

Long Paddock

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Philippa Kelly, *The King and I*

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When writing about literature, drama, or art we generally separate ourselves from the work. We do this for the sake of clarity and authority. But this means scholarly writing usually does not account for why we actually read, watch, study, and write about a work. Philippa Kelly's *The King and I* is part of Continuum's *Shakespeare Now!* series and the editors have discarded this formal imperative. Their mandate is to publish "books that speak directly from that fundamental experience of losing and remaking yourself in art" (Fernie and Palfrey, xi). So, although Kelly's book is ostensibly about Shakespeare's *King Lear*, she completely entangles her self with the famous play and its cantankerous old protagonist. Kelly is an Australian Shakespeare scholar and dramaturg, and *The King and I* is about the experience of reading, teaching, and thinking with *King Lear* in the Australian context. The book is part close reading, part cultural history, and part memoir; Kelly and Lear dance together as cultural misfits, like Deborah Carr and Yul Brynner, awkwardly and compellingly for seven short chapters. The canonical monolith of *King Lear* is broken apart and its fragments are distributed throughout Kelly's life and across the Australian landscape.

Why would any woman, let alone a "ten-pound pom" who grew up in rural Oakey during the reign of Joh Bjelke-Petersen, want to understand her life with the help of *King Lear*? It is a play about a self-righteous and misogynistic autocrat, who seeks unconditional love, total authority, and no responsibility in his "twilight years". But Kelly did not choose *Lear*; it was forced upon her. Like thousands of others educated in the Australian system, she was introduced to the play at high school. Often such encounters can be formative insofar as they repel students away from the Bard; but it

had the opposite affect upon Kelly. Her favourite teacher, Mr Yeabsley, brought *Lear* into her life and it “provoked in (her) a fascination with the play that would last for all of (her) life to date” (10). This book unravels the historical and cultural significance of this very personal and particular ‘fascination’ with the play.

The book begins in the 1970s with Kelly’s memories of her mother. This is the first surprise. The mother figure is notoriously absent in *King Lear*; although most of the conflict centres on Lear’s relationship with his daughters, ‘Queen Lear’ is rarely mentioned. Indeed, the play’s most direct reference to ‘the mother’ is not to a character at all, but rather to an early modern psychosomatic disease Lear feels within his body: “this mother ... *hysterica passio* ... thou climbing sorrow” (2.2.249-50). But Kelly’s mother was not absent; she raised ten children and also worked in the Bailey Henderson mental hospital in Toowoomba. So, how does this link with *Lear*? The connection is complex. During the play’s famous storm scenes, Lear encounters Edgar disguised as the Bedlam beggar, Poor Tom. Lear is isolated and exposed to the storm, he comes to see himself as a Bedlam beggar and he uses his relationship with Poor Tom to try and reorient himself in the world. When Kelly was in high school Mr Yeabsly told her that the Bedlam referred to in the play is much “like that place in Toowoomba” (10). That place where Kelly’s mother worked. It turns out it was not simply like the hospital, but rather the Bailey was “based on the structure of the Hospital St Mary of Bethlehem (Bedlam) in London” (8). By way of an overworked and underappreciated mother who treated mental illness, a mad king who forms a relationship with a Bedlam beggar, and the colonial cousin of the original “Bedlam” built by the British in Toowoomba in the nineteenth century, Kelly fuses her life with *King Lear*.

Each subsequent chapter entangles another aspect of the Lear story with Kelly’s life in Australia. Kelly considers the Australian feminist movement and the politics of reading gender in *Lear*; the Whitlam dismissal and the question of authority dramatised in the play. She recounts her experience working at the Australian Defence Force Academy, and the pedagogical challenge of teaching a play about the vicissitudes of power, hierarchy, and loyalty to students who are training to subscribe to those ideals. She explores her time working at Mullawah Women’s prison in relation to the dramatisation of banishment in *Lear*. She reads the role of the Fool in

comparison to the figure of the Aussie larrikin. The book then opens up onto a litany of philosophical and ethical questions regarding nationality, ethics and identity: our island geography and post-colonial sovereignty, our treatment of indigenous Australians, migrants, and refugees, and the question of caring for elderly parents are just a few of the issues raised. The book culminates with a brief analysis of three productions of *King Lear* in Australia, all starring John Bell. In this short and sharp book *King Lear*, Australian culture, and Philippa Kelly are exploded and rebuilt in relation to each other.

Ultimately, the book is both stimulating and frustrating. It is frustrating because of the form. I found myself craving more rigorous analysis and less suggestive generalisation, simply because each link between Kelly, the play, and Australian culture is so potentially rich. For example, I remain unsure about the analogy between the Fool and the ‘Aussie larrikin’, but there is no space for extended consideration of the links. This is, of course, perhaps too much to ask of a book described as a “minigraph” (xii); a form that the editors have invented between the essay and the monograph. Also the formal idiosyncrasy has a conceptual purpose; it is playing with the form of post-colonial Shakespeare scholarship and experimenting with how we can think about Shakespeare’s place within Australian culture. Kelly begins the book with the claim that “*King Lear* is alive” (1). By “alive” Kelly does not refer to the play’s potential to be produced on stage. Rather, as a canonical work of drama, the play is itself active within culture. In this respect, the frustration I experienced with the scale of the book was also stimulating. Kelly’s way of thinking about art as alive within culture is contagious: while reading I wrestled with about precisely how I think this play is embedded within our culture and alive within myself. For someone like myself, whose experience in the world is entirely mediated by literature, drama, and art, it is energising to read a book unashamedly invested in exploring the complex intersection between life and art.

King Lear quotation from Arden Shakespeare, Complete Works, 1998.