

## PRESENCE IN ABSENCE

# GENDER DYNAMICS IN RECENT HUNGARIAN APPROPRIATIONS OF SHAKESPEARE'S *KING LEAR*

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How do we see King Lear? How do we want to see King Lear? Answers, of course, to these questions can be so varying that it would need a bulky volume to cover them. Yet, from much advertised, star-lined, touring productions one trend emerges: on contemporary stages King Lear has become an old man. Not necessarily a king anymore, simply an old man. Johann Wolfgang Goethe's remark that "[e]in alter Mann ist stets ein König Lear",<sup>1</sup> is echoed by Bridget Escolme's chapter on recent *King Lear* productions in the *Oxford Handbook of Shakespearean Tragedy* where she claims that the main contemporary interpretational trends in Britain favor humanizing Lear, presenting him in a more down-to-earth, psychologized light, as an old man with everything old age might bring.<sup>2</sup> Ian McKellen's recent portrayal is characterized by *The Guardian's* reviewer<sup>3</sup> as naturalistic, displaying signs of old age and dementia, while a recent woman Lear, Glenda Jackson also suggests that her portrayal of Lear is that of an old person. She claims that it is exactly the reason why the question if Lear was played by a man or a woman is irrelevant. "As we get older, we begin to explore, I think, rather more the gender alternatives of our defined gender [...] those kind of gender barriers begin to crack",<sup>4</sup> she argued in a podcast on NPR.

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<sup>1</sup> Johann Wolfgang Goethe, "Zahme Xenien," in *Gedichte*, accessed August 29, 2022, [http://www.zeno.org/Literatur/M/Goethe,+Johann+Wolfgang/Gedichte/Gedichte+\(Ausgabe+letzter+Hand.+1827\)/Zahme+Xenien/Zahme+Xenien+3](http://www.zeno.org/Literatur/M/Goethe,+Johann+Wolfgang/Gedichte/Gedichte+(Ausgabe+letzter+Hand.+1827)/Zahme+Xenien/Zahme+Xenien+3).

<sup>2</sup> Bridget Escolme, "Tragedy in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Theatre Production: *Hamlet*, *Lear* and the Politics of Intimacy," in Michael Neill and David Schalkwyck, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespearean Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 540–56.

<sup>3</sup> Arifa Akbar, "Ian McKellen's Dazzling Swan-Song weighted with Poignancy" *The Guardian*, July 26, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/jul/26/king-lear-review-ian-mckellen-duke-of-yorks>.

<sup>4</sup> Terry Gross, "Glenda Jackson on Playing King Lear: Gender Barriers 'Crack' with Age," an interview with Terry Gross, *NPR*, April 23, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=716305342>.

In other words, when we think of Lear as a cultural symbol for aging, his gender as performed on the stage becomes redundant.<sup>5</sup>

The question this essay sets out to answer is how an aging Lear is portrayed in two Hungarian independent productions, far away from the limelight of Anglo-American brick theatres. How much of his Learness is left in these adaptations to show, and how much his gender is relevant to the interpretations of these plays. Whilst exploring the aging Lear-figures that appear in these productions the paper also wishes to find Lear's so famously silent daughters,<sup>6</sup> or indeed to explore what happens to the play's gender dynamics when Lear is bereft of his crown.

The two productions the essay is concerned with are not straightforward rewritings of Shakespeare's play, they use *King Lear* as a cultural metaphor, therefore, in Richard Proudfoot's term, are "some Lears."<sup>7</sup> Yet, it seems that they still tap into the above-mentioned contemporary theatrical trends, by appropriating the character of King Lear as a symbol to discuss aging in a contemporary setting or by imagining Lear as a woman.

The first production, an interactive theatre project by the Káva Kulturális Műhely (Káva Cultural Workshop) from 2016 entitled *Lady Lear*:<sup>8</sup> rewrote the Shakespearean plot as a parable of a typical Hungarian family where the aging mother's illness challenged the independence of her three sons. Using *Lear* as a cultural symbol of parents/authority figures who, despite their physical weakness, wish to control the lives of their children/subordinates, the play confronted audiences in dialogues initiated by the actors to discuss how they would react in a similar situation.

The second production the paper intends to introduce is a two-person play entitled *Lear's Death*<sup>9</sup> that premiered in the studio space of the Miskolc National Theatre in 2018. While *Lady Lear* repositions the Shakespearean plot into a wider contemporary social setting, this production digs into the personal psyche of an aging Lear. Accompanied by his

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<sup>5</sup> And, indeed, Andrei Serban's 2010-all-female *Lear* did not emphasize the gender switch either. Furthermore, it seems casting a woman actor to play Lear has become a trend, since the latest Canterbury Shakespeare Festival season also advertised a *King Lear* about a single mother of three. See, accessed August 29, 2022, <https://www.canterburyshakespeare.co.uk/current-season>.

