oppositional adaptation, Tate’s *King Lear* draws attention to its difference from Shakespeare:
it writes against the original author, halts the transmission of literary heritage and replaces community with distance and difference.

Contrasting Tate’s oppositional adaptation to David Garrick’s revivals in the mid-eighteenth century and the Shakespeare burlesques of the nineteenth century, the second half of this chapter will explore how the desire for novelty is replaced by the desire for authenticity in Shakespeare adaptations. Garrick’s adaptations, which capitalize on nostalgia and the period’s growing sense of bardolatry, show how the change in Shakespeare’s status affects the adaptation of his work as much as the period’s changing understanding of authorship, creativity and originality. Shakespeare burlesques of the nineteenth century are similarly nostalgic. Like Garrick’s work, they unite the audience as a community of people who understand and appreciate Shakespeare in common ways. They reinforce literary traditions by maintaining consistency with a Shakespearean ideal, by striving for authenticity or by criticizing inconsistency in performance. The purpose of this chapter is twofold: to examine adaptation from a more or less historicist perspective in order to establish a firm point of departure for twentieth-century adaptors, and to begin to historicize traditional models of adaptation by locating nostalgic and oppositional models within specific contexts.

As anticipated, traditional models of adaptation work well with earlier works, but they begin to break down when applied to later adaptations that express more complicated and problematic positions towards literature and society. Chapter 2 will explore how adaptations change in the early twentieth century, and why traditional models based on an oppositional/collaborative dichotomy become inadequate in light of the more contradictory relationship to Shakespeare articulated in the twentieth century. In contrast to Tate and the early adaptors, the twentieth century saw a radical reconception of the idea of adaptation. No longer simply burlesquing an original text, playwrights like Gordon Bottomley use adaptation as a means to create an alternate textual reality for Shakespeare’s characters. In its attempt to reify fictional characters, Bottomley’s *King Lear’s Wife* (1913) relates directly to the romantic obsession with character that inspired such works as *Shakespeare’s Heroines* (1832) by Anna Jameson and *Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Heroines* (1850–52) by Mary Cowden Clarke, and to character-based Shakespeare criticism of the late nineteenth century, such as A.C. Bradley’s *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904).

Despite its modernity, Bottomley’s adaptation remains steadfastly nostalgic. In contrast, Bottomley’s contemporary Maurice Baring uses irony in his epistolary adaptation *Dead Letters* (1910), which confounds traditional models of adaptation and hints at the type of double gesture that will emerge as the defining feature in later twentieth-century adaptations. Comparing the methodologies of Bottomley and Baring shows the limits of nostalgic and oppositional models of adaptation, and how a new model must accommodate the intersections of these impulses. As a conclusion to this chapter, I will consider Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1967) in light of this newer model of adaptation. Like Baring, Stoppard treats character criticism and adaptation ironically. His play
emphasizes the absurdity of making characters independent of their texts, and satirizes both the flawed critical tendencies of Shakespeare scholars and playwrights like Bottomley, who sought to make King Lear more real than real. The purpose of this chapter is to show the innovative nature of early twentieth-century Shakespeare adaptations, to examine their difference in kind and motivation from earlier works and to explore the limits of traditional models for adaptation. Understanding how and when these models break down is the first step in constructing a new model for the double gesture of modern adaptation.

Where Bottomley’s drama constituted a straightforward nostalgic gesture, the plays of Edward Bond and Howard Barker deploy nostalgia and alienation in varying and paradoxical ways that suggest more problematic adaptive gestures. In Chapter 3, I consider Bond’s Lear (1971) and Barker’s Seven Lears (1989) as attempts to balance collaboration and opposition in adaptation. Using a highly stylized method of cathexis and deconstruction, Bond collaborates with Shakespeare by evoking King Lear, and then proceeds to take the story apart and rebuild it around contemporary issues of nationhood, war and peace. As the familiar King Lear falls apart, the contemporary significance of the play emerges along with Bond’s adjuration to political action. In the context of traditional models of adaptation, Bond is creating both a community based on the shared recognition of the original work and one based on shared and acknowledged difference from Shakespeare: audiences ‘get’ Lear because they likely know King Lear, but they also ‘get’ that Bond is asserting his (and their own) difference from Shakespeare by deconstructing the original and replacing it with something new. Thus, audiences perceive how Bond is both reviving their literary heritage (in the constant reiterations of the original on stage and in the audience’s memories) and curtailing that heritage (by altering those things they perceive as foundational to the original work). The success of Bond’s play is that it operates both nostalgically and oppositionally.

Barker’s work similarly acknowledges both a debt to Shakespeare and a difference from him. Like Bond, he employs and deconstructs King Lear, using the violence of the deconstruction to shock audiences into a state of self-analysis. But where Bond rebuilds King Lear and re-employs it in the service of political action, Barker simply annihilates the original. The double gesture of collaboration and rejection is less balanced in Barker, who stresses his difference from Shakespeare by writing against what he sees as a cultural machine that reproduces docility and ignorance. While both playwrights engage in adaptation as a double gesture – collaborating and rejecting Shakespeare at the same time – the different effects of their adaptations reflect the differences in their modern and postmodern ethos, and their different opinions about Shakespeare’s continued relevance.

Although both Bond and Barker collaborate with and reject Shakespeare as a means to write critically about contemporary politics and literature, their rejection of Shakespeare tends to be broad and unfocused. In contrast, the Women’s Theatre Group employs and rejects Shakespeare to articulate the particular political concerns of a specific group. Chapter 4 will consider in detail
the feminist project of adapting Shakespeare with a view to understanding how it satisfies the unique needs of modern women writers. Because of its inherent double gesture, adaptation allows feminists to show their debt to Shakespeare and their engagement in their literary heritage, and also to write against the traditional and negative representations of femininity they see reflected there. While the focus of this study is on theatrical adaptations of Lear, I will briefly discuss Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres* (1991), Paula Vogel’s *Desdemona* (1977) and Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Good Night Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* (1988) as examples of the genre. What constitutes a feminist adaptation? Why is adapting Shakespeare so important to feminist playwrights? Why *King Lear*? In considering these questions, I will discuss Adrienne Rich’s theories on re-vision and suggest ways that feminist adaptors incorporate and expand upon re-vision in their work. The primary text for consideration in this chapter is *Lear’s Daughters* (1987), written by the Women’s Theatre Group. As a re-vision of *King Lear* told through the female characters, *Lear’s Daughters* incorporates strategies common to feminist adaptation, and engages in the double gesture of collaboration and rejection common to other modern Shakespeare adaptors. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the extent to which the double gesture of modern adaptation affords women a unique opportunity to engage with a part of their literary heritage that often marginalizes them without sacrificing their feminism.

The conclusion to this work is both a summary of issues raised around the development of a theoretics of adaptation as well as a potential introduction to any broader issues the study of adaptation raises. In revisiting the unique, almost postdialectical structure of twentieth-century adaptation, this discussion examines the rhetorical similarities between adaptation and postmodern conceptualizations of aesthetics and subjectivity, exploring how adaptation might participate in these broader debates about the relationship between art and a writer’s sense of self in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In conclusion, this section assesses the unique value that adaptation has as an expression of identity, criticism, cultural tradition and artistic independence, as a solution to an increasingly challenging relationship with a problematic cultural past and a strategy for navigating an equally problematic cultural present.

