

Scott O'Neil
University of Rochester

Title: Courting the Fool: The Creation of Authoritative Space in *King Lear*

When considering issues of absence and omission in Shakespeare, the Fool in *King Lear* seems to be particularly fertile ground. The character is perhaps best known for his vanishing act mid-way through *Lear*, 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 1681—when Nahum Tate removed both the tragic ending *and* the Fool—until 1838, when William Macready restored the original text. Thus the Fool was absent for more than two full acts of *King Lear*, and omitted for nearly 160 years.

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 Leinwand on conservative fools, and incorporating performance history and spatial theory, 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 the play, 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. The Fool's disappearance, also the moment where the play becomes spatially indistinct, is the point of no return. There can be no other alternative but tragedy from that point forward.