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Dhar, Amrita

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The Case of Eyes: Two Blindnesses on the Shakespearean Stage

AMRITA DHAR

ABSTRACT: This essay studies two blindnesses on the Shakespearean stage: the feigned blindness in *2 Henry VI* and the violently inflicted blindness in *King Lear*. Through a reading of these blindness episodes using insights from premodern critical disability studies, this essay demonstrates that blindness on the Shakespearean stage functions to denote the limits of vision, intellection, and even justice. The appearance of blindness on the Shakespearean stage works as a means to interrogate the very nature of theatricality. The staging of blindness equally provides readers, viewers, and audiences with the means of rethinking the equation between vision and intellection that was prevalent in Shakespeare's day and persists to our own.

This essay studies two blindnesses on the Shakespearean stage. In one of Shakespeare's early plays, one collaboratively authored by Shakespeare and other dramatists of his time but included in Shakespeare's First Folio (1623) and thus indicating significant involvement by Shakespeare, a man called Simpcox feigns miraculously gained sight after congenital blindness.¹ This Simpcox is shrewdly interrogated onstage, found out, and chastised. This play has been dated plausibly to composition in 1591, for a 1594 quarto publication as the *First Part of the Contention of the Two Famous Houses of York and Lancaster*.² Today, the most widely used title of this play is *2 Henry VI*. Halfway through a play Shakespeare wrote near the end of his career, a peer called Gloucester is violently blinded onstage and spends the remainder of his time in the play in realizations that appear to supersede what he

¹ *Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies: Published according to the True Originall Copies* (London, 1623).

² *The Contention* was printed in quarto (Q) in 1594. The now customary title of this play, *2 Henry VI*, derives from its appellation in the First Folio (F): *The Second Part of Henry the Sixt*. *2 Henry VI* is approximately one-third longer than *The Contention*. For citations from Q, I use signatures. For citations from F, I use page numbers.

calls his erstwhile—and sighted—misjudgments. This play has a first recorded performance in the Christmas holidays of 1606 and was published in quarto as *The True Chronicle Historie of the Life and Death of King Lear and His Three Daughters* (1608).³ Today, the most widely used title of this play is *King Lear*.

In this essay, I examine these two plays' affective and theatrical manipulation of viewer, reader, and audience expectations through the characters Simpcox and Gloucester, who severally bring different blindnesses to the Shakespearean stage.⁴ My readings engage with premodern critical disability studies and theater and performance studies.⁵ What do these blindnesses achieve for 2

³ From the Stationers' Register (26 November 1607) and the title page of the first quarto (Q1), we know that the first recorded performance was at the court of James I on St. Stephen's Day, 1606. The First Folio (F1) version differs significantly from the Q1 version. I consult both, but unless otherwise noted, all citations are from *The Tragedy of King Lear*, ed. Jay Halio (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁴ Scholars today agree on the fact of the collaborative creation of 2 *Henry VI*. Discussion of the potentially collaborative authorship of 2 *Henry VI* has persisted from 1734 to the present day. However, there is no definitive consensus among scholars on which authors—especially among the likely candidates for Shakespeare's collaboration, including Christopher Marlowe, Robert Greene, and Thomas Nashe—are to be attributed which parts within the play. When I say "Shakespearean stage" in this essay while discussing 2 *Henry VI*, I thus both use a label of convenience and acknowledge the reality that this play afforded a point within the trajectory of development of Shakespearean staging techniques within that poet and playwright's professional lifetime.

⁵ For my use of the term "premodern critical disability studies," see the teachings of premodern critical race studies, to which I owe an anchoring of my intellectual commitments. See also David

Henry VI and *King Lear*? What skepticism or empathy do the blindnesses, real and unreal, enable for us, the plays' viewers and readers—that is, whether we come to the plays as receivers of a director's interpretation of them, or (only) through reading and thus through the interpretive work of staging this theater in our minds?⁶ How does theater do its work of conjuring, acting, and seeming to be

Houston Wood's necessary recollection that there has been "a general, if not institutional, reluctance to engage disability as a theoretical model for early modern topics." See "Shakespeare and Disability Studies," *Literature Compass* 5.8 (2011), pp. 280-290, specifically p. 280. Thanks to work by Wood and many others, some of whom are cited in this essay, critical studies in early modern literature and disability is now a thriving area of scholarship. Finally: making the case for why disability studies, even in early modern studies, should call itself so, Sonya Freeman Loftis capably summarizes: "scholars should use the terminology now preferred by the minority group who may see their bodies and minds reflected in these characters—and currently that term is "disability'." *Shakespeare and Disability Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 26.

⁶ I do not presume or center a normative audience or readership. I also do not presume an audience or readership with the luxury of choice. Readers of all kinds, whether reading normatively or via assistive technology or assisting humans or via Braille or screen readers, may—and do—read drama. Similarly, blind, low-vision, and other visually non-normative persons attend and critique theater, cinema, and other predominantly visual forms of art aurally and through supplemental description. In her useful reading of "dramatic prosthesis" in *Lear*, Cameron Hunt McNabb is right to assert that drama may require "its own theoretical concepts for analyzing disability beyond what literary disability studies currently offers." However, I gently resist McNabb's claim that necessarily and inevitably, "reading dramatic depictions of disability as literary texts, rather than embodied performances, flattens the semiotic work that they do." Disability methodology asks that we attend

what is not? What position of access or lack thereof does a viewership, audience, and readership hold when confronted by a medium for which the readiness to be manipulated by the senses is essential to its meaning? Finally, what are the terms and limits of that permitted manipulation—and where are those limits extended, or transformed?

The episode in the tragedy of *King Lear* that I scrutinize contains one of the most celebrated scenes of world theater, in any period or culture. Critical engagement with this scene by literary and theater scholars across centuries, languages, and cultural registers has produced a wealth of insights on cognition, performance, art, disability, simulation, grief, and perseverance, to name only a few of the extraordinarily broad range of responses it has elicited. It is a scene that prompts contemplations like: “Are Shakespeare’s Plays Always Metatheatrical?”⁷ I recall a moment from my first and undergraduate-level reading of this scene—a moment to which I return later in this essay—when my encounter with this scene seemed to me to be an education into the very discipline of drama. In

to multi-modal access and access in all its forms, including financial. Thinking back to my own first reading of *Lear*, when I was using a third-hand copy of the play in a resource-strapped higher-education setting—I had finally acquired a copy of the edition by R. A. Foakes (Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 1997) as my “own,” but at that moment had not a chance in the world of attending a theatrical performance of the play no matter how badly I wanted to—I cannot posit the act of reading a dramatic text as an inevitable “flattening” of the semiotic work of that text. Sometimes, access is through the written text, and sometimes, through the embodied dramatic text. See Cameron Hunt McNabb, “Dramatic Prosthesis: Embodying Disability in *Lear*,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 42, nos. 3–4 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v42i3-4.8274>.

⁷ Stephen Purcell, “Are Shakespeare’s Plays Always Metatheatrical?” *Shakespeare Bulletin* 36, no. 1 (2018): 19–35.

addition to the work of making theater, and rendering conspicuous the artifice of making theater work, this scene's focus on sight and sightlessness also draws out questions about the equations between vision, intellection, belief, and comprehension, both in early modernity and in the present.⁸

Here, I juxtapose this much-discussed scene in *Lear* with a peculiar moment in the less-studied *2 Henry VI*. The two scenes have not been brought together in prior scholarship, despite what I demonstrate is their shared intellectual preoccupation with questions of where seeing is believing and where it is not. I offer that considering these blindness scenes together generates insights into the nature of intellectual and cognitive work undertaken by drama in Shakespeare's time and, more widely, allows us to register the ethical work of critical compassion that is—that should be—a necessary component of literary and theatrical enjoyment. My juxtaposition of these two blindness scenes, I hope, also defamiliarizes and thus renews a heavily canonical play for present-day readers and audiences.

⁸ See, for instance, Robert B. Pierce, "‘I Stumbled When I Saw’: Interpreting Gloucester's Blindness in *King Lear*," *Philosophy and Literature* 36, no. 1 (2012): 153–65, <https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.2012.0008>; Simone Chess, "Performing Blindness: Representing Disability in Early Modern Popular Performance and Print," in *Recovering Disability in Early Modern England*, ed. David Houston Wood and Allison P. Hobgood (The Ohio State University Press, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv17260bx.11>; Amrita Dhar, "Seeing Feelingly: Sight and Service in *King Lear*," in *Disability, Health, and Happiness in the Shakespearean Body*, ed. Sujata Iyengar (Routledge, 2015); Robert Bechtold Heilman, "‘I Stumbled When I Saw: The Sight Pattern,'" in *Critical Insights: King Lear*, ed. Jay L. Halio (Salem Press, 2012); and Lindsey Row-Heyveld, "‘Known and Feeling Sorrows’: Disabled Knowledge and *King Lear*," *Early Theatre* 22, no. 2 (2019): 157–70, <https://doi.org/10.12745/et.22.2.4007>.