<sup>6</sup> Dymrna Callaghan, "The Construction of Women through Absence, Silence and Utterance," in *Woman and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1989), 74–89.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Proudfoot, "Some Lears," *Shakespeare Survey* 55 (2002): 139–52.

<sup>8</sup> *Lady Lear*, 2016, Káva Cultural Workshop. Written by Júlia Róbert; director: Dániel Ambrus Kovács; actors: Viktor Bori, Gábor Gyombolai, János Kardos, Melinda Milák, Gábor Takács.

<sup>9</sup> *Lear's Death*, Miskolci National Theatre, 2018. Written by Éva Enyedi; director: László Keszég; actors: Attila Harsányi, Krisztián Rózsa; music by: Ákos Zságer Varga.

Fool the play follows "Uncle Lear" through several stages of self-investigation ending in his death.

Strangely enough, although the *Káva Lear* features a Lady in its title, and the Miskolc *Lear* introduces the Shakespearean female characters as well, both express the Lear problematic as primarily a male issue, with female voices absent or mediated by male actors. The paper will delineate how the male vocalization of the aging and death of King Lear affect the gender dynamics of these productions.<sup>10</sup>

### 1. GABI NÉNI<sup>11</sup> HAD A STROKE

*Lady Lear* by Káva Cultural Workshop addresses the contemporary problem Western countries all face: that of an aging society. That "by virtue of age and retirement – there is a much larger nonworking population than a working population."<sup>12</sup> It asks how far we are expected to take care of our parents, how much of a personal sacrifice we should be willing to make to help them. The fictional Lady Lear of the play, a former leader, not of a country, but of a school choir, a widowed mother of three boys, got a stroke that left her paralyzed on one side. In the course of the play her boys and her only grandson try to resolve the crux this situation has brought their lives into. As the ensemble website indicates: it is "a crap of a situation with a capital C, served with lots of bittersweet humor."<sup>13</sup>

As it is clear from this short description, this adaptation of the Lear theme is a domestic version of the play where "the main emphasis is on family dynamics."<sup>14</sup> It primarily addresses a social concern many of us refuse to face, the aging of our parents. Indeed, in Goethe's understanding of King Lear's figure the situation challenges the audience to grasp "the sad commonness of the [Lear] experience rather than providing the rarified emotional distinction craved"<sup>15</sup> by many. This, as Peter Conrad convincingly argues, is

<sup>10</sup> For photos and videos, please refer to: *Lady Lear*, <http://kollokvium.figura.ro/play/en/18>; *Lear's Death*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bK7NVkXUcm4>; <http://csokonaiszinhas.hu/en/eloadasok/enyedi-eva-lear-halala/>.

<sup>11</sup> In Hungarian every elderly woman is called "néni", which roughly translates as auntie, while every elderly man is called "bácsi" that roughly means uncle. Both terms can be used with family and Christian names as well.

<sup>12</sup> Gross, "Glenda Jackson on Playing King Lear."

<sup>13</sup> <https://kavaszinhas.hu/lady-lear-en/>.

<sup>14</sup> For similarly angled adaptations see: Christy Desmet, "Some *Lears* of Private Life from Tate to Shaw," in Jeffrey Kahan, ed., *King Lear: New Critical Essays* (New York / London: Routledge, 2008), 326–50.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Conrad, "Expatriating Lear," in *To Be Continued* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 95–152, 97.

what the play itself teaches by doubling the fate of Lear with that of Gloucester's. In this sense "every old man is a deposed king",<sup>16</sup> even if in this case she happens to be a woman (but more of that later). This commonality is what ultimately enables the play to engage the audience in conversations during the two "openings" the production accommodates.