**Sources of King Lear**

Although the story of King Lear has become synonymous with Shakespeare and his genius for tragedy, its true roots are neither Shakespearean nor particularly tragic. The story most likely had some basis in fairy tales, in which the motif of a father submitting his three daughters to a love-test is common and almost always ends in a moment of happy reconciliation and marriage. In *Will in the World*, Stephen Greenblatt writes that ‘the fate of Lear was principally rehearsed in Shakespeare’s time both as a piece of authentic British history from the very
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ancient past (c. 800 B.C.E.) and as a warning to contemporary fathers not to put too much trust in the flattery of their children’.  

Stories of a king called Lear (or Leir, Lyr) can be found in both English and Irish mythology, and there is a long tradition of a Celtic ocean god called Llyr. The first written record of the king associated with the Lear legend is Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Historia Regum Britanniae written around 1136. Monmouth, a Welsh bishop, undertook this nascent history of Britain in an attempt to create a narrative heritage linking Aeneas to the Roman period in Britain. As part of a series of fabulous tales, he describes King Leir, the son of Bladud, as a pre-Christian warrior king ruling southern Britain for a period of almost sixty years and the founder of the city of Leicester. The story begins in the familiar way: having no male heirs, Leir decides to divide his kingdom among his three daughters, conceiving of the love-test as a way to determine who should receive the fairest amount of the kingdom and make the best marriages. His eldest daughters Goneril and Regan answer accordingly, but his youngest daughter Cordeilla answers, ‘You are worth just as much as you possess, and that is the measure of my own love for you’. Leir spurns Cordeilla. Instead he marries Goneril and Regan with advantage to Maglaunus, Duke of Albania, and to Henuinus, Duke of Cornwall. Cordeilla, without land or dowry, is married to Aganippus, King of the Franks, and dispatched to Gaul. As Leir ages, he divides his time between Goneril and Regan, who gradually dismiss his retinue. In poverty, Leir travels to Gaul where Cordeilla restores him. With the help of Cordeilla and Aganippus, Leir heads an army back to Britain, where he overpowers the forces of his sons-in-law and regains his kingdom. After three years of rule, Leir dies and Cordeilla inherits the kingdom of Britain, which she rules for five years before her nephews, Marganus and Cunedagius, begin to revolt against the rule of a woman. They defeat Cordeilla in an insurrection and imprison her. ‘There she grieved more and more over the loss of her kingdom and eventually she killed herself’. In an effort to date this period, Monmouth writes: ‘At that time Isaiah was making his prophecies; and on the eleventh day after the Kalends of May Rome was founded by the twin brothers Remus and Romulus’. Despite its fable-like qualities, Monmouth’s account purports to be history.

It is some time before the story of Lear is taken up again, in the more deliberately romantic Mirror for Magistrates by John Higgins (1574) in the section titled ‘The Tragoedye of Cordila. Cordila shewes how by despaire when she was in prison she slue herselfe. The yeare before Christ. 800’. Telling her sad tale in narrative verse, Cordila explains:  

[...] if I more willing be to tell my fall,

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26 Geoffrey of Monmouth, The History of the Kings of Britain, trans. Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth, 1987), p. 82.
27 Ibid., p. 87.
28 Ibid., p. 87.
And shew mishaps to ease my burdened brest and minde:
That others haply may avoide and shunne like thrall,
And thereby in distresse more ayde and comfort finde.

She goes on to tell of her father Leire and her older sisters Gonerell and Ragan.
Leire establishes the love-test to divide his kingdom between his daughters, and
‘by flattery fayre they won their fathers hart’. Cordila instead responds:

I lov’d you ever as my father well,
No otherwise, if more to know you crave:
We love you chiefly for the goodes you have.

As in Monmouth, Gonerell and Ragan are married off, to the King of Albany and
to Hinnine, the Duke of Cornwall, and Cordila is given to Aganippus, the King
of Fraunce. Leire, deprived of his ‘crowne and right’, continues to live in Britain.
Gonerell and Ragan take away Leire’s entourage of knights; he repents his harsh
words to Cordila and flees to France. Cordila raises a force and returns with Leire
to Britain to vanquish their enemies. Again, Leire rules for three years before he
dies and the kingdom passes to Cordila. As in Monmouth, Cordila is challenged by
her nephews Morgan and Conidagus, who imprison her. Cordila is visited in her
prison by the ghost of Despaire, who offers her a knife and escape in suicide.

The account of King Lear was taken up again by Raphael Holinshed in 1577
in his retelling of Monmouth’s history, The Chronicles of England, Scotland and
Ireland. As R.A. Foakes points out, Holinshed’s emphasis, like Monmouth’s, is on
civil wars, the uprising of Albany and Cornwall against Lear and the insurrection
of their sons against Cordelia.29 Holinshed dates Lear’s rule in ‘the year of the
world 3105’. The story follows Monmouth’s account faithfully, albeit providing
Cordelia with a more fleshed out response to Lear’s love-test. She says:

Knowing the great love and fatherly zeal that you have always borne toward me
(for the which I may not answer you otherwise than I think and as my conscience
leadeth me), I protest unto you that I have loved you ever and will continually
(while I live) love you as my natural father. And if you would more understand
of the love that I bear you, ascertain yourself that so much as you have, so much
you are worth, and so much I love you and no more.30

Another notable difference in Holinshed’s account is that Gonerel and Regan are
made less responsible for alienating Lear. Holinshed is specific that it is Albany
and Cornwall who diminish Lear’s retinue of knights; likewise, it is Aganippus,

30 Raphael Holinshed, Shakespeare’s Holinshed: An Edition of Holinshed’s Chronicles,
not Cordelia, who organizes an army to reclaim Lear’s kingdom, although in Holinshed and Monmouth she accompanies Lear and the army back to Britain. From there, the story continues much as it was written in Monmouth, although with Lear ruling for two not three years after his restoration. It is, of course, impossible to determine what of Holinshed Shakespeare would have read. His debt to the *Chronicles* seems clear in his history plays, so it is perhaps safe to assume that he would have been familiar with Holinshed’s account of Lear and Cordelia.

While Monmouth and Holinshed were clearly concerned with the historical treatment of the Lear story, Edmund Spenser, like Higgins before him, was more interested in its poetic qualities. Writing in decametric verse, Spenser incorporated the legend into his poetic epic, *The Faerie Queen*, in 1590:

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Next him kin Leyr in happie peace long raind,
But had no issue male him to succeed,
But three faire daughters, which were well uptraind,
In all that seemed fit for kingly seed:
Mongst whom his realme he equally decreed
To have divided.31
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As in Higgins, the story moves quickly through Lear’s love-test and Cordelia’s reply:

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But Cordeill said she lov’d him, as behoov’d;
Whose simple answere, wanting colours faire
To paint it forth, him to displeasance moov’d,
That in his crowne he counted her no haire,
But twixt the other twaine he kingdome whole did shaire.32
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Spenser’s account proceeds quickly along conventional lines: Lear is stripped of his companion knights, repents his harsh words to Cordelia, travels to France and recovers his kingdom. After Lear’s death, Cordelia inherits the kingdom and rules for five years before her nephews’ revolt. What is perhaps the most notable addition in Spenser’s work is Cordelia’s suicide by hanging.

