'The mirror shattered into tiny pieces':
Reading Gender and Culture in the Japan Foundation Asia Centre's LEAR

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1. The Japan Foundation Asia Centre's inter-cultural production of LEAR had its Australian premiere (and only performance in Australia) at the Festival of Perth in February, 1999. The project was conceived and produced by Yuki Hata, Performing Arts Co-ordinator of the Centre, whose objective it was 'to present a new vision of Asia.'[1] To this end, in 1995, the Centre began its collaboration with theatre practitioners from Asian countries (including Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand). The selection of Shakespeare's King Lear as the primary text from which to embark upon a reinvention of Asian identity, generally, and Asian theatre practices, specifically, was motivated, in Yuki Hata's words, on the one hand, by the desire 'to avoid introducing a bias in favour of the playwright's own culture' [2] and, on the other, by an interest in seeing 'how Asian artists would dismantle and reassemble a work that already enjoyed a universal significance.'[3] Intriguingly, and despite the disclaimer that the choice of a Shakespearean text was not a necessary one, the project as conceived by the producer may be seen to align to some extent with Harold Bloom's position in Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human.[4] In this important (if, for cultural materialists and new historicists, contentious) work, Bloom argues that the influence of Shakespeare, universal in its impact, is responsible for nothing less than the invention of what we understand by the idea of the human. In his words:

   Early modern English was shaped by Shakespeare: the Oxford English Dictionary is made in his image. Later modern human beings are still being shaped by Shakespeare; not as Englishmen, or as American women, but in modes increasingly postnational and postgender. He has become the first universal author, replacing the Bible in secularized consciousness.[5]

2. A claim of this magnitude naturally raises several issues most of which are beyond the analytic scope of this paper. 'Bardolotry,' is one of them, although in Bloom's complex, nuanced readings of Shakespeare's universalism, reverence is muted by argument. Another, perhaps more problematic issue, however, is the putative community signified in the following comments, and implied in his deployment of pronominals:

   Can we conceive of ourselves without Shakespeare? By 'ourselves' I do not mean only actors, directors, teachers, critics, but also you and everyone you know. Our education, in the English-speaking world, but in many other nations as well, has been Shakespearean.[6]

3. Bloom unabashedly espouses an Anglocentricism in this work that more politically sensitised critics (he calls them, pejoratively, 'ideologues,'[7]) in cultural materialist or postcolonial studies would eschew, for it entails an unreconstructed neo-colonial standpoint which the
last two decades of criticism in these fields have - in the interests of equity and justice -
done much to dismantle. The link that I perceive between Yuki Hata's interest in the
universal appeal of a Shakespearean text and Harold Bloom's paean to Shakespeare's
invention of modern humanity is instructive in that the former uses universalism as a starting
point for an adaptation of King Lear while the latter minutely examines it, denying (with his
precursor, Charles Lamb) its capacity for theatrical representation: 'the greatness of Lear'
for Lamb and his successor, Bloom, is 'a matter of intellectual dimension'; finding in the text,
greatness, both in [Shakespeare's] protagonists and in their creator. King Lear, the modern touchstone
for the sublime, hollows out if Lear's greatness is scanted or denied. [8]

4. For Yuki Hata, Ong Keng Sen and Rio Kishida, by contrast, King Lear offers an opportunity
to engage the theatrical qualities of disparate Asian traditions that have led to an
intercultural performance piece resonant in a manner that the mere 'reading' preferred by
Bloom (or Lamb) can never achieve. This is an approach favoured by contemporary
performance practitioners such as Mike Pearson[9] who regard interdisciplinarity -
the hallmark of adaptation - as crucial in contemporary productions. His model would require
that performance, 'be reconstituted as a complex form of text which integrates image,
musical score, technical instructions, dialogue.' [10]

5. The LEAR text, similarly, draws on multiple theatrical and literary disciplines, adapting them
to a series of themes deriving from the literary text: in doing so, an entirely new, richly
evocative performance text emerges. As an adaptation it departs radically from the original
but in doing so - with the best in the tradition of adaptation to which it gestures - LEAR offers
a novel critical perspective on the issues of the represented dramatic world that owes as
much to Barthes and Foucault as it does to Shakespeare. [11]

