Reflections apropos of Two Australian Books on Shakespeare
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Kate Flaherty, Ours As We Play It: Australia Plays Shakespeare (UWA Publishing, 2011)
Philippa Kelly, The King and I (Continuum, 2011)

Both of these books are written from an Australian perspective, being significantly, deeply, and explicitly based on the authors’ experiences with Shakespeare. They offer an exploration of material which is perhaps particularly of interest to those of us who live in Australia, but which, I dare predict, is also accessible and significant to those living elsewhere. Neither author is parochial in outlook, and each writes, at least implicitly, with an international audience in mind. As well, they leave us in no doubt that Shakespeare’s impact on them has been that of a transnational author.

In writing about these books I shall, more than I normally do, also offer material of my own, explaining in part why I see the books the way I do, and not least because I am interested in the issues raised by the authors from both an Australian and also – perhaps especially – a wider perspective. My views are not necessarily as objective as those of simply a reviewer. This is not only an academic review, but also a somewhat more personal essay.

I should like to state initially that the two books are both, in my view, very good, and I wish to emphasise this because I shall nonetheless here and there be found to dissent rather strongly from what I have read. I start with Flaherty’s book because she is concerned with Shakespearean plays as approached by others, particularly in performance. Her interest is quite markedly in Australian views of Shakespeare as distinct from non-Australian ones, but she does speak about Shakespearean play scripts and performances thereof as matters outside herself. Her response is ultimately more pronouncedly to Shakespeare’s texts and less internalised than is that of Philippa Kelly’s to King Lear. Kelly does in part enable us to see King Lear as others might also see it, but she offers a book which is primarily of interest to us for the way she describes how the play has impacted on, and been viewed by her, in her own life in Australia, even though she also more widely relates it to Australian events and attitudes. Kelly’s is a significant departure from the more conventional external tradition of responding to Shakespeare within which, in her own way, Flaherty operates.

Before I consider these books in some detail I feel I should – by way of declaring my hand – say something about my own attitude, as someone born and bred in the Netherlands, but who is, no doubt, in relation to Shakespeare more Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Celtic in outlook than Dutch. My adult life since the age of eighteen has been devoted to the study of English, and there has not been a year since 1957 in which I have not been somehow in close contact with Shakespeare through reading or seeing his plays, and generally in an English-speaking environment (the UK, New Zealand, and – mostly – Australia). As a student of Shakespeare I must clearly state that I am an ‘oldie’, and I confess that as such I bring a good deal of what others may see as ‘baggage’ with me, of which I am, however, not ashamed. I am still among those who believe that, if we talk about, or perform, Shakespeare, we have above all a primary duty to attend very specifically and thoroughly to what William Shakespeare...
(from Stratford-upon-Avon) wrote, and I consider that there is such a thing as a specific author visible within his corpus. Thus, those proferring to concern themselves with this author as critics and theatre directors should, in my view, attempt to do justice to this author and what they may work out to be his implied intentions and attitudes. (I say this in full awareness of the existence of the ‘death-of-the-author’ view: I do not share that, believing that authors are personalities who intentionally shape, and often in quite a distinctive, analysable way, what they create.)

I do not object to fantasies, in criticism or on the stage, based on what Shakespeare can be transformed into, but I feel we should be very clear about what we perceive – or indeed can clearly see to be – Shakespeare on the one hand, and transformations of Shakespeare on the other. I know I am somewhat out of fashion in believing in this to me all-important distinction, although more so, I feel, among specialist academics or theatre practitioners than the vast majority of, say, undergraduate students and most other people who enjoy reading and/or watching Shakespeare. Those, I believe, see themselves as primarily getting close to that author rather than caring about the creative efforts of others to turn Shakespeare’s works into something they plainly are not. I admit, of course, that there are difficulties in interpreting Shakespeare, but there is still a major difference in grappling with that attempt on the one hand and what amount to significant transformations on the other.

There are two developments that I particularly regret having had to observe during my professional lifetime: (a) the way Shakespearean drama has often become, in reading and when performed, the target of purely theoretical or ideological approaches, and (b) the fact (as I see it) that in productions the text has been treated with less and less respect, and that an emphasis on all sorts of extraneous material in settings and so on has become more pronounced. I believe that (b) is in part logically connected with (a), but also has been fed by an insatiable appetite on the part of producers to try and produce something which would stamp their production as novel (‘innovative’ is often a favoured word) or unique. Again, I am aware that in saying this I am speaking in a way which is currently old-fashioned among professionals, although, again, I believe that many ‘ordinary’ readers and viewers continue to see matters the way I do, whether young or old.

