

**From *King Leir* to *King Lear***  
**The Art of the Remake in Jacobean England**  
by Jerry James

*Mediocre artists borrow—great artists steal.*

— Attributed to Pablo Picasso, William Faulkner, Steve Jobs, T. S. Eliot, Igor Stravinsky, etc.



King Leir and his daughters, a marginal illustration in the *Chronica Majora*, c. 1250.

In January 1606, William Shakespeare was widely thought to be a has-been, an Elizabethan in a Jacobean age. Oh, sure, his company accounted for ten plays out of the eighteen being done before King James in the current holiday season (stretching from November to February), but those were all old. What had he written since James came to the throne in 1603? *Timon of Athens*? Please. Later that year, Shakespeare would write *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Some has-been. And he would do it as much by craft as by genius.

**Shakespeare's Company**

Shakespeare wrote for a company, a company whose actor/shareholders had made a curiously smooth transition from being the Lord Chamberlain's Men under Elizabeth to being the King's Men under James. If this had required them to take in as a share-holder an actor favored by the king, then so be it.

Numbering less than a dozen, these men had been working together for over fifteen years. They were an ensemble, equipped to play whatever Shakespeare might throw at them. For years, they had rehearsed during the mornings and played during the afternoons, except during Lent, or when the playhouses were closed due to plague.



Richard Burbage

Their leading player was Richard Burbage, widely acclaimed as the finest actor of his day.

In 1606, he would create the roles of Lear, Macbeth and Antony, as well as (most likely) Ben Jonson's Volpone.

Over the past twenty years, London's theatre scene had burgeoned. Where once there had been only three theatres, there were now at least ten. Still, Shakespeare knew that despite the increased competition, having the king's patent meant he could call on the finest contract players available. In 1606, the most important of these would be the boys.

The name of the leading boy player of the King's Men has been lost. But we can surmise that in 1606, he created the roles of Goneril, Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra, a feat comparable to Burbage's. The secondary boy player created Regan, Lady Macduff and Octavia. The third boy, the one who played Cordelia, would have been cast more for his weight than his talent, because Burbage had to carry him. (Puberty generally happened three or four years later than it does now, which might extend the professional life of a boy player into his late teens.)

These were the men with whom Shakespeare had to work. What would he now do with them?

### The Favor of the King



King James I

Elizabeth died on March 24, 1603. On May 19, less than two months later and with James still in Edinburgh, Shakespeare & Co. were named the King's Men. That so honoring a band of players should have even crossed the king's mind during this hectic time seems very odd indeed. We might infer, therefore, that this

was an action taken at the instigation of a Very Important Nobleman (VIN). The new King's Men could be sure that, sooner or later, they would have to deliver a *quid* for the VIN's *quo*.

In 1603, Shakespeare was doing very well. The previous summer, he had obtained a leasehold on land outside Stratford, his hometown, for £440, twenty times the yearly salary of a Jacobean schoolteacher. Now, having earlier achieved the rank of Gentleman, he had been elevated to Groom of the Chamber, entitled to four-and-a-half yards of red cloth for royal livery.

Fortuitously, the debt the King's Men owed the VIN was delayed throughout 1603 by the plague. But by the fall of 1604, it was time to pay up, or so we will conjecture. The VIN had a scheme to ingratiate himself with King James. The King's Men would put the king onstage as a hero. James would be flattered, the VIN would humbly reveal his own modest part in the affair and James would advance him.

If this appeared an elegant scheme to the VIN, it doubtless seemed less so to the King's Men, for they knew the law. Stephen Greenblatt relates, "In 1559... the queen instructed her officers not to permit any 'interlude' to be 'played wherein either matters of religion or of the governance of the estate of the commonweal shall be handled or treated.'" This was widely understood to prohibit any depiction of contemporary events or personages.

Pish and tush, the VIN may have replied. Surely a new monarch would mean a new understanding. So let the King's Men present the king himself before the king, as they told the story of the treason at Gowrie House.

In August 1600, the story went, the Earl of Gowrie and his brother lured King James to their home and attempted to kill him. The assassination failed when James, while heroically holding off the Gowries, was able to call for help. The assassins were dispatched, and all ended well.

The King's Men played *The Tragedy of Gowrie* before King James in December 1604. (Greenblatt suggests Shakespeare himself might have played the king.) The play was done twice, before large audiences, but a court

spy noted the play did not please everyone. “I hear that some great Councilors are much displeased with it, and so ‘tis thought shall be forbidden.” (Greenblatt) And so it appears to have been, very quietly. The text has been lost. Not even the author’s name survives.

If the Very Important Nobleman existed, he escaped serious punishment. The King’s Men may have received a stern finger-wagging. This was a far better fate than would befall the Children of the Queen’s Revels, who in 1606 unwisely performed *The Isle of Gulls*, a satire on Scots and Scotland. “[T]hose involved in staging it were committed to Bridewell Prison,” James Shapiro tells us.