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6. This version of Shakespeare's King Lear, then, constitutes an attempt by its Singaporean
director, Ong Keng Sen and Japanese feminist writer, Rio Kishida, to reconfigure the field of
diversely rooted, high cultural readings of Shakespeare's play. One of the tasks they set
themselves was to harness significant themes of the play (patriarchy, authority, the role of
tradition and gender) in an exploration of historical imperatives that could be seen to shape
regional and national identities for a 'new Asia.' [12] 'How,' Ong Keng Sen asks, 'can history
not become baggage but become constructive for the future?' [13] King Lear becomes a
highly suggestive text from this perspective in that it allows for an investigation of patriarchal
constraints, particularly given the ways in which authority is figured in the play. Moving
outward from the family, to the realm, and ultimately to the cosmos, the thematic landscape
of King Lear, reinvented as LEAR, allowed Ong Keng Sen to reconfigure authoritative
control and question, dramatically, naturalised notions of respect for the aged, for the
representatives of familial and state authority that he argues are the limited contemporary
options in relations for many Asian citizens. Moreover in the deliberate decision to cross-
dress the actors of Lear's daughters, questions of gender are highlighted in ways that
impact, perhaps most strongly, on those audiences familiar with specific theatrical
conventions (Chinese Opera and Japanese Noh for example). Knowledge of the gender
constraints on the performances of the Mother (Lear's absent wife), Older Daughter
(Goneril) and Younger Daughter (Cordelia) awakens complex responses even in western
audiences less familiar with the homo-erotic Asian theatrical traditions of cross-dressing
informing the performance. In co-opting performers from these different theatrical and
cultural contexts within Asia Ong Keng Sen was, however, careful not to render the
'different' the 'same,' recognising the significance of confronting and acknowledging
difference as 'we face the new millennium.' [14] He states, further, that:
No one culture should be able to understand LEAR in its entirety, no one culture appropriates another. Above all LEAR would be performed in many different languages. Any culture would require translation to understand this production completely. [15]

7. In the sense that 'every rewriting is a critical reading and every critical reading is a rewriting,'[16] Ong Keng Sen and Rio Kishida offer a fresh and fascinating feminist/postcolonial critique of King Lear in their representation of the power play between the Older Daughter and Lear. The insertion of the absent mother/wife into the represented world as a symbolic figure of universal salvation offers the opportunity for a critically reflective reading of the role of the family, traditionally conceived, and its impact on relations between its members. This is clearly a deviation from the original but as with all successful adaptations[17] it highlights certain meanings that offer insights to a contemporary audience; insights that might otherwise not have emerged.

8. The origins of the Lear tale lie in folklore and are closely linked, according to Kate Chedgzoy[18] with folk tales of incest and adultery. She argues that feminist critics such as Coppelia Kahn, whose influential Freudian reading of Shakespeare's text, 'The Absent Mother in King Lear'[19] - inflected in the deliberate (resistant) engagement of this production of LEAR with the misogyny of King Lear - nevertheless failed to relate the latent theme of incest to the events of the dramatic world. Chedgzoy comments on the expansion of this theme in a narrative adaptation of the play, by the American writer, Jane Smiley whose novel, A Thousand Acres[20] uses

The Shakespearean framework to engage with social issues such as the tension between individual desires and social conventions which have the force of traditions; difficult relationships between adult children and elderly parents; and sexual abuse within the family.[21]

9. Likewise, it seems to me, Ong Keng Sen and Rio Kishida have determined to engage with the forces of tradition and the family that stultify rather than facilitate new possibilities for identity formation. While there are no explicit references to incest (a trope that arguably remains latent in LEAR as it does in Shakespeare's text) adultery figures in the sexual liaison between the Older Daughter and her retainer (Scene 15). Providing a stark contrast with this lascivious relationship is the narrative of authentic love between the Mother, who had been 'a poor lowly spinner'[22] and Lear which is sung by 'the phantom of the mother,' appearing to the Younger Daughter in Scene 4. The Mother's spirit, appearing here and evoked by the Old Man in Scenes 16 and 17, with whom she unites, frames the performance, suggesting an affirmation of the family to which the Mother is returned and, without which, the family is dysfunctional. The absent mother of the play, therefore, is reintegrated, symbolically, into the dramatic world: a postive symbol in Kishida's figuring of her role for this production. Intriguingly, though, it is played by the Noh actor, Naohiko Umewaka, whose performance combines the masculine (Old Man/Lear) and the feminine (Mother) in a complex shifting of the possibilities of gender behind the masks of Japanese theatrical convention. This meta-theatrical deployment of convention to highlight tensions 'between individual desires and social conventions' is foregrounded in this production. Masculine authority (Old Man/Lear/King) is usurped by the Older Daughter (Goneril) and the family destroyed by her denial of her Mother as progenitor: 'Only the king's blood flows in my veins.'[23]