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Till that her sisters children, woxen strong
Through proud ambition, against her rebeld,
And overcommen kept in prison long,
Till wearie of that wretched life, her selfe she hong.33
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32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.
It seems likely that Shakespeare would have read Spenser’s work, and that he conceived her death by hanging through this influence.

While these four source works were most likely read by Shakespeare, the most obvious source for his tragedy is the anonymous play *The True Chronicle History of King Leir and his three daughters, Gonerill, Ragan and Cordella*, published in 1605. This was likely the same play mentioned in Henslowe’s diary, performed by the Queen’s Men and the Earl of Sussex’s Men in April 1594, and entered into the Stationers’ Register in May 1594 as ‘Leire Kinge of England and his Three Daughters’. Foakes writes: ‘The connections are strong enough to suggest that Shakespeare read the old play carefully’. Certainly the emphasis on motivation, reconciliation and pathos which distinguish the anonymous *King Leir* from other sources makes the play a more obvious theatrical predecessor to Shakespeare’s work.

Shifting the focus from civil wars towards the fortunes of the king and his daughters, *King Leir* turns a history lesson into a family intrigue. Cordella’s motive in replying frankly to her father – hitherto left ambiguous in the source texts – is made manifest in her desire to marry only for love. Leir, in contrast, has his sights set on a dynastic marriage for Cordella, but knowing her state of mind, he plans to trick her into compliance. This creates the necessary conflict that drives the love-test; Leir stages the test anticipating that Cordella will outdo her sisters in her love for her father, a love he can then insist she prove by marrying his choice. Recognizing her dilemma, Cordella replies succinctly ‘what love the child doth owe the father’ (Act 1, scene 3). Leir storms out disowning Cordella, who resigns herself to working as a seamstress for a living. To add to the romantic intrigue, the King of Gallia arrives in disguise as a palmer named Will and falls in love with Cordella. From here the play proceeds as we would expect: Leir goes to stay with Gonorill, who halves his allowance; Leir despairs of his state, but is comforted by his noble friend Perillus. He travels to his daughter Ragan, who vows to curb his manipulation and weakness, and who eventually plots to have Leir and Perillus killed. In a new twist, Leir and Perillus are set upon in a nearby forest by a messenger who tells them of Ragan’s murderous intent. When Leir and Perillus call on God for salvation, they are saved by a flash of thunder and lightning which frightens the assassin to repent. Leir and Perillus escape to France, where they are met by Cordella and Gallia in disguise on the seashore. They reconcile. Leir and Gallia set sail for Britain, which they regain. Gonorill and Ragan depart, at each other’s throats, Leir abdicates in favour of Gallia, and they all retire happily to France.

Shakespeare’s tragedy owes many obvious debts to the anonymous play *Leir*. In *Leir*, the playwright establishes a narrative arc that begins with the love-test, escalates with Leir’s mistreatment at the hands of his daughters and is resolved by his reconciliation with Cordella, a trajectory that Shakespeare’s play consistently

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34 R.A. Foakes, Introduction, p. 89.
follows. And like Leir, Shakespeare’s play puts considerable emphasis on the
love-test, making that the primary source of conflict to be resolved; the subsequent
civil war and invasion of France act in both plays as corollaries to the domestic
dispute. Both plays end with domestic reconciliation of a sort, unlike their source
texts which extend the narrative a further eight years into another civil war,
imprisonment and suicide.

Despite these similarities, Shakespeare’s particular interest in psychology
transforms the raw theatrical material of Leir into a nuanced and complex
representation of the story. Beyond the tragic ending, the most notable differences
between the plays are Shakespeare’s portrayal of Lear’s madness, the addition of
the Fool and the Gloucester/Edgar/Edmund subplot. It seems most likely that the
subplot derives from Sir Philip Sidney’s account of the Paphlagonian prince in
The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia, published after Sidney’s death in 1590. The
episode occurs in Book 2, Chapter 10, in which Pyrocles and Musidorus come
across a blind man, once the Prince of Paphlagonia, begging his son Leonatus to
lead him to a promontory so that he can kill himself. The prince explains that he
was exiled by his other son Plexirtus, a bastard whose scheming turned the prince
against Leonatus. Plexirtus took power of the prince’s kingdom, blinded him and
exiled him. With the help of Pyrocles and Musidorus, the prince and Leonatus
regain their kingdom, Leonatus is crowned and the prince dies, weeping tears of
joy and sadness.

The parallels between Sidney’s story and Shakespeare’s subplot are obvious,
though with a number of salient differences. In his introduction to the Arden King
Lear (2000), R.A. Foakes argues that Shakespeare enriches and complicates the
story he remembered from the Arcadia, and that these changes ‘in effect transform
it’. 36 He points out that Shakespeare tends to shy away from Sidney’s blatantly
good/evil dichotomy, portraying the brothers in more complex terms. ‘Sidney’s
sons are simply heroic or wicked, and the old Prince, presented largely as the
victim of the villainy of Plexirtus’. 37 In contrast, neither Edmund nor Edgar is
entirely good or evil in the chivalric sense; each is a complex and problematic
character. Edmund does not take part in his father’s mutilation, a fact that Foakes
uses to mitigate Edmund’s villainy when contrasted to Plexirtus’. To extend
Foakes’s argument further: Edmund is noticeably softened in Lear by his role in
the love triangle with Goneril and Regan, by his death-bed repentance and by his
eleventh-hour attempt to stop the murders of Cordelia and Lear. He is further made
sympathetic by soliloquies and asides that invite the audience to understand his
motivations. Although he is the villain in Lear, his villainy is tempered by a sort of
love and by his attempts to justify his actions.

Edgar and Gloucester are similarly less simply drawn than their prototypes
in Sidney. Edgar’s delay in revealing his identity to his father at Dover, which
prolongs the old man’s suffering and delusion, shows a distinct lack of charity, a

36 Ibid., p. 101.
37 Ibid.
marked difference to the kindly Leonatus. His character is further complicated by his disguise as Poor Tom and his perplexing behaviour on the heath. Shakespeare’s invention of the Poor Tom role allows him to develop the character of Edgar into a strange hybrid of prince and fool, a hero who acts in flawed and inappropriate ways but who is fundamentally good. The conflict in Edgar as he struggles to remain good through familial discord and loss of identity, and as he emerges as a surrogate hero, differentiates him from the bland chivalry of Leonatus. Like Edgar, Gloucester undergoes a similar transformation in Shakespeare’s adaptation. From a slightly dotty prince in Sidney, he is expanded into the misguided, tormented but fundamentally well-intentioned father he becomes in Shakespeare. In Shakespeare’s hands, Sidney’s stock characters take on shifting dimensions of personality that elevate them beyond simple heroes or villains.

The result of these newly complicated characters is newly complicated relationships. In his adaptation of Sidney, Shakespeare shows the father/son dynamic in all its nuanced, fragmented and often misguided iterations. He portrays resentment and jealousy, partiality and unfairness, disillusionment and despair long before he leads these characters to redemption and forgiveness. This transition, the fact that Shakespeare shows relationships moving in nonlinear ways through growth, disintegration and reconnection, is a marked contrast to the static love and hate triangle in Sidney. While Foakes’s argument suggests that Shakespeare enriches his characters along moral lines, blurring the boundaries between good and evil, it overlooks the subsequent interaction between these characters and the more significant way Shakespeare uses these interactions to show change and emotional growth.

