There are several options for this essay: please forgive a lengthy exploration of opportunities. Stuart and Matthew will be available to you during office hours to discuss prospective essays.

1. *King Lear*, Shakespeare's and Brook's

You'll already be aware that Peter Brook's 1971 filmed *King Lear*, based on his 1962 stage version, caused controversy by its resistance to the traditionally uplifting endings assigned to the play and its rigor in staging the play as a grotesque, even apocalyptic action. The excerpts from A. C. Bradley and Jan Kott on the open website (linked from the syllabus) reflect radically opposed views of Lear. Bradley offers a "redemptionist" view that survives in part in many twentieth-century interpretations; Kott stresses the existential despair conveyed to him by Brook's show, which his own thought had influenced.

View the Peter Brook *Lear*, which you'll find streamed from the Blackboard site (under Course Reserves). Then write an essay showing how this production interprets the outcome and import of Shakespeare's play and how you evaluate it as a version of the play. **Focus your interpretation on two or three key scenes**, going into detail about language, action, visual imagery, dramatic emphasis, and emotional tone, and be sure these details support and illustrate your judgment of this filmic interpretation.

- **What scenes?** They will probably jump out at you: they include (filmic action corresponding to) the hovel scene on the heath at 3.4; the Cordelia-Lear action at 4.4 and 4.7; the Edgar, Lear and Cloucester action at 4.6; the capture of Lear and Cordelia and the death of Cordelia in 5.3. There may be others whose key significance you can show. You are encouraged to put the scenes you choose in context, but your chief attention should be on features of them that mark the film's interpretation – with which you may well disagree.

- **What about cuts?** You can expect textual cuts in almost any staged or filmed Shakespeare; they should not startle or shock you. But if lines that are important to your reading of the play disappear, ask what their omission shows and how it fits with other features.
  
  Example: Does Brook cut Cordelia's crypto-Christian speech at 4.4.25-6, "O dear father, It is thy business that I go about"? If so, why? If not, how does that fit with other seemingly Christian references in the neighborhood?

- **How to reference filmic text?** With films, readers often need help, and you should not hesitate to fill in contextual detail that will identify what you're writing about, but this is true of discussion of the text, too. The film obviously, does not number its parts, but you can mention "the action corresponding to Shakespeare's 4.6" or "Edgar's defeat of Edmund in the final scene."
  
  Example: Suppose you want to cite from the film Lear's "No, no no, no! Come, let's away to prison" speech (at 5.3.8-19 in the play text). Readers would expect brief contextualization ("The British forces have won the day against the invaders, and Lear and Cordelia enter as prisoners"). They would want to know why he's speaking ("Cordelia asks, "Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?" but Lear replies . . ."). You would also want to include dramatic and visual
detail supplied by the film: the burning ships and sheds, for example, and Edmund's close, scowling scrutiny of Lear and his daughter. You do not, by the say, have to mark action obviously in the film with parenthetical reference to e.g. "(Brook)."

- What if you don't like or agree with this production? That's all the more reason to offer an intelligent critique of it, based on particular observations and evidence – or enjoy and write about Kurosawa's *Ran*.

- What's at stake here? We're not trying to back you into large statements about time, death, the universe, eternity, or the fate of man. Nor should you come up with an abstract, formulaic definition of Tragedy, whose meaning has been under scholastic discussion since Aristotle. Many familiar definitions of tragedy, it is true, emphasize that the sequence of doing and suffering shown on stage culminates in a state of learning or insight on the hero's part, and perhaps that of others, that has some redemptive value for him or her, for their society, or for the audience. And it is this pattern that some critics and audiences have longed to find in *King Lear* and that you may or may not discern in Peter Brook's production of the play.

2. *Lear* and Kurosawa's *Ran*

We'll screen Kurosawa's film at least once, and it's available on reserve at the Uris Circulation Desk (along with print copy of the original screenplay) for viewing, most conveniently in the Olin Media Room. Be sure you have the handout "Contexts for *Ran,*" downloadable from the course website.