In this essay I am at least initially as much concerned with performance as with the way Shakespeare is or might be read. This results from the fact that the book closest to Shakespeare’s texts and interpretations of the two under consideration, namely Flaherty’s, discusses his theatrical work very much in terms of performance. As the UWA Press Media Release puts it, ‘By closely examining Shakespeare’s plays as they’ve never been studied before—performed by Australian theatre companies in contemporary Australia—the author, Kate Flaherty, argues that Shakespeare’s plays cannot help but resonate with local concerns.’ It is, moreover, clear from her book as a whole that she believes that Australian performances also should in some significant way be obviously Australian. I disagree strongly with her assumptions, though that is not to express any hostility towards them. It might be nice, indeed, if somehow we could readily ‘translate’ Shakespeare’s plays into something Australian rather than British, as that might bring out Shakespeare’s universality and timelessness yet more readily than if he gets performed as an English author writing four centuries ago.

But we might ask ourselves: how necessary is it to Australianise Shakespeare in performance, on the stage, rather than to leave it to the audience to work out what, in his work as an English writer from long ago, might specifically be of value for...
Australians? Further, could it somehow be actually damaging, both to the author and to the audience, to present a play as Australian which remains automatically, as a text, English (and from the past) even if we were to make it look part-Australian (and contemporary)? What I have in mind here is not that we must show some sort of colonial respect for Shakespeare simply because he is English and as such superior: rather, that if we feel we can reasonably access (in translation) Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* or Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler* without any effort to Australianise such plays on the stage, the same might surely apply to Shakespeare.

Let me give an example of a performance of *King Lear* which I was lucky enough to see in London in the late 1990s and which I believe would to the non-British members in the audience – including people from entirely different cultural backgrounds – have seemed hardly less understandable, important, and enjoyable than it was to those who could trace their ancestry in Britain back to Shakespeare’s time, and I would even include those who were specialists in Renaissance drama (like myself, though I am not British). The production which was so much lauded at the time, and remains I am sure as highly regarded now as it was then, was the one featuring Ian Holm as Lear. My memory of what I saw is that of Holm and his fellow players (to use the Elizabethan word) acting – by using their voices and their bodies – not relying on eccentricities in their clothing (which I do not recall), on technically clever use of lights, sound effects, a notable stage, settings, or props. Human bodies with voices carried the play – virtually nothing else. To refresh my memory of what others thought at the time, I have just read the fine critic Benedict Nightingale’s review, published in *The New York Times* on 4 May 1997. Nightingale writes about the play extensively and with awe, but he, too, was obviously overwhelmed by the acting, and he fully concentrates on that. My wife Truus, also, found the performance astonishingly good, and free from so many things that have interfered with our enjoyment of other *Lears* (and other Shakespeare plays) which we have watched.

Of course, one remains aware that the play is set in the past, and that it was written by an Englishman, also in the past. The England of the past is not Australia of the present, but Australians, I am very confident, would have enjoyed and understood the play as much as others, including most British people today (who are often hardly better informed about Elizabethan times or the English language than other speakers of English). Geographically, too, we are a long distance away from Britain, but again this would not have handicapped Australians seeing Holm and his fellows perform *Lear*.

Why is this? Why does Shakespeare speak so much to people globally and at all times? It is not a fiction to say that he does: the facts speak for themselves. After all, if in recent decades it was at some point possible to see eleven different productions of *Hamlet* in Tokyo, all at the same time, this must mean that the now so often questioned notion that Shakespeare is for everyone and for every time is likely to be quite correct. And that must also mean that what speaks to others, anywhere and at any time, is within Shakespeare, though conveyed by him to others in such a way that we can identify with it as important and engaging in a fairly direct manner even if – at all times, including his own – Shakespeare was and is at the same time complex. Indeed, I would argue that the very complexity of the author is one reason for his ongoing and universal popularity. *Should* Hamlet kill his uncle? Hamlet himself believes he should and eventually he does, though impetuously rather than with self-control. But, although ostensibly, even in his monologues, Hamlet rebukes himself for
not acting, there is something inside him – with which many can identify, whatever it may be – that makes him procrastinate. Shakespeare never really lets us know (and may not feel that human nature allows us to know) why someone in his position might hesitate and find reasons for inaction. Matters like these remain eternally and globally fascinating.

