



RECENTLY PUBLISHED **Suspended God: Music and a Theology of Doubt** / MAEVE LOUISE HEANEY / T & T CLARK, £24.99; TABLET BOOKSHOP PRICE £22.49 / The history of music's presence in Christian thought, and its influence on figures such as Balthasar, Barth and Bonhoeffer

PHOTO: ALAMY/PA, ANDY BUTTERTON

Mirror of mankind

MADOC CAIRNS

Mad About Shakespeare: From Classroom to Theatre to Emergency Room

JONATHAN BATE
(WILLIAM COLLINS, 320 PP, £25)

TABLET BOOKSHOP PRICE £22.50 • TEL 020 7799 4064

THE POWER of tragedy rests, in part, upon the secret conviction that everything really could turn out for the best. Julius Caesar could pay heed to the warning of the soothsayer; Macbeth pay none to the witches' words; Cleopatra might yet, at curtain's rise, set the asp dancing by the banks of the Nile. *King Lear* opens *in medias res*, the play's background tragedy – age – is already well under way, but an as-of-yet undashed hope perdures in Lear's one decent daughter, Cordelia (inset, Timothy West as Lear and Rachel Pickup as Cordelia at the Old Vic).

Shakespeare's frustration of this hope in Cordelia's death, Jonathan Bate realises in *Mad About Shakespeare*, makes for an unsettlingly tragic tragedy. For generations of theatregoers, unbearably so: Nahum Tate's bowdlerised *Lear*, complete with an uplifting and, of course, entirely fabricated ending, concludes with Cordelia and Edgar riding off into the sunset. It ran for 150 years. Strong medicine, but creative editing was for the Bard's own good – so conventional wisdom insisted for centuries. Elijah Fenton put it

like this: Will's "mind (the universal mirror of Mankind), Expressed all Images, enriched the stage/ But sometimes stooped to please a barbarous Age". It was not permissible that Shakespeare's universal relevance be stymied by mere manuscripts. He was too good not to change.

A sentiment sour-tasting to the modern palate. But Bate's account of his own encounters with Shakespeare gains greatly from his curiosity about Tate and Fenton, and people like them: people who made sense of Shakespeare in ways that make no sense to us. *Mad About Shakespeare's* ricocheting from the literary to the theatrical to the personal preserves itself from seminar-class cleverness by this kind of instinct: a sense that Shakespearean universalism goes hand in hand with Shakespeare's own particularity. Bate is honest with himself, and with the reader. There are times where you won't understand Shakespeare. Even when Shakespeare understands you.

This is discovered by the author intimately and painfully at the age of 18, when his father suddenly dies. Searching through his belongings and mementos, Bate finds a record of wartime heroism – and a mysterious love of Shakespeare flowing through the capillaries of his father's life. Following his father's traces, the youthful Bate finds himself beginning the same life journey through and with Shakespeare. Setting off, he's accompanied by a host of collaborators at school and university, his way lighted

by past keepers of the flame: Edward Thomas, Samuel Johnson, Virginia Woolf.

They help Bate keep his internal fires banked as the path gets mazy, and the hour late, and tragedy unfolds her wings over the author's head. Admirably, Bate resists the now jaundiced temptations of the literary self-help tome, though you can see where he could've succumbed and produced a softer,

pastel-hued book, with title to match –

How Shakespeare Saved My Life, or something similarly hideous. We get wisdom here, not rules.

Shakespeare doesn't save Bate's life: Shakespeare helps him live it.

Bate nevertheless doesn't quite deliver on his title, understandably: madness is an awkward hook to hang your whole life on. Adjourning

discussions of Shakespearean madness to medical science, as Bate sometimes does, doesn't ring hollow, but it does ring wrong. Shakespeare, "barbarous age" or not, was a great playwright, not a bad doctor.

In true madness there's no tragedy, John Berryman put it in his notes on *Othello*. Being stripped of reason, memory, language – something to say, and a way to say it – inhibits exactly the conscious action that makes tragedy what it is. Madness in Shakespeare is subtler, fine-grained, nearer to normality than that. It's far closer to home.

We'll "pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh", Lear tells Cordelia in his final scene; hope and madness in the air, the tragic underfoot. "We'll live."