At the same time that Shakespeare adds complexity and the dimension of growth to his characters, he excises background and motivation from their actions. A notable difference between Lear and the source play is the seeming inexplicability of Cordelia’s answer in the love-test. The anonymous Leir is specific in identifying Cordella’s motive for rejecting Leir: she wants to marry for love and refuses to be implicated in his manipulative contrivance for a dynastic marriage. Even in the four earlier source texts, Cordelia’s response to Lear is motivated generally by a sense of revolt against her sisters’ flattery. But Shakespeare makes no such claims. Instead, he strips away Cordelia’s motivation so that her response seems unmotivated, capricious and unexpectedly blunt. In Will in the World, Stephen Greenblatt argues that this excision of motive is a deliberate dramatic gesture by Shakespeare: ‘Once again, as he did in Hamlet and Othello, Shakespeare simply cut out the motive that makes the initiating action of the story make sense’.38 Similarly, Lear’s response, stripped of the motivation it had in Leir, is equally capricious and vastly out of proportion. ‘By stripping his character of a coherent rationale for the behavior that sets in motion the whole ghastly train of events,

38 Greenblatt, Will, p. 328.
Shakespeare makes Lear’s act seem at once more arbitrary and more rooted in deep psychological needs.\(^3^9\)

Comparing Lear to Shakespeare’s sources, Greenblatt identifies a number of instances where Shakespeare pares down motivation and rationale – ‘what would seem indispensable to a coherent, well-made play’\(^4^0\) – to get at a deeper psychological truth in his characters. To explain this strategy, he suggests that Shakespeare must have experienced a conceptual breakthrough while writing Hamlet, a breakthrough that changed the way he wrote and which subsequently informed his great tragedies, Othello (1603), Macbeth (1606) and King Lear (1608). He associates this breakthrough with a deliberate strategy to withhold motives or explanations, a strategy he calls ‘opacity’. He uses the idea of opacity to explain the choices Shakespeare made when putting together his tragedies: Hamlet’s enigmatic madness, Iago’s unmotivated villainy, Cordelia’s senseless rejection of her father or Lear’s inexplicable rage. Instead, he argues, motivation is suggested through consistent repetition of key terms and images that reveal an inward logic from which an audience must deduce meaning. Opacity suggests a distinct preference for ‘things untidy, damaged, and unresolved over things neatly arranged, well made, and settled’,\(^4^1\) a preference that is more than pronounced in King Lear.

Although Greenblatt’s argument is convincing, he is considering only a narrow aspect of the play, the Lear/Cordelia story. What his argument fails to take into account is the presence of a unique and highly indicative subplot that distinguishes Lear from other Shakespearean tragedies. The Gloucester/Edmund/Edgar subplot is striking if for nothing else than the fact that it is original to Shakespeare’s adaptation. None of the historical sources, or indeed the source play, involves a subplot. This alone invites the question why Shakespeare would include a subplot in his adaptation, and why this one in particular. The subplot in Lear is unique among Shakespeare’s tragedies in two additional ways: i) the extent to which it mirrors the main plot and ii) the way that it uniquely interacts with the main plot to supply, or more accurately to imply, any motivation missing from the main plot. Although Greenblatt is right to argue that motivation is missing from the Lear/Cordelia narrative, his sense of opacity needs to change in order to encompass the unusual way the subplot in Lear supplements opacity with transparency.

Critics have often noted the careful parallels between the subplot and the main plot in Lear, though they have tended to overlook how unique this is in Shakespeare’s tragedies. None of Hamlet, Othello or Macbeth has a subplot in which the action of the main plot is so closely replicated. What does this replication serve? The most obvious conclusion is that Shakespeare wanted to draw a thematic parallel between Lear and Gloucester. The parallels are clear: a father deceived by the flattering words of a child; a faithful child disowned and exiled; the father’s recognition and

\(^{3^9}\) Ibid.

\(^{4^0}\) Ibid., p. 325.

\(^{4^1}\) Ibid., p. 324.
despair; finally the father’s forgiveness, reunion and death. Focusing primarily on thematic parallels has meant that criticism has often overlooked the more pertinent ways in which the subplot strategically interacts with the main plot. An examination not of the similarities but of the differences between the main plot and the subplot reveals how the subplot functions dramaturgically to supplement the main plot, particularly around the articulation of motive.

Motive abounds in the subplot, in contrast to the main plot. From Edmund’s ‘Thou, Nature, art my goddess’ speech, which proclaims his villainy in Act I, to Edgar’s ‘I heard myself proclaimed’ speech in II, ii when he decides to flee, motive is made manifest. Shakespeare informs us explicitly and often repeatedly of the reasons behind Edmund’s villainy, Edgar’s ineffectual goodness or Gloucester’s misguided actions. Unlike the opacity of the main plot, there is an abundance and a transparency to the motivation in the subplot at odds with Greenblatt’s sense of Shakespearean opacity.

Moreover, because the subplot is so like the main plot in action, the motivation from the subplot effectively crosses over and informs the main plot, suggesting motivation where none is provided. Edmund’s jealousy of Edgar, for example, suggests motivation that explains Goneril and Regan’s resentment of Cordelia. He says:

Wherefore base?
When my dimensions are as well compact,
My mind as generous and my shape as true [...].

What Edmund is articulating is both the unfairness of fate and his resentment towards those who benefit from fate where he does not; specifically, he is expressing his jealousy towards his brother who is preferred for seemingly arbitrary reasons. But Goneril and Regan suffer as much from jealously and unfairness as Edmund. Conscious of their father’s preference for Cordelia, Goneril and Regan must similarly curse their fate and resent their sister. Like Edmund, they are motivated by jealousy, resentment and revenge, but their motivation is not expressed as clearly as Edmund’s soliloquy to the audience. Instead, Edmund’s motivation, coming as it does immediately after Goneril and Regan decide to join ranks against their father, fills in the missing motivation in the main narrative.

In a similarly supplementary act, Edgar articulates the motive missing from Cordelia’s actions. His decision to flee rather than fight – ‘I will preserve myself’ – shows an awareness that he is opposing forces he cannot conquer. His decision to flee is a decision to maintain his integrity, much like Cordelia’s decision to remove herself from Lear’s love-test. Both recognize how ineffectual they are in

43 Ibid., I, ii, 6–8.
44 Ibid., I, ii, 177.
the face of flattery and deceit, and both opt to withdraw in order to remain true to themselves. But an interesting intersection occurs at precisely the moment in the play that Edgar articulates his motives. At the end of a long speech – ‘I heard myself proclaimed’ – in which he clearly states that he is leaving court in order to save himself – ‘While I may scape / I will preserve myself’ – he concludes by saying ‘Edgar I nothing am’, a comment strongly reminiscent of Cordelia’s repeated ‘Nothing’ in Act I. In Greenblatt’s argument, Cordelia’s ‘Nothing’ stands out as an example of Shakespearean opacity, as an ‘intense representation of inwardness’, in which motivation is suggested but not articulated. In Greenblatt’s argument, the audience is provided only with these key terms and images from which they must deduce motivation; but Greenblatt overlooks the extent to which Edgar’s ‘I nothing am’ evokes Cordelia’s ‘Nothing’ at the precise moment that he expresses a motivation similar to Cordelia’s. Edgar’s simultaneous allusion to Cordelia and expression of intent supplements the key terms and images of the main plot and provides its missing motivation, a more complicated, reciprocal gesture than Greenblatt’s opacity would suggest.