In the course of my analysis, I draw attention to a kind of extraneousness of the two central episodes, in these two plays, through which we engage with blindness on the Shakespearean stage.⁹ In *2 Henry VI*, the Simpcox incident that interrupts the affairs of intrigue and state seems to bear little connection to the rest of the play. In *Lear*, the scene with Gloucester at the cliffs of Dover remains one of the best-known instances of theatrical apparition anywhere, though its relationship to the larger action of the play ultimately proves tenuous. Neither play would present anything of plot-level consequence if the blind-presenting characters did not appear. However, I suggest that the very fact of these episodes' meager contribution to the primary narrative is reason to take them seriously in their work of making theater. I submit that these blindness episodes make perceptible the infrastructures of theater that enable its aesthetic aspirations and ethical achievements in the first place. I further offer that they allow readers and audiences to register that theater—and not only early modern or European or Shakespearean theater, although that is what allows me to think about theater in the larger sense—is about images and the act of imagination, and about an ethical demand upon that imagination. The affective and ethical questions that readers and viewers must confront have consequences for the meaning of theater.

⁹ Other comparable depictions of blindness or attempted blindness on the Shakespearean stage concern the “sand-blind” Old Gobbo in *The Merchant of Venice* (1600) and Hubert’s attempted/charged blinding of young Arthur in *King John* (1595–1596). Gobbo’s son, Launcelot, wishes to “try confusions with [Old Gobbo]” (2.2.35–36) in a recognizable nod to the blind “confusions” tried by Edgar on Gloucester in *King Lear*. The *King John* episode similarly reads as Shakespeare’s own imagining of what an onstage blinding might look like and ask of writers, actors, viewers, and characters—and backing down from it even as Arthur pleads his cause and pity overcomes Hubert. These incidents too are peripheral to the larger actions of the plays.

This essay thus engages with a central claim Katherine Schaap Williams makes in *Unfixable Forms*, that “disability operates as a formal aesthetic for the early modern theater,” adding, “by which I mean that the work of performing bodily difference enables the theater to theorize theatricality itself as a medium.”¹⁰ This essay extends Williams’s claim to suggest a particular affordance of blindness within the theater’s theorization of itself as a medium, as I argue that the blindness episodes I study, for reasons of the cultural meanings that attached and still attach to visual acuity and disability, enable viewers and readers to question what they encounter in the unsettling knowledge that their—our—pleasure in the theatrical medium is complicit in the violence it allows us to witness. This essay also echoes James Kuzner’s claim that “*Lear* . . . casts doubt on just what we can know about blindness and care, and how we might find value in the epistemological humility that the play enjoins.”¹¹ I argue that it is where—and because—blindness on the Shakespearean stage records the limits of vision and intellection that it is of deepest critical value.

I finally suggest, albeit not in any linear fashion and certainly not in biographical terms for Shakespeare, a possible progression of craft on the playwright’s part, and a willingness to open up the very mechanism of theater using these blind episodes. Both events present fundamental interrogations of power through the staging of disability, particularly blindness, even as the presentation integrates matters of class, status, and differential access to continued life, livelihood, and survival. The Simpcox incident is a tentative exploration of how a playwright might write a blind person—and the playwright’s or playwrights’ discovery, perhaps even exposure, of that scripting’s

¹⁰ Katherine Schaap Williams, *Unfixable Forms: Disability, Performance, and the Early Modern English Theater* (Cornell University Press), 3.

¹¹ James Kuzner, “*King Lear* and the Irony of Blindness,” *Modern Philology* 121, no. 2 (2023): 145–68, specifically 146.

essential injustice. By the time Shakespeare takes us with Gloucester to the latter's blind-making home and then to the surreal cliffs of Dover, the work of making theater itself is placed on trial, and must pass or fail by its audience's capacity for critical kindness. At stake is our collective willingness to understand suffering from multiple angles, none of them just, and still engage with sympathy, still engage as though what *is* just is possible.

The Man of Pure Need

Near the start of *2 Henry VI*, a strange interlude interrupts the dealings of state and strategy that drive the action of the play. The king, Henry VI, his queen, Margaret of France, and the nobles Duke Humphrey of Gloucester, Cardinal Beaufort, and the Duke of Suffolk are in the middle of a falconing expedition when an unnamed "one" enters "crying 'a miracle.'" This "one" reports that a man blind from birth has miraculously gained sight after a visit to nearby St. Alban's shrine. What follows is an unfolding of the "miracle" until it is emptied of its claim and its conclusion becomes something of a warning for anyone, either within or watching (or reading) the play, who might want to play at being blind.

Readers of current editions of the play are primed to anticipate the incident through the naming of its episode ("The false miracle") and its actors (Simpcox, his wife, and others from St. Albans) in the prefatory "Persons of the Play."¹² But after the incident takes place, and the play itself concludes, this episode remains disconnected from the rest of the play's action. "One" need almost not have bothered. But the incident has tenacious life. By the time the play came to be printed in the First Folio (F) as *The Second Part of Henry the Sixt*, the initial quarto version (Q) of this episode had undergone revision and refinement, as though this inconsequential incident had become more

¹² See, for instance, the edition by Ronald Knowles (Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 1999), 144.

deserving of attention. It is admittedly the nature of dramaturgy in the early modern theater, especially in history plays, to have seemingly irrelevant scenes or passages reflect major themes. What major theme does this incident reflect? In this section, I examine the Simpcox episode in both Q and F to examine precisely what it enables for the world of the play, and for the world(s) in which the play is viewed or read.¹³ I read the cues available to the “blind” actor onstage, and attend to the perceptions and anticipations generated by what audiences and readerships are presented with as the markers of Simpcox’s ocular condition.

When the nameless “one” runs into the courtly falconers’ gathering to announce the miracle, the king receives the news with quick belief and approbation.¹⁴ When the erstwhile blind man is

¹³ This episode has garnered limited critical attention. Knowles takes it as indication of the play’s fascination with credulousness. See his introduction to *Henry VI, Part II* (Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 1999). Ralph Berry posits in it a preoccupation with the framing conceit of trial that operates throughout the play. See *Shakespearean Structures* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1981). Lindsey Row-Heyveld has examined retellings of this story across the Reformation—by Thomas More, Richard Grafton, John Foxe, and finally, Shakespeare—to lay out “how the turbulent religious climate of this period transformed early modern understandings of disability.” See “‘The lying’st knave in Christendom’: The Development of Disability in the False Miracle of St. Alban’s,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (2009), <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v29i4.994>.

¹⁴ This is clear in Q: “And it please your grace, there is a man that came blinde / to S. Albones, and hath receiued his sight at his shrine” (sig. C2r), but played up further in F:

Forsooth, a blinde man at saint Albones Shrine,
 Within this halfe houre hath receiu’d his sight,
 A man that ne’re saw in his life before. (126)

carried on stage seated on a chair, the good-faith gullibility of the king is striking. In Q, he greets the alleged newly sighted man with no hint of skepticism: “Thou happie man, giue God eternall praise, / For he it is that thus hath helped thee” (Q, sigs C2r-C2v). In F, he addresses the Cardinal to speak about the man in the third person but in the man’s presence: “Great is his comfort in this Earthly Vale, / Although by his sight his sinne be multiplied” (F, 126). Both texts present the king’s acceptance of the miracle as unambiguous. Consequently, those of us outside the play and viewing or reading it are also willing to accept, at the least, the play-world’s unhesitating faith that the blind man has gained sight. Of course, in Shakespeare’s time or in ours, audiences (or readers) may raise their eyebrows at quite so miraculous a miracle. But we recollect that we are being entertained by a play. If the play’s narrative can integrate a miracle, so can we.

But the world of the play is composed of more than just the king and the people of St. Albans, all of whom appear to believe the miracle. The queen and the peers also effect a remarkable interrogation and discovery—as though they know something that readers and viewers do not. Indeed, as though they are capable of deconstructing appearances or narratives in a way that we are not. In the queen’s and the peers’ reactions of disbelief or distrust, three matters especially warrant close examination.

First, there are the amplified echoes of the biblical events around the miraculous sight of “a man which was blind from his birth” (John 9:1) who had erstwhile “sat and begged” (John 9:8). Between Q and F, references to the biblical incident become more explicit. The folio gains the assertion, for instance, that the man being discussed is not just blind, but “never saw in his life before.” The calling for the man’s parent(s) appears in both Q and F, in keeping with the biblical

rendering.¹⁵ In the folio's assertion that the cured man's sins are multiplied by sight, the pious king echoes the concluding verses of John 9.¹⁶ By strange parallax, sight in this earthly vale might mean a persistence in sin. A contemporary popular ballad such as "A New Ditty, shewing the Wond[erful Mira]cles of our Lord Jesus Christ" similarly names miracles such as Christ's curing of lost or impaired senses.

