UNDERGRADUATE PAPER

Walking Off The Dover Cliff

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Hidden inside the "Dover Cliff" scene of William Shakespeare's *King Lear* is a trick with setting that the modern audience may not appreciate entirely. The modern audience often sees Shakespeare performed in naturalistic settings that clearly represent Lear's throne room and the storm-swept fields of England. However, the Elizabethan audience in the Globe Theater never saw lightning, naturalistic settings, or realism, but instead was exposed to ploys and illusions on a bare stage. Cambridge University lecturer Stewart Eames[1] states that the Elizabethan audience comes to the theater ready to fill, with their imaginations, any gaps in perceived reality. A scene like Edgar and Gloucester on the Dover Cliff is written specifically for an audience that imaginatively sees lightning, throne rooms, and the fields of England as the verbal cues direct.

However Shakespeare manipulated the performer signals to trick his audience, Elizabethans, an audience adept at listening for the setting rather than seeing it, were ready to build their own sense of setting despite the bare stage. They completely rely on Edgar's description of Dover Cliff to understand the location of the characters in the story. They even trust Edgar's verbal cues to imagine something more than a bare stage. In the case of the Dover Cliff scene, the result is a trick of stage illusion that makes the audience "just as blind as Gloucester."[2] With a naturalistic setting, the modern audience is no longer blind and the trick of setting is lost. Though a modern audience at a naturalistic performance may laugh at Edgar's deception, the Dover Cliffs no longer possess the ambiguous trick of the setting that Shakespeare intends for his Elizabethan audience.

William H. Matchett, Oxford University Shakespeare scholar, claims that the representation of reality in Elizabethan theater began with a bare-stage and required little more. He writes, "[Shakespeare] sets the scene exactly as scenes are always set on the empty stage,"[3]

implying that the Elizabethan audience could never expect anything more than the emptiness of the stage. Andrew Gurr supports the regularity of empty stages: "The bare stage backed with a curtain on which the Tudor moralities and farces were played forms the basis of the Elizabethan staging tradition, and seems to have remained firmly entrenched at all the Stuart playhouses up to the closure."[4] Some props may complement the acting, items the actors can carry with them onto the stage, but no naturalistic stage setting.

Andrew Gurr also makes argument against the use of scenery:

> The commercial playhouses could not have afforded the loss of playing-time involved in setting up such nontraditional devices. Still less could they have spent time and money making their own scenery. There are occasional references to pieces of scenery being employed in the private playhouses from the earliest days, but they cannot ever have been a prominent feature of the staging, or they would have drawn more comment."[5]

Gurr suggests that companies sometimes performed for private functions and had both the time and luxury to spend days setting up scenery. However, the Globe performed every day and did not have days to set up each different performance. Logistically, the Globe could not provide the audience with more than an empty stage.

The fact that forest scenes, ocean scenes, throne rooms and dungeons all look the same on the bare stage is not a drawback for the Elizabethan. As Cambridge University lecturer Stewart Eames suggests, Elizabethan audiences possessed an immense capacity to imagine the scenery themselves. Bernard Beckerman, Director of the Hofstra College Shakespeare Festival, seeking to explore the authentic staging of Shakespeare's plays, describes the function and capacity of Elizabethan imagination:

> In brief, the Globe was constructed and employed to tell a story as vigorously and as excitingly and as intensely as possible. Though spectators were usually informed where a scene took place, they were informed by the words they heard, not the sights they saw. Instead, place was given specific emphasis only when and to the degree the narrative required.[6]

Cambridge scholar Alan C. Dessen, whose broad body of work targets the stage conventions that Shakespearean actors employed, adds to Beckerman's description of place: "To the original audience, 'place' was an adjunct of the narrative, not an end in itself."[7] Dessen sets up the contrast between an audience that sees the play and an

audience that hears the play. The Elizabethan audience went to the Globe to hear the play and enjoy the visual component. As astute listeners able to pick up on the language of the play, they experienced no disappointment when the setting was an unimportant aspect of the narrative, but felt great satisfaction when they heard the narrative itself. On the other hand, the modern audience sees the narrative, which makes the presence of naturalistic scenery absolutely necessary.