The intersecting nature of these narratives suggests that the subplot serves a strategic purpose. By echoing the events of the main plot, it draws obvious thematic parallels, but by carefully and specifically detailing motivation, it supplies by implication what is missing from the main plot. This complementary interaction allows Shakespeare to pare down the main plot, perhaps even further than he does in Hamlet or Othello, permitting a full exploration of the deeper psychological imperatives in human nature – all that is unspoken in the main plot – without sacrificing motivation as a necessary dramatic tool to make sense of the play. Where Greenblatt astutely notes the excision of motive in Shakespeare’s main plot, he overlooks the extent to which the unusual subplot in Lear strategically interacts with the main plot to articulate motive. The uniqueness of Shakespeare’s adaptation is the way opacity meets transparency, and the way composite parts combine to provide a meaningful whole.

Beyond the subplot, the most notable difference in Shakespeare’s adaptation is the ending of Lear. Here, Shakespeare took leave of his sources and created a work of unparalleled despair, a ‘tremendous explosion of rage, madness, and grief’. None of Shakespeare’s sources end in anything but happy reconciliation. Greenblatt argues that the ending is consistent with Shakespeare’s new-found refusal to provide familiar interpretations or comfortable resolutions. He writes that the last scene in Lear shows the mastery of Shakespeare’s opacity, that his determination to ‘cut out the triumph of Cordelia’ was a determination to cut out

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46 Greenblatt, Will, p. 323.
47 Ibid., p. 357.
48 Shakespeare, King Lear, V, iii, 262.
‘the vindication that made moral sense of the whole narrative’. Instead, the image of the ruined king cradling his dead daughter and ‘howling with grief’ uncovers emotions that are immeasurably more profound and troubling: a powerful ending not easily forgotten.

Greenblatt’s argument does not explain why Shakespeare wrote this ending. Assuming that Shakespeare adapted deliberately, that is, not for random reasons like the number of actors available or what props were on hand, he must have had a reason to write not only against his sources but against history itself. The simple conclusion is that Shakespeare is suggesting an amoral Providence, one indifferent to virtue and vice, reward and punishment, a bleak universe where the good are not necessarily rewarded by virtue of being good. There are no moral consequences here, nor any justice: ‘As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods’, says Gloucester. By this argument, Cordelia’s death is one more unresolved, untidy, empty event, more damaged cause and effect. But if Cordelia’s death is so meaningless, why did Shakespeare go to the trouble of changing history so dramatically? The heightened tragedy of the death scene, the last-minute bid to save Cordelia’s life, suggests a carefully planned dramatic moment much more sophisticated than mere untidiness. The deliberate nature of this portrayal suggests that Cordelia’s death serves a dramatic purpose beyond a mere nod to the meaninglessness of the universe.

Critical to Shakespeare’s adaptation is the fact that Cordelia’s death is a murder and not, as the sources indicate, a suicide. This alteration is significant. Murder implies a darker and more sinister causality than depression; it entails premeditation, motive and an altogether more menacing level of crime and vice. In the sources Cordelia dies because she despairss. In Lear she dies because she represents a threat to Edmund’s ambition, in a crisis brought about by her sisters’ ambition and her father’s pride. In the context of the play, her death serves two immediate dramatic purposes: it kills Lear, and it leaves succession open to Albany, Edgar or Kent. The consequences of pride and ambition are more significant in Shakespeare’s adaptation than they are in the source texts: in Lear, pride and ambition have immediate mortal consequences and devastating long-term dynastic effects.

The representation of pride and ambition as mortal sins marks a radical departure from the morality expressed by Shakespeare’s sources. In Leir, the king’s pride and the sisters’ ambition are punished with exile, he to France for the duration of the play and they to their own kingdoms at the end. Despite the civil war, no one seems the worse at the end of Leir – pride and ambition are repented and overcome, proven insufficient to overturn the status quo. As such, they are relegated to the less significant level of wrongdoing that can be forgiven and overcome. In contrast, in Shakespeare’s adaptation, pride and ambition not only kill Cordelia, Goneril, Regan, Edmund and Lear, but they terminate a dynasty and

50 Ibid., p. 329.
51 Shakespeare, King Lear, IV, I, 38.
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imperil the destiny of a kingdom. Although it can be argued that Goneril, Regan and Edmund commit enough other crimes to deserve death, and that Lear dies not of pride but of a broken heart, Cordelia’s guiltlessness suggests that her death is a direct result of the pride and ambition of others. Her death, rather than meaning nothing at all or betokening an amoral Providence, serves the dramatic purpose of delivering a heavy moral censure on pride and ambition.

The fact that Shakespeare rewrote history, complicated characters and rearranged outcomes in his adaptation of Lear is no great surprise; like the playwrights who would later adapt his own work, he rewrote his sources for a variety of theatrical, aesthetic and ideological reasons. In the context of the theoretical models of adaptation discussed by Bennett and Erickson, Shakespeare’s strategies are oppositional. He writes in the gaps and margins of the original texts to point out difference and advocate replacement. He writes about what is not in Sidney, Monmouth or the anonymous source play. His recharacterization of Providence, for example, is typically oppositional. In Leir, the good characters are saved on numerous occasions by a benign Providence, as in scene 19 where Leir and Perillus face the messenger sent by Goneril and Regan to kill them. When Leir and Perillus repeatedly call upon the ‘the King of heaven’ for salvation, dramatic rolls of thunder and lightning cow the terrified messenger to repent. He drops his daggers and Leir and Perillus are saved, proving that ‘fervent prayer much ill hap withstands’.

In contrast, in King Lear, Lear and Cordelia are conspicuously not protected by a benign Providence; situations arise in which they could be saved but are not, suggesting that Shakespeare may have adapted Leir with a darker ideology in mind, wanting to use the source’s story and characters but replace its optimistic view of Providence with his own stricter and darker view. Here, Shakespeare’s use of his source material is more vandalistic than collaborative, taking and replacing without acknowledging the value of the source as anything beyond raw material. This style of adaptation, seen again in Tate’s adaptation of King Lear (1681), expresses the casual disregard for authorship characteristic of a particular historical moment prior to bardolatry and the Romantic idealization of the author.

While Shakespeare’s adaptation was primarily oppositional, there is the possibility that he also used his sources collaboratively, hinting at the type of double-gesture adaptations more common in the twentieth century. Considering that his source play, Leir, published in 1605, may recently have been performed and may have been fresh in the minds of his audience, it is possible that Shakespeare may have capitalized on his audience’s familiarity with the story to heighten the dramatic effect of his own tragic ending. Because Shakespeare’s play so closely follows the plot of the earlier play, audiences would potentially have anticipated the same happy ending staged in Leir. And Shakespeare almost gives it to them.

