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Essay Title

Something will come from nothing: The use of absence in Don Colleys 'Lost Leor'

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Something will come from nothing': The use of absence in Dan Colley's 'Lost Lear'

King Lear, for nearly a third of its existence, was lost. The controversial adaptation by Nahum Tate lacked many of the play's paramount details; it was not until 1838 that the Fool, the purveyor of some of the play's most culturally significant lines, reappeared. The justification behind this adaptation was, at the time, that King Lear was not Shakespeare's best work. The parallel structure of the play pointed towards the marriage of Cordelia and Edward, the loose ends intertwined in a finishing bow; as G. K. Hunter puts it, "The sense of moral logic and the sense of narrative logic seemed to point naturally in only one direction."[1]. It did not make sense for Lear and Cordelia to die. Yet today, if a company producing Lear had cut Act 3 Scene 6's threefold dialogue of madness in the barn, or the final stage image of Cordelia in Lear's arms, they would be criticized for not having a grasp of the text. Lost Lear, performed in the Traverse as part of the Edinburgh Fringe 2025, by Dan Colley, has neither of these scenes. Nor does it have Edmund, Edward, Gloucester, Albany, Cornwall or Oswald. Told through the perspective of Joy, an actress with dementia in a care home, reliving her memory of Lear rehearsals, the play utilises many techniques to portray the distorting and tragic effects of dementia, perhaps the most striking of which was the use of absence. Dementia itself is a non-entity; an umbrella term for multiple symptoms associated with age, one of which is amnesia, the absence of memory. Therefore, it is in the lack of Shakespeare's language, the missing understanding of Lear's character, and the production's remise of the original's tragic ending that the disorienting reality of dementia is conveyed.

Joy's introduction comes in the form of Lear's first speech. Joy begins by repeating "I've made a decision"[2] before continuing. This dialogue contrasts with Shakespeare's as the line lacks any rhythm, the purpose is stated directly, and repetition is seldom used within his plays. Repetition is abundant in Lost Lear. For example, as Joy begins reciting in the storm, she skips four lines of the original before returning, at the end of which she begins repeating like a broken record, "Ingrateful man, ingrateful, ingrateful"[3], showing that Joy's repetition is her struggling to recite properly. As the play progresses, Joy continually forgoes Shakespeare's own dialogue in favour of "play[ing] the intention"[4], such as giving Regan a "nice bit of kingdom for you"[5]. She forces this style on others, loosening the connection to the original to cover her misremembrance. Tom McAlindon argues that a key feature of

[1] Shakespeare, William. *Four Tragedies: Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*. Penguin Books, Limited, 2025. P517
[2] Colley, Dan. *Lost Lear*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2025. P5
[3] Ibid, P21
[4] Ibid, P14
[5] Ibid, P6

tragedy is “the passions whose overflow brings disaster”[6], and I would point to Lear's defining passion as his anger, something Joy shares. The catalyst for Lear’s anger is his daughters’ suggestion he forgo his knights and remit into their care; as an ageing man, Lear’s pride is hurt at the suggestion of dependency. Comparatively, as Joy experiences fecal incontinence, she refuses to ask for help from her son, who remarks, “Your pride has got the better of you!”[7]. Yet where Lear can express his anger through his eloquent descriptions of the “all-shaking thunder”[8] storm, Joy’s misremembrance of the lines shows the disorientation in her incapability to express her anger. The line she frequently repeats from Act I Scene V, “O let me not be mad, not mad”[9], is Lear’s most straightforward expression and a clever wordplay on insanity, showing an attempt to ground herself in the knowledge of her emotions and the fear of her mental decline. By omitting Lear’s characteristic verbal declarations, Joy lacks bravado in contrast. Joy’s greatest fear is not being believed as Lear because otherwise, “You’re just some women in a crown [...] nothing but a terrifying blank”[10].