Stewart Eames points out that English language speakers use the words "hear" and "see" as substitutes for "understanding"; therefore, a person can say either "I hear you" or "I see what you're saying" to represent that they understand. However, the modern speaker is more likely to use the latter to signify understanding than the former. Harold Bloom identifies the difficulty Shakespeare presents to a modern audience, which is so visual in nature of understanding, in these words: "Assaulted by films, television, and computers, our inner and outer ears have difficulty apprehending Shakespeare's hum of thoughts."[8] The modern audience does not listen as astutely to the words of Shakespeare's narrative as they ought, and the naturalistic setting compensates for the failure of both the inner and outer ears. Yet if modern audiences listen to the narrative, they will hear the verbal cues Shakespeare imbeds in his words.

The players' language signals a crowd to bring the stage to imaginative life even though the physical stage does not change appearance as scenes change imaginative locations. The verbal cues for the imaginary scene change lie in the first lines of the scene. The first scene of *King Lear* to occur outside is Act 2 Scene 2. Oswald enters and says, "Good dawning to thee, friend: art of this house . . .Where may we set our horses" (2.2.3),[9] thus indicating that the scene is outside with horses, though the bare stage indicates neither outside the castle nor horses. Later in the play, Lear opens another scene with different verbal cues to indicate he is in the midst of a storm: "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow" (3.2.1) , followed by eight more lines describing a great storm on the heath for the Elizabethan imagination to see on the stage. No stage crew dumps water on the stage or generates an artificial wind, yet the verbal cues in the first lines of the scene indicate the appropriate setting to an imaginative Elizabethan audience.

These examples, however, do not show the complex kind of illusion that Shakespeare begins to create near the end of his career. Anne Barton, of Trinity College Cambridge, groups Shakespeare's last tragedies together and suggests an alteration in Shakespeare's

attitude towards the illusion of the stage near the end of his career. "The stage is a thing devoid of value,"[10] she writes. "Shadows, dreams, the actor and the play: these traditionally related ideas are all degraded in the tragedy."[11] Barton wants to suggest a reason that Shakespeare begins to challenge not only conventional styles of illusion, but his own styles of illusion, too. Conventional illusions have mostly to do with simple representations of different settings or situations with only the narrative and the actors. Dessen illustrates some common stage illusions:

> Sea scenes regularly call for a captain or some other recognizable nautical figure; pastoral or forest scenes provide shepherds, foresters, or huntsmen; courtroom scenes are linked to judges and other legal personnel in their distinctive costumes; the famous garden scene in *Richard II* is keyed to the presence of the gardeners, not to any discernible stage properties.[12]

Elizabethan stage illusion tended to mean more than imaginative setting or an actor's interaction with that setting. Plays within plays and prologues are examples of how Shakespeare complicates the relationship between illusion and reality. The roles of audience and player blur and thus, as Barton points out, the stage becomes devoid of value. Gurr says of the degradation of the shadow and the actor,

> So the illusion is acknowledged to be an illusion. From there it was a slight further twist to develop inductions in which the players come on the stage to talk about their play and in so doing actually play themselves, performing what the playwright has written for them to speak in their own personality, as if reality and illusion were the same."[13]

Still, experimentation with illusion and reality does not degrade the value of the audience. The Dover Cliff scene is a perfect example of Shakespeare's experimentation with blurring shadows, dreams, actors, the play, and the audience.

Dover Cliff incorporates the active imagination of the Elizabethan audience into the illusion. According to Dessen, "A major key to that shared sense of theater lies in the active role demanded from the audience....Repeatedly Shakespeare asks his audience to accept a part for the whole, to supply imaginatively what cannot be introduced physically on to the open stage."[14] Though Dessen uses *Henry V* for his chief example, the movement of French and English soldiers in *King Lear* can serve the same purpose. The audience saw small parties of soldiers move on and

off the stage. The bare stage was not vast enough to accurately present the rolling heath of England and scattered troops roaming the grasses in search of Lear. Nor could the bare stage do justice to the way Lear desperately avoided the various parties. However, when the Elizabethan audience did its job to "accept a part for the whole," the need to represent the heath and countless search parties was no longer necessary. Instead, the small parties move on and off the stage while Lear moves about the stage to avoid all the various searches as they pass by him.

Matchett also implies that the Elizabethan audience is a part of the stage production when he says, "Shakespeare thrusts experience upon us not only as observers of the suffering of his characters but as participants."[15] Matchett and Dessen both suggest that Shakespeare expects the imaginative Elizabethan audience to play its own role in the performance. Without the imagination of the audience, the bare stage remains empty, with a handful of actors who pitifully attempt to look like a vast army. Without the imagination of the audience, the scene where Lear scolds and chastises the storm seems rather delirious, and Oswald looks silly when he stands on the bare stage and talks about a castle and horses. The audience's imagination becomes a crucial stage device for setting. Like the lighting and scenic backdrops that serve as stage devices for modern audiences, the Elizabethan audiences themselves are the stage devices for setting.

Where previous illusions entertain audiences, the Dover Cliff includes the audience in the deception of Gloucester because the audience imagines the wrong setting. Normally, the audience has a more omniscient perspective than the characters. The audience knows that Edmund is the bad guy who betrays his own father, even while the father, Gloucester, trusts his son's faithfulness. Alan C. Dessen calls the audience's perspective an "ironic double perspective,"[16] which refers to the viewer's perspective of the hero's flawed perspective. In the case of Edmund and Gloucester, the audience can see Gloucester's flaw of trust. After Edmund's betrayal of Gloucester and Cornwall's gouging out both Gloucester's eyes, Gloucester earns a new flaw in addition to his trust: blindness. The audience possesses ironic double perspective when blind Gloucester mistakes his other son, Edgar, for a wild man. However, in the Dover Cliff scene, when Edgar leads Gloucester to the imaginary cliffs, the audience shares Gloucester's flaw and is as blind as Gloucester. The audience is able neither to hear nor see that the Dover Cliff is not there. Shakespeare's illusion takes ironic double perspective from the Elizabethan audience in

order to lure the audience into Edgar's deception. The audience acts as stage device for setting, imagines the Dover Cliff, and is blindly unaware that they imagine the wrong setting.

Edgar's verbal cues create the existence of the Dover Cliff on the Elizabethan stage. James Black, writing in the *Shakespeare Survey*, describes the passage where Edgar sets the illusion of setting as the "[g]reatest passage of scene setting in Shakespeare and possibly in all literature."[17] Black describes not only the richness of the language and the powerful imagery of the verbal cues, but also the great deception that is the product of Edgar's words. Edgar goes to great lengths to describe the steepness of the climb, the height, the dizziness and a buoy floating in the great distance. "Shakespeare is taking great pains," writes Dessen, "to set up an obvious fiction on the stage, a fiction accepted by the deluded hero but evident to the audience,"[18] a perfect situation of ironic double perspective.

The modern audience is aware of the deception and plays spectator to the trick on Gloucester, but the fiction isn't evident to the Elizabethan audience, which has only Edgar's verbal cues with which to imagine the scene. Unless the Elizabethan audience sees the absence of the Dover Cliff on the naturalistic stage, as does a modern audience, there is no way for the Elizabethan audience to sense the obvious fiction. With only the narrative and a bare stage to go by, the Elizabethan audience must rely only on Edgar's verbal cues. Edgar says,

> Come on, sir; here's the place:—Stand still.—How fearful
> And dizzy 'tis to cast one's eyes so low!
> The crows and choughs that wing the mid way air
> Show scarce so gross as beetles: half way down
> Hangs one that gathers samphire,—dreadful trade!
> Methinks he seems no bigger than his head:
> The fishermen that walk upon the beach
> Appear like mice; and yond tall anchoring bark
> Diminish'd to her cock; her cock a buoy
> Almost too small for sight: the murmuring surge,
> That on the unnumber'd idle pebbles chafes,
> Cannot be heard so high.—I'll look no more;
> Lest my brain turn, and the deficient sight
> Topple down headlong. (4.6.10-23)

Since Gloucester agrees with Edgar's description of the setting, the audience has no alternative but to believe the two actors on the bare stage.

