

# Why Corrie is less topical than King Lear

There's a new production of *King Lear* at the National Theatre. I went last week and was struck afresh at Shakespeare's capacity to be, in the words of Ben Jonson, "not for an age but for all time".

Lear and Gloucester are fathers with grown-up children who want to expedite their assets. As Gloucester's son Edmund puts it: "This policy and reverence of age makes the world bitter to the best of our times, keeps our fortunes from us till our oldness cannot relish them."

Edmund sounds like "Generation Rent", today's young professionals who can't afford a deposit until a parent or grandparent dies and leaves them money, secretly thinking how much easier life would be if granny or grandpa weren't around.

Lear is also becoming a burden on the next generation. Actor Simon Russell Beale plays him as a dementia sufferer – Lewy body dementia to be precise – and as Lear's behaviour deteriorates, daughters Goneril and Regan wonder what's in it for them to keep caring for him. Given half a chance they'd put him in a home, out of sight out of mind.



Laura Keynes  
Notebook

Only Cordelia understands duty and natural law, and it's significant that she is accompanied on stage by a doctor: Cordelia represents a culture of care and her sisters a culture of death. Cordelia instructs the doctor to "be aidant and remediate in the good man's distress. Seek, seek for him, Lest his ungoverned rage dissolve the life that wants the means to lead it." The threat of suicide is never far away in *King Lear*.

Gloucester, viciously blinded, decides his life is no longer worth living. Rejecting offered care – "Thy comforts can do me no good at all" – he asks son Edgar to assist his suicide by leading him to a cliff edge and "from that place I shall no leading need". Gloucester's intention is clear. In today's terms he'd be saying: "Take me to Dignitas." If Edgar recognised personal autonomy as the ultimate arbiter, he'd assist his father's suicide, but mercifully he doesn't. Shakespeare's genius is mastering audience sympathy, so that even when Gloucester cries out "is wretchedness deprived that benefit to end itself by death?" few in the

audience would support the character's suicide. Instead, the audience hopes Edgar will lead his father to safety.

Compare this with a recent depiction of suicide on *Coronation Street*, a dramatic performance that also commanded sympathies and moved public opinion. The storyline prompted debate about legalising assisted suicide, with polls suggesting 75 per cent of the British public favour "giving wretchedness the benefit to end itself by death" – aka assisted dying.

Would a straw poll taken among audience members coming out of *King Lear* return the same result I wonder? Would 75 per cent of the audience say: "Well, if that's what Gloucester wanted, his son should have helped him commit suicide?" Shakespeare makes it clear where audience sympathies should lie: with Edgar and Cordelia, characters who do the right thing and understand the duty of care owed the elderly and disabled.

Our national bard is making the argument, in our national theatre, that suicide is an act of despair, to be prevented at all costs, and that disability does not make a life any the less worth living. Shakespeare continues to be relevant, not only in his time but for this age too, acting as a national conscience, showing us what should be valued, what we value as a nation, and who we might become in a culture of death.

Theatre was popular culture in Shakespeare's day and I only hope as many people see *King Lear* as watch *Corrie*. But it might be too much to hope: Generation Rent can't afford the price of theatre tickets these days.

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