The bond between Lear and Cordelia is comparable to that of Joy and her son Conner, the tragedy of which comes from Joy’s misunderstanding of Lear. The failure of language is an important theme within King Lear. Cordelia refuses to overuse meaningless language for praise, and is comparable to Conner, whose response to Joy’s performance as a child is that “it was good yea”[11]. In both, it is not the lack of sentiment; as the play proves, Cordelia loves Lear more than any of his daughters, instead both children are unable to overstate above their genuine feelings. As Joy becomes harder to deal with, their relationship forms less over love and more out of necessity: when Joy tells Conner to leave in act 2, he replies, “I wish I could”[12]. Neither child can give their parents the unconditional love they assume. Like Lear, Joy attempts to drive Conner away because of this, mistaking an inability to express love for a lack thereof, calling him “a disease that's in my flesh”[13]. Her delusions are not only escapism, but attempted justification for her ineptitude. She believes it cannot be her who is ailing, rather Conner’s non-existent “sisters [...] [who] took my lands [...] my money”[14]. Joy believes material possession to be the reason she is ridiculed, no longer an actress in the same way Lear is no longer king; but there is a crucial development in Lear’s character which is missing from Joy’s. In the scene before his reconciliation with Cordelia, two truths are realised by Lear; one, that his daughters’ flattery “‘tis a lie, I am not augue-proof”[15], and that “Thorough tattered clothes great vices do appear. Robes and furred gowns hide all”[16], or that material wealth and status do not demand respect, rather, respect is gained from actions. It is this understanding that allows Cordelia to forgive Lear, yet when Joy is asked why Lear is forgiven, she says, “because he’s a foolish fond old man”[17]. Joy still believes she deserves unconditional love from her son, and the absence of understanding of Lear’s character shows a misunderstanding of herself. In Act 3, young Joy watches as a puppet of her older self takes the stage, unable to see her own body as human anymore. Whilst in Lear’s madness he gains an

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[6] McEachern, Claire, editor. *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespearean Tragedy*. Cambridge University Press, 2002. P10
[7] Colley, Dan P64
[8] King Lear 3.2.6
[9] King Lear 1.5.43
[10] Colley, Dan P44
[11] Ibid, P60
[12] Ibid, P65
[13] Ibid, P68
[14] Ibid, P53
[15] King Lear 4.6.104-105
[16] King Lear 4.6.165-166
[17] Colley, Dan P39

understanding of himself, Joy's state prevents her from reconciling with her son because she is unable to reconcile with what she only sees as an absence of being.

Even with the tragedy of Joy's reality, the enactment of King Lear goes no further than Lear and Cordelia's reunion. Lear ends with the deaths of both Cordelia and Lear, yet the playwright chooses not to end in such devastation. A visual metaphor is present when Joy is given a box filled with tightly folded envelopes, creating the impression of a marble within it. To Joy, the marble, whilst not being physically there, is "as real as anything I've felt"[18]. The marble is consciousness, a non-existence made from the foldings of memories; therefore, when such memories begin to disappear, consciousness becomes harder to grasp. This is why Joy's delusions are supported by her care home. Without the acceptance of her reality living in memories of her prime, Joy lacks consciousness. The line she repeats throughout, "I've made a decision"[19] is painful because they are not her decisions. Conner finds it easiest to communicate through letters, symbolic of memories, yet when Conner tries to communicate to Joy through his reality of the past, Joy is only pulled further into non-existence. Crucially, the play respects her reality as an equal; when Liam, Joy's carer, explains the situation to Conner, he describes what would happen if he were to "try to force her into accepting *your* reality"[20]. The emphasis on 'your' suggests that reality can only be interpreted through perception. Like that metaphor with the envelopes, even though Joy cannot grasp their consciousness as easily, the box shows that all consciousness is fabricated and empty. Conner's reality is no more 'right' than Joy's. This theme is present in King Lear; the pre-Christian world is fundamentally more elemental than Shakespeare's, but Lear worships these "great gods / that keep the dreadful pudder o'er our heads"[21] as his reality of madness where he can reconcile himself. In the inverse of the original ending's death of Lear, Joy accepts her reality as Lear, but only through Conner accepting it with her does Joy understand she does not unconditionally deserve Conner's love; but in her admittance of herself as "old and foolish"[22] through Lear, she gains his forgiveness.

In conclusion, Lost Lear is a fragmented and incomplete interpretation of King Lear which serves to portray the confusing experience of dementia. Through the play's lack of Shakespearean dialogue and misunderstanding of Lear's character, it explores how Joy's perception of her consciousness has deteriorated into absence, sound and fury signifying nothing. Yet the play argues that this non-existence is still living, a perception counted equally to others. Like Lear, it is only through the acceptance of 'madness', a different perception, that both characters can reconcile with their children and with themselves.

[18] Ibid, P45
[19] Ibid, P5
[20] Ibid, P29
[21] King Lear 3.2.49-50
[22] Colley, Dan P75

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