The season of Lent and another episode of plague left Shakespeare ample time to choose his next project. He may have considered *Macbeth*, but the failure of the full-frontal flattery of Gowrie made the subject less attractive. Better that Shakespeare seek a more oblique way to flatter the king. He would find it in an old play and a new political issue.

### Union and Disunion

James I of England was also James VI of Scotland—and uneasy lay the head that wore two crowns. What if these two separate kingdoms could be united? The question had concerned him for years. Back in 1599, James had written a political pamphlet for his son denouncing the dividing of kingdoms.

Union was James’ dream, but there were two major problems: The English hated the Scots, and the Scots hated the English.



“The Unite”

Faced with a hostile House of Commons, James did what he could. In 1604, he issued a new one-pound coin called “the Unite” (above), on which he proclaimed himself King of Great

Britain. “On the reverse was a Latin translation of Ezekiel 37:22... “*Faciam eos in gentem unam*”—“I will make them one nation.” (Shapiro)

Shakespeare knew this. All that he needed was a plot that showed the perils of disunion. He found it in an old play newly published.

### The Culture of the Remake

In the summer of 1605, *The True Chronicle history of King Leir, and his three daughters, Gonorill, Ragan, and Cordella* was finally published, fifteen years after its production by the Queen’s Men. As their name suggests, these now-anonymous players were once the foremost thespians in the realm. Their playwright is equally unknown.

There were no copyright laws. It was steal, steal, and the devil take the hindmost in this Culture of the Remake.

The culture could be blamed on the voracious appetite of the Elizabethan/Jacobean playgoer, an appetite that demanded a new play every day. Or the cause might lie in the sheer laziness of playwrights. Whatever it was, Shapiro reminds us of the craft involved in “giving a cold, hard look at an old favorite, recognizing what now felt a bit off or what trick had been missed. [Shakespeare’s] ability to pinpoint what was flawed in the works of others was one of his greatest gifts... It was a talent closely allied to his habit of relying on the plots others had devised rather than inventing his own.”

Lear first appears in 1135, in a book by Geoffrey of Monmouth. By 1600, it was common knowledge that Geoffrey had just made things up, but no matter. Shakespeare wanted a story that was good; it did not need to be true. And *King Leir* had some very good things in it. The foremost of these concerned the folly of dividing one’s kingdom.

Shakespeare discarded Gonorill and Ragan’s plot to murder Leir but kept Perillus, changing his name to Kent—one of the alterations in names designed to pull the play out of antiquity. Another alteration was more pointed: The King of Cambria would be renamed the Duke of Albany.

And who was the former Duke of Albany? Why, King James, of course, as were his fathers before him. Continuing in this mode, Shakespeare used the word “British” in *King Lear*, something he’d never done before. He also had the Fool—another Shakespearean addition—mock Lear’s attempt to divide a single crown between Cornwall and Albany.

Shakespeare’s greatest feat of craftsmanship in remaking *Leir* was the addition of the Gloucester subplot. Shapiro says, “It was the first and last time that Shakespeare ever included a parallel plot or subplot in one of his tragedies... a way to highlight Lear’s figurative blindness by juxtaposing it with something more literal.”

From Samuel Harsnett’s, *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*, a favorite of the king’s, Shakespeare took more than eighty passages, including the names of Edgar’s devils. But Edgar’s devils don’t exist. There are no witches (*Macbeth*), no ghosts (*Hamlet*), nothing supernatural in the play.

Shakespeare knew a good remake had to have what Hemingway called “a wow at the end.” The audience at the Globe in the early months of 1606 knew the story of *Leir*. They expected Lear and Cordelia to win the final battle. Their deaths not only shocked the

audience, they meant the Duke of Albany was going to have to start Britain all over again, because the royal family had been wiped out.

No one could miss the reference to the Gunpowder Plot of the previous November, a plot to wipe out the British Royal Family. It’s still a major holiday in England, celebrated because on that date, nothing happened.

“Nothing!” says Lear. “Nothing will come of nothing.”

Although it was thought that the threat of such a massacre would strengthen the king’s case for Union, nothing came of nothing. On December 18, James sent Parliament home.

On December 26, 1606, the most coveted date in the holiday season, the King’s Men presented *King Lear* at court, before King James.

In attendance was the current Duke of Albany, Charles, the six-year-old heir to the two crowns and James’ hope for a future Union. No one could know how ironic this hope was to prove.

Forty years later, Charles I would finally see his kingdoms united, but under the Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell. The only division would be that of Charles’ body from his head. The crowns would not be united until 1707, under Queen Anne.



Edwin Austin Abbey, “*King Lear*,” Act I, Scene I—Metropolitan Museum of Art

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