

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Philippa Kelly, *The King and I* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011). 128pp. ISBN 978 0 2680 4140 3.

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The most striking thing about this book is its straightforward intimacy. It comes at you straight-on, directly announcing that 'For me, *King Lear* is alive' (p. 1). I suppose you could call it bio-criticism, not in the Agamben/late Foucault sense but in a rich narrative open-ness to the way the human experience of living with great literary works over time folds them into your personal history, so that the mad old king starts to feel familiar, connected, part of your life. This is a theatrical book, focused on great performances and productions, and a careful study of the play. By the end you feel as if you'd know Philippa Kelly if you saw her on the street or, say, around a seminar table somewhere.

It's also a thoroughly Australian book, wrestling repeatedly with the insight that 'Both Australia and *King Lear* are forces I am always catching up with. Neither is for me a simple, comfortable fit' (p. 1). The Oz-ness inside the narrative includes parallels drawn from Australian history, including The Dismissal (her caps, or possibly Australia's) of George Whitlam from the post of Prime Minister in 1975. Kelly connects this notorious event in national politics directly to the play, via the public downfall of a politician who 'thundered that he was every inch a king even though his crown had been ripped away' (p. 20). The interlocking of nation and stage – Kelly notes that the following year, 1976, marked her first student encounter with Shakespeare's great tragedy – suggests not so much that life follows art but that each of our individual experiences of national or personal dramas get filtered through and alongside the texts and stories of that life. In some sense, don't all sacked ministers perform something like Lear's rage and loneliness?

In addition to national politics, Kelly weaves together stories of growing up in the remote interior, an early-career teaching gig at a women's prison, Kelly's immediate family, a parrot named Boris, dementia, and the politics of race and rural culture in Australia. Despite all that variety, the book moves at an easy, personal pace. Connections are measured, sure-handed, and never pushed too hard.

An especially engaging chapter explores Shakespeare's cultural status in relation to the lack of overt sentimentality in Australian public life. After devastating fires in Canberra in 2006, Kelly appeared on a national radio program that wanted to use *King Lear* as a model of dispossession. 'Giving It All Away' was the title of the program. She notes some dissonance in the set up – for families who lost their homes in the fire, the title doesn't apply – but also suggests the larger question of degradation pushes back from the canonical play against the fairly comforting public radio moral, in which loss of possessions does not mean loss of self. The play provides, Kelly suggests, a template through which Australians can 'imagine the scope and nature of...cultural wounds' (p. 71), which might include everything from losses to fire to the original dispossession of Aboriginal people. *King Lear*, while unarguably part of dominant white European culture, provides for Kelly a powerful mirror into the nation's 'blind spots' (p. 71).

At the core of this very personal book is a rich theatrical fantasy, a belief in the redemptive power of art, and a mature acceptance that art never quite finishes or finalizes the transformations it sometimes promises. The book closes by mixing the author's avowedly 'childish longing for life to stay happily ever after' (p. 95) with the overwhelming tragic force of *King Lear*, which has by this time entwined itself around the musical from which she adapts her title: '*The King and I* was never just about a three-hour play, much less a musical: for me it is a story that goes on' (p. 95). This last refusal of the conclusive ending of tragedy for the open-endedness of lived experience marks a divergence between the narrator and the play; having entangled their experiences throughout the book, perhaps it has become time to unravel the threads.