53 Ibid., 19, 17.
54 Foakes, p. 89.
The final scene in *King Lear* sets the stage for a last-minute reprieve in which Lear and Cordelia could emerge happily from prison. The Folio text in particular capitalizes on the audience’s expectations for a happy ending; Lear’s final lines almost suggest that Cordelia might have escaped death: ‘Look on her: look, her lips, / Look there, look there!’ Shakespeare’s technique of circling back to the story’s presentation in *Leir* compounds dramatic effect when indeed he stops returning to *Leir* and delivers the startlingly bleak multiple-death scene in Act V. If this were the case, that Shakespeare was deliberately evoking the original and then rejecting it in order to heighten the tragic effect in his adaptation, then *King Lear* would be a unique early example of the type of double-gesture adaptation common in twentieth-century re-writings of his own work.

Yet, while Shakespeare may have been both collaborating with and rejecting his sources, the double gesture expressed by twentieth-century adaptors importantly articulates a sense of nostalgia absent in Shakespeare’s adaptation. Adaptors like Bond, Barker and the Women’s Theatre Group adapt Shakespeare because of the status of the original work, because Shakespeare is foundational to their culture and to their sense of self as writers. Their collaborations with Shakespeare express a desire to connect with their literary heritage and validate shared cultural traditions, even while they reject that heritage and identify the limitations of those traditions. In contrast, there is no way of knowing whether or not *Leir* had the same complicated cultural resonance for Shakespeare that Shakespeare has had for twentieth-century writers. It is unlikely that Shakespeare identified the author of *Leir* as a literary forefather, and only slightly more likely that he identified Monmouth, Holinshed or Sidney in this way. Clearly, he saw their works as raw material, but he displayed no sense that he was collaborating with them in order to reinforce the value of their work, or engaging with them to revive a sense of literary heritage in his community. Without that awareness of status and that sense of deference, Shakespeare’s adaptation remains more oppositional than nostalgic, and cannot be considered a double gesture akin to that of twentieth-century playwrights.

The nature of Shakespeare’s approach to adaptation is relevant in that it contributes to the historicization of the theoretical models for adaptation discussed by Bennett and Erickson. To the extent that Shakespeare’s strategy is oppositional, it has similarities to Tate’s, similarities which suggest that adaptation responds, at least in part, to prevailing notions of authorship and literary tradition. That is, that adaptation is rooted in its historical moment. When authorship and literary tradition have little value, original work is regarded as raw material; adaptation, motivated by a desire for novelty, seeks to replace this work with something new and different. It is vandalistic in nature. As authorship and literary tradition gain in value, the desire for novelty is replaced by nostalgia, that quality that recognizes value in tradition and the past. Adaptation, now motivated by a desire for authenticity, seeks to collaborate with the original work in order to reinforce

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literary tradition and increase value in the adapted work. It becomes collaborative and nostalgic.

Shakespeare’s reworking of earlier writers is consistent more with oppositional than nostalgic adaptation, but do these models hold up when an author adapts his own work? King Lear is unique among Shakespeare’s plays, and intriguing in the context of adaptation studies, because of the possibility that Shakespeare may have adapted his own draft of the play. Critics have long been troubled by the existence of two different versions of King Lear: the Quarto published in 1608 as M. William Shak-speare: his true chronicle historie of the life and death of King Lear and his three daughters, and the Folio version that appeared in Heminge’s and Condell’s collected works in 1623 as The Tragedie of King Lear. These two texts differ in a number of pertinent ways, not least of which is the fact that the Quarto contains some 285 lines not evident in the Folio, and the Folio some 120 lines not evident in the Quarto. The most notable discrepancies have become famous cruxes in the textual criticism of the play: Kent’s description of the French forces landing (Q III, i, 17–42) and the Fool’s prophecy (F III, ii, 76–96); the mock-trial sequence in which Lear tries Goneril and Regan (Q III, vi); the compassion of Gloucester’s servants following his blinding (Q III, vii); and the Gentleman’s description of Cordelia’s reaction to news of Lear’s madness (Q IV, iii). The differences between the two texts have significant ramifications, and have been a hurdle for both editors and critics alike since 1623.

Some of the discrepancies between Q and F alter what Graham Holderness refers to as the geopolitical world of the play. Kent’s allusion to French forces landing at Dover, apparent in Q III, i but not in F, is a notable instance. In Q, Kent sends a knight to Dover, where he will find ‘some that will thank [him]’ for his news, a reference conventionally taken to mean that French forces have landed at Dover. In F, the reference in more veiled; Kent suggests instead that English spies sympathetic to Lear are sending news back to French forces still stationed in France. In Revising Shakespeare (1991) Grace Ioppolo summarizes that the variations here ‘shift the audience’s view of war from an “unprovoked” foreign invasion to a “provoked” civil rebellion’. R.A. Foakes, in contrast, disagrees that the lines cut from Q to F significantly alter the nature of the conflict in King Lear. In his introduction to the Arden King Lear (2000), he argues that despite the textual emendations, enough references remain in F to suggest the invasion of a French army on British soil.

Other discrepancies between Q and F relate to the theatricality of the play in performance. One example is the mock trial of Goneril and Regan, appearing in Q III, vi but not in F. In French foreign invasion to a “provoked” civil rebellion’. Revising Shakespeare (1991) Grace Ioppolo summarizes that the variations here ‘shift the audience’s view of war from an “unprovoked” foreign invasion to a “provoked” civil rebellion’. R.A. Foakes, in contrast, disagrees that the lines cut from Q to F significantly alter the nature of the conflict in King Lear. In his introduction to the Arden King Lear (2000), he argues that despite the textual emendations, enough references remain in F to suggest the invasion of a French army on British soil.

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Consequences’ (1983) Roger Warren argues that this ‘elaborate theatrical device’ was likely cut because it was theatrically confusing. ‘In rehearsal or performance’, Warren suspects, ‘it became clear that the focus of the scene had shifted from Lear’s mock-justice to eccentric individual detail — the Fool’s joint-stool joke, Edgar’s songs and devils — leading to a generalized sense of chaos’. Other variants in Q and F relate to character. Ioppolo argues that the 56 lines that appear in Q IV, iii ‘substantively alter the audience’s view’ of Cordelia, ‘as well as her integral relationship to other characters and to the play’s major themes’. Q, writes Ioppolo, establishes Cordelia as ‘an active, foreign queen who exercises strength even when not present on stage’, whereas F ‘recasts her as a submissive, nonpolitical, and nonmonarchical daughter who embodies strength only when present on stage’. Similarly, R.A. Foakes and John Kerrigan both write that differences in Q and F alter the Fool ‘more than any other character’, changing his personality from a ‘blathering natural’ in Q to a ‘canny rationalist’ in F. ‘In F’, Kerrigan writes, ‘the Fool is consistently a wise and worldly jester, more urbane and more oblique than his precursor’. Like Ioppolo, Foakes and Kerrigan, Michael Warren contends that characters are dramatically altered from Q to F. In ‘The Diminution of Kent’ (1983) he argues that Kent undergoes ‘a substantial change’ from Q to F in the last half of the play, shrinking almost to a marginal role just prior to Lear’s final scene. Stephen Urkowitz similarly notes changes in the character of Albany in Shakespeare’s Revision of King Lear (1980), and R.A. Foakes notes changes to Lear, Edmund, Goneril and Regan.

