

MLA 2018--400 Years of King Lear

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Paper Title: The Fool's Errand: Connecting Folly and Tragedy in *King Lear's* Performance History

Abstract:

The Fool in *King Lear* is perhaps best known for his vanishing act mid-way through the play, and scholars have long speculated potential reasons for that disappearance, ranging from censorship to the possibility that the part was doubled due to an over-large cast. In addition to being absent from the second half of the play, Lear's Fool was absent from the play altogether from Nahum Tate's 1681 revision until 1838, when William Macready restored the original text. My paper, an excerpt from my in-progress dissertation on license and physical space, intends to offer an alternate reading of the Fool's disappearance. Building on the work of Theodore Levin on conservative fools, and incorporating the extensive performance history of the play, I intend to argue that the disappearance of the Fool was not only intentional, but a crucial element in the tragic structure of *King Lear*. Using a close reading of spatial elements in *Lear*, I will make two claims. The first is that the Fool's disappearance is due to the spatial nature of his license rather than performance elements like doubling. The second claim is that the Fool's presence and ultimate disappearance is absolutely necessary for the tragic ending. I argue that the Fool's disappearance, also the moment where the play becomes spatially indistinct, serves as an indicator for the original audience that the play must end in a more tragic way than its source material.