10. For Ong Keng Sen, gender constraints symbolically merge with the political constraints of tradition. In his view the social world(s) of Asia require a reinvention that materialises in LEAR in the dislodging of patriarchy by the maternal impulse represented by the Mother figure. The production, inventive and provocative though it is (not least, as suggested above, because of the blurring of the boundaries of gender roles for a western audience for whom the conventions of cross-dressing in Asian theatre are alien), nevertheless raises several issues for the feminist critic. A central concern derives from the role reversal at the core of
the father/daughter relationship. Conceiving of the new Asia as the Older Daughter committing parricide in her efforts to usurp patriarchal power presents the feminist theatre critic with some interpretative difficulties. While we may approve of a dramatic technique that demonstrates the force of the destabilising effects that the reversal of power relationships within the family can generate (the Older Daughter seizes the throne from her father, the Old Man, and then kills him), to reaffirm the power struggle at the core of the relationship - now merely with different variables - seems to deny the production its potential emancipatory effects. For Rio Kishida and Ong Keng Sen in this dramatic construction the family is the crucible of gender and power relations and the implications for the development of a 'new Asian' identity are trialed, metonymically, within its confines. A problem, however, arises if - in its conscious transformation of Shakespeare's presentation of power relations - it fails, adequately, to reconfigure the gender relationships within the family except by way of the reversal of oppressive controls. Thus, when in Scene 15 of LEAR, the Older Daughter and her retainer are celebrating their success by making love, his lines:

"The old era has been overthrown, and a new era has arrived. It is yours and mine."

take on a sinister resonance as, in a deliberate merging of sex and death, they ironically presage his demise. The 'new era' that engulfs this dramatic world is by no means utopian ushering in the retainer's brutal death by his lover's hand in a world order where loyalty (to the family, the state, or the ruler) is displaced by the valorisation of a code that endorses betrayal. At another level it might be argued that this is indeed by no means a new era: the old order (represented by the patriarchy with all its limitations) has merely been bequeathed, untranslated, to the next generation. The gendered link to patriarchal oppression finds its expression, now, in the daughter who proves as capable of violent oppression as any father or son of conventionally conceived patriarchal relations.

11. In an important moment of recognition after the decapitation of her lover (at her behest) by her 'shadows,' the now all powerful Older Daughter 'laments':

"The mirror shattered into tiny pieces. Inside my heart now are tears."

Denial of the maternal impulse and the unquestioned embracing of the worst aspects of patriarchy, the production asserts, lead to isolation and loneliness. As the Older Daughter sings in Scene 12, revealing her vulnerability,

"A glass ball containing loneliness
I hold it in my hands, and gaze at it forlornly
if I drop it, it will shatter
and loneliness will scatter far and wide
so I gaze at it, careful not to drop it."

12. Without the modifying influence of the Mother and all she represents, LEAR suggests, she is immoral, violent, murderous. The stark binarism of the misogynist representation of the Older Daughter (imbued with patriarchal precepts: authority, power, oppression) and the Mother and Younger Daughter (valorised as the feminine sublime: redeemer and saviour) while dramatically powerful appears to depoliticise gender. This is somewhat ironic given the stated intention of the writer and director to engage with the misogyny of the original. From this critical perspective LEAR remains more faithful to the original than, perhaps, it had intended to be. The theatrical pleasures discernible in this aspect of the production are made available only to those members of the audience who can reconcile the oppositions between a misogynist representation of woman (crystallised in the character of the Older Daughter) on the one hand, and an idealised representation of the maternal on the other.[26] It is notable that the writer and director have tried to forestall such criticisms in their deployment of the two positively evaluated female characters in the family relationship:
the Younger Daughter and the Mother figure. If their symbolic significance is to assert the power of the feminine (the Mother, after all, in Yuki Hata's words, 'represents a figure who saves all beings'[27]) then their presence is vital to the production's architectonic of gender.