View this 160m film and ☛ write an essay appraising one of the transformations wrought on Lear by Kurosawa's *film*. Be sure to cite lots of verbal and filmic detail. Be sure your essay reflects a judgment on this transformation and its impact on your understanding of Shakespeare's original. Following are some suggested transformations.

- **Daughters into sons.** Kurosawa’s most obvious change in the *Lear* material was to swap daughters for sons, presumably for cultural as well as aesthetic reasons. In principle, the change should have relieved the heavy burden of misogyny carried by the *Lear* plot. Responsibility for the filial ingratitude, treachery, cruelty, changefulness, and lust shown by Goneril and Regan is shifted in part from women to men, and the complexities of in-law descent of property (to the daughter’s husbands) are avoided. But does this massive shift relieve *Lear*’s emphasis on the corruptions and vicissitudes of female human nature? Are leading characters in *Ran* less or more preoccupied with woman’s role in crime, sex, and generation? Are representations of women more or less complex, interesting, or nuanced? If so, is this change the result of writing women out of key roles in the action (and inserting them elsewhere)? If not, and if you find that the film insists equally with *Lear* that women are a source of evil (as well as, with Cordelia and Sué, a source of virtue and transcendence) how do you account for the persistence of this charged gender theme?

- **Double to single plot.** An intricately plotted play like *Lear* is like an equation with many variables (change one value and all the rest are changed) or like a large tissue (tweak one thread, or make one fold, and the whole fabric is affected). Write an essay in which you show a central
connection between major structural changes and the net narrative and dramatic effect of the whole.

One major change is this: in eliminating the double-plotted structure of *King Lear*, Kurosawa effectively combines the Lear plot and the Gloucester plot of the play, merging partially independent actions into one and distributing roles from the second plot among characters in the first plot. (Trace this redistribution. Where do the bits and pieces of the Gloucester plot go in this new structure? What roles and actions in the Lear plot absorb them, and how are they changed by this massive act of consolidation? Who takes on the Edgar role? the Edmund role? the Gloucester role? Most important, what is the effect of lodging some or all of these roles in representatives of the past enormities committed by Hidetora in his path to power?)

Issues of motivation matter here. Recall Kurosawa's puzzlement at the fact that "Shakespeare gives his characters no past. We are plunged directly into the agonies of their present dilemma without knowing how they came to this point" (quoted on "Contexts for *Ran*"). His compression of plots works to provide the prehistory he finds lacking in Shakespeare. And it may provide a clearer, perhaps simpler combination of necessity and contingency in the causing of tragic actions. But you should ask: in combining the two *Lear* plots, does Kurosawa improve or impair the unity of Shakespeare's story, and in what ways? Show how some of these changes alter the motivation of actions in *Lear* and affect the nature of action offered by Kurosawa.

*Fool (et al.) to Kyoami et al.*. One role that grows significantly under Kurosawa's hands is that of the Fool, who as Kyoami is part of the action from beginning to end and comments richly on it, providing theological and moral perspectives at almost every turn. Compare Kyoami's relationship to Hidetora with the Fool's to Lear, seeking to show what other key changes in Shakespeare's play are connected with the building up of this relationship. There may be a link to sex and gender here (Kurosawa's Kyoami is an actor expert in transvestite roles), and there is surely a connection with the heightened emphasis on loyalty and service — and the heightened horror at seeing it break down — created by Kurosawa's translation of the action into a medieval Japanese milieu where the relationship of lord and vassal was thought to be at its breaking point. Kyoami may also absorb some of the commentator's function from characters excluded from Kurosawa's reduction of the *Lear* double plot.

This topic should lead you to a key question: in putting so much folly and so much wisdom into Kyoami's mouth, does Kurosawa clarify the philosophical perspective on human action and suffering in Shakespeare's play, or does he make it more diffuse and conflicted?

Before writing, be sure to read the handout "A good paper in English 2080," downloadable from the open website.