And by his glorious power and might,
 Unto the blind he gave their sight;
 [. . .]
 The man who was both deaf and dumb,
 which never heard nor spoke with tongue
 By Christ was heard when he did come,
 whose praise he then pronounced.¹⁷

¹⁵ "But the Jews did not believe concerning him, that he had been blind, and received his sight, until they called the parents of him that had received his sight" (John 9:18). All citations from the Bible are from the King James Version, edited by David Norton (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹⁶ "And Jesus said, 'For judgment I am come into this world, that they which see not might see, and that they which see might be made blind.' And some of the Pharisees which were with him heard these words, and said unto him, 'Are we blind also?' Jesus said unto them, 'If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, "We see," therefore your sin remaineth'" (John 9:39–41).

¹⁷ This ballad was published in London c. 1684; played to the tune of "Triumph and joy." "A New Ditty, shewing the Wonderful Miracles of / our Lord Iesus Christ, which he did while he remained

Another ballad, “A Happy Damsel: Or, A Miracle of GOD’s Mercy,” goes so far as to name a subject’s unstinting devotion as the trigger for miraculous outcomes.

*Nay, gracious Lord, I do believe,
 thou able art to cure me still,
 And I might soon my Limbs receive,
 if it were but thy blessed will.*

These Words she had no sooner spoke,
 but Nerves and Bones did snap amain
 Thus God, who she did then invoke,
 in love her Limbs restor’d again.¹⁸

Such examples could be multiplied, but we merely need note here that those who are hearing, writing about, and circulating these stories are also rooting *for* the miracles. These intertextualities not only underscore the living inheritance of the biblical narratives of miracles but also flag the real but slippery connections between observed truth and mythical truth that operate at the level of the play *and* for those who are watching or reading it. Depending on spiritual, devotional, or personal orientation, a viewer in Shakespeare’s day—or in ours—might *want* the miracle to be true. Though

on earth,” 1684?, 3.36, ESTC ID R216009, C.20.f.9.36, British Library-Roxburghe, *Early Broadside Ballad Archive*, <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/30389/>.

¹⁸ London, 1693; played to the tune of “Summer-time.” “The Happy Damsel,” 1693, ESTC ID R234289, Pepys Ballads 2.81, Pepys Library, Magdalene College – Pepys, Pepys Library, *Early Broadside Ballad Archive*, <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/20705/>. The italics are in the original.

such a reader or spectator would proceed to be “corrected” by what follows in *2 Henry VI*, the desire for the miracle to be true has implications for the tenor of a reader’s or audience-member’s interaction with theater itself, which is a joint function of sight and hearing and amenability to what one sees and hears.

This willingness to be persuaded relates to my second point: that as the scene progresses, its readers and audience are trained in a form of skepticism. This training begins simply enough in Q, with Humphrey inquiring where the reportedly newly sighted man was born. In Barwick, comes the answer. But something now *happens* on stage, beyond the sight of the readers of the play, which prompts Humphrey to ask, in what might echo a question a *viewing* audience might have: “What art thou lame too?” Somehow, in front of his spectators’ eyes, the newly sighted man has indicated that his mobility is also non-normative. He responds that he is, indeed, also lame. Humphrey proceeds to ask how this lameness came to be. From climbing a tree and falling off it, comes the reply. He was climbing while blind?—Humphrey asks. Yes, while blind. His wife made him do it.

Thus far, F only shows small variations, but the general thrust of the inquiry remains the same. Only, in F, the man called Simpcox is more emphatically pushed to explain his tree climbing while blind. And the Simpcox in F explains: “Alas, good master, my Wife desired some Damsons, and made me climbe, with danger of my Life” (. This is a fuller account than Q’s “My wife did long for plums” and more explicit in its punning on sexual dam-sons or testicles.¹⁹

Moments before, the audience had been encouraged to at least consider a miracle. But that gesture of faith quickly yields to an interlude that now has every indication of building toward the revelation of a hoax. Almost to cinch it, Humphrey now says: “A subtill Knave, but yet it shall not

¹⁹ F, p. 126; Q, sig. C2v.

serve,” then proceeds to administer a peculiar visual test: “Let me see thine Eyes; winck now, now open them, / In my opinion, yet thou seest not well” (F,126).

What are spectators and readers, at this point, meant to be seeing or imagining? (Indeed, what is a director of this play meant to be directing?) Readers and audiences are presented with a man who obeys another of greater status and rank, and thus greater social and political power. These readers and audiences know, as does the man being tested, that to disobey or to fail to co-operate would not be practical or smart. The man being tested does, presumably, now wink—or close his eyes and open them again. To most, this ability to close and open one’s eyes is a mundane indication of how eyes operate. But Humphrey decides that somehow this action of winking reveals the truth of Simpcox’s inability to see. What *does* Humphrey see that convinces him that Simpcox does *not*? We do not know, and it is perhaps essential that we the audience and viewership of the play must remain ignorant. The moment is fleeting. Yet the sense that Humphrey knows something lingers. There is even a thrill about it, despite its evident double standard.

By the time the second set of questions and answers commences—about the colors of the peers’ clothes and the names of the peers—Simpcox can provide no right answer. Every correct answer that Simpcox gives—that, for instance, the cloak is red, red as blood; the gown is black, black as jet—serves to indict him further. The play presents a man answering “correctly” because he has no other option—and because at least part of what he says is common knowledge in idiomatic vocabulary and where the answers should mean nothing more than that he knows the quotidian uses of his language. A man born blind may arguably not know what red is, but still know that blood is red; he may not know what black is, but still know that jet is black. Readers and audience members become complicit in what we begin to realize is a man’s undoing of himself. When Humphrey proceeds to question Simpcox about the peers’ names, Simpcox answers as best he knows. But at

this stage, Humphrey can use against Simpcox whatever Simpcox says. He outs Simpcox as an imposter:

If thou hadst beene borne blinde,
 Thou might'st as well haue knowne all our Names,
 As thus to name the seuerall Colours we doe weare.
 Sight may distinguish of Colours:
 But suddenly to nominate them all,
 It is impossible. (F, 127)

We know even as we watch or read that Humphrey advances a false parallel. Knowing the peers' names—when, presumably, these peers do not spend much of their time in St. Albans—is not the same as knowing the names of colors or knowing the idiomatic attachments of color-indicating adjectives to common nouns. We also understand that even telling Humphrey the names of the peers, would not have saved Simpcox. The ableist “scientific” thesis that Humphrey advances is at once appealing and disturbingly powerful. Humphrey's claim is that although the newly sighted eye may distinguish colors, such immediate knowledge of their names by a newly sighted person remains beyond plausibility. Thus, while we were in a position to consider the miraculous, moments later we find ourselves “discovering” a deception.²⁰ Viewers and readers are drafted into participating in what

²⁰ Williams's insight about disability presentation and representation focusing on another episode of this play is instructive here. Williams discusses Jack Cade and Lord Saye's back-and-forth about the latter's “Palsy” (4.7.91) to point out that Cade and Saye's “exchange underscores the ease with which

the more cynical among us may call Humphrey's pragmatism, even if we comprehend the fundamental cruelty articulated by his wit: "My Lords, saint Albone here hath done a Miracle, and would you not thinke his cunning to be great, that could restore this Cripple to his legs againe" (Q, sig. C3r; F, 127). This remark cues readers and audiences to grasp that just as we might have been taken in by Simpcox's acting blind, we may have been taken in by his acting—or not acting, for he had been carried in—lame. We are about to find out.

At this point, however, matters become more intriguing from a theatrical point of view, which brings me to my third point. A man may act lame on stage and ask to be believed in his role of a lame man.²¹ But the situation is different if what is presented on page or on stage triggers anxieties about what presents in life. At this moment, viewers and readers uneasily register a desire to withhold—or at least offer with reserve—our credibility even as consent to the spectacle unfolding before us. Sure enough, Humphrey's cruel measure of calling in the Beadle to chastise what he has already decided is "the lyingest knave in Christendom" is effective. Given the choice to "leape me ouer this Stoole, and runne away" or to endure a whipping, Simpcox does in fact depart the scene with what speed he can muster. We cannot know if it is the play's joke on audiences and readers that at this point the St. Albans crowd follows Simpcox, again crying, "A Miracle" (Q, sig.

Cade's judgment makes bodily evidence signify any way he pleases, for even the interpretation of his own body does not belong to Saye himself." See *Unfixable Forms*, 166.

