JOE BIDEN LEAVES THE STAGE

The Shakespearean end to a distinguished reign.

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The painful but essential self-removal of Joe Biden from the race for President—one that he has run so hard and, in many ways, in so distinguished a manner—holds some of the shape of a Shakespearean tragedy. So obvious is the seeming connection that it was already a pregnant

comparison before there was even a likelihood, much less a certainty, that Biden would cede the stage. The *Times* has been full of talk of "Shakespearean" falls, its pages touched by leavenings of Julius Caesar and mutterings of King Lear. Indeed, a few weeks ago at the Aspen Ideas Festival, the paper's own Bard-obsessive columnist, Maureen Dowd, asked two eminent Shakespeareans, Stephen Greenblatt and Simon Schama, just whom in the canon Trump and Biden reminded them of. Neither, tellingly, at that moment, had a strong analogue for the President—though, for Trump, Schama chose Dogberry, the clownish sheriff with the incompetent posse, in "Much Ado About Nothing," albeit a Dogberry with a darker heart.

An analogue that immediately comes to mind for Biden at this dramatic moment in his and the nation's life is John of Gaunt, in "Richard II," the deeply patriotic, yet superannuated and out-of-touch grand old man who, on his deathbed, delivers a matchlessly beautiful speech in praise of the England he has known and of the values he fears are passing. "This earth, this realm, this England," he chants, warning with desperate alarm that his opponents' "rash fierce blaze of riot cannot last"—meaning, of course, that he thinks it might. Gaunt resonates because of the depth of Biden's patriotism and the self-evidence, post-debate, of his own superannuation—of the pathos of his devotion to his country and of the increasing impotence of his rhetoric, however deeply felt and however right the warnings that he offered were. Anyone who admires Biden's accomplishments as President—real, far-reaching, and always well intended even when arguably wrong—had to respond with pain to the past few weeks' pitiful, and often infuriating, show of bafflement. *What is wrong with you?* he kept demanding, in effect. *I've kept my promises. I've achieved my ends. I have been a good and honest king! Turn on me and stab me in the back because I lost my way in a duel where one man lied as he breathed—and all anyone talked about was how unsteady was my gait (F.D.R. couldn't walk at all) and how husky was my voice (Reagan's was husky, too).*

But, of course, it was apparent to all who admired Biden, if not soon enough to the court circle around him, that his fall was irrecoverable. The man we saw in the debate last month on CNN was not simply an aging politician having "a bad night"; Biden was lost and wandering on a heath of his own devising, and the attempts by his supporters and his friends to rally around him recalled not so much a character out of Shakespeare as the medieval epic hero El Cid, who is mounted on his horse in the desperate hope that the memory of his courage might still be enough to frighten the enemy.

So, yes, let us go there: of all the Shakespearean figures whom Biden's fall recalls, it is Lear. Lear in his sense of self-loss; Lear in his inability to understand, at least at first, the nature of his precipitous descent; and, yes, Lear in the wild rage, as people sometimes forget, that he directs at his circumstances. "Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! spout, rain / Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters. . . . Then let fall / Your horrible pleasure: here I stand, your slave, / A poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man." This was all too evidently Biden's emotional tone in these past weeks. When he announced to George Stephanopoulos, in an interview meant to recover his position, that he's "not only campaigning" but "running the world," the forced grandiosity of the wounded King was all too apparent. (For his daughters, read passim, his one-time supporters, with Nancy Pelosi cast as Goneril, and Barack Obama as an improbable Regan, a double betrayal by those whom he had trusted.)

But the President stands, or sits, in relation to Lear with this significant addendum. Until his decision to stand aside for a new Democratic Party nominee, Biden seemed to be solving an ancient literary question: What would have happened if the King had *not* given up the throne? And that answer was plain; it would have been even *worse* than what happened when he did. Lear, let us recall, begins the play by giving up his office in exchange for the gratification of the praise of his children, all of whom ostentatiously flatter him—except for Cordelia, the only one who genuinely loves him, who fears seeming insincere. The loss of office and the betrayal of his daughters

leaves him soon alone and friendless, save for his loyal fool, out in a wild storm.

With Biden, though, unlike Lear on the heath, raging in the company of only his fool, we were out there on the heath with him, being rained on and blown about, too. The final chapter of the Biden campaign was not pleasant or pretty, with the rage of the President lacking the dignity of age and the instinctive patriotism of service that he had shown for so long, replacing it with sheer frustration and echoes of another, forgotten Joe Biden. That was the Biden whom chroniclers had long seen as profoundly ambitious, easily frustrated, and in his way already unduly embittered by the neglect of the élite for whom so much, including political elevation, seemed so much easier. The Biden whom Richard Ben Cramer portrayed in "What It Takes," a chronicle of the 1988 Presidential race—awkward, amiable, and angry—seemed uncomfortably reanimated. On a daily basis, we were watching a man who might well have mulishly pushed aside the evidence of his cratering support. For weeks, there was the very real chance of civic catastrophe, with the fierce blaze of riot likely to set the whole country on fire.

Today, Biden, just as Lear does at the end, seems to have made his peace with the necessity of accepting the sheer injustice of his condition and his predicament, while seeking comfort in the saner corners of his life. Now, with the knowledge that he has finally made the right call for the general good, we can look back in sympathy with his personal predicament. It *is* unjust; he did a good job. The injustice extends to the reality that, while Biden is old and frail, his opponent is, and sounds, old and nuts. To reflect on Trump's speech to the Republican National Convention is to see true madness: a disjointed sequence of grievance, self-reference, and unmoored stream of consciousness, offered in a disturbing flow of disjointed imagery, bleeding ears backing into Hannibal Lecter. The whole sounded less like poor Lear and more like poor Tom, the lunatic on the heath whom the disguised Edgar impersonates. *Who gives anything to poor Trump?,* the ex-President said, in effect. *Whom the foul fiend hath led through fire and through*

flame, and through ford and whirlipool, o'er bog and quagmire . . . to course his own shadow for a traitor. Bless thy five wits! Trump's a-cold!

Biden, by comparison, deserves to be ennobled, not ejected. But if there is one theme that runs through Shakespeare it is that the search for justice is almost always doomed, and that the best we can hope for is self-insight and compassion. And so, unjust or not, Biden's act is also essential—the good job he had done was over. He has, unlike Lear, who ends his life in the midst of a civil war, the gratitude of his country, too, or at least that of part of it not already despairing.

The great lesson of "King Lear" is not that it is wise, or unwise, to give up power, but that power is always insufficient balm to the human condition. Shakespeare's point is that we should seek comfort neither in empty flattery nor in the exercise of office but in the presence of those who genuinely care for us. Biden has all that which, as poor Macbeth, who has none of it, says, "should accompany old age, / As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends."

Biden has known terrible loss. But he also has the love of his family and the gratitude of so many citizens who thank him not only for his achievements but also for having found wisdom enough at the end. ♦