Thus the Elizabethan audience did its job as the stage device for setting and faithfully imagined the Dover Cliff just as Edgar prompts. Rather than an obvious fiction, though, the Elizabethan

audience submits to an ambiguous fiction, because without clues to the contrary nothing is obvious about the scene except for Edgar's cues. Yet Dessen is right about the obvious fiction in terms of a naturalistic stage. The naturalistic setting obviously contrasts with the cliff at Dover. Modern audiences still wield Dessen's ironic double perspective; they see Edgar does not lead Gloucester up any incline. There are no great heights, crows in the air, distant fishermen, and no murmuring surge. There are limits to the ironic double perspective of modern audiences, however, because they are not imaginative stage devices for setting like Elizabethans. The modern audience relies on naturalistic settings and expects to hear the sound of the murmuring surge from backstage. Yet the modern audience neither sees nor hears a murmuring surge because there is no surge at all. There is no Dover Cliff. Instead, modern directors must choose what naturalistic setting decorates the stage or production set while Edgar deceitfully describes the cliff. Dessen states of the modern audience and Dover Cliff: "the viewer is forced to confront the obvious fiction."[19] Shakespeare does not dupe the modern audience or their naturalistic settings.

Though the reactions of a Shakespearean audience are not on record, such a record would indicate whether Shakespeare's audience fell for the trick in the Dover Cliff scene. The record could show if Edgar did something in addition to verbal cues to tip off the audience, or as Dessen writes, "theatrical strategy and techniques taken for granted by Shakespeare, his player colleagues, and his play-goers."[20] However, there is no such record, and Edgar's verbal cues are all the information available. Yet Harry Levin believes the verbal cues are enough, given a convention which "prescribes we accept whatever is said on the subject of immediate place as the setting."[21] Levin suggests that the audience trusted Edgar's verbal cues and faithfully acted as the stage device for an imaginary setting. On the other hand, modern audiences with naturalistic settings have setting preset for them visually; consequently, they can grasp no ambiguity from verbal cues, and the audience confronts Edgar's obvious fiction.

In the absence of an obvious fiction, like the presence of Dover Cliff, the Elizabethan audience likely wondered at the credibility of Edgar's verbal cues. The audience finally understands only after Gloucester falls from the nonexistent cliff. After Gloucester lands from his fall, Edgar makes some valuable asides, such as, "Had he been where he thought, /By this had thought been passed" (4.6.44-45), which help clear the confusion of the audience and restore its

power of ironic double perspective. Edgar continues the trick only for Gloucester, and the audience's ironic double perspective allows them to see Gloucester's flaws once again.

Before Gloucester falls, however, the Elizabethan audience still trusted Edgar blindly. James Black points out the audience's confusion: "When we set off to Dover with Gloucester and Edgar we have no way of knowing whether they are headed for a real or symbolic cliff."[22] Black suggests an ambiguity that riddles the scene as Edgar creates the sense of setting. Gloucester enhances the audience's sense of ambiguity with his inquiries into Edgar's words. If Gloucester doubts Edgar's description of the journey, then he cannot go through with the jump. Therefore, Gloucester does not doubt Edgar. He simply wonders at how inaccurate his own senses have become. Gloucester's first statement of wonder comes when he questions how close they are to Dover Cliff. Edgar claims, "You do climb up it now: look, how we labour" (4.6.2). Gloucester replies, "Methinks the ground is even" (4.6.3). Similar statements of wonder cause the audience to question the verbal cues without compromising their duty as the stage device for setting. The audience remains faithful to Edgar because, as Levin claims, they accept everything Edgar says. Yet a sense of ambiguity hangs over the audience as Gloucester wonders at the verbal cues without disbelief. The result is an audience who still labors to create Edgar's setting in their imagination while wondering at the verbal cues themselves.