Another reason why Shakespeare transcends limitations is that he is often called on to support some fashionable ideology, yet his texts resists such attempts, because Shakespeare is not an ideologue himself. For example, *The Tempest* is now often read, and performed, as though Prospero is an evil imperialist patriarch and Caliban merely his victim, as some sort of noble savage. Yet in the play itself Caliban is described as the son of a witch. This does not seem to bother many people today, but anyone who regards rape as a peculiarly heinous crime, and most of us do, should surely not fail to observe that Shakespeare presents Caliban as a would-be rapist, which some explain as due to his believing in free love. The fact is that increasingly rape is seen as evil, and thus would go down as a black mark against Caliban. Shakespeare’s point, it seems to me, is that human behaviour requires a framework broad enough to deal intelligently with the good and the bad that can be found in a great many humans, including both Prospero and Caliban. Shakespeare, I believe, challenges ideology *per se*, and makes us question things rather than construct facile answers. Despite this, I also believe that the author enables us to make distinctions between bad and good conduct which seem to be very broadly shared by most people. For example, *Lear* very unjustly disinherits his youngest daughter, but that does not mean that we must see the suffering inflicted upon him by his other daughters as somehow other than evil on their part. It is only during – usually fairly short – periods of fanaticism that audiences will lose their sense of perspective. I remember going through a brief phase as a teacher when it was difficult – considered by some as sexist – to argue that Lady Macbeth, Goneril and Regan are evil women: but even then their supposedly good qualities were not universally recognised, and the signs are that today this view is less enthusiastically maintained.

Flaherty does an excellent job in describing a number of contemporary (or at least recent) Australian productions of *Hamlet*, *As You Like It*, and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. She provides sufficient detail, with sufficient clarity, to enable one to imagine a performance that one has not seen, which is greatly to her credit. She also manages to make the various experiments sound interesting. So, at the very least, I would see her book as a most welcome record of theatrical history.

Where we part company is in our appreciation, at least in part, of what those productions offer us as renditions of Shakespeare’s play scripts. To me the *Lear* performed by Holm and his fellow actors was a great success because the acting was of such a quality, and there were so few distractions to interfere with one’s concentration as a spectator, that I was totally absorbed by what I saw, and mentally dwelled for a few hours in the world which I think Shakespeare asked me to inhabit. One felt involved in the human story shown, which seemed utterly real, and was hardly aware that one was in a theatre. To me, and I would maintain this is still true for most audiences, what mattered was that, as Coleridge recommended in 1817. I could easily and willingly believe that what I saw and experienced was real. To the extent that the performance asked me to supply certain elements not shown on stage in my imagination (typical of Shakespeare) I found that easy to do, nor was my attention disrupted by various elements that broke the spell cast over me.
Shakespeare, as I firmly believe and as contemporary observations suggest, practised the art of illusion, as, until Brecht invented what the English-speaking world usually calls ‘the alienation effect’, performance of plays axiomatically endeavoured to do. There was (and usually still is today) a silent contract between those putting on plays and those watching them to the effect that we are all entering into a world different from the reality immediately around us, and into which we are mentally transported.

It is the acting which will, in this situation, make or break the performance. Such things as settings may occasionally help, but very often they add little or indeed are a distraction. The Holm _Lear_ was to all intents and purposes dependent on acting alone. And I think that the evidence is that Shakespeare’s theatre had little need of anything else during his own time. Even a change of scene was usually only very summarily indicated. Thus, we are, as an audience, informed by words that we have been imaginatively transported into the Forest of Arden in _As You Like It_ when the banished Duke Senior says: ‘Are not these woods / More free from peril than the envious court?’\(^1\) The Forest of Arden was and is part of the locale where Shakespeare grew up. Even today, the audience would realise that it needs to envisage (that is, to imagine) a forest, and an English one at that: it does not need to be given anything actually to see in order to do so. Flaherty makes a similar observation when she mentions (107) that at the beginning of another scene Rosalind says ‘Well, this is the Forest of Arden’ (2.4.11). Flaherty sees the statement as an example of ‘the performative potential of language’, as indeed it is: many stage directions in Renaissance drama are provided by the actors within their speeches. Even so, much of what she discusses is concerned with theatrical settings, and in particular Australian ones.

In a film, it is possible to take the audience with one, imaginatively, by placing the actors in a real forest. In the theatre, except when a play is performed within a forest-like setting, it is hardly possible to use something tangible which will as easily suit the purpose, and many efforts at naturalism are actually counter-productive. The kind of productions which Flaherty refers to, and which are typically contemporary (not necessarily peculiarly ‘Australian’, by the way) can to my mind legitimately be accused of wilfully introducing a context which is not that of a forest. Rather, we are asked to see something unlike it which is ‘innovative’, and which tells us more about the production than the play. Thus Flaherty describes what happened in a production of the Sydney Theatre Company, 1996, where the audience was directed from the COURT (indicated by a sign) to the forest:

The blue silk of the court backdrop disappeared into a trap in the stage to reveal a jumbled array of giant, tarnished-gold letters on a concentric double revolve. Despite the lazy tilt of the ‘F’ across the ‘O’, the ‘FOREST OF ARDEN’ was discernable [sic] in autumnal disarray ... In the centre a small ensemble accompanied jazz singer Kerrie Biddell in her sultry number: ‘Under the Greenwood Tree’. Biddell’s ‘Come hither, come hither, come hither’ was a direct invitation to the audience who applauded the striking fluid transition. (104)

\(^1\) 2.1.3–4; I refer, as does Flaherty, to the Norton Shakespeare.

One can see how a contemporary audience might be impressed by the sheer theatricality of all this, but I would argue, despite the view of commentators to the contrary, that little of this helps us to experience the world which Shakespeare’s words create. Indeed, some praised the staging because it was not Shakespearean:

This textual Forest of Arden is decidedly autumnal – no green world here. It starts out red, a jazz cellar which could be in another wing of the Duke’s Palace. There is at first no sense that the exiles have fled the court at all. They have simply found a more congenial part of it. In the modern world there is no duality between the city and the forest. (105-6).

There is, of course, a duality between the city and the forest in the modern world. And in all respects we are still close enough to Shakespeare, not least in a country like Australia, to produce something far simpler, and far more faithful to his play than this. Of course, for those who have already seen a production closer to the original play it may be interesting and entertaining to play about with the script and produce something quite different as a variation on it, but then we should be clear about what we are doing, i.e. that we are not pretending to present something Shakespearean. The technical experiment described by Flaherty is one which Shakespeare does not need, and which makes us move, imaginatively, into some kind of strangely heterogeneous fanciful world which is a hybrid: a Shakespearean text placed in an environment where Elizabethan English can only come across as an archaic oddity. In reading about this sort of thing I am reminded of the idiocy of the production of Richard III which showed towards the end a battle with tanks and the king even so exclaiming that he would willingly swap his kingdom for a horse. All imaginative unity and coherence gets lost in such muddled productions.

Company B, in a 1999 production of As You Like It, came closer to the Shakespearean play, from what I read in Flaherty’s account. It showed a stage floor which ‘appeared as a sunlit lawn, scattered with eucalyptus leaves’ (110). The eucalyptus leaves were no doubt intended to Australianise the forest, but what seems to me more concerning was that ‘in the final scenes, the spatial identity of this Arden was confirmed as being closer to a suburban backyard than a wilderness’ (112). From a Shakespearean viewpoint this again was simply wrong, and ultimately damaging to the play. It is part of the very structure of As You Like It that within the Forest of Arden the characters experience something profoundly different from what they bring with them from the court: their new environment tests them, and in general alters them significantly more than the atmosphere of an Australian backyard would. A backyard may supply some of the comfort of pastoral which for one thing Arden provides, but it is not importantly transformative, as Arden is in Shakespeare’s play. Flaherty writes: ‘Much was made of this playful closure and many reviewers saw it as an explicit stamp of the production’s Australian identity’ (112); and it appears that the presence of an Australian identity, just as such, was seen as a good thing. I would argue that where that identity readily fits in with what the play offers it is innocuous (possibly advantageous though hardly needed); but where it clashes with the world of the play we can well do without it, and surely should.

This is perhaps the moment to face the most important point of all: Shakespeare is universal and timeless because, although he wrote plays as an Englishman around 1600, his human insight was such that anywhere and at any time audiences can extract...
from him what matters to them without having to distort his world by explicitly making it, for example, twentieth-century and Australian. He does not need that kind of help to make him accessible and important. Others, I know, will profoundly disagree with my position, and of course they have every right to do so.

Enough about this particular matter, and I move on to the matter of role-playing. The main difficulties in this area over the last few decades have been due to a misunderstanding of the nature of Shakespeare’s plays as somehow creating a strong sense of metatheatre, and, as part of this, also an alienation effect. Metatheatre, of which Flaherty appears to see many signs, is automatically assumed to exist where Shakespeare’s plays make us think of the existence of play-acting, as though we are bound, in that event, to reflect immediately upon the on-stage action as acting only – not part of a world of make-believe which, during the performance, we accept as real. But there is a profound illogicality behind this assumption. Hamlet (a play which Flaherty discusses) shows us, in the play-within-the-play, the work of what are emphatically declared to be professional actors (‘players’) who are not to be confused with the actors who carry the main action of the play (Hamlet). The play-within-the-play is offered as a deliberate construct, something we are meant to be aware of as acted out, and on Hamlet’s – the producer’s – instructions. As Shakespeare is offering a contrast between the playlet and the play, without which we could not understand proceedings, the effect is that the characters whom we believe to be real, such as Hamlet and Claudius, become the more convincing as a result of their not being part of what is offered deliberately as artificial.

Another major – perhaps the major – factor in creating what has been a fashionable interest in supposed metatheatrical or alienation effects is the confusion which has bedevilled the interpretation of boy actors in the Elizabethan theatre. The misunderstanding of their role is to an extent understandable. One of its sources is no doubt that generations of audiences have tended to believe that Shakespeare’s women, such as Rosalind, remain recognisably women when they appear in male disguise. Almost all modern audiences confronted with cross-dressing in Shakespeare have this form of dressing (a female disguised as a male) in mind, and indeed are not confronted with the opposite. There is, undeniably, a considerable difficulty arising from this situation. If one cannot, as a member of the audience, accept as male what one sees to be a woman in disguise, even as a male just in the eyes of other characters on stage, the theatrical art of Shakespeare – the art of theatrical illusion – no longer has validity. The spell is broken. From this, it is only a small step towards the belief, which is now very widespread and visibly shared by Flaherty, that audiences who saw boy actors at work when disguised as women would inevitably have been incapable of thinking of them as – within the play – women, not in any sense men.

This is a sad stage of affairs. With the pernicious impact of Brecht’s ‘alienation effect’ (be aware that what you see is acting) as an added factor, it is now often seen as a mark of sophistication not to believe that in Shakespeare’s time a boy who acted the part of a woman on stage was simply regarded as, within the play, a woman, and nothing else. The emphasis today is on the desirability of seeing gender disguise of any kind as automatically drawing attention to two genders, at all times. Yet there is no evidence whatever that Shakespeare’s audiences did not and could not engage in willing suspension of disbelief when seeing a male actor performing the part of a female. References to performances do not indicate any such problem. Indeed, there is the famous instance of Henry Jackson, who, having seen Othello performed in 1610,
wrote about Desdemona, ‘She [sic – this is said about a male actor] acted the matter very well, in her death moved us still more greatly; when lying in bed she implored the pity of those watching with her countenance alone.’ This reaction, I feel, must have been representative. If the audience did not think of Desdemona as a woman, the character could not possibly have been tragic, and the play would have been some sort of hideous farce.

I am hopeful that a better understanding of gender issues in relation to role-playing is beginning to emerge, but so far Flaherty and I seem to be poles apart on this issue. One of the Rosalinds she discusses is the one in Cheek by Jowl’s 1991 performance of *As You Like It*, which I recall seeing in Adelaide at the time. Although the company was not, of course, Australian, I think it is legitimate enough that Flaherty should comment on its production, as she is concerned with the development of various presentations of Rosalind in modern Australia, and the emphatically all-male cast of Cheek by Jowl made quite an impact. Flaherty writes that the production ‘completely eliminated the female presence. Paradoxically, this production was seen as both restorative of Elizabethan staging traditions and as offering a challenge to contemporary notions of gender identity’ (130). Certainly, it did result from, and produced, a degree of confusion. The cast was all male, and I presume that that fact was seen by some as restoring Elizabethan staging traditions. It was nothing of the sort, however. Those acting the parts of women were, even though dressed as such, recognisably male. In Shakespeare’s time, they would have been male, but would to the audience have been entirely convincing as females. It was not difficult for a young Elizabethan male, and particularly with appropriate clothes, to be seen as a female, and notably if the actor specialised in such roles, as happened. We have the nearest modern (ongoing) living presence of such a tradition in the Japanese Kabuki all-male theatre, where the onnagata (female impersonators) play the parts of women with astounding virtuosity and are found entirely credible in their roles as females.

Thus I believe that much discussion about gender matters in Flaherty’s book (but not more so there than in many other studies) is misguided and beside the point. I do not say this to criticise Flaherty in particular, but a general current outlook on an important theatrical matter. We should realise that in Elizabethan times the fact that the actors were males is unimportant: they were doing a particular theatrical job. We should, instead, concentrate on what happens on stage. When we see Rosalind on stage initially, she is simply a woman. When, however, she disguises herself as Ganymede, the audience is aware of the fact that it is watching a female character impersonating a man, and we thus in that sense can simultaneously think of her as to us both female (in reality, as a character) and a male (in a role which carries weight and interest). Several of Shakespeare’s most admirable and appealing female characters seem to have been thought of, by him, as capable of covering a range of qualities which we conventionally think of as male and female, and Shakespeare’s positive contribution to consideration of gender lies notably in his making us aware that women show themselves remarkably capable of being male in their capacities when offered the opportunity to do so. The question as to whether the role of Rosalind is played by a male or female actor is in essence immaterial: we are not asked to reflect on that when we watch the play.

Before I move on to consider Kelly’s *The King and I*, I should like to stress that I found Flaherty often particularly gratifying on *Hamlet*. That play is always greatly admired in Australia, and she discusses with great acumen several different

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productions. She also identifies as Australian something which is indeed so: a peculiar kind of gauche macho mentality, which she relates to the Anzac tradition, warfare, and the Australian enthusiasm for sports. She sees Hamlet, particularly recent Hamlets in Australia, as providing an antidote to this tradition, and although I do not think that there is necessarily anything deeply and specially Australian in the way Australian actors perform Hamlet as a character, she does explain to me why the play appeals not only to women but also to Australian males of a non-macho kind. Her discussion of these matters seemed to me remarkably good, and despite my disagreements with her on some vital matters I respect her work greatly. There is a great deal more of worth in the book which I have no space for discussing.

Philippa Kelly’s *The King and I* deals with the impact *King Lear* has made on her life and how she views the play. She is of course also interested in how the play is best performed, and it has to be said that her account of three productions in which Australia’s most famous Shakespeare director and actor, John Bell, played the main part, confirms much of what I have said above. The first time Bell acted the part, for the Nimrod Theatre production in 1984, he was restricted by the nature of the production (not directed by him), about which he later said: ‘If you start with rubble, you don’t have anything much to give away. The production didn’t really have anywhere to go’ (86–7). The production started with ‘the rubble of warfare’ and, as one spectator commented, ‘I got no sense of Lear’s painful journey out of self-preoccupation’ (86). In short, the extraneous elements of the production hemmed in the main actor of the play, who could not show how during its action Lear psychologically develops – going through an ‘arc’, as Kelly calls it, which to her and me, and surely most people, provides much (perhaps most) of the value and interest of the play. But worse was to come in the 1998 production by Barrie Kosky: here all sorts of directorial interference utterly dislocated the audience from what the play actually says. What was seen was, as I would put it, ‘Kosky’s fantasy on *King Lear*’, rather than anything showing respect for or understanding of Shakespeare’s text. Needless to say, again Bell could not flourish in this environment, in which he was actively directed to play a role of someone very different from the Lear of Shakespeare’s play. Yet in 2010 – in a production by the Bell Shakespeare Company itself which I have unfortunately not myself seen – and in which Bell could present to his audience what many would agree to be something close to *Shakespeare’s Lear*, the emphasis was strongly on Lear as a character of considerable complexity developing throughout the play, and on human relations and interactions in general (91–4). Of course one good reason why this was possible was that the emphasis was, as in Holm’s English performance, on good acting (speaking and moving) – not on distracting directorial interference. The key point I want to make, I should stress, is not one against *Australian* productions specifically, but on those, including Australian ones, which place the emphasis on the wrong things.

To Kelly the importance of *King Lear* as a statement – or rather a work of art – presenting human situations, actions, thoughts, feelings, and relationships is obviously paramount and has been from the first time when she first encountered it as a teenager in 1976. While guided by an excellent teacher, and no doubt helped by seeing a televised version of the play, it would be true to say, from what I read, that the play immediately made a deep intrinsic and personal impact on her because of her own receptivity to it. This is probably in no small measure a matter of character: from Kelly’s account of her life in relation to *Lear* it is clear that hers is a deeply serious
nature, which is prepared to – indeed derives satisfaction from – literature dealing with the depth of human experience, with suffering, with hope amidst suffering, with loyalty, love, and human relations generally. It is, I think, appropriate for me to mention what I infer from her book about her as a person, for this is not just, or even primarily, an analytical, objective book about Lear, but a much more personal statement. That being the case, the value of what she says is automatically in part established, in the reader’s mind, by whether or not the reader is prepared to be interested in, and to have some sympathy for, her as a person. I do, from what I read, and so apparently do many of her readers, for during 2011 the book was not printed once but twice, and readers have formulated some very enthusiastic responses.

The importance of the book lies, for me, not just in its own individual merits, but also in what it attempts to do as part of a new kind of writing on Shakespeare, and as a welcome swing away, not so much from the ‘close reading’ approach which I grew fond of as a student and still enjoy, but notably from what I see as the dark period of a criticism overwhelmed by theory and ideology which gradually developed an impact during the late 1970s, the 1980s, and notably the 1990s – although already in 1993 some very potent criticism of it appeared. Kelly’s book is part of a refreshing new series Shakespeare Now!, edited by Ewan Fernie and Simon Palfrey for Continuum in London, in which a number of titles have already appeared. I strongly sympathise with the ideals of the editors, which in a way take me back to the time when I first enjoyed Shakespeare as a young man. Academic fashions come and go, and although predominantly I still feel out of fashion, I believe also that of late fashion has certainly been coming my way again. The editors plead ‘above all for aesthetic immediacy’, saying that the books which they champion ‘speak directly from that fundamental experience of losing and remaking yourself in art’ (xi).

Surveying generally much of what has been written in recent decades they note (and I rejoice):

In recent years there has been a move away from ‘theory’ in literary studies: an aversion to its obscure jargon and complacent self-regard: a sense that its tricks were too easily rehearsed and that the whole game has become one of diminishing returns. This has further encouraged a retreat into the supposed safety of historicism. (xiv)

As part of the preoccupation with theory, or indeed historicism, we have also seen an emphasis on very predictable ideological stances, according to which it became commonplace for commentators to attack, almost invariably, any character in a play who had (or was claimed to have) a patriarchal role, and to argue that there was nothing wrong with Lady Macbeth, Goneril, Regan, or for that matter any female character, – all in a very simplistic and one-sided mode of regard. Above all, careful study of a play itself became a casualty: as Fernie and Palfrey put it: ‘Often “the play” is somehow assumed, a known and given thing that is not really worth exploring’ (xiv).

For Kelly, by contrast, a play like Lear is worth exploring again and again, and I would agree with her that one never tires of it and one continues to be fascinated and nourished by the experience one encounters, whether it strikes one as the same as

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A new element in criticism like hers is that it is far more subjective than what has been customary, but this – although it should not become the only possible approach – lends considerable interest to reading and thinking about Lear in her company. I should add, by way of caveat, that I do not think that her approach is always equally effective. Let me give one example, here, of what I think is a success of the subjective approach and one which I think is a failure. Early on, in speaking about her youth, Kelly tells us that her mother worked in ‘the Bailey Henderson, the pharmacy department of a mental hospital in Toowoomba’ (8). This was (tellingly, for those of us who read Renaissance literature) based on the Hospital of St Mary of Bethlehem (Bedlam) near London. Kelly mentions some of the suffering which occurred there, explaining that people could be put in mental hospitals for all kinds of things that are unthinkable now. She also explains how caring an attitude her mother had to the patients (9). Proceeding logically, in associative fashion, she writes how this made her observe ‘the bias against age, against nature, against madness; people shivering together, the rejects of the earth’ – all of which, I can immediately see, we also find in King Lear. So she can very naturally write: ‘It was in 1976, some years into my mother’s sojourns at the Bailey, that I first experienced another place of lost identity, another place of emotion played out in a largely uncaring universe’ (10), thus logically taking us to her first encounter with the play.

I think this connection between Kelly’s perception of a mental hospital on the one hand and of King Lear on the other is illuminating. It is entirely understandable why, not least in a child’s mind, but also that of older people, Lear would make one think of patients in a mental hospital (particularly a crude one), and indeed, also, why someone with knowledge of such a place of suffering and insensitivity would readily think of that when presented with the world of Lear.

By contrast I am not impressed by Kelly’s attempt to compare Lear and Gough Whitlam. Whitlam was dismissed as Prime Minister of Australia, with his government, by Queen Elizabeth’s representative, Sir John Kerr, on 11 November 1975. There is no clear connection between Whitlam’s situation and Lear’s which I can see or which Kelly presents. Rather, she sees a similarity in character:

The figure of Lear nudges at my memory as I look back at this scene and the characters involved. Whitlam’s is the first image that comes to mind – this vastly tall politician with an equally towering wife, a charismatic pair who symbolized the rollicking free spirit of Australian leadership. (18)

I see no significant resemblance whatever – going even by Kelly’s own words – between Lear and this Australian politician. Things are not made much better when she says a little later that Whitlam had ‘too much hubris and too much decency to see’ (19) what Kerr was up to and relates Whitlam to Lear in these terms. It is a vague and unhelpful comparison at best, and not least when the two figures are compared in terms of the context in which they find themselves and what happens to them afterwards. There is a big difference, I feel, between throwing light on Lear through mentioning natural analogies between things seen or experienced in one’s own life and the play on the one hand, and dragging in unnatural ones on the other: the Whitlam–Lear comparison seems to me to be in the latter category and actually
detrimental to a reader’s understanding of Lear rather than useful to it.

But no book is likely to be perfect, and there is far more that is truly good than bad in this one. I was surprised to see the names of Cate Blanchett and Baz Luhrmann misspelled on page 84, but, far more importantly, I enjoyed reading about Kelly’s experience as a teacher at the Australian Defence Force Academy where she managed to encourage her students to enlarge their human experience (a good thing for a soldier as well as anyone else) by commenting on Lear; and I was also particularly moved by what she writes about Mullawah, the women’s prison in Sydney (26ff). This place of banishment, often of loss of dignity and suffering, obviously does bring us close to the experience of Lear and his small band of fellows out on the heath. In particular, it also helps us to become aware, like Lear, of our humanity at a very basic level, and of our interconnectedness as humans. Kelly describes in touching terms her uncertainty about whether she should accept a drink of water from a cup offered by one of the inmates of the prison. Although frightened about possible infection, her fellow feeling wins out, and she drinks.

In Chapter 3, I found Kelly very convincing on the role of the Fool in the play, and interesting as well as relevant in her discussion of playing the Fool as a characteristic within Australian society. From my own observations, I think her view of this component in Australian life is quite accurate and it is actually very valuable to see such information supplied, as it helps both Australians and others to understand why people in this nation seem to have such a good understanding of a character like the Fool, and in general of anything that deflates pretence, helps us to see reality, and thus—in a case like Lear—to gain insight into ourselves as well as others. The book is especially worthwhile because it not only makes Lear reflect on Australia, but also Australia on Lear. For anyone living in this country and interested in both Lear and Australia it is indeed necessary to see matters in both directions.

What I shall all in all remember the most about this fine book, however, is the depth of its understanding of Lear as a play, and perhaps especially of Lear as a faulty but tragic and deep character. At the root of it all is not only the quality of King Lear as a play but also the impressive way in which Kelly responds to it with her whole being.

Both books show us how Shakespeare deeply matters in Australia as elsewhere, and, as well, that Australian writers contribute significantly to study of him.