The play light-handedly molds some themes from *King Lear* to fit the scope of the project – Gabi néni, the mother, starts out from her own flat with her youngest son taking care of her, then slowly loses all aspects of comfort she enjoyed in that first situation. She temporarily has to reside in her second son's apartment, where her pregnant daughter-in-law is disgusted by her "old person smell", and where she is stranded in the living room, as Lear on the heath, naked, since she is unable to put her dress on again alone. Gradually all three sons of hers desert her care, and as a final blow her doctor, one of her former students who admires her for her energy and vitality, refuses to administer her a self-imposed death of sleeping pills. In the penultimate scene of the play it is her grandson who tries to keep her spirit alive, only to witness her second stroke,<sup>17</sup> which leaves the family with "the worst that is yet to come."<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, very differently from *King Lear*, the boys in *Lady Lear* are not simply male versions of Lear's pelican daughters – even if communication is not their forte, they still try to help. When they fail on their own, they are willing to hire a full-time nurse to assist their mother or look for a well-established nursing home. Their mother, who claims that caring for her is *their* job, immediately turns these ideas down with pain and disgust. What she does not realize is how much, similarly to her, her sons are also determined by their particular life situation they cannot escape: the oldest lives abroad with his second family, and apart from regular money transfers and Skype calls with his son from his first marriage, he cannot leave his new life and family for longer periods of time. Her second son has just started his own family, and his wife – who fails to see herself as a prefiguration of her mother-in-law – is not willing to share the last months of her pregnancy with Gabi néni daily. Her youngest boy still lives at home, but has finally, after many years of failure, found a job he likes – he becomes a tour sound technician, a work that leaves him much less time at home.

Although far less of a dragon than Lear, the play shows Gabi néni as temperamental and outspoken, with rather harsh opinions of her sons. According to the list of characters, she is supposed to be a 78-year-old retired music teacher, yet the play itself presents her

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>17</sup> As the doctor explains it was an atrial fibrillation, but the consequences are the same for the family.

<sup>18</sup> This is the final sentence of the play, spoken by the middle son as a conclusion to previous events.

as someone much older, something of an anachronism. She is given a gray wig and a home dress ("otthonka") – a usually 100-percent polyester piece of clothing worn by women in the 1970s while doing their household chores – that is rarely seen today.<sup>19</sup> Her taste for food is also rather conservative, she only eats traditional Hungarian food, mostly from warmed up tins, is baffled by take-away pizza, and is proud of her family's secret "pogácsa" recipe. These characteristics are the source of most of the bittersweet humor the play's website promises, but they age Gabi néni unfavorably, making her closer to 98 than 78, and a thing of the past, almost a caricature.

What complicates her portrayal even more is that although the play's title promises us *Lady Lear*, she is played by her three sons, who take her role one after another. A choice applauded by all Hungarian reviews as an ingenious doubling that foreshadows the future fate of the sons, it is, at the same time, a decision that did significantly change the gender relations of the play. While *King Lear* does give spectators the image of an old man, frail and weak at times, *Lady Lear* deprives the audience of seeing an elderly woman on stage. When the middle son clumsily tries to undress then redress his mom, it is a middle-aged male body on display that we see. When the grandson readies to give a pedicure to his grandma, it is giant male feet we see soaking in a bowl of hot water. The annihilation of a fragile elderly female body on stage and the extinction of an actual female voice deprives the play of the connotations the gender switch promised by the title would have brought, namely the associations one has with the body of one's mother.

Due to the naturalistic acting style present all through the production, the image mediated by the boys, while recalling early modern practices, is primarily masculine, distancing the idea of a mother from the audience. Whereas Lear's journey is definitely a passage during which he has to grapple with his own femininity, Lady Lear here is prevented even from showing her femaleness. Although still there in the playscript,<sup>20</sup> she is absent from the stage. Similarly to how her boys decide her fate, the production deals with her without giving her an actual presence.

## 2. LEAR BÁCSI IS DYING

*Lear's Death* is a play with no linear plotline, it is a series of scenes, linked by loose association and the two characters that perform them: Lear and the Fool. Lear plays himself, while the Fool takes on several roles: he becomes Goneril, Regan and Cordelia, Death,

<sup>19</sup> See slideshow here: <http://kollokvium.figura.ro/play/en/18>.

<sup>20</sup> The whole playscript can be read here: [http://szinhaz.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Kava\\_Lady\\_lear\\_2017\\_marcus.pdf](http://szinhaz.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Kava_Lady_lear_2017_marcus.pdf).

James the butler, and, of course, Lear's Fool. In a short paper it is nigh impossible to do justice to the manifold connotations the play unlocks, so the essay merely attempts to introduce a few aspects to be able to discuss the gender dynamics of the play.

*Lear's Death* is first and foremost a journey into Lear's psyche. It starts with the sentence: "I don't want to die!",<sup>21</sup> and ends with Lear's death and him concluding: "There's! Nothing! Wrong! *Va bene!*" It is a journey of self-confrontation, of self-annihilation and personal growth, a journey towards the acceptance of death. In a whirlwind ride of scenes, full of grotesque and farcical situations – at times hilariously macabre or tear-jerkingly honest, the two actors who play Lear and the Fool discuss aspects of Lear's death.