Edgar actually speaks one of his informative asides before Gloucester falls. He leads Gloucester along and reports that they are at the "extreme verge" (4.6.26). Right before Gloucester's dramatic suicide speech, Edgar says, "[Aside] Why I do trifle thus with his despair/ Is done to cure it" (4.6.33-34). Where other asides seem to let the audience in on the deception, the revelation that Edgar trifles with his father's despair does not give the deception away. In fact, Edgar's words seem to indicate that he is plainly aware that he makes a mockery of his father's suicide. He seems to goad his father on up the cliff to the extreme verge and does not seem to make any clear effort to stop him. Only after the fall does Edgar reveal that there is no cliff. Only then does the audience know what Edgar means by "trifle thus." Before the fall, "trifle thus" seems to mean that Edgar waxes eloquent with verbal cues and plays his father right to the cliff's edge. He is possibly ignorant of Gloucester's intentions, but that seems unlikely after he outlines the cure for Gloucester's despair in lines 33-34. Yet the aside does not give away Shakespeare's trick of setting. Only

after Gloucester's fall, does "trifle thus" mean the deception. After the fall is when the Elizabethan audience retrieves ironic double perspective and sees all the verbal cues for what they are. "Trifle thus" refers to the active lying that Edgar does not only to his father, but to the Elizabethan audience as well.

Two stage directions appear in the text that can have different effects on what the audience does with Edgar's verbal cues before Gloucester falls. Both directions are in Gloucester's final speech before his plunge off what he supposes are the cliffs of Dover: "He kneels," after the first line of his speech and "He falls" after what he believes are his last mortal words. These two stage directions introduce different kinds of problems with the ways actors can pull off the deception. Nothing indicates that Gloucester stands again after the text directs him to kneel, unless line 41 counts, "Now, fellow, fare thee well" (4.6.41). The usage of "Now" can substantiate a break in the farewell speech so that Gloucester can successfully execute his suicide. The actor can stand as he speaks, "Now."

In support of the notion that Gloucester stands back up is the obstacle of the jump. No one is able to jump from a kneeling position. Yet the stage directions do not require Gloucester to jump. The stage directions read, "He falls." Gloucester can fall convincingly from his kneeling position and be safe in the process. However a safe fall from a standing position may not convince an audience at all because the actor must brace for impact with the stage. Without a stage direction that reads, "He stands," and without a safe and convincing way to fall from a standing position, there is great strength to the argument that Gloucester falls from his knees.

A few things the actors can do on the stage can compromise Shakespeare's Dover Cliff trick. Gloucester cannot fall from anything, whether a platform or rock. A fall from a stage prop compromises the ambiguity. The action is ambiguous only if the audience does not see the actor fall from some specific scenic clue. He must make his fall from the bare floor of the stage. A fall from the flat, bare stage leaves the details of placement in the setting to both the verbal cues and the imagination of the Elizabethan audience. Gloucester must also fall forward, in the direction to which Edgar indicates is the edge of the cliff. He cannot collapse limply to one side. Nor can Gloucester fall in any other direction than the one Edgar indicates. Such falls may suggest to the audience that Gloucester doesn't think he is falling or isn't really falling. In addition, Gloucester falls forward from a kneeling position. A standing fall or jump of any kind may be ridiculously

melodramatic, or comic enough to make the audience suspicious of the scene's sincerity and ruin the trick.

Further, the stage must be absolutely bare so that while Edgar speaks of a "horrible steep" (4.6.4) climb, no props contradict his words. Any signs or gestures Edgar makes to accompany his words are made either to the audience or to the open sky. If Edgar refers to anything on the stage, he may hint at some kind of interpretation of place. If the Elizabethan audience detected any reference to the stage, they may have seen through the deception. For instance, Shakespeare frequently used the edge of the stage to indicate barriers between land and sea or edges in the landscape that correlate with verbal cues. A reference to the edge of the stage meant that Shakespeare would be supportive of the murmuring surge and the existence of the Dover Cliff. Such a reference would only confound the effectiveness of the deception. On the other hand, if Edgar refused to refer to the edge of the stage, and such a reference was a standard cue for the edge of a cliff, then the Elizabethan audience would recognize the trick. Of course, the lack of a reference to the stage, when the Elizabethans expected one, would compound the ambiguity of the fiction.