²¹ In our current moment, however, I should state that this is not an endorsement of ableist casting. The history of theater (and now, film) is replete with instances in which the disabled are considered too disabled to play disabled—an ableist practice whereby honors accrue to able-bodied actors while professional opportunities are withheld from actors with disabilities.

C3r; F, 127), or if it only serves the folio's Queen, who says out loud, as almost a grotesque prompt to readers and viewers that "It made me laugh, to see the Villaine runne" (127).

At this point, Simpcox's "Wife" explains in the folio what the quarto had already revealed in its very nomenclature of the "Poore man" who is the subject and occasion of this incident.²² "Alas Sir, we did it for pure need," she says (127). But no one—from St. Albans or from the king's company or even those who read or watch the play—has any time for her during the play's progress. No one sharing the stage with her listens to or acknowledges Wife's plaintive appeal—not even to rebuke her for the deception in which she and her companion presumably conspired. Her plea for lenience—indeed, for help—is absent in Q, and remains only a line in F. And it goes unacknowledged even where it is uttered. The appeal compels no mitigation of the punishment that Simpcox and she are about to receive: in Humphrey's words, "Let them be whipt through euery Market Towne, / Till they come to Barwick, from whence they came" (F, 127). If readers and viewers have been held to a twinge of pity in Wife's artless articulation of motives, such a thought is gathered up as part of a pervasive anxiety about the "correct" use of charity. The play serves as a reminder to readers today that by the time the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601 codified Poor Relief Laws, the demarcation between the "deserving" (that is, the disabled, the sick, and the elderly) and "undeserving" (that is, able-bodied and allegedly willfully idle) poor was clear.²³ In the twenty-first

²² It is only in F that Q's "Poore man" is called Simpcox. At one point in Q, Humphrey addresses him as Sander (sig. C3r). In F, he once refers to himself as Symon (126).

²³ Similarly, the law laid out *where* a deserving poor person was authorized to beg. An impotent person begging outside their authorized geography was punished with the stocks—before being sent back to where they were allowed to beg. An able-bodied beggar was whipped back to where they were born—or had last been known to live for three years. Reliable structures of help were

century, social anxieties crowd to other terms but without losing any of their ableist, capitalist, or dehumanizing accusations. Today, affluent nations and demographics fear “welfare queens,” “illegal” human beings, “hordes” and “invasions” of “immigrants,” and “fake” disabled persons.²⁴ 2

unavailable to those who were able-bodied and presumably willing to work but unable to find employment. Lindsey Row-Heyveld unpacks some of the connections between disability, suspicion, and perceived deception prevalent in late medieval and early modern England in *Disassembling Disability in Early Modern English Drama* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). See also Steve Hindle, *The State and Social Change in Early Modern England, 1550-1640* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2000); Paul Slack, *From Reformation to Improvement: Public Welfare in Early Modern England* (Clarendon Press, 1998); and Ari Friedlander, *Rogue Sexuality in Early Modern English Literature: Desire, Status and Biopolitics* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

²⁴ For intersectional studies on these often imbricated and mutually reinforcing categories within racist and ableist discourse, see only a small sampling of work in Jay Dolmage, *Disabled Upon Arrival: Eugenics, Immigration, and the Construction of Race and Disability* (The Ohio State University Press, 2018); Doron Dorfman, “Fear of the Disability Con: Perceptions of Fraud and Special Rights Discourse,” *Law & Society Review* 53, no. 4 (2019), 1051–91; and Sami Schalk, *Black Disability Politics* (Duke University Press, 2022). For connection of these issues to early modernity and its bearing for the present, see also Amrita Dhar, “Shakespeare, Race, and Disability: *Othello* and the Wheeling Strangers of Here and Everywhere,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Race*, ed. Patricia Akhimie (Oxford University Press, 2024); Christine M. Gottlieb, “‘Unaccommodated Man’: Dismodernism and Disability Justice in *King Lear*,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v38i4.6079>; and Penelope Geng, “Against White Cripistemology: Seeing Race and Global Disability in *King Lear*,” in *The Shakespearean International Yearbook* special issue on “Global Disability Studies,” ed. Katharine Schaap Williams (Routledge, 2024).

Henry VI's depiction of this episode testifies to the mounting awareness of different legal and social structures around non-normativity in his time, just as it reflects apprehensions over vagrancy, idleness, and able-bodied mischief reflected in law over statutes in 1597 and 1601. But the play does not afford audiences and viewers and readers time to dwell on what we have just encountered. The action moves apace: most immediately, to discover the fate of Eleanor Cobham, who has been caught engaging in witchcraft.

Once the play closes, however, this apparently irrelevant episode still warrants consideration. We may, to begin, think of it as a premonitory mirror for the action that enfolds it: the exposure of Eleanor Cobham as a dabbler in witchcraft, and her punishment. But if so, we must note too that the Cobham episode is in turn echoed and compromised by what precedes and follows it: the travesties of justice concerning Peter Thump and Thomas Horner. Second, we may see the Simpcox affair as a harbinger of the arbitrariness of the ruling classes' harsh treatment of commoners throughout this play; it appears to be accepted practice for the privileged to treat commoners poorly. Third, we may receive this episode as a reflection of the redress-less-ness that was the fate of many in the Simpcoxes' position in Shakespeare's day. We might therefore, as a fourth point, propose that this episode initiates us into the pain and indignity that will be the desert of many, across the power divide, before the play is over. The wrongs that this scene stages—a confession coerced through cruelty (Simpcox must be whipped until he can leap over the stool and run away), and the deliberate dismissal of a genuine confession that is also a cry for help (“Alas Sir, we did it for pure need”)—allow this episode to anticipate increasingly serious reverberations for what will follow. The human

bodies that will be maimed, brutalized, and destroyed by the play's contending forces are brought here into prefigurative relief.²⁵

But none of these reasons quite accounts for the unsettling prickliness and unsettled “humor” of the episode. Its brittleness, its coarse laughter, and its confused pity persist like a dense irresolution. As I conclude this section, therefore, I offer a longer-term purpose for this episode, and as such, advance something of the playwright's or playwrights' aspirations toward deeper and more desperate explorations of injury, otherness, alienation, affliction, and desire.

This episode of false blindness, whether authored by Shakespeare or agreed upon by Shakespeare as part of the collaboration for this play, constitutes something of Shakespeare's training in what it means to write a blind person, and the revelations of the fallacies that surround such an exercise. For how *should* a blind person who does not present with obviously absent or variant eyes set about convincing those around them that they do not see?²⁶ And how is a sighted

²⁵ For instance, Humphrey will be smothered in bed (onstage in Q, offstage in F), his corpse described in gruesome detail. Suffolk's bodiless head will serve to remind Margaret of her “illegitimate” desire. Lord Saye's and his son-in-law's bodiless heads will be taken through town in a grotesque “kissing” exhibition.

²⁶ Consider in this context a celebrated example of an unsighted person in early modernity who did not “look blind”: John Milton, who shared a temporal boyhood with the maturity of Shakespeare's professional career in London, and whose own first publication was in the Second Folio of Shakespeare's *Works* in 1632. Milton went blind as an adult, in his late thirties. Milton's anxiety over presenting as sighted while not being capable of sight informs a poignant moment in one of his sonnets on his blindness. His eyes, he writes:

though clear

actor supposed to convincingly act blind? *Can* they reverse-pass as blind?²⁷ If the actor is sight-*less*, could they ever pass for the eventually sighted Simpcox? And should the theatrical medium be used to demonstrate the social anxiety enveloping that reverse-passing or feigning of disability?

Shakespeare may not know yet. We do not, either. But when such concerns arise again, Shakespeare stages not only a blindness, but also the blinding, so that not a scintilla of doubt lingers about the non-ocular condition of the unsighted person. Gloucester, in *King Lear* (in both the 1608 quarto and the 1623 folio versions), is violently blinded onstage and sees the remainder of his time on stage out “feelingly.” It is to that play that I now turn.