The traditional solution to these variant versions is the conclusion that Shakespeare wrote only one draft of the play, a manuscript now lost, and that both the Quarto and the Folio versions are based on this lost original. The textual discrepancies between Q and F have been explained by a series of increasingly far-fetched excuses:抄本ist and compositor errors, inefficiencies in Elizabethan shorthand, shoddy memoral transmission, even illicit textual piracy.

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60 Ibid., p. 46.
61 Ioppolo, pp. 166–7.
62 Ibid., p. 167.
63 Foakes, Introduciton, p. 133.
65 Ibid., p. 219.
67 These explanations begin with Heminge and Condell, editors of the first Folio, who claim that the Folio’s discrepancies stem from their intention to replace ‘stolne, and surreptitious copies, maimed, and deformed by the frauds and stealths of injurious
or at least to efface the problem of these textual differences, editors traditionally have conflated the Quarto and Folio texts, using the rationale that a conflated text would more accurately approach the hypothetical lost original than either of the ‘incomplete’ extant versions (Q or F). This conflated version has existed as the

impositors’ (Foakes, Introduction, p. 117). Attempts to explain textual discrepancies in King Lear continue with Alexander Pope (1725) who suggested that the Quarto plays were early draft copies of the Folio plays, and that certain low passages in the Folio plays were attributable to the interference of actors who cut and added for their own purposes (Murphy 25–6). Pope’s view was sustained by a number of eighteenth-century editors, such as Edward Capell and Edmond Malone, and nineteenth-century critics such as Charles Knight (Murphy 26). Other editors, like Lewis Theobald, suggested that the textual discrepancies resulted from faulty transmission of the texts by copyists who had acquired them by means of shorthand transcription, a theory maintained into the twentieth century when it was called into question by William Matthews in the 1930s (Murphy 30).

Modern critics like Peter Blayney, (The Texts of ‘King Lear’ and their Origins vol. 1) and R.A. Foakes both give credence to Theobald’s idea that Q was sloppily printed, suggesting that two compositors, ‘one of them possibly inexperienced’, (Foakes, Introduction, p. 111) working for a printer ‘who had never before printed a play text’ (Foakes, Introduction, 111) could account for many of the errors. Foakes goes on to suggest that the second quarto (Q2) was intended as a corrected version of Q1 which nonetheless initiated further errors, but which is significant as the source of F (112–113).

Other twentieth-century critics (Clare, Annabel Patterson) have argued the case that censorship accounts for many of the passages present in Q but omitted from F. Janet Clare suggests that F omits almost all references to the French arriving to capitalize on the civil unrest in Britain (Kent’s speech in 3.1 for example), as well as the Fool’s speech referencing King James’s propensity to hand out monopolies (1.4.145–8), both potentially politically sensitive topics which would have been flagged by the Master of the Revels. Gary Taylor argues convincingly, however, that censorship could not account for the changes made to F unless the text had been substantially revised first and then resubmitted to the Master of the Revels. Instead, like Warren and Urkowitz, Taylor argues that F constitutes a substantial artistic reimagining of Q.

Foakes, Ioppolo and Andrew Murphy all summarize and evaluate other common explanations for textual discrepancies between Q and F: that Q was a reported text, transcribed during performance or reconstructed from memory (Foakes, Introduction, 115, Murphy 27) by one or more of the actors, an argument taken up by G.I. Duthie and Kenneth Muir (Ioppollo 163); that Q was based on Shakespeare’s foul papers, already significantly marked up by the playwright’s own notes and revisions. Foakes also considers W.W. Greg’s argument that Q was a result of hastily copied shorthand transcription taken surreptitiously during performance at court, and that F was based on a collation of Q and the theatrical promptbook, with errors introduced by a collator or book-keeper (Introduction, 115). Murphy concludes his argument by noting, astutely: ‘Perhaps the best – albeit unsatisfactory – explanation that can be provided for the divergent texts is that they offer variant conceptions of the plays, marked by complex theatrical and extra-theatrical histories and arriving into print by routes which are not amenable to a single explicatory narrative’ (30). For further reading, see Grace Ioppolo Revising Shakespeare (1991).
official or modern *King Lear* text since Lewis Theobald first tried to reconcile the differences between Q and F in 1733.

But what if the differences between Q and F were deliberate? What if these discrepancies reflect not the distance from a lost original, but an intentional process of revision from an early to a later draft of the play? What if *Lear* were composed in stages? Or written in draft form and revised for performance? These questions were brought to bear in ‘Quarto and Folio *King Lear* and the Interpretation of Albany and Edgar’, a paper presented by Michael Warren at the International Shakespeare Congress in 1976. Warren’s paper took three basic but startlingly revolutionary principles as its starting point:

a. that there may be no single ‘ideal play’ of *King Lear* … that there may never have been one, and that what we create by conflating both texts is merely an invention of editors and scholars;
b. that for all its problems Q is an authoritative version of the play of *King Lear*; and
c. that F may indeed be a revised version of the play, that its additions and omissions may constitute Shakespeare’s considered modification of the earlier text, and that we certainly cannot know that they are not.  

Warren argues that the differences between the Q and F texts of *King Lear* ‘go beyond those that may be expected when two texts descend in corrupted form from a common original; they indicate that a substantial and consistent recasting of certain aspects of the play has taken place’.  

Working concurrently with Warren, Steven Urkowitz agreed that the Folio text is a ‘careful and dramatically sensitive revision of the Quarto’.  

Focusing on the theatrical nature of the changes between Q and F, he argues that the lines cut or altered may seem to make only slight literary difference, but signal radical changes in the way the text was performed.  

Most likely, Urkowitz argues, the Folio text was printed from a Quarto version that had been carefully brought into agreement with a playhouse promptbook, revised by Shakespeare into something more closely resembling actual theatrical practice. Grace Ioppolo consolidates these revisionist claims, stating conclusively in her introduction to *Revising Shakespeare* (1991) that Shakespeare must be regarded as ‘a deliberate, consistent, and persistent reviser’.

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69 Ibid.
71 Ibid., p. 16.
72 Ibid., p. 129.
73 Ioppolo, p. 5
Urkowitz, like Ioppolo, Warren and Taylor, specifically uses the word ‘revision’ when discussing the changes made to the Quarto text. John Kerrigan is equally careful to distinguish between revision and adaptation in his essay on the changes made to the Quarto King Lear. In ‘Revision, Adaptation and the Fool in King Lear’ he argues that the Folio is a revision of the Quarto, that is, a text reorganized by the author – and not an adaptation, a work rewritten without authorial assistance. He suggests that authors often revised their texts by tinkering with minor alterations, like those in King Lear, while adapters tend to work with larger units of text. He uses this distinction between revision and adaptation to argue that the changes made to the Quarto text are more characteristic of authorial revision than they are of adaptation, suggesting that it was Shakespeare himself who authored the changes. Kerrigan’s essay defines revision in contradistinction to adaptation, which is a useful contribution, but his argument is undermined by a number of rash and highly subjective conclusions:

The excellence of the new material [in the Folio] helps support a second argument: the [Folio] Fool is dramatically superior to his [Quarto] equivalent; the only writer capable of surpassing Shakespeare at the height of his powers was Shakespeare; therefore the Fool’s part was revised, not adapted. 74

The superiority of the Folio text, whether real or imagined, cannot be taken as evidence that Shakespeare was responsible for it. As Gary Taylor points out ‘Shakespeare was not, after all, the only competent dramatist alive in England at some time between 1605 and 1623’. 75 But despite Kerrigan’s conclusions, his argument is consistent with the work done by Warren, Urkowitz, Taylor and Wells: the changes made to the Quarto text are consistent with an effort to make the play more conducive to theatrical practice, and the resultant Folio text likely represents revisions made by the author.

