



There follow twenty-eight lines of sublime poetry, ending with the best line of all, because it lets the actor slow it right down, slow, slow, slow, leading at last to a silence that cries out for applause.

*Sans teeth...*

*(Pause.)*

*Sans eyes...*

*(Long pause.)*

*Sans taste...*

*(Longer pause.)*

*Sans everything.*

*(Silence, followed by rapturous applause.)*

I have never seen *King Lear* and in some ways, especially now that I know it so well, would rather not. Of all his plays, it is perhaps the one that most rewards reading and is most likely to disappoint when seen. Shakespeare was a poet and a playwright. As Ben Jonson wrote in the first folio of Shakespeare's works:

*Thou art a monument, without a tomb,  
And art alive still, while thy book doth live,  
And we have wits to read, and praise to give.*

It's all about reading, though he is also very complimentary about Shakespeare's acting. As the less well known poet, L.Digges, put it in his contribution:

*...this book,  
When brass and marble fade, shall make thee look  
Fresh to all ages...*

The perfection of Shakespeare's dramatic art lies in the poetry. That is to say, in the perfect assimilation of words to action in the iambic pentameter that is (or was) the natural home of the English language. This was the great achievement of all the Elizabethan dramatists that reached its apotheosis in Shakespeare and has never been matched since. Hamlet again:

*...suit the action to the word, the word to the action; with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature: for anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.*

And as Shakespeare was 'not of an age but for all time' that form and that pressure are as real, as palpable, now as they were then.

You can open the book any time you like. You don't need to go to the theatre and pay good money to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters. Better stay at home and feel the tears prick at your eyes when you hear in your head King Lear say to Cordelia:

*No, no, no, no! Come, let's away to prison:  
We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage:  
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,  
And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,  
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh  
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues  
Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too, -  
Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out; -  
And take upon's the mystery of things,*

*As if we were God's spies: and we'll wear out,  
In a wall'd prison, packs and sects of great ones,  
That ebb and flow by th' moon.*

Apart from anything else, when you read it alone in the privacy of your own room, you can weep as loud and long as you like.

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