The Man of Feeling Sight

In *King Lear*, Lear’s eldest daughters, Goneril and Regan, and Regan’s husband, Cornwall, learn that Gloucester has set off on his reckless errand of kindness toward his old king from Gloucester’s son Edmond. They also discover that in the impending battle with France, Gloucester intends to side with the party of Lear’s youngest daughter, Cordelia, from France. Cornwall is furious. “Seek out the traitor Gloucester,” he says (3.7.2–3). “Hang him instantly,” suggests Regan (3.7.4). “Pluck out his eyes,” offers Goneril (3.7.5). These proposed punishments are apparently advanced in the heat of the discovery that Gloucester’s actions endanger the kingdom by exposing it to foreign invasion. But Cornwall orders what is effectively a premeditation: an utterance that casts

To outward view of blemish or of spot,

Bereft of light, their seeing have forgot. (Sonnet 22, ll. 1–3)

²⁷ In disability discourse, passing refers to the way many people conceal markers of variance impairment in order to pass as “normal.” Thus, reverse-passing is an able-bodied person’s attempt to present as disabled.

doubt on the case of anger that he pleads for himself. Cornwall's directive bespeaks a complacency and confidence of knowing that the unethical use of power is still power, and that although taking a life may be considered a charge of some gravity, a person in power may inflict mutilation, suffering, pain, and disability with impunity. He knows, as audiences and readers do not yet, what he will do with Gloucester:

Though well we may not pass upon his life
 Without the form of justice, yet our power
 Shall do a curtsy to our wrath, which men
 May blame but not control. (3.7.24–27)

Cornwall, chillingly, is of the opinion that his “power” must do a “curtsy” to his “wrath,” and goes so far as to express a horrible solicitousness toward Gloucester's son Edmond. Edmond, Cornwall suggests, should leave the castle because “[t]he revenges we are bound to take upon your traitorous father are not fit for your beholding” (3.7.7–8).

Gloucester returns to his own castle only to be surprised by Regan and Cornwall, who tie him to a chair to conduct an interrogation. What letters has he had from France? Where has he sent the king? Has he sent the king to Dover? Wherefore to Dover? Again, wherefore to Dover? (3.7.42–54).²⁸

²⁸ It is the 1623 folio version that asks “Wherefore to Dover” three times. In the 1608 quarto, the final iteration of the question, asked by Regan, is “Wherefore to Dover, sir?” See Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern, who sensitively read this scene cue-wise to unpack the ratcheting of verbal and physical violence across the two versions, Q1 and F1, of this scene. “If the part used by the player

At the third iteration of the question from his inquisitors, Gloucester breaks into defiance and response, his words betraying anger, perplexity, and a peculiar reliance on sight:

Because I would not see thy cruel nails

Pluck out his poor old eyes [. . .]

But I shall see

The wingèd vengeance overtake such children. (3.7.55–56, 64–65)

As Shakespeare sets Gloucester up for the most feeling sight of any of his characters across any of his plays, he gives Gloucester a strange insistence on metaphor. Gloucester does not wish to see

resembles the Folio script, then this raises the possibility that upon hearing Regan's first demand the Gloucester-actor would have wanted to charge straight in . . . The Regan-actor will of course see that he is to speak his cue phrase twice; . . . this knowledge prepares the actor to be interrupted, and in turn to meet this interruption with contemptuous vehemence, shouting his interlocutor down with the words still to be spoken." This accretion "helps orchestrate something of the heady, escalating, improvisatory rage of suddenly unbridled cruelty: the inquisitors, in their rage or eagerness, almost compete with one another to elicit the killing confession; physical torture is matched by verbal torture, as the old man is manhandled, tied to a chair, his speech sabotaged." In the quarto version, with the "sir" at the end of the third time of asking the "Wherefore to Dover?" question, "there is a tremendous accumulation of suspense and fear as Gloucester persists in his silence" and has to be asked the same question thrice. But "concomitantly, and perhaps for the first time in the play, we are absolutely 'with' him." See Palfrey and Stern's *Shakespeare in Parts* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 245–46.

Goneril and Regan pluck out Lear's poor old eyes, says the peer. But Gloucester does wish to see the wingèd vengeance overtake such children as Goneril and Regan.

At this pronouncement, however, Cornwall takes his cue from Gloucester's own words. He takes the metaphor apart and crushes together the language and the action, whose separation is typical to the regular operation of theater and whose discreteness is fundamental to the theater remaining a place of safety rather than risk. Meaningful juxtaposition of the real and fictional worlds of readers and audiences depends on the theater's capacity to maintain a distance between words and actions. But Cornwall says: "See't shalt thou never. Fellows, hold the chair. / Upon these eyes of thine I'll set my foot" (3.7.66–67).²⁹ Thus, Shakespeare breaks a fundamental pact between the play and its viewers: following Cornwall's words is both an invitation to follow the action—perhaps to look—and a challenge to such a course of action. Cornwall inflicts a nearly unimaginable, or very painfully imaginable, act of violence on the primary physiological organ of human image-making. As Gloucester suffers the loss of one eye, he calls out for help, but in curious terms: "He that will think to live till he be old, / Give me some help! O cruel! O you gods!" (3.7.68–69). Does Gloucester imagine that intercession on his behalf will in fact add to the years of whoever intercedes? And need only those who "will think to live till he be old" apply? Does Gloucester, indeed, utter something like a curse, that anyone who witnesses the violence and fails to intervene is doomed to be forever haunted for remaining bystanders to such a spectacle? Should these onlookers, even at this moment, have the sense to "think to live till he be old" and thus reach out with help?

Even as the world of the play—the world of metaphor, of words, of mimesis, of representation, and of habits of thought—is in the process of being dismantled by the brutal

²⁹ Kuzner astutely notes about this moment and its dramatic aftermath that "the earl speaks of Dover only as a site for self-killing." See "Irony of Blindness," 155.

actualization of words into actions as attempted by Cornwall, intervention comes from an unlikely quarter. A Servant, who has had no part of the action until now, whose existence the play has thus far not even registered, and a character unnamed and unrecognized by any other appellation save the label of his subservience, sees Gloucester's blinding feelingly. He responds to Gloucester's plea. Betraying that he must not, at this point, be thinking at all to live till he be old, Servant intervenes, addressing Cornwall:

Hold your hand, my lord.

I have served you ever since I was a child,

But better service have I never done you

Than now to bid you hold. (3.7.71–74)³⁰

Servant says to Cornwall, revealing too that he knows that his intervention may cost him: “Nay then, come on, and take the chance of anger” (3.7.78). I take Servant's words seriously. Servant's is a very different anger than Cornwall has claimed for himself a few minutes ago. Servant speaks because he

³⁰ On the matter of Servant's relational service and radical intervention, see Urvashi Chakravarty, “Race, Labour, and the Future of the Past: *King Lear*'s ‘true blank,’” *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 11 (202): 204–11, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41280-020-00168-7>; and *Fictions of Consent: Slavery, Servitude, and Free Service in Early Modern England* (University of Pennsylvania Press), 171–97. See also Holly Dugan, who pertinently draws the questions of service, race, and animality together with matters of disability in *Lear*, in “Dispossessed and Unaccommodated: Race and Animality in *King Lear*,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Race*, ed. Patricia Akhimie (Oxford University Press, 2024).

cannot *not* speak. His delay in acting—he responds *after* Gloucester has already lost one eye—and his driven-ness in acting thus out of turn, indicate the very high stakes he faces: that Servant’s responsibility toward the humanity he is part of overrides his concern for self-preservation. But Servant’s feeling sight, and his consequent impassioned intervention to save some of Gloucester’s sight—and his own, from witnessing inhumane viciousness—costs him his life.

For those outside the play and viewing or reading it, our own perception is dramatically changed after our co-spectatorship with Servant—for we were watching precisely the action that Servant was. In Servant, and through Servant’s actions, readers and audiences encounter embattled spectatorship rendered selfless to the point of sacrificing the self to try to protect another. Studying Shakespeare’s “careful analysis of just what it means ethically to experience pain, to observe the pain of others, and to cause the pain of others,” Michael Schoenfeldt writes about this scene in *Lear*—about its effects on Servant and on us. The “combination of pain and indignity imposed on a fellow human is in fact too much for the unnamed servant (or for us) to watch.”³¹ It is what Servant cannot see and thus cannot not participate in—Servant knows that to do nothing where he stands is in fact to do something, is in fact to allow something terrible to happen—that prompts Servant’s

³¹ Michael Schoenfeldt, “Shakespearean Pain,” in *Shakespearean Sensations: Experiencing Literature in Early Modern England*, ed. Katharine A. Craik and Tanya Pollard (Cambridge University Press, 2013), specifically 194, 202. For a set of related, equally generative, but different angles for regarding disability through the critical concepts of responsible beholding and disability gain, see Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford University Press, 2009); Alison Hopgood, *Beholding Disability in Renaissance England* (University of Michigan Press, 2021); and Elizabeth Bearden, *Crip Authority: Disability and the Art of Consolation in the Renaissance* (University of Michigan Press, 2025).

intercession. That, in turn, impacts our readership and viewership. But the instrument of our troubled and transformed vision, Servant, is extinguished as he speaks.

SERVANT: Oh, I am slain. My lord, you have one eye left

To see some mischief on him. Oh!