The modern audience misses the entire trick of the setting that Shakespeare plays on the Elizabethan audience. The modern audience sees the setting naturalistically, which interprets the verbal cues for the audience and establishes setting automatically. The audience is no longer the critically necessary element to the performance that Shakespeare expected of his Elizabethan audience. Not only does a naturalistic setting eliminate the audience's role as the stage device for an imaginative setting, but Edgar and Gloucester must also interact with the naturalistic setting that Edgar does not describe. Rather than observations of animals and tradesman along the hike to the top of the Dover Cliff, Edgar and Gloucester walk through the common heath. Edgar must silently avoid the patrols in search of Lear so that Gloucester does not suspect and disbelieve. The naturalistic setting gives the actors a concrete sense of place that is difficult for an audience to see beyond. The result is that Gloucester is obviously led to a discernible location that is not a cliff in Dover. Edgar obviously deceives Gloucester. In that the modern audience with their naturalistic stage setting is in on the deception with Edgar, with an acute sense of ironic double perspective, the scene is no longer ambiguous fiction but a bit of comic relief.

The obviousness of naturalistic settings is something that Elizabethan audiences did not ever see. Where Elizabethans

struggled to confront the ambiguous fiction of the Dover Cliff, a modern audience is aware of the fiction and receives the confrontation in a package deal with the cliff. The modern audience easily sees through Edgar's verbal cues and the trick is lost. As Matchett points out, "Modern audiences are not aware of the extent to which Shakespeare tricks us."[23] The loss of the trick is unavoidable as no challenge of ambiguity is given to a modern audience. A modern audience is not deceived. Instead Dover Cliff generates nervous laughter in a modern audience as Edgar fools recklessly with his father's sanity. James Black identifies the comic potential of the scene: "There is enormous comic potential—or comic risk—in this soon-interrupted fall at what should be Gloucester's most solemn moment."[24] The recession of the cliffs back to comic form reduces the trick back to the common conventions of illusion—Oswald outside the castle walls with horses, Lear out in the storm on the heath, search parties out on the vastness of the stormy heath.

A modern audience includes the Dover Cliff in the inventory of common illusions. In that the naturalistic setting clearly provides the visual surroundings for the audience, the modern audience is not a stage device for setting. Imagination is what substantiates stage illusion in the first place, and therefore the inventory of common illusions is simply no longer a list of illusions. However, Dover Cliff transcends Shakespeare's repertoire of illusions. He used the imagination of the Elizabethan audience to trigger his deception and trick his reliable stage devices for setting. Shakespeare incorporates the audience into his cutting-edge stage illusion. He degrades and blurs his audience so that they have the same value as shadows, dreams, actors, and the play. Shakespeare's deceptive trick of setting works for audiences who watch the play on a bare stage, but is lost to modern audiences with their naturalistic settings.

Notes

1. Stewart Eames, Member of the Faculty of English, Cambridge University, Course Lecture, "Theatre and Theatricality" (Cambridge University, 2000).

2. Harry Levin, "The Heights and the Depths: A Scene from King Lear," *King Lear*, ed. Russell Fraser (New York: Signet, 1998), 272.

3. William H. Matchett, *Shakespeare: The Theatrical Dimension*, ed. Philip C. McGuire and David A. Samuelson (New York: AMS Press, 1979), 192.

4. Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 202.

5. Gurr, 201-202.

6. Bernard Beckerman, *Shakespeare at the Globe 1599-1609* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 108.

7. Alan C Dessen, "Shakespeare and Theatrical Conventions," *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare Studies,* ed. Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 93.

8. Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Berkeley Publishing Group, 1998), 476.

9. William Shakespeare, *King Lear,* ed. Peter Holland (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 2.2.1,3. All line references to *King Lear* appear in the text and refer to this edition.

10. Anne Barton, *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), 164.

11. Barton, 168.

12. Dessen, "Shakespeare," 94.

13. Gurr, 180-181.

14. Dessen, "Shakespeare," 89.

15. Matchett, 185.

16. Alan C Dessen, *Elizabethan Drama and The Viewer's Eye* (Chapel Hill: University of North.Carolina Press, 1977), 119.

17. James Black, "King Lear: Art Upside-Down," *Shakespeare Survey 33,* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 39.

18. Dessen, *Elizabethan,* 119.

19. Dessen, *Elizabethan,* 122.

20. Alan C Dessen, *Recovering Shakespeare's Theatrical Vocabulary* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 3.

21. Harry Levin, "The Heights and the Depths: A Scene from King Lear," *King Lear,* ed. Russell Fraser (New York: Signet, 1998), 272.

22. Black, 39.

23. Matchett, 190.

24. Black, 40.