In the context of adaptation studies, it is important to reiterate Urkowitz and Kerrigan’s conclusion that the Folio King Lear constitutes a revision but not an adaptation of the Quarto version. This finding is consistent with my own sense that adaptation refers to the reworking by one author of another author’s work, and that it excludes authorial revision. The questions that arise around Shakespeare’s own style of adaptation must be directed exclusively, then, towards his reworking of his source works not to the reworking of his own work.

Where Urkowitz and Kerrigan’s arguments do pertain to this study is the significant identification of problematic source material. The existence of multiple Shakespearean King Learss complicates the question of adaptation because it destabilizes the notion of an original text, of what exactly is being adapted. When

74 Kerrigan, p. 230.
Tate adapts *King Lear* in 1681, it is unclear whether he is adapting the Quarto or Folio text. Similarly, when Garrick tries to wrestle Shakespeare back from Tate in 1773, he allegedly restores much of the original text – but which original text is not certain. The problem of adapting from multiple sources becomes even more complicated with the Shakespeare burlesques of the nineteenth century. According to Richard Schoch’s argument in *Not Shakespeare: Bardolatry, and Burlesque in the Nineteenth Century* (2002), burlesque satire critiqued contemporary Shakespeare performances, which were seen as a degradation of a Shakespearean ideal. For the burlesque to succeed, an audience needed to make the distinction between Shakespeare in contemporary performance and a mythically pure Shakespearean performance. To understand what exactly was being adapted here requires sifting through layers of nineteenth-century stage *Lears*, nineteenth-century printed editions of *Lear*, and all their various and convoluted sources in Quarto and Folio versions of the play. In these adaptations, an original *King Lear* becomes an almost unidentifiable source.

Confronting the problematic issue of source work in adaptation studies, Margaret Jane Kidnie offers an elegant solution in *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation* (2009). Kidnie notes that the study of adaptation is frequently undermined by a lack of consensus around the source. She attributes this problem to a cultural bias ‘towards understanding the work as embodied in its written or printed text’ which becomes self-defeating in the face of multiple originals, and in light of the dualistic nature of all dramatic works which ‘exist simultaneously in two media – text and performance’. It becomes impossible to decide on any originating text or performance for the play, or even to conceive of the play as a single, unified thing. Instead, Kidnie argues for considering the play as a work, an ongoing and evolving process made up of the play’s recurring iterations in print, performance and criticism. While there can be no consensus on a fixed, original *King Lear* in text or performance, there is a common understanding of *King Lear* as a work: a grouping of non-identical instances of text and performances, validated in part by the debates surrounding them.

Kidnie’s identification of the play as a ‘work’ or evolving process corroborates Grace Ioppolo’s sense of the transient nature of Shakespearean texts. In *Revising Shakespeare*, she uses the term ‘abstract textuality’ to describe a phenomenon common in literary critical interactions with the play: ‘When new historicist, deconstructive, semiotic, psychoanalytic, or feminist and gender critics discuss and analyze the “text” of a Shakespearian play, they are, in great measure, creating the “text” as they interpret it.’ Ioppolo’s ‘abstract textuality’ and Kidnie’s ever-

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77 Ibid.
78 Ibid., p. 8.
79 Ioppolo, p. 161.
80 Ibid.
evolving ‘work’ both usefully draw attention away from the unresolvable dilemma of an unstable original, focusing instead on the existence of a conceptual composite King Lear: an entity made up of a variety of textual and performance sources, cultural images and associations, and critical debates, all of which help to shift and define the parameters of the play.

This idea that a play can exist independent of text or performance, as part of a shared critical discourse or cultural consciousness, is not as unfamiliar as it may seem, particularly with regards to Shakespeare’s work. ‘Shakespeare one gets acquainted with without knowing how’, Jane Austen wrote in Mansfield Park in 1814. ‘It is part of an Englishman’s constitution’. The playwright Charles Marowitz corroborates this sense that Shakespeare’s work exists in a shared, conceptual state: ‘there is a kind of cultural smear of Hamlet in our collective unconscious and we grow up knowing Hamlet even if we have never read it, never seen the film or attended any stage performance’. Linda Hutcheon agrees that a canonical work like King Lear can be used as a source for adaptation, even if ‘we may not actually have direct experience of it’. Instead, she writes, we rely on what John Ellis calls a ‘generally circulated cultural memory’ of the source for the adaptation to work.

Reconceiving of the source so that it is no longer a specific text removes a great deal of the anxiety inherent in writing about adaptation. Rarely do adapters identify their source as the Quarto version or the Scofield performance, or direct their audiences to a particular instance of King Lear; instead, relying on the play’s abstract textuality, the King Lear they reference is a culturally shared idea, a play that might be individuated according to different audience members, but which is generally recognized to share certain common qualities.

In Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Fredric Jameson relates a similar phenomenon that usefully sheds light on how adaptations function in relation to their sources. Describing a quality similar to Ioppolo’s ‘abstract textuality’ in which a play is collectively and contingently defined, Jameson describes how the past is conceived of in historical novels and nostalgic films. He argues that novels like Ragtime (1975) by E.L. Doctorow and films like American Graffiti (1973) by George Lucas both evoke and create a conceptual past – not a real historical past, but an image of the past based on ideas and stereotypes about it. Because the ‘real’ past is lost to us, he argues, these novels and films can only ever evoke the past in a series of surface images (fashion or appliances, for example, specific to a particular time). These images help to evoke specific, commonly held fantasies about ‘pastness’ (what it looked and sounded like) while glossing over the work’s lack of genuine historicity.

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82 Marowitz, Recycling, p. 19.
83 Hutcheon, Adaptation, p. 122.
Adaptations of Shakespeare employ a similar device. They can never access the one, ‘original’ King Lear – the play exists in too numerous and varied written manifestations, and performances are too ephemeral to identify anything as original. Instead, they employ a series of iconic images (Lear in the storm, Lear carrying the dead Cordelia on stage), character names and themes associated with King Lear to evoke the collectively held idea of the play. This conceptual King Lear, made up of images and associations, like the ‘ideological mirage’ of the past in Jameson’s historical novels and films, represents western literary culture’s shared ideas and stereotypes about King Lear.

To return to Urkowitz and Taylor, the arguments made by revisionists may be foundational to an accurate textual understanding of King Lear, and they initiate useful discussions around the idea of original sources, but their focused attention on difference de-values the significant presence of a unified, culturally shared, conceptual King Lear. It is this King Lear – not the Quarto or Folio text, nor any specific theatrical incarnation but an imaginative, remembered King Lear – that has the most cultural currency and is most often evoked in adaptations.

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