CORNWALL: Lest it see more, prevent it. Out, vile jelly! (3.7.80–82)

The last nerve is snapped. Servant is killed. Gloucester is fully blinded. The irresistible power of Servant's feeling sight remains only an echo of his mortal pity. It achieves nothing of what it ostensibly set out to achieve. Very soon, "[a]ll [is] dark and comfortless" (3.7.84) for Gloucester, and eyeless, he is thrust out at gates to "smell / His way to Dover" (3.7.92–93).³²

³² On Gloucester being derisively told to "smell" his way to Dover in newly afflicted blindness, see Holly Dugan, "The Smell of a King: Olfaction in *King Lear*," in *Shakespeare/Sense: Contemporary Readings in Sensory Culture*, ed. Simon Smith (Bloomsbury, 2020). As Susan L. Anderson notes, "all literary practice engages with bodily identity and its limits in some way, [but] drama foregrounds the body—or rather, a range of bodies—as the very medium through which it makes its claims." See Anderson's "Introduction: Disability in Early Modern Theatre," *Early Theatre* 22, no. 2 (2019): 147, <https://doi.org/10.12745/et.22.2.3998>. For work at the generative intersections between embodiment, materiality, and performance, see also Erika T. Lin, *Shakespeare and the Materiality of Performance* (Palgrave, 2012); and Genevieve Love, *Early Modern Theatre and the Figure of Disability* (Bloomsbury, 2018).

The Case of Eyes

I read *King Lear* before I knew “what happens” in the play or had watched a performance of it. The first time I read Act 4 Scene 5 of *The Tragedy of King Lear*, I struggled against a mounting terror as two ragged figures, one leading the other, conversed in a landscape I could not picture. I knew only that we had reached the place promised a while ago: Dover, where “a cliff whose high and bending head / Looks fearfully in the confined deep” (4.1.68–69). But owing to an instinctive empathy with a newly blinded man who wants to use acutely—or at least as acutely as pain and disorientation will allow him—all his remaining faculties, I found myself trusting Gloucester in his perception of the landscape more than the apparently more reliable Edgar’s description of it.³³

GLOUCESTER: When shall I come to th’top of that same hill?

EDGAR: You do climb it now. Look how we labour.

GLOUCESTER: Methinks the ground is even.

EDGAR: Horrible steep

Hark, do you hear the sea?

GLOUCESTER: No, truly. (4.5.1–4)

³³ When I say “trust,” I mean it as a condition of readership and also along the lines of the question posed by Julia Reinhard Lupton: “How does trust function as both a theme in dramatic literature and a condition of theatrical work?” See “Trust in Theater,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Affect Studies and Textual Criticism*, ed. D. R. Wehrs and Thomas Blake (Palgrave, 2017), specifically 155. Lupton writes: “Theater, I argue, offers a laboratory and clinic for exploring trust” (156) and proceeds to study “trust in theater” in part through the Dover Cliff scene in *Lear*. The theater that must be “staged” in the mind of a reader offers, I submit, a similar if not the same laboratory and clinic.

This exchange reads almost as if the two were travelling along different landscapes.

Since that first time reading the play, I have almost obsessively tried to catch performances of *Lear* on the theater stage, to try and understand how much of the interpretative weight of this moment is in fact carried by productions' presentations of the scene and its actions. But the fact remains that even for sighted viewers—and certainly for readers of any persuasion—our position remains in a real way allied to that of the blind Gloucester, in that Gloucester, and any director of the play, and we have nothing to truly go on *but* Edgar's words.³⁴ Disconcertingly, we must watch or read or listen as Edgar attempts to unmoor the blind Gloucester even from the rest of his perceptive faculties. "Why, then your other senses grow imperfect / By your eyes' anguish," Edgar tells the blind man (4.5.5–6).³⁵ The eyeless Gloucester agrees: "So may it be indeed" (4.5.6), then quickly adds: "Methinks thy voice is altered, and thou speak'st / In better phrase and matter than thou didst" (4.5.7–8). Gloucester is right to notice his companion's controlled iambic pentameter, a marked departure from his previous speech as Poor Tom. But Edgar insists otherwise. There is an odd sharpness to his urgency to convince Gloucester that the latter is incapable of deciding matters for himself anymore: "Y're much deceived" (4.5.9). Gloucester persists: "Methinks y're better spoken" (4.5.10). Now, Edgar speaks to turn everything that Gloucester (or we) can neither hear nor see into evidence on his own behalf. In the process, Edgar proves Gloucester correct—he *is* better spoken; so well spoken, indeed, that from his mouth issues one of the most enduring speeches of sheer imagination in English drama. But readers and viewers may not immediately have time to

³⁴ A director of the play is similarly directed by the lines of the text, which, again, are Edgar's lines.

³⁵ Laura Seymour places useful pressure on this point in the play by asking: "Does Edgar need to discombobulate Gloucester while helping him, or are there other ways he might have behaved?" See *Shakespeare and Neurodiversity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), p. 15.

register this fact critically. We simply read or listen as the tables are turned on Gloucester and on us, with the theater and the awe of the moment eliminating all room for argument.

EDGAR: Come on, sir, here's the place. Stand still. How fearful

And dizzy 'tis to cast one's eyes so low.

The crows and choughs that wing the midway air

Show scarce so gross as beetles. Half-way down

Hangs one that gathers samphire, dreadful trade!

Methinks he seems no bigger than his head.

The fishermen that walk upon the beach

Appear like mice, and yon tall anchoring barque

Diminished to her cock; her cock, a buoy

Almost too small for sight. The murmuring surge,

That on th'unnumbered idle pebble chafes,

Cannot be heard so high. (4.5.11–22)

Edgar's speech images a landscape that we are not equipped to dispute precisely because its details of vertiginous distance cling so desperately to it. Every detail of sight or hearing is conjured only to be emphatically zoomed away from and made unfathomably distant. From the top of the cliff, everything is claimed to be so far away as to be at the limits of vision. And precisely because Edgar asserts that he reports about those limits, we grant him all the vision in between.³⁶

³⁶ As Jonathan Goldberg writes: "vision depends upon blindness; it rests upon a vanishing point.

These lines [spoken by Edgar to Gloucester], spoken for the benefit of a blind man, establish him as

Finally, Edgar says that he cannot bear to look on:

I'll look no more,
Lest my brain turn and the deficient sight
Topple down headlong. (4.5.22–24)

There is nowhere to turn but away when the very object of vision threatens vision. But we fear for the blind man precisely at the place that we concede the soundness of the need to look away. The blind man may not look at or away from anything or anywhere as he stands on the brink of an “extreme verge” (4.5.26). Gloucester now wants to let go—even as he relies on his hearing to ensure that he is alone at the edge of the world. “Let go my hand. / [. . .] Bid me farewell, and let me hear thee going” (4.5.27, 4.5.31).

In my first reading of this play, I could hardly read any further, for fear of what I thought I knew was coming. But Edgar says something that gave me pause—and continuation. “Why I do trifle thus with his despair / Is done to cure it” (4.5.33–34). Even in my anxiety, and although far from excusing Edgar for having brought his father to what I believed was a high cliff, I suddenly knew that no one had higher stakes in the destitute Gloucester than Edgar.³⁷ Gloucester was *his*

the best audience for a mode of vision.” See “Dover Cliff and the Conditions of Representation: *King Lear* 4:6 in Perspective,” *Poetics Today* 5, no. 3 (1984): 542.

³⁷ I thought—still think—it categorically wrong to “trifle” with “despair.” Additionally, and although I had every sympathy for Edgar negotiating his own sense of time running out, I was not very keen on the idea of “cure,” perhaps especially because the text signalled Edgar’s search, as it seemed, for a *quick* “cure.”

father, his *father*, and he had had to see him with his “bleeding rings” and lead him by the hand (5.3.180). Without knowing why, I trusted Edgar, trusted whatever he was doing. He must know something that I did not. I still argued with Gloucester as he prepared to renounce the world (4.5.35). I wanted to tell Gloucester that either in my sight or in his gods’ sight, he could not patiently shake off his great affliction (4.5.35–36)—that such a notion was just a contradiction in terms. I wanted to remind Gloucester of what he had said earlier:

O dear Son Edgar,
 The food of thy abused father’s wrath:
 Might I but live to see thee in my touch,
 I’d say I had eyes again. (4.1.21–24)

and thus, tell him that although he did not know it, he *had* acquired eyes by his own peculiar terms. I wanted him to know what *I* knew as reader and potential viewer, and therefore to step away from the brink. But he was not listening. In a moment, he had fallen.³⁸

The terror provoked by this scene resides in two realities of reading, and possibly viewing, this play so far. The first is our witnessing Cornwall’s prior and violent smashing together of language and reality, whose separation alone gives theater its safety, as it were, and thus its reassurance as a mimetic and representational medium. Here, in Dover, readers and viewers of the play are effectively placed where we are not allowed to know where things are. Such conditions are

³⁸ Q1 inserts a single stage-direction: “He fals.” F1 lacks even this instruction, and readers are left to carry on and find out that Gloucester indeed falls. Modern editions, like the New Cambridge Shakespeare, provide brief directions: “[Gloucester throws himself forward and falls]” (219).

chilling, because we have been here before, in Gloucester's castle, and we remember what happened there. After the incident of a good man's cruel blinding, we may believe anything, for we do not know what to believe anymore in this play. Second, this fear owes to our belief-against-disbelief and horror of a good man potentially convincing himself that he must put an end to himself and falling to his extinction—and another somehow standing by and allowing such a thing to happen.