Secondly, the play is a metatheatrical tragi-comedy, a commentary on Shakespeare in performance. As if it wanted to show arm-chair critics complaining about the inability of theatrical productions to display a plethora of interpretations one can ponder about in the quiet of one's mind with a glass of sherry in hand, the production gives spectators just that. We first see Lear on the heath, being investigated by the Fool, sometimes more his executioner than his companion, then he becomes a whining old man in a chaotic Hungarian hospital with the Fool forcing him to swallow all the medicine he ground up in a mortar while singing a botched up version of the song *Brazil* about the lure of death. Later he morphs into Szabolcs, the Leader, the hero of the first Hungarian translation of *Lear*, who in turn becomes the actor playing Lear, Attila Harsányi himself, disclosing his own innermost feelings for his mother, only to transform into Lear again seemingly dead, but alive enough to listen to his eulogy. The list could go on. It is a dance macabre across a modern version of Hell that contains circles of burlesque halls, cabarets, or for that matter a Jerry Springer-like tabloid talk show that hosts the play's mock-trial scene.

Besides the virtuoso performance of the two actors (Attila Harsányi as Lear and Krisztián Rózsa as the Fool) there is a video screen showing flashing images or extra scenes,<sup>22</sup> as well as the monologues the two actors improvised into the text that all add to the overt metatheatricity of the play. So does the live accompaniment of music and effects by Ákos Varga Zságer, who remains on stage throughout the production. While *Lady Lear* wished the audience to internalize the events they were watching, *Lear's Death* continuously distances viewers from Lear's vicissitudes on stage. Frailty and death are depicted

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<sup>21</sup> Enyedi, *Lear's Death*, 2. All quotes from the play are from this translation. Courtesy of the translator, Philip Barker and the author, Éva Enyedi. Furthermore: *Lear's Death*.

<sup>22</sup> Like that of the two hilariously confused murderers, also played by Harsányi and Rózsa, who discuss whether to blind, castrate or simply kill Lear and Cordelia.

here as "concepts that are incomprehensible, that are only to be reflected on with the help of an adequate toolkit."<sup>23</sup>

While displaying a vast array of interpretational possibilities, the play also reflects on its own idiosyncrasy. In several asides to the audience the two actors debate how this production fails to present the "famous royal costume drama from the pen of the greatest of all playwrights, the Bard of Avon."<sup>24</sup> They discuss what tricks it would take to gain "serious professional recognition, critical acclaim, if not the occasional invitation abroad"<sup>25</sup> and in an interlude entitled: "Long Live Youth – Festival Interlude" they satirize the backward theatrical hierarchies of the country's theatres.

Yet, at the bottom of this metatheatrical extravaganza, at the core of Lear's quest for the acceptance of death, is Lear's struggle with his daughters. Although the three daughters never appear in person on stage, they are recalled and are played by the Fool from the first scene to almost the last. They are evoked in their father's curses,<sup>26</sup> are presented as relatives who never visit their father in hospital, appear as speakers of Lear's eulogy who lie to put him in a favourable light, are portrayed as rather simple creatures with broad countryside accents who dis their father in front of the TV cameras, but also are seen as victims of child abuse (Cordelia), and finally as the ultimate source of consolation. As if a magic mirror would have refracted the chronological events of *King Lear* into myriad pieces that display us all the viewpoints of the characters, we also hear Goneril's and Regan's woes and Cordelia's aches besides Lear's laments. Since no single narrative can do justice to Lear's journey, we get all of them.

We are in Lear's head, therefore everything is uttered in a male voice – all three daughters are played by the Fool and although their portrayal, their tones change from scene to scene, ultimately all are mediated through the Fool's persona, a male presence. To complicate matters more, the production plays with the similarity of the two actors so often (their faces are morphed into each other on the video screen and the poster of

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<sup>23</sup> Zsolt Almási, "A halál geometriája," February 15, 2019, *prae.hu*, <https://www.prae.hu/article/10829-a-halal-geometriaja/>.

<sup>24</sup> *Lear's Death*, 12.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>26</sup> "I was a great king! I had three daughters! Now here I am whimpering like a miserable worm! [...] But how could they be so vile? I gave them all I had! I raised them alone. Do you know how much Goneril ate when she was little? Her nappies always full of crap! You know how much nappies cost? [...] I always had to buy new clothes for Regan, and games and a horse and a blackamoor! Their mother was to blame, always spoiling them till the day she died! And I was an idiot! Having them taught, and they were girls! I thought they'd be grateful and take care of me when I got old and sick! But they're beasts! My God, what will happen to me when I get sick?" (*Ibid.*, 2.)

the production uses the same image)<sup>27</sup> that they seem to be just two faces of the same person, two voices of the same experience. As if their roles could be reversible, their lines could be uttered by the other, their roles could be switched if wished so. Consequently, the Fool can also be read as a projection of Lear's mind, or vice versa, an interpretation that questions the validity of the daughter's utterances even more.