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13. It is just because of the depth and complexity of the discrete cultures' reflective artistic endeavours that we can hold Ong Keng Sen to a standard he himself celebrates. Art, of the quality he assays, intends to take the measure of humanity at some level and this high road to philosophical anthropology threatens - in each distinctive cultural context - to resist any contrapuntal positioning of its melodic purity of line. It is here that Ong Keng Sen's vision reveals itself and resonates with an emancipatory impulse that requires endorsement. LEAR offers a polyphonic vision where the philosophical anthropologies of art, in their accommodation of each other, attempt to track more truly (I suggest) the underlying commonalities of our species. It is with respect to this analysis of the general aim of the LEAR project that I wish to offer a reading of the inter-cultural[28] components of the Japan Foundation Asia Centre's production of the play.

14. As Yuki Hata has indicated, the decision to avoid a monologic production was taken in 1995 and the collaborative process that resulted in a performance of LEAR in Tokyo in 1997 involved Ong Keng Sen as director (Singapore) and Rio Kishida as writer (Japan), the goal being no less than 'to present a new vision of Asia.' This vision was augmented by the inclusion of additional Asian art forms. The acting, as indicated above, was drawn from Chinese opera and Japanese Noh theatre; the music from Indonesia (traditional gamelan) and Japan (biwa), a contemporary 'international' quality being added through the use of pop music; and the choreography by Indonesian Boi Sakti based on a traditional martial arts form. The result was an allusive, multi-layered performance text, bearing the hallmarks of contemporary inter-cultural theatre (layering, contrast and cultural difference). The stated intention of the collaborators was, at all times, to affirm the diversity of its informing cultural architectonic so that no single culture's art form dominated to the exclusion of another. But I believe that despite this laudable goal the production's ideological frame is undermined nevertheless.

15. Ironically, rather than the celebration of difference that the collaborators envisaged as they embarked on a project that sought to re-vision 'Asia,' this production, despite its visual richness and spectacle, achieves a more conservative (and apparently unintended) objective. The dramatic harmonics of this multi-authored/multi-cultural LEAR reveal that each culture's unique perspective on humanity is (surprisingly) in fundamental alignment. At this level - and it is the level against which Ong Keng Sen suggests that the dramatic venture be assessed - the polyphonic blending of inter-cultural moments articulates a broader, multi-cultural cohesiveness, an alignment by virtue of the very success of the play, of the isolated dramatic text's fundamental coherence. Like a uniting pantheism the Japan Foundation Asia Centre's dramatic vision, as realised here, becomes - problematically, given its postcolonial tenets - a theatrical vindication of an Enlightenment belief that though we see 'through a glass darkly,' nevertheless, each culture has in common the desire to take the measure of our humanity.

16. The glass held up to reflect back the unity of practice of our varied undertakings is, I argue, 'shattered,' but not into 'tiny pieces' which may be pieced together to create a heteroglossic whole in Bakhtin's sense. Rather, the 'mirror' of the work ideology of LEAR[29] is flawed, paradoxically concealing more than it reveals; and as we unravel the threads of the work ideology that unconsciously conceal what they attempted to exemplify, what is revealed is
disturbing. If we track the refractive index of the flaw in this inter-culturally marked production there emerges a deeply ingrained obedience in the reception of this text; what may even be characterised as submissiveness on the part of the audiences to which it has played. This is not to the forces of cultural cohesiveness (a representation that reduces difference, rendering the 'other' the 'same' is not what we witness - the production is theoretically too sophisticated to make so naive a point) but to the dictates of what I believe is an inter-culturally immanent co-optive injunction. This production of LEAR, layered, moving and challenging as it is with its fine acting, spectacular direction, hauntingly evocative music and dangerously energetic choreography, nevertheless subscribes, I believe, to a normative orientation that sets Shakespeare's tale at the heart of the dramatic narrative and clothes its centre in the tightly woven cloth of textural detail that comprises the cultural Other. The west with Shakespeare as its canonical 'text' offers this production team the opportunity for an interesting inversion of conventionally conceived Orientalism, perhaps best described by its binary opposite, Occidentalism. If the contrapuntal complexity is witnessed, it is within the form of the fugue where, albeit subject to patterns of displacement (the swapping of gender roles; the inversion of hierarchies of character, and so on) Shakespeare-as-text remains the central (and centred) subject. The multi-cultural encrypting becomes decodable via an essentially Anglicised offering, nuanced through a western sensibility. The surtitles indeed mark a departure from the Shakespearean original (the spare, lyrical beauty of Kishida's text haunts the imagination even as western audiences may search fruitlessly for the language of King Lear). Shakespeare's universalism - the 'neutral' quality the collaborators sought in a text that would not privilege one culture over another - coaxes the audience to track the displacement of LEAR in relation to our understanding of his King Lear. The structure of the audience's reception, the lodestone by which our interpretation of this complex performance is oriented, is inevitably and fundamentally Shakespeare's play. LEAR remains - for all its multicultural diversity, its celebration of inter-cultural difference - a fugue on the theme of Shakespeare's work. Here, I fear, cultural co-option is cross-dressed as cultural convergence.

17. Earlier in this section, I spoke of this dramatic work as treating the world's (or at least a significant section of its) artistic attempts to take the measure of our humanity. In this rarefied company a new chain of dramatic being is forged. It is of little service to artistic integrity that collaborators of such stature on this project should tell a moving and complex story, one that purports to reveal cultural co-option, as a story that may be read as one, rather, of cultural cohesiveness/convergence. On this reading the very success of LEAR constitutes (if I am right) a rhetorical obfuscation of a cultural domination more worthy of dramatic interrogation than celebration/affirmation.[30]

18. If a trope can be said to underlie the vision that articulates itself in this work's ideology it is, paradoxically, a trope of equilibrium, a harmonisation of discordant elements trailing different histories under the authority of a uniting truth. The second section of this article suggested that this uniting truth had been yoked with unconscious violence to a western sensibility. In conclusion the concerns I have are aimed not at the narrowness embodied in identifying the authentic dramatic visions with essentially European (English) dramatic visions. Rather than engaging with postcolonial issues regarding cultural imperialism and hegemonic threats to Asian cultural traditions, I wish to suggest the possibility that LEAR (despite its inter-cultural impulse) is an instance of mimetic art. Such an artistic orientation in the context of inter-cultural agendas runs the risk of foreclosing too rapidly on the possibilities of cultural incommensurability with the concomitant haunting invocation of dramatic aporias. These possibilities if allowed to inform the dramatic process may yet allow a treatment of diversity that doesn't coerce the polyphony through a controlling western sensibility of the kind that Harold Bloom affirms. This would leave open the question of a multicultural dramatic form contested by its components in an adversarial and spontaneous dramatic argument appealing to local truths and staining life in colours other than those of the occident. The collaborators' fundamentally neo-classical anthropology, their epistemic reach...
notwithstanding (if they allow their creativity to remain unchallenged by postmodern and materialist insights where the disintegration of the subject and the demise of grand narratives, for example, have denied us the stability of coherent and stable theories of culture) remains resolutely secular, atomistic, individualistic and - as the Older Daughter discovers - lonely.

Endnotes


[2] Rio Kishida is a significant Japanese feminist playwright whose work focuses on the role of paternalistic structures in the construction of women's lives. Her plays have dealt with women whose lives have seldom emerged in Japanese histories (Ito Jigoku, 1986; Tsui no Sumika/Kari no Yado, 1988) and she engages the topics explicitly from the perspective of gender.


[17] Massai documents some of the important adaptations of Shakespeare including Edward Bond's Lear, 1971 and Charles Marowitz's Measure for Measure, 1975 in her article, 'Stage over Study.'


[22] LEAR Program Notes, p. 9.
I have argued in an article on *Othello*, 'Blackface and Madonna: Race and Gender as Conditions of Reception in Recovering *Othello*,' in *Shakespeare: Readers, Audiences, Players*, ed. R.S. White, Charles Edelman and Christopher Wortham, (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1999, that in order to maintain their dramatic effect texts generate their reception and that unless they wish to sacrifice the drama, revisionist performances are coerced into compliance with the dramatic signals. Audiences of LEAR may be compliant or resistant but the architectonic of gender in this performance coerces the reception, I believe, of a somewhat stark binary that posits a male/female; good/evil relation between the sexes.

For an extended discussion of 'interculturalism' and LEAR, see Helena Grehan's article, 'Performing Promiscuities: Interpreting Interculturalism in the Japan Foundation Asia Centre's LEAR' in *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context*, issue 3, January 2000.

This concept derives from the aesthetic theories of the Polish phenomenologist, Roman Ingarden, whose works on *The Literary Work of Art*, trans. George G. Grabowitz, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973 and *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*, trans. Ruth Ann Crowley and Kenneth R. Olson, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973, postulate the aesthetic object as layered with the 'work ideology' comprising a significant level for interpretation by the reader. I would suggest the audience, equally, is required to interpret the work ideology of a theatrical representation or performance.