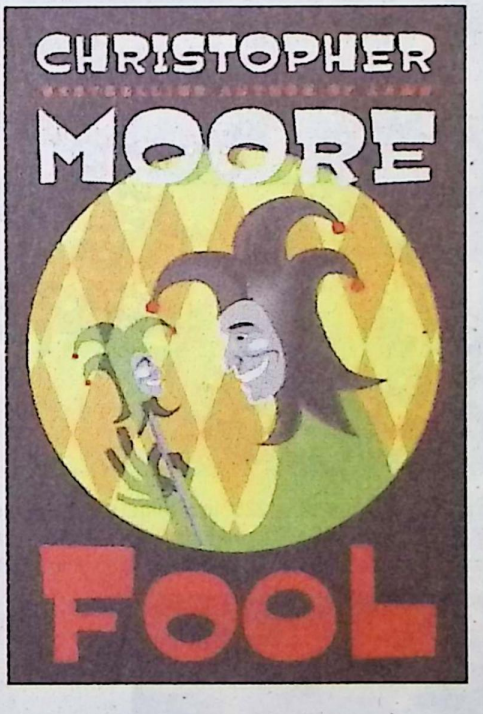
Making King Lear Hilarious

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The Tragedy of King Lear is William Shakespeare's most complex play. Its arcane, archaic vocabulary is out of the reach of most educated readers today, and its theme is dismal enough to counteract a year's dosage of Wellbutrin.

Its comic relief, represented by the court jester, a.k.a. the fool, is not comic and not relief. The fool and Lear seem fixated on the word "nothing," a comment on the nature of life. Lear says, "That way madness lies," then goes that way.

The Earl of Gloucester, an important and sympathetic character (though like Lear, discernment-challenged) gets his eyes gouged out by Lord Cornwall, who says, "Out, vile jelly!" Gloucester's comment on life: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods / They kill us for their sport." At the end, all the major characters die violent deaths.

After 600 years of dreary old addled Lear and his doomed daughters, associates and enemies, Christopher Moore comes to the rescue with this retelling of Lear in modern prose and mostly invented slang. (Moore is the author of You Suck, The Stupidest Angel, The Lust Lizard of Melancholy Cove and Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ's Childhood Pal.)

This one takes us into the comic world of sibling rivalry, poor estate planning, elder abuse and the blood bath that results when brothers and sisters go to war over a demented parent's leftover stuff. It's a raunchy saga motivated by two intertwined family struggles, narrated by the libidinous fool, a.k.a. Pocket, a punning, manipulative mastermind of perversity. It's what Richard Armour tried to do a few decades ago but lacked the demonic mind to carry off. In style, it's like Young Frankenstein, Mel Brooks' retelling of Mary Shelley's classic novel.

There's even an Igor-like character: Drool, Pocket's apprentice fool, who has the gift of mimicry, as well as a way with the fair ladies of the court, including Lear's insatiable daughters, Regan and Goneril. Drool sleeps on a dung heap for warmth, the aroma of which apparently does not diminish his sex appeal. This novel is chock full of such uplifting information.

There are also many of the familiar Shakespearean contrivances we have come to love, such as witches, wenches, ghosts, forged letters, incarcerated nuns, love potions, poofters, crones, mistaken identities, anachronisms, coincidences and swordplay.

And also wordplay. Lots of wordplay. As for anachronisms, we have a reference to a ruler named George who governs a land called Merica and ruins the world. We have a sour breakfast item called Green Eggs and Hamlet. And, oh yeah, the three witches are named Parsley, Sage and Rosemary. "What, no Thyme?" says the Earl of Kent. Ha, ha.

And, like the Sweet Swan of Avon, this Weird Wankster of Logophilia is a lover of the labyrinthine plot. No move, no twitch of any character goes unrecorded. A mercifully brief example:

"Edmund will dispatch your Lord Albany, thus releasing your lady to other affections, only then will we reveal to Cornwall that Edmund has cuckolded him with Regan, and the Duke will dispatch the bastard, at which time, I will cast the love spell on Goneril, sending her into your own ferrety arms."

Thus spake Pocket, the fool. And thus speaketh the fool throughout, parceling out his limitless planning, plotting and manipulating, most examples of which are suitable to read only in secret.

Often funny, sometimes hilarious, always inventive, this is a book for all, especially uptight English teachers, bardolaters and ministerial students of the kind who come to our doorstep on Saturday mornings.

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