Yet this visceral pity and fear enhance the aesthetic achievement of this episode and of the play. While not directly consequential for the plot of the play—a blind man decides to die and fails to do so—this episode remains key for the affective weave of the subplot with the plot of *King Lear*, and for the ruthless intertwining of metaphors of vision and intellection that permeates the play. If we are viewers of the play, something of the weight of interpreting this fall is lifted from us by the production we are watching. A director may play it for frightening laughter, or profound confusion, or any manner of other constructions or slippages of meaning. But the most significant cues to us are still deployed by the man who at once enabled and disabled the fall: Edgar. If we are readers of the play, our eyes arrive quickly at the crux, which is Edgar's question: "Alive or dead?"

EDGAR: Gone, sir; farewell.

[Aside] And yet I know not how conceit may rob

The treasury of life, when life itself

Yields to the theft. Had he been where he thought,

By this had thought been past. — Alive or dead?

Ho, you sir, friend! Hear you, sir? Speak!

[Aside] Thus might he pass indeed. Yet he revives. —

What are you, sir? (4.5.41–48)

The possibilities now before us—and, I suggest, before Edgar—are overwhelming. Before the fall, Edgar hinted to Gloucester that he was leaving, just as the blind man had asked.³⁹ With Gloucester's fall, Edgar speaks (to us) onstage. But he speaks almost as though he needs to speak to himself. Intimacy and deepest apprehension come together in a confession of unknowing, and a question that we can make figurative only in our “comfort” of knowing the story of events without fully attending to the story of causes. For at this moment in the play, Edgar's questions are real. We too cannot know how and to what extent a terminal conceit or pretense or performance to which an actor *entirely* subscribes may impact them. Had Gloucester been where he thought, Edgar tells us—thus also confirming that Gloucester (and we) had *not* known exactly where he was—even his capacity for thought would have been a thing of the past by now. The displacement of the cliff from our view is dizzyingly swift. This might, at lower stakes, have led to an anti-climax. But here it does not, because we still do not have firm ground beneath our feet. The question remains: “Alive or dead?”

As viewers or readers, we may at this point hold reasonable assurance that the “blind” actor's life is secure. But either way, we are less certain about Gloucester's life. In a manner reminiscent of the gradual “discovery” afforded us of Simpcox's physiological abilities, we are finding out that we are not quite where we might have thought we were. For all the headlong rush of the view that Edgar had plummeted us into, that edge is (thankfully) not where Gloucester had been standing.

³⁹ Edgar must convince Gloucester—and us—of his leaving, for Gloucester had asked to “hear thee going.” Perhaps Edgar walks audibly “away” now. Perhaps he tries to sound his voice as though from a distance.

But there is an extra turn of the screw: If we did not know when we were not at the cliff, what do we now know about a fall from a non-cliff? In the physical world, if one falls unchecked from a high cliff, one dies. But what happens if one wishes one were on a high cliff, thinks they are on it, and falls from such a pinnacle of mortal desire? In the fraction of time it takes Edgar to switch from his “aside” to the urgent direct address of his father—that is, in the space of the few breaths of the “blind” actor who has fallen—gravity and yearning collide to produce a potentially radical shift in readers’ and viewers’ allegiance and center of knowledge. Suddenly, we are Edgar, asking in earnest: “Alive or dead?” Whatever Edgar had been orchestrating, he is now inside. Whatever he had been performing, he wants, for and at this moment, to break. As for us readers and viewers, we remain at the edge of our seats, aware of the risks of both the worlds we straddle. In the world of the play, we cannot tell if a blind man lives, for all his son’s wish to “cure” that blind man’s despair by mighty conjuration. We also cannot look away if we want to discover what happens next. When standard communication breaks down but affection does not, we have nothing but performance and improvisation in our repertoire. What if they too fail?

Edgar’s next sentences are choppy with worry. “Ho, you sir, friend! Hear you, sir? Speak!” A vestige of performance clings to this mounting tension—Edgar is still playing a part, can still only call his father “friend” and “sir”—and readers and audiences must realize that Edgar hopes his father lives even as he does not know yet if he does.⁴⁰ A little while ago, when he had seen

⁴⁰ Between the Q1 and F1, the implications of this non-revelation are played out in a stunning textual transformation later when Albany asks Edgar how the latter came to know of Gloucester’s sufferings. Where Edgar answers Albany, Q1 reads:

met I my father with his bleeding rings,
The precious stones new lost became his guide,

Gloucester for the first time after Cornwall and Regan were finished with him—"But who comes here? / My father, parti-eyed?"—Gloucester's injury and inability to see had violently thrust Edgar into a position of fundamental caregiving for this now abject man (4.1.9–10). By Edgar's construction, the sight that arrested him radically threatened reciprocity: even as the regard of the greatest pity in the world, a blind person cannot look back. But there is also violence to the presumption, on Edgar's part, of Gloucester's incapacity to reciprocate care. Gloucester cannot return Edgar's ocular regard, but that does not mean he is unable to sense a primal affection or reciprocate in love. If proof were needed of this interchange, we might say that Edgar has it when Gloucester prays, immediately before his fall: "If Edgar live, O bless him" (4.5.40). Yet, for Edgar, that invitation to recognition too may have been less than possible, for what is a man to do by way of revealing himself to his father only to tell him that the latter has wronged him? If Edgar now must see his father's inability to see, he would then have to see his father's inability to see *him*, his son. He would have to stand by and assure his father of something like forgiveness, knowing that the same pardon may be out of reach for Gloucester to give himself. It is possible that Edgar has done what he could have done. But like us, Edgar is allowed to wonder if he should have done differently. For this is where we find ourselves, at the bottom of a fall—and "[t]hus might he

Led him, beg'd for him, sau'd him from dispaire,

Neuer (O Father) reueald my selfe vnto him. (sig. L2v)

The corresponding passage in F1 reads: "Met I my Father with his bleeding Rings, [. . .] Neuer (O fault) reueal'd my selfe vnto him" (sig. ss2v). In the F1 revision, the echo of Q1's "O Father" lingers in the text acutely unregistered by that father, because never spoken—and the act of not-speaking, almost as textual-poetic justice, is rendered as "O fault."

[Gloucester] pass indeed,” heavy with grief and helpless with hope for the son he is immediately beside yet immeasurably distant from.

King Lear does not use blindness only for affect, nor does it simply depict a lived reality of blindness, powerful as each of those functions might in themselves be. Rather, this moment encompasses the agency and the vulnerability of both aspects of disability depiction, allowing audiences and readers to perceive binds in either direction, and potentially beyond personal sympathies or identifications as children, parents, caregivers, cared-for, or those between.

As readers and viewers, we know that Gloucester lives when we confront Edgar’s utterance: “Yet he revives.” But this utterance is followed immediately by Gloucester’s enduring desire for death: “Away, and let me die” (4.5.47). Whom is Gloucester meant to be addressing? In this space between perilous falls, safe landings, and the acknowledgment of either possibility, all we can know for certain is that Gloucester speaks to the person who has just spoken to him. We cannot know yet who this is: not Poor Tom anymore, and possibly not the better-spoken man who had led Gloucester up that “horrible steep” ground.⁴¹ In the wild invention, perhaps improvisation, of whoever Edgar now is, the matter of utmost importance is Edgar’s ability to convince Gloucester that his, Gloucester’s, life is both extraordinary and worthy.

⁴¹ A belated introduction is staged later; by then, Edgar’s “feeling sorrows” read as an echo of what we have heard Gloucester say about seeing the world “feelingly” (4.5.143).

GLOUCESTER: Now, good sir, what are you?

