



Poor Tom: Living "King Lear"

Simon Palfrey

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King Lear is perhaps the most fierce and moving play ever written. And yet there is a curious puzzle at its center. The figure to whom Shakespeare gives more lines than anyone except the king—Edgar—has often seemed little more than a blank, ignored and unloved, a belated moralizer who, try as he may, can never truly speak to the play's savaged heart. He saves his blinded father from suicide, but even this act of care is shadowed by suspicions of evasiveness and bad faith.

In *Poor Tom*, Simon Palfrey asks us to go beyond any such received understandings—and thus to experience *King Lear* as never before. He argues that the part of Edgar is Shakespeare's most radical experiment in characterization, and his most exhaustive model of both human and theatrical possibility. The key to the Edgar character is that he spends most of the play disguised, much of it as "Poor Tom of Bedlam," and his disguises come to uncanny life. The Edgar role is always more than one person; it animates multitudes, past and present and future, and gives life to states of being beyond the normal reach of the senses—undead, or not-yet, or ghostly, or possible rather than actual. And because the Edgar role both connects and retunes all of the figures and scenes in *King Lear*, close attention to this particular part can shine stunning new light on how the whole play works.

The ultimate message of Palfrey's bravura analysis is the same for readers or actors or audiences as it is for the characters in the play: see and listen feelingly; pay attention, especially when it seems as though there is nothing there.

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