A Study Guide to
Hofstra University’s
Department of Drama and Dance
Production
of
KING LEAR
by
William Shakespeare
March 1999

The Pelican Shakespeare version of King Lear, edited by Alfred Harbage, is the text used in the current production. It is published in paperback by Penguin Books.

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cause Shakespeare is acknowledged to be the greatest
dramatist and poet in the English language, a natural and
burning curiosity has fired critics, scholars, and artists from
the time of his death to the present day. The complete facts of his
life have eluded them all because actors and playwrights of that
age were not held in high esteem, and the writing of letters and
the keeping of journals were not common practice.

We can be relatively sure that Shakespeare was born about three
weeks after the birth of the twins, Hamnet who died at the age of eleven, and Judith who died in 1662, eight
years after the birth of Susanna. Shakespeare’s name
occurs in connection with the first of his plays produced in
London. It is reckoned that he left Stratford around 1587, but
what he did in those years is pure conjecture. Some legends say
he was a schoolmaster; others claim he got into an altercation
with a local squire for poaching deer and had to flee; still others
maintain that he went off to join a touring company of players.

In 1592, however, in a dying warning to fellow
playwrights, Robert Greene attacked Shakespeare as “an upstart
crow” and firmly established him as the successful author of the
three history plays, Henry VI, Parts One, Two, and Three. By
then it was assumed that Shakespeare had already also written
and had seen productions of The Comedy of Errors, Richard III,
The Taming of the Shrew, The Two Gentlemen of Verona,
Love’s Labour’s Lost, and the bloody but popular tragedy of
Titus Andronicus.

Between 1592 and 1594 the theatres were closed on an account of plague, and Shakespeare turned to poetry, composing
Venus and Adonis, The Rape of Lucrece, and probably the 154
sonnets.

When the theatres reopened, Shakespeare had become
a stockholder in the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, so called because
it was under the patronage of England’s Lord Chamberlain. It
was one of London’s two major theatre companies. Four years
later the theatre moved to the other side of the Thames and
opened the Globe, where ultimately most of the great tragedies
were presented.

During the period 1594 to 1600, with the production of
A Midsummer Night’s Dream, The Merchant of Venice, Romeo
and Juliet, as well as the two parts of Henry IV, among others,
the theatre company prospered and Shakespeare became a man
of means. He lived in a fine home in London and purchased the
largest house in Stratford. He was granted a coat of arms

In 1582 when he was 18, at which time a
marriage license was issued to him and Anne Hathaway, a
woman eight years his senior from a tiny neighboring village.
Five months after they were married, their first child Susanna
was born, followed in 1585 by the birth of twins, Hamnet who
died at the age of eleven, and Judith who died in 1662, eight
years before the death of Shakespeare’s last descendant.

there is no secure information about Shakespeare’s
schooling—a sore point with many snobbish critics who cannot
conceive of a person who has not gone to college writing as
elegantly and knowledgeably as Shakespeare did. It is assumed
that he went through the Stratford grammar school from the age
of six until his sixteenth year. Days were long at school, fromive or six o’clock in the morning until five in the evening, six
days a week. Latin and Greek were certainly taught, and there
Shakespeare must have come into early contact with the Roman
plays of Seneca, Plautus, and Terence which found their way
into his own works as did the poetry of Ovid, Virgil, and Horace
and the histories of Caesar and Livy. By any contemporaneous
or modern estimation, Shakespeare must have been an educated
man. As Dryden observed, “He was naturally learned; he
needed not the spectacle of Books to read Nature; he looked
inwards and found her there.”

Title page of the First Folio Edition of Shakespeare’s plays with the
famous Martin Droeshout engraving, 1623.
acknowledging him as a “gentleman,” an honor coveted but never achieved by his father because of money problems.

By the turn of the century Shakespeare had written his major romantic comedies: As You Like It, Much Ado About Nothing, and Twelfth Night; and with the accession of James to the English throne after the death of Elizabeth in 1603, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men were taken under the monarch’s wing, calling themselves thereafter the King’s Men. Many of the plays were then performed at Court, and in 1608 the company was able to open a second theatre, the Blackfriars, indoors and mainly for the upper classes, which allowed Shakespeare to turn to more subtle themes and pastoral romances, including Pericles, Cymbeline, The Winter’s Tale, and The Tempest.

Shakespeare’s reputation as a fashionable writer by then, however, was perhaps beginning to wane, or he lost enthusiasm for the bustle of London life. In 1611 he retired to Stratford returning pen to paper only to compose Henry VIII, a pageant, which by stage accident occasioned the burning of the Globe in 1613 at its premiere performance. He is also reputed to have collaborated in the writing of a minor play titled Two Noble Kinsmen—to be presented by Hofstra, fall 1999.

Apparently he died on his birthday in 1616, some say as the result of contracting a “fever” after drinking with some of his playwright friends. His grave is marked by a stern and ominous warning, supposedly composed by the Bard himself, adding to the mystery surrounding his life but perhaps merely posted to keep his remains from being moved as was often done:

Good frends for Iesus (Jesus’) sake forbear
To dig the dust encloased heare!
Blest be ye (the) man yt (that) spares thes stones,
And curst be he yt moves my bones.

According to Shakespearean scholar G.B. Harrison, the complete list of the plays with their approximate dates is as follows:

1591
Henry VI, Parts One, Two, and Three
Richard III
Titus Andronicus
Love’s Labour’s Lost
The Two Gentlemen of Verona
The Comedy of Errors
The Taming of the Shrew

1594
Romeo and Juliet
A Midsummer Night’s Dream
Richard II
King John
The Merchant of Venice

1597
Henry IV, Parts One and Two
Much Ado About Nothing
Merry Wives of Windsor
As You Like It
Julius Caesar
Henry V
Troilus and Cressida

1601
Hamlet
Twelfth Night
Measure for Measure
All’s Well That Ends Well
Othello

1606
King Lear
Macbeth
Timon of Athens
Antony and Cleopatra
Coriolanus

1609
Pericles

1611
Cymbeline
The Winter’s Tale
The Tempest
Henry VIII

emanating from this time betray a developing dark attitude about human nature, even cynicism at times. This is characterized by Much Ado About Nothing, The Merchant of Venice, Julius Caesar, and Troilus and Cressida.

3) The Mature Years (about 1600-1607). During this period Shakespeare produced his greatest work: Hamlet, King Lear, Macbeth, Othello, and such comedies as Twelfth Night and Measure for Measure.

4) The Late Period (about 1608-1613). This era is marked by the playwright’s concern with more mystical matters often set in pastoral surroundings. The difficult plays of this group include Pericles, Cymbeline, The Winter’s Tale, and The Tempest.

SHAKESPEARE’S PLAYS

It is generally acknowledged that Shakespeare’s writing for the theatre falls largely into four main periods:

1) The Early Period (about 1590-1595). The plays that fall into this group reflect Shakespeare’s youthful vitality and energy, both in conception and verse. Plays from this period include Romeo and Juliet, A Comedy of Errors, The Taming of the Shrew, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, and Richard III.

2) The Middle Period (about 1595-1600). The plays...
With our contemporary exposure to modern theatre, television, and film, with their capacity for reproducing everyday reality so precisely and astounding us with amazing special effects, it is perhaps difficult to envision the kind of productions and the quality of imagination that Elizabethan audiences experienced when they attended a performance of Macbeth.

Our information about the playhouses of that time is very sketchy, derived as it is from one or two drawings, scanty stage directions, a few building specifications, contracts, and prop lists. It is clear, though, that the major plays were presented out of doors in open theatres in daylight. When nighttime scenes were called for, a few words sufficed to set the hour and the mood. Locations were also clarified by the actors' speeches. We can, therefore, assume that only the barest, most essential pieces of furniture and scenery were set—a chair, a bush, or a throne. The plays were done without intermission—many of the audience members stood throughout—and, therefore, the production had to move quickly from scene to scene in an almost cinematic way in order to achieve, as the Chorus in Romeo and Juliet calls for, “the two hours’ traffic of our stage.”

To accommodate tombs, beds, and balconies and to allow “dead bodies” to exit without being carried off, some device was needed to permit them to be hidden or to give them some elevation from the stage level. It is therefore conjectured that there was a curtained area somewhere on the back wall of the stage area, both on the platform level and above it. Since actors often had to traverse the playing area from one side to the other, it is likely that there were entranceways or doors on either side of the stage which also served to clarify opposing forces in a play—Montagues and Capulets, French and English armies, or rebels and loyalists. The rest of the play was performed on a large square or rectangular (we cannot be sure) area which extended out into the audience, surrounded on three sides by the spectators.

Usually stage directions in many of the texts were added later by the editors, but an early edition of Romeo and Juliet gives us some clues about the theatres. After Juliet drinks the potion, the script indicates, “She falls upon her bed within the curtains,” and then one assumes they are closed. After discovering and lamenting Juliet’s supposed death, “They all but the Nurse go forth, casting rosemary on her and shutting the curtains.” Suggestions such as these are all that historians have to go on in determining how the plays were staged.

It is thought that the architecture of the playhouses was developed from touring companies who set up and performed at innyards against one wall of the building. Audiences could stand at ground level or watch from balconies and galleries on three sides. These galleries found their way into the structure of theatres built for the purpose of productions.
performances in all sorts of weather, perhaps allowed some rudimentary lighting effects, but, above all, acoustically gave Shakespeare the opportunity to write more subtle dialogue with more complex imagery and ideas than the direct, open, heroic speeches required by playing out of doors.


The act and scene divisions in the plays were later textual additions, but an audience usually knew when a major section had ended by the rhymed couplet which summarized or rounded out a series of dramatic events. For example, in Act V the forces led by Albany and Edmund are about to engage the army led by Cordelia. As Albany exits, Edmund ends the scene with a sneer at Albany and Albany’s intention of being merciful to Cordelia and Lear after the battle:

As the mercy
Which he intends to Lear and to Cordelia,
The battle done, and they within our power,
Shall never see his pardon; for my state
Stands on me to defend, not to debate.

As Steven Urkowitz has pointed out, in Shakespeare’s Revision of King Lear, the rhymed couplet is used frequently to heighten tension and to undermine audience expectation. