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Moving Back from the Limelight: Aging and Ageism as the Shakespearean Actor's Tragedy in Ronald Harwood's *The Dresser*

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The motif of aging and the plight of the aged, who struggle with their own failing bodies and minds while also suffering from the humiliation of having to give up their independence and control over their lives, have more than once been the focus of Ronald Harwood's dramatic work. At the same time, one could equally say that Harwood's main theme is the stage itself, and his long-standing love affair with the world of the theatre is what his plays regularly reflect on. Some of his best-known work, among them *The Dresser* (1980), combine the two themes, showing the way aging is itself a performance of sorts, a show that goes on in front of a dwindling and increasingly critical audience, which makes it an ideal case study for investigating forms of ageism in dramatic fiction. One of Harwood's later plays, *Quartet* (1999, adapted to film in 2012 as Dustin Hoffman's directorial debut), although sometimes dismissed by critics as "a flat-out crowd-pleaser" ("*Quartet*"), is even set in a retirement home and shows "the ravages of age on a profession which largely depends on staying young," as one reviewer summarizes the paradox of aging for performance artists (Morley). This is, of course, inherently tied to another paradox, rooted in the ruthlessness of contemporary society, which Harwood's theatre is also aware of, as pointed out by Sally Chivers:

> The cultural prescription to resist the apparently inevitable physical and mental decline that comes with age is accompanied by a competing cultural need to see older bodies

> failing to reinforce the apparent strength of youth. This paradox is evident in *Quartet*'s combined portrayal of the physical changes that come with age along with the characters' apparent abilities to overcome them when they take the stage. (215-16)

Harwood's theatre is thus looking back nostalgically at what has been, and *The Dresser*, the play in the focus of this article, investigates the slowly but painfully fading past not only in terms of the personal life and achievements of individual performances, but also concerning the theatre as a medium. Partly relying on autobiographical elements and Harwood's personal recollections (discussed below), this nostalgically revisited theatrical past is embodied first and foremost by Shakespeare, both as a textual heritage and a performance tradition.

Shakespeare's oeuvre can be a natural choice for representations of age and aging, as it abounds in references to the controversial and often destructive power of time. We can find numerous examples all over his work, from the first group of the sonnets, which use various images to remind us of the inevitable passing of youth and beauty, to a wide range of dramatic characters and situations in which the source of the conflict is in some way related to human age. Yet the most iconic example of age demanding center stage is clearly *King Lear*, the tragedy of an octogenarian monarch and his similarly aged companions, the Earls of Kent and Gloucester. It is also fitting that this is the very play Harwood's protagonists, the aging actor and his dresser, are preparing to put on for what turns out to be the final time in the course of *The Dresser*.

If we look at the play not simply in search of age but also of ageism, Shakespeare's dramatic text proves just as much a

treasure trove, as it includes plenty of lines that could be used as evidence for "discrimination based on age" (Gendron et al. 997). In fact, it is easy to argue—as several studies do—that the tragic denouement at least partly comes about as a direct result of this destructive attitude towards the elderly. Whether hearing Goneril's statement that "old fools are babes again and must be used with checks as flatteries" (1.3.20-21), or even the Fool's sympathetic and proverbial "thou should not have been old till thou hadst been wise" (1.5.41-42), one cannot but observe that in the play's world, old age is treated as a condition of decay and decline, which results in a complete loss of control over the characters' fate and the representation of their identity. *King Lear* is indeed such a perfect example of the problems of aging and ageism that it is often employed in medical, psychological, or sociological studies, to illustrate a variety of opinions of and about old people in critical situations (see, for example, Batch, Gullette, Krims, Ottilingam, Rapoport, and Truskinovsky). Some of the studies investigating ageism are somewhat reductive, reading textual symptoms in search of actual physiological conditions, but it is undeniable that this Shakespearean tragedy can easily be mined for proof that age can be used as an excuse for a discriminatory, or even downright cruel, treatment of the elderly.

At the same time, *King Lear* is not only a literary text and it does not exist in an abstract and isolated form, but in its stage or screen performances it also allows us to gauge contemporary artists' interpretations of the conflict between generations. What is more, it is also a prime example of the theatrical metaphor, seeing life as play-acting, and within this universal human spectacle, it presents the performance of old age, which can also be seen as a rehearsal for the greatest part of all: dying. In this respect, Margaret Morganroth Gullette observes an

interesting tendency in the production history of the play, claiming that "ageism in *Lear* is a worsening trend" (62). She points out that "[l]ate 20th-century views and productions that find less fault with Goneril and Regan can do so because they are making Lear more arbitrary, and either arrogant or senilely 'cranky'" (62). She quotes a series of reviews from the past four decades that all refer to theatrical performances representing Lear in a manner that forces the audience to identify with the (traditionally "evil") daughters. Looking further back, she argues that "[i]n the history of the theater, productions of *King Lear* turn out to be a way to measure ageism—or its opposites" and concludes that "[w]hat horrified earlier centuries in Lear's fall derived from the play's inextricable and feverish combination of politico-religious beliefs in monarchical authority and deeply ingrained family duties toward fathers" (64). Nevertheless, Gullette admits that as a spectator, an arguably ageist contemporary performance of the play has made a deep impression on her, with its family dynamics that felt utterly realistic for the contemporary viewer.

What is, therefore, wrong with a performance that is able to engage its audiences with such elemental power? Gullette claims that the problem is identifying with the wrong side and taking the word of the evil daughters for granted, over the complaints of the aging fathers who have clearly never in their lives experienced a moment when the veracity of their statements would have been called into doubt. But how can we decide who is right or wrong in this debate, when the only evidence—the play's text—offers just as much support for one side as for the other? We do not actually see the riotous behavior of Lear's knights, only hear about it in potentially biased reports, but neither do we see the childhood of Lear's daughters, and without the "ocular proof," to use Othello's

words (3.3.363), how can we decide which character is the one "more sinned against than sinning" (*King Lear* 3.2.59-60)? Yet some of these textual absences are—either by necessity or choice—embodied in performance, and performance is by its very nature self-reflexive: rooted in its present place and time. Therefore, it makes perfect sense that in our age, when popular culture tends to humanize monsters and audiences no longer accept an inherited viewpoint as the single interpretation, we need to see these trends in performances as a way towards a balance between representing either Lear or his daughters as victims of discriminative attitudes.

When casting actors for the role of Lear, the biological-biographical age of the actor is often relied on, to achieve a level of authenticity on the stage, even if this is not necessarily a requirement or a mark of value in a performance. This unity of actor and role can be seen as one of the keys to the play's power to engage audiences, and this self-reflexivity of performance is at the heart of Ronald Harwood's *The Dresser*, which is closely connected to Shakespeare's *King Lear*. In fact, *The Dresser* can be described as an adaptation or offshoot of Shakespeare's play (Nardo 105), as it offers a metadramatic look at the backstage drama of an aging actor and his equally aging companions, struggling through a final performance of *King Lear*. Interestingly, Milwaukee actor James Pickering refers to his age and life experience as an advantage in his representation of a whole series of old men, among them Lear, using a line almost verbatim from *The Dresser*: "I (was) practicing being old guys for a long time. . . . But I found year after year I'd have to put less makeup on my face" (Higgins).

In what follows, I intend to look at the ways the potentially ageist (or painfully realistic) experience of *King Lear* is transmitted through a peculiar chain of influences from

Shakespeare's tragedy to Harwood's *The Dresser*, looking at the variety of new interpretational contexts acquired along the way. Although the article focuses on the play itself, passing references will be made to a recent adaptation as well, directed by Richard Eyre in 2015. This BBC television adaptation of the play has been described by Joanna Norledge as "a theatrical story and dramatization which captures a vanished world. This world is brought to life in the screenplay and dramatic performances from the actors, both veterans of the theatrical world represented." The choice of veteran actors, both in their late seventies at the time of making the film—Anthony Hopkins as Sir, the dying Shakespearean actor, and Ian McKellen in the role of Norman, his dresser—distinguishes this adaptation from the 1984 film version, where Norman was played by 46-year-old Tom Courtenay, and Albert Finney, playing Sir, was only one year older, and as a result, the film's focus was elsewhere, less concerned with the plight of the aging and the aged.

It is undeniable that Harwood's play is a story primarily about the theatre, offering "a peep behind the curtain at a theatrical world that exists only in the memories of the oldest among us" (Berkowitz). Yet *The Dresser* is more than simply a backstage story, or a dramatization of a vanishing world, although naturally it is both. For one thing, not only does it capture more than one world in the process of their vanishing, but it also ends up questioning their significance—possibly even their existence—in the grand scheme of things. What is being lost here is theatre as a self-contained universe, in which Shakespeare is a language that everyone speaks and understands, and where the language learned from previous generations can be passed on effortlessly to the young equally eager to participate in the discussion. At the same time, the play,

and particularly Eyre's film adaptation, also use the notion of aging as a metaphor, a mirror that reflects on the performative aspects of human life and the drama of aging.

In Harwood's play, we can find references to a variety of typical attitudes and stereotypes associated with old age, but the play offers no reference to the age of either of its protagonists, allowing various stage or screen productions to choose different paths in this respect. In contrast to *The Dresser*, the titular character in *King Lear* famously refers to himself as "a very foolish fond old man, / Fourscore and upward, not an hour more nor less" (4.7.60-61). This in itself is important, since Lear defines his age as a boundary beyond which one cannot and should not expect anything from life. Harwood's Sir, whose age is undefined, can be seen either as someone past his prime, or simply overwrought by a life of hardship in a repetitive professional life—Tzachi Zamir suggests that the play focuses "on how exhausting such a repetition can be for an actor" (241 n28), in itself a possible explanation for his decline. Whatever the cause, the "play's dramatic action centers on Sir's failing health and questionable mental capacity to perform Shakespeare's *King Lear*" (Essin 174)—ironically, the closer the actor to the actual age of the character, the harder it seems for him to present it on stage.

Yet the play is also a nostalgic contemplation of the past, and the looming specter of the journey's end. The nostalgia is directed at both personal and social losses, and the play can be perceived as a lament for a lost theatrical world, shown through the eyes of the most peculiar spectator, the liminal figure of the dresser, who inhabits the threshold between the stage and the outside world, between illusion and reality, trading in the secrets of both, being the star of neither. At the same time, we can also witness loss on a more universally human level: the

loss of youth and what comes with it: a loss of control over one's mental and physical capacities, personal and professional choices, at times, even one's identity. This is in turn the aspect where the perspective of ageism becomes a useful tool to observe how Harwood's entertaining comedy hides painful and bitterly ironic truths about the world and how it sees old age.

To offer a brief summary of the plot: set on a single evening, before and after curtain up, *The Dresser* presents the last hours of Sir, a great Shakespearean actor-manager, performing *King Lear* somewhere in the provinces with his ragtag bunch of semi-amateur thespians. Apart from Sir, who is way past his prime, the play also focuses on his most faithful companion, Norman, the dresser, who has been assistant, confidante, nursemaid, even confessor, and thus witness—the ultimate spectator—to all the successes and failures of the past sixteen years. Outside of the theatre, the Second World War is raging: it is January 1942, bombs are falling on actor and civilian alike, and air raids are part of everyday life. On the inside, in the shabby dressing room of Sir, there are signs of decay, both physical and mental, both equally irreversible. The situation is almost a cliché, and the Learesque parallels between the two worlds—troubles inside and out—are clear, with the raging storm of the mind and the raging war in the world constantly reflecting on each other. Norman can also be seen as a version of Lear's Fool, the one who offers witty repartees and has a license to tell the truth, and whose existence is given meaning only through his service to his master. In the words of one reviewer, "Harwood's script, treating a touring Shakespearean troupe in the provinces of England during the Blitz, focuses on the symbiosis between Sir and his dresser Norman" (Grove 9). This symbiosis is only one of several—the two aging men are certainly two halves of one unit, unable to

function without one another, but their whole existence would seem equally meaningless outside the world of the theatre and the tradition of Shakespearean acting in particular.

On the night when the play is set, Sir and his troupe are staging his 227th performance of *King Lear*, and it is evident that in this staging all motions, lines, technical details, and interpretive subtleties have been fine-tuned and honed by age and routine. Sir, however, is not exactly himself—he has not been well lately, and today he ended up in hospital after making a spectacle of himself in the street, discarding his clothes in a Lear-like manner, and then weeping by a lamppost. Yet, in spite of everyone's doubts whether he is well enough to go on stage at all, he refuses to cancel the performance, claiming that he "Can't. Mustn't. Won't" (Harwood 80). Norman, equally unwilling to admit defeat, uses all his tact and wit, coaching and coaxing, prompting and bullying Sir back to the old routine, to enable him to go through the process of divesting himself of throne and crown, sanity and life for the 227th time, not to mention carrying his no-longer-fragile Cordelia on stage.

Unsurprisingly, the atmosphere is melancholy and nostalgic; the old man's mind is clearly wandering towards his youth, his past fame and recognition. But, as already implied above, in Harwood's play it is not simply Sir's personal memories that are evoked, but a great tradition of Shakespearean acting which is seen to be vanishing with him, mostly because the world appears hell-bent on destruction and forgetting this noble past. Thus it is when his fears catch him in a more lucid moment that Sir tries to divide his kingdom and legacy, giving Madge, the faithful stage manager of twenty years, secretly in love with him, his press-cutting collection, spanning "a lifetime, an entire career," begging her to preserve his memory: "Talk of me sometimes. Speak well of me. Actors

live on only in the memory of others. Speak well of me" (120). But Sir also offers her another symbolic object: "I want you to have this ring. If possessions can be dear then this ring is the dearest thing I own. This ring was worn by Edmund Kean in a play whose title is an apt inscription for what I feel: *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*. When you talk of it, say Edmund Kean and I wore it" (120). The reference to Kean is more than fitting, although subtly ironic as well; out of the long line of the great English performers of Lear, Edmund Kean's performance belonged to the "infirm tradition," together with David Garrick and Henry Irving, who represented the king as an "old man who is feeble (either hysterical or gentle) from the beginning" (Reuss, "Genesis"). But Edmund Kean's Lear was maybe even more memorable for the tragicomedy of the short actor struggling under the weight of his plump Cordelia (Reuss, *Shakespeare Londonban* 107, 112)—a plight Harwood's Sir could certainly sympathize with.

Through such references, the play expresses a longing for the past era of actor-managers who were no longer around, certainly not in 1980, when the play was written, but were in steady decline already by the 1940s, the time of the plot. Yet even the paratexts, most of all Harwood's Foreword, imply a more personal indebtedness: since he used to be the dresser of the great Shakespearean actor, Sir Donald Wolfit, the play inevitably pays homage to men like Wolfit, and "the tradition of actor-management," which defined British theatre "from the early eighteenth century until the late 1930s" (66). As the playwright claims, for all "their obsessions and single-mindedness . . . many of them were extraordinary and talented men; their gifts enhanced the art of acting; they nursed and kept alive a classical repertoire which is the envy of the world, and created a magnificent tradition which is the foundation of

our present-day theatrical inheritance" (66-67). Yet in spite of this somewhat romanticizing view, using language colored by nostalgia, by the time we witness Sir and his entourage, his "compulsion to go on and on, bringing Shakespeare to every corner of Britain" (Berkowitz) seems doomed to fail, and he is fighting a losing battle that no one is able to believe in any longer.

The trouble is—who will remember Edmund Kean, let alone Sir, if the theatre as a physical reality is also in a state of collapse? The nostalgic longing of Sir is not only for the nineteenth-century theatrical tradition, but also for peacetime, when Lear's storm is not interrupted by air raid sirens and when acting in a Shakespearean company brought one glory and lasting fame. Now the memory of Sir's former glory no longer sheds any comforting light either on him or his fellow thespians, just coldness in every way, as Her Ladyship (Sir's Cordelia on stage, and not-quite-married partner off) bursts out:

> . . . I'm sick of cold railway trains, cold waiting rooms, cold Sundays on Crewe, and cold food late at night. I'm sick of packing and unpacking and of darning tights. I'm sick of the smell of rotting costumes and naphthalene. And most of all I'm sick of reading week after week that I'm barely adequate, too old, the best of a bad supporting cast, unequal to you, unworthy of your gifts, I'm sick of having to put on a brave face. (Harwood 117)

Yet Sir is unsympathetic to her complaints, because Sir's longing for the past cannot for a moment be mistaken for sympathy for the suffering of others. It would be natural for the aging and the aged to live in their memories, as Naomi Conn

Liebler refers to Italian philosopher Norberto Bobbio's thoughts to argue that "remembering is not only a kind of action but is the penultimate kind (just before dying), . . . it is in fact *the* important action of old age" (112). Yet there are instances when idealized memories are symptoms of the opposite: a lack of acceptance of one's identity and position in life. As the selfish figure of the old actor manifests, nostalgia is a self-centered sentiment, focusing on one's own losses, even if other, more momentous disasters attempt to blow these out of proportion.

Sir even takes the bombings as a deeply personal insult from the enemy, meant to undermine his work:

> SIR. Do you know they bombed the Grand Theatre, Plymouth?
> NORMAN. And much else of the city besides.
> SIR. I made my debut at the Grand Theatre, Plymouth.
> NORMAN. They weren't to know. (Harwood 86-87)

The German bombers, however, have not only launched an attack on Sir's personal memories, but they are constantly thwarting his artistic endeavors in other ways as well, leaving him with only a miserable skeleton cast. Norman, the dresser, takes the pragmatic view, as ever, having learned to make do with what is available, but for Sir, this will never do.

> SIR. How then do we dispose our forces?
> NORMAN. Mr Thornton is standing by to play Fool.
> SIR. And who as Oswald?
> NORMAN. Mr Browne, I'm afraid.
> SIR. That leaves me a Knight short for 'reason not the need'.
> NORMAN. Ninety-eight short, actually, if you take the

> text as gospel, so one more or less won't be too upsetting.
>
> SIR. Thornton toothless as Fool. Browne lisping as Oswald. Oxenby limping as Edmund. What have I come to? I've never had a company like this one. I'm reduced to old men, cripples and nancy-boys. Herr Hitler has made it very difficult for Shakespearean companies. (Harwood 87)

If we look at Sir's "troubles" in the broader context of ageism, we may in fact notice that it is not simply the elderly who are seen as lacking in essential qualities. The play is set at a time and place where being too old or too young (and too damaged) to do a job perfectly is the norm rather than the exception. And while *The Dresser* gives homage to all who have struggled to keep up the good fight, while the more able-bodied were doing the actual fighting on the battlefields, it also acknowledges that a constant battle against prejudices and stereotypes wears down the soul as well as the body. Everyone in the troupe—on stage and off—knows what rejection and loss feel like, and for that they deserve pity, even respect; at the same time we can also see that the illusion they all struggle to maintain is no longer tenable.

The physical buildings are crumbling in the same way as the bodies of the players are, and it is not only Herr Hitler and his bombs that are undermining the morale of the cast: the harshest critic of the leftover would-bes and has-beens is Sir himself. Everyone is pulling their weight as much as they can, but nothing is quite good enough for him, as the storm is never loud enough, yet in his self-centeredness, he never notices his own failing capacities. As Her Ladyship complains: "You do

nothing without self-interest. And you drag everyone with you. Me. Chained. Not even by law" (115). She also takes the critics' ageist comments to heart, but then again, her tragedy is aggravated by the fact that as a female in a Shakespearean troupe, her professional lifespan is much shorter than that of the lead actor. When she is no longer young and light enough for the role of Cordelia, she will become expendable, and maybe young Irene, now map-carrier, will replace her like Her Ladyship replaced the previous Cordelia. Irene still thinks her youth is a virtue, but Norman soon disabuses her of these false notions:

> You're lighter than she is, ducky. . . . You're not the first to be placed on the scales. How do you think Her Ladyship got the job? Her Ladyship, when a slip of a girl, went from map-carrier to youngest daughter overnight. . . . It's not youth or talent or star quality that he's after, ducky, but a moderate eater. . . . So. Ducky. Keep well away. The old days are gone, the days of vim and vigour, what's to come is still unsure. (124–25)

It seems that the only character who sees clearly in this chaotic world of prejudice and destruction is someone who can understand the language of Shakespeare, someone who never leaves the closed world of backstage: the dresser. On the one hand, he is the primary spectator, and audiences are vital in reanimating the dying body of the actor and the theatre alike. It is only for the sake of the audience that Sir can get on the stage, since he believes that the theatre is the only way to heal wounds. As Norman says: "What'll happen to . . . the customers? There was a queue at the box office this afternoon, if four elderly spinsters constitute a queue. Pity to give them their money back, they've likely had enough disappointment in

life as it is" (78). And the cue works, the vision of a full house gives Sir the strength to pull himself together one last time.

Yet the play's titular character is Norman, the dresser, the figure in the shadows, the one not meant for the stage, who is an equally aging character, having spent his active years in the service of Sir. He is no star, but his service is just as essential as that of the great actor, and his spectatorship—his constant watching over his master and his theatre—may be the key to the survival of this theatre. The play is set in the dressing room; even when we catch glimpses of the onstage action, our feet stay firmly planted in the wings, behind the scenes, in a position from which the onstage spectacle seems not much more than carefully constructed stagecraft. As Norman's slip of the tongue in the announcement manifests, his existence hovers on the threshold between illusion and reality. The halting announcement, meant to defy outer reality, claiming that in spite of the continuing air-raid warning the performance shall take place, makes it clear that for Norman the theatre is a question of life and death:

> NORMAN. (Softly) Ladies and gentlemen… (Louder) Ladies and gentlemen, the—the warning has just gone. An air-raid is in progress. We shall proceed with the performance. Will those—will those who wish to live—will those who wish to leave do so as quietly as possible? Thank you.
> *(He stands rooted to the spot. Bombs.)* (103)

Yet it would be wrong to think that his tongue slips on account of his fear of bombs—he is simply no actor and lacks the talent to tread the boards, and he is in his element only when he is backstage. He knows not only the routine of the

performance, which costume and makeup is needed in which act, or how to operate the wind-machine and the thunder-sheet, but he can also prompt Sir when the play's first line eludes the great actor, and Norman appears to remember the whole repertory by heart. He and the dressing room are in fact the perfect "*lieux de mémoire* where memory crystallizes and secretes itself" (Nora 7), his "backstage perspective" (Essin 174) offering the intimately personal version of the mediated tradition that cultural memory is, passing a respectful attitude towards the monuments of the past down to the younger generations. Even though he can never watch the performance from the auditorium, only from the wings, his feedback is what counts the most to Sir, and in his feedback he once again relies on figures of cultural memory to reanimate the dressing room:

> NORMAN. . . . I've been mingling. You should hear what they think out there. I've never known an interval like it. Michelangelo, William Blake, God knows who else you reminded them of. One poor boy, an airman, head bandaged, was weeping in the stalls bar, comforted by an older man, once blond, now grey, parchment skin and dainty hands, who kept saying, "There, there, Evelyn, it's only a play," which seemed to me no comfort at all because if it wasn't a play "There-there-Evelyn" wouldn't be so upset.
> SIR. Michelangelo, did they?
> NORMAN. And Blake. (118)

We are fully aware that some (or most) of this may be fiction—when he reports to Sir that Her Ladyship called his performance "mighty," she denies it right away: "I never said

anything of the kind. He makes these things up" (114). Yet making things up is just as much a compulsory part of the routine, vital to keep up not only the pretense of success, but also necessary in order to put Sir back on his feet and enable him to give his all to his audience.

Norman may not work on stage, but his presence is vital—and by the end we realize that in this world of daily stage-pretense, his life is just as much at stake as anyone else's. In a painfully anti-climactic moment, after 227 majestic death scenes as Lear on stage, the death of Sir is witnessed only by Norman, who bitterly describes it as a failure: "Wasn't much of a death scene. Unremarkable and ever so short. For him" (135). As a spectator, Norman's disappointment comes from an expectation based on spectacular stage deaths, but as a performer in his own private globe, his distress is even more painful. He, who could remember everything about Sir's life and work, does not even get a mention in the single paragraph written from Sir's autobiography, a paragraph of thanks and acknowledgments to everyone but the dresser. And at the end, when Norman has lost the single most important spectator of his own backstage performance, and he is bound to disappear into the darkness of oblivion, he opens his bitter heart to the grief-stricken Madge: "We all have our little sorrows, ducky, you're not the only one. The littler you are, the larger the sorrow. You think *you* loved him? What about me?" (137).

The tragedy of this unremarkable denouement is in turn enhanced by the underlying reality of modern society: that outside the world of the theatre, Norman is a nobody, and precisely because he has spent all his active years in the service of Sir, he has no future anywhere else. "Cultural biases that identify the labor performed by dressers—cleaning and polishing, comforting and coddling—as 'women's work'"

performed in "a traditionally feminized domestic space" (Essin 177) are directly responsible for the way their work is undervalued, if not completely ignored. Norman is, like Lear's Fool, left behind without a proper farewell, as if the world has already forgotten about him. But his bitter questions may also recall Edgar's couplet at the end of the *King Lear*, in which the survivors look back on the achievements of the deceased and turn toward their own future with anxiety: "The oldest hath borne most; we that are young / Shall never see so much, nor live so long" (5.3.324-25). As Liebler argues, "Edgar's line is a prediction, of course, and as such has little impact on an unpredictable, as-yet-unknowable future" (120). His anxiety about the expectations he may never be able to fulfil brings us back to the problem of age: "The matter of potency/usefulness and its inevitable link to questions of agency is one of the most compelling—and disturbing—among questions about old age and the reciprocal relations and obligations between one generation and another" (116). Norman is thus the character whose drama is both that of the Fool—lost without his old master—and that of the survivor, who sees no reason to go on living, but he is also an aging character in an environment where age brings vulnerability, rather than wisdom.

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