However, no matter what the ultimate source of these two voices is, it is only when they become harmonious, in a somewhat classical reconciliation scene between Lear and Cordelia that Lear's journey nears its end. When the antagonism, the continuous bickering between the Fool (also as Goneril, Regan and Cordelia) and Lear subsides and they mutually forgive each other, is Lear finally ready to die. It is first Lear who asks for Cordelia's forgiveness:

Thank you! You must put up with me. I was cruel to your mother and didn't give a shit about you three. I only cared about gaining more and more power. I got everything. Flat, property, car, country! I got new kidneys, a new liver, a new face. I didn't want you to have the kingdom. I didn't trust any of you. You are too good-hearted. Goneril's stupid. Regan's greedy. Or vice versa. Regan's stupid, and Goneril is greedy. I'm always mixing them up. I wanted to be king even after my death. Please forgive me for everything. I am an old fool. Senseless. I had no sense. Pity.<sup>28</sup>

Replying, Cordelia admits that she was stupid to compare her love for her father to salt.<sup>29</sup> They embrace and plan to stay like that forever. Everything seems to be ready for a celebration.

A festive dinner follows, a burlesque take on the classic drunk butler routine,<sup>30</sup> a reconciliatory banquet, or a wake – for Lear who is finally ready to die. The Fool, who this time plays James, Lear's butler, seats an impressive circle of guests at the table: Goneril, Regan, a guest called: Albany-Cornwall-Kent-Burgundy-Frank, Mr.Trump, Mr. Bean, Death, and finally the filthy, smelly, diabolical Poor Tom, a.k.a. Edgar Gloucester. As a mocking summary of all the previous scenes, the Fool speaks all the lines of the guests and drinks their drinks. As he gets more and more inebriated, Lear keeps asking him where Cordelia is. But

<sup>27</sup> <https://mnsz.hu/eloadasok/single/734>.

<sup>28</sup> *Lear's Death*, 20.

<sup>29</sup> The play continuously uses the Hungarian folk tale motive of the youngest daughter loving her father as much as people love salt instead of the lines from *King Lear's* love scene where Cordelia says "Nothing".

<sup>30</sup> See "drunk butler," YouTube-video, 10:50, uploaded by „jeroenschoones", September 13,2009, YouTube,<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i8xPhU5132I>.



she never arrives. After the final dessert course James/The Fool faints/dies so it takes the onstage musician, Zságer to announce that Cordelia has died and will never come.

This utterance turns the banquet retrospectively into an unplanned wake for Cordelia, too. Her death, as in Shakespeare's play, happens offstage and is only reported by outsider onlookers. She is given no final words, no tragic treatment. If she was projected onto the stage through the Fool's words, then her death is rather farcical – a drunken stumble and a stunt-like fall. Yet the void that her absence created during the dinner lingers there in the final scene of the play, too. Instead of the pieta we are accustomed to at the end of Shakespeare's play, here in the last scene we can see an old man agonising *with* and later *ona* stool – Cordelia's empty chair – that signifies Cordelia, or more specifically her absence.

Lear's dearest daughter, who has previously been mediated through the Fool is ultimately objectified as a stool, similar to those that stood in for her older sisters in Shakespeare's mock trial scene. Her role here, however, could not be more different. Her presence in absence is the final push Lear needs to be able to die. Although the play asserts that dying is a lonely act, Cordelia's nothingness, her non-attendance is vital for Lear's acceptance of death.

Similarly to *Lady Lear*, *Lear's Death* also interprets *King Lear* as a story told from a male perspective in which female viewpoints can only be mediated through authoritative male voices. Yet, while *Lady Lear* wishes to camouflage this absence, in *Lear's Death* this marked void is interpreted as presence. This reverberates in the final text of the play, a poem by Lajos Kassák, recited in Lear's voice: "Who's gone is gone, said my mother, never grieve over wayward souls./ Who's gone is gone, say I as well, but at the same time I feel profoundly /those once with us can never leave us completely."<sup>31</sup> With these words Lear climbs back to the Fool's shoulders and the cycle starts again.

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<sup>31</sup> *Lear's Death*, 29.