EDGAR: A most poor man, made tame to fortune’s blows,

Who by the art of known and feeling sorrows

Am pregnant to good pity. (4.5.210–213)

EDGAR: Hadst thou been aught but gossamer, feathers, air,
 So many fathom down precipitating,
 Thou'dst shivered like an egg. But thou dost breathe,
 Hast heavy substance, bleed'st not, speak'st, art sound.
 Ten masts at each make not the altitude
 Which thou hast perpendicularly fell.
 Thy life's a miracle. Speak yet again. (4.5.48–55)

Edgar's attempt to return Gloucester to the mundanity of gravity and to human subjection to its force is as gentle as it is full of wonder, perhaps his own that he is still holding his father, alive, in his arms. "Hadst thou been aught but gossamer, feathers, air, / So many fathom down precipitating," *you were almost gossamer, feathers, air; you behaved like gossamer, feathers, air*, "But thou dost breathe, / Hast heavy substance, bleed'st not, speak'st, art sound," *you are a member of the human world, not the stuff of air; you are a person of substance and health*, "Ten masts at each make not the altitude / Which thou hast perpendicularly fell," *yes, you fell; you fell an almost inconceivable distance*, "Thy life's a miracle. Speak yet again," *let me prove to you [and to myself] that it is as I say; your life is wondrously preserved, and you will judge for yourself even as you utter the words I now invite you to speak*.

This time—unlike outside St. Albans—audiences and readers have read or watched the "miracle," and we may be permitted to take it for what we too may call a miracle, but it operates at a multi-layered and different register than in *2 Henry VI*. This "miracle" succeeds best where we allow it to function as evidence of our own engagement. Gloucester's life is a miracle because we, like Edgar, have been willing to go to the brink of theatrical conceit, and returned from it. The scene is a miracle of expectations set up and amazingly unfulfilled. It has perhaps been astonishing, in that we have been turned to stone and returned from such a state of being. It is a miracle of theater for

mantling and dismantling a grand and precipitous landscape, and for allowing us to register it being done, even to participate in it.

At every stage, what is key is our willingness to be manipulated, our acceptance of the emotional and intellectual perils attending the manipulation, and our capacity for sympathy with the strangely attuned yet conflicted positions of the persons involved. Gloucester's blindness, which makes possible the summoning of visions and vistas that we have just witnessed (whether on the page or the stage), thus functions as theater's thing itself: an energy and an invitation to understand improvisation and the need for improvisation; an urge to grasp the last reaches of performance, even to the point that it almost fails; and to inhabit a place of radial empathy no less certain for also being one of complete uncertainty.

But it is no miracle—yet—for Gloucester, and this too has consequences. “But have I fall’n or no?” (4.5.56). Audiences and readers may have the same vertigo: Did what we think just happened indeed just happen? Edgar, dramaturge of the moment, hurries to assure:

From the dread summit of this chalky bourn.

Look up a-height: the shrill-gorged lark so far

Cannot be seen or heard;

Do but look up. (4.5.57–59)⁴²

Edgar's normative pleas for Gloucester to “look up” are as apparently absurd for the moment as they are potentially necessary for him to direct Gloucester's attention, yet again, to what he cannot

⁴² Q1 reads: “from the dread sommons of this chalkie borne” (sig. I3r), thus layering meaning by indicating the allure of the abyss.

and must not see or hear. In its very absence, the flight-height of the invisible and inaudible lark fills in for the vertical measure of the chalky bourn from which Gloucester has fallen. But Gloucester knows the violence of this negation of all his sensible experiences, this dismissal, for that is what it amounts to, of all his agency.

GLOUCESTER: Alack, I have no eyes.

Is wretchedness deprived that benefit

To end itself by death? 'Twas yet some comfort

When misery could beguile the tyrant's rage [. . .] (4.5.60–63)

The bitterness of this moment spills from the man uttering the words to the play itself and over to those engaging with the play. In this spilling out is the play's interrogation of what it has just made possible. Audiences and readers must read and watch in the awful appreciation of a theater that can strip a blind man of what he calls his last agency.

Yet the very vainness of this achievement, and readers' and audiences' awareness of the violence we have been implicated in, provides something potentially affirmative. In this moment of metatheatrical valence, once again the man with some of the highest stakes acts this out for us: his is a hand held out in help and stubborn hope. Thus speaks Edgar, trying to get his father up: "Give me your arm. Up; so. How is't? Feel you your legs? You stand" (4.5.64–65). Perhaps Gloucester now takes his son's hand, and sees his son, again without knowing that he does so, in his touch. Perhaps he stands.

Thus speaks Edgar again, insistent on establishing the wonder of his father's life: "This is above all strangeness" (4.5.66). With nothing to lose anymore and possibly with something to gain, Edgar continues: "Upon the crown o'th'cliff what thing was that / Which parted from you?" (4.5.67–68). What follows now does not even attempt to refute Gloucester's answer that it was "A

poor unfortunate beggar” (5.6.68). Instead, Edgar proceeds to describe what, again, neither Gloucester nor anyone confronted by the stage or page could have seen. Only we know, by now, that Edgar is inventing. Gloucester appears not to know. But at the end of his speech, under open cover of the idioms of common speech, Edgar calls his father “father,” even “happy father,” but only to be unheard in that word of belonging.⁴³ And the blind man vows, unreally, to weary out affliction itself.

EDGAR: As I stood here below, methought his eyes

Were two full moons. He had a thousand noses,

Horns whelked and waved like the enragèd sea.

It was some fiend. Therefore, thou happy father,

Think that the clearest gods, who make them honours

Of men’s impossibilities, have preserved thee.

GLOUCESTER: I do remember now. Henceforth I’ll bear

Affliction till it do cry out itself

“Enough, enough,” and die. That thing you speak of,

I took it for a man. Often ’twould say

⁴³ In a bit, Edgar uses the word again. After Lear’s appearance and departure, Gloucester speaks in what is closest to a return to his former self:

You ever gentle gods, take my breath from me.

Let not my worser spirit tempt me again

To die before you please. (4.5.208–210).

Edgar returns: “Well pray you, father” (4.5.210).

“The fiend, the fiend!” He led me to that place. (4.5.69–79)

Here, between a non-cliff and a mad king, a blind man makes a promise we sense—maybe know—he cannot keep. No one subject to the human condition can keep such a promise. Whatever Gloucester says he remembers, he remembers from a reality to which we do not have access. He will soon be joined, onstage, by another man of different registers of memory and promise. And there will not be much anyone can do about either of these old men and their regrets, their present and “feeling” negotiations of the world, and their occasional sharing of the world as we know it only to repeatedly step back from what may be understood as reality. We might say, as does Edgar: “I would not take this from report; it is, / And my heart breaks at it” (4.5.136–37). But readers and audiences and spectators may, at this point, be far too deep in to stop attending to what happens next in the story.

Miracles

Blindness on the Shakespearean stage is thus about the limits of vision and the limits of intellection or knowledge or certainty, or perhaps even narrative. Equally, blindness on the Shakespearean stage performs a refusal to excuse our collective implication within the pleasure of the theatrical medium. Perhaps blindness on the Shakespearean stage is ultimately an excavation in miracles—in the full etymological sense of the word “miracle,” as an object of wonder.⁴⁴ In and

⁴⁴ “Anglo-Norman and Old French *miracle* (c1050 in Old French; also in Anglo-Norman in form *mirakelle*; c1258 [...], late 13th cent. in sense ‘astonishing thing’, 1567 in sense ‘thing worthy of admiration, marvel’, 1690 in weakened use) < classical Latin *mirāculum* object of wonder, in post-classical Latin also miracle (from 4th cent. in Christian authors), miracle play (13th cent. in British

through blindness on the Shakespearean stage, theater becomes grandly available and accessible *as* medium, its very scaffolding open to examination, its foundations subject to unsettlement, revision, and readjustment. And somewhere between the disassembly and reassembly of the framework and building blocks of theater—and thus of the mechanisms of theatrical discernment and pleasure—the work of hard and uncompromising compassion is required of readers and viewers. The seeming work of theater, which rests on our willingness to be persuaded by what we have in front of us, cannot continue without our acquiescence to trust the medium with our attention and intellection despite what we register of its possible violence. Precisely by becoming a means through which to interrogate theatricality itself, and by virtue of being material with which to rethink the equation between vision and intellection that was prevalent in Shakespeare’s day and persists to our own, blindness on the Shakespearean stage functions as a site of radical meaning and critical kindness.

Amrita Dhar is an Assistant Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of California, San Diego, where she researches and teaches on early modern studies, disability studies, postcolonial studies, and the environmental humanities. She is the director of the open-access digital project *Shakespeare in the “Post”Colonies: Postcolonial Shakespeareans at Work*, <https://shakespearepostcolonies.osu.edu>; co-editor of a *Borrowers and Lenders* special issue on “Shakespeare in Undivided Bengal,” <https://borrowers-ojs-azsu.tdl.org/borrowers/issue/view/34>, and co-editor of *Shakespeare in the ‘Post’Colonies: Legacies, Cultures and Social Justice* (Bloomsbury, 2025).

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sources) < *mīrārī* to wonder (< *mīrus* wonderful; further etymology uncertain) + *-culum* *-cule* *suffix*.”

Oxford English Dictionary, “miracle (n.), Etymology,” March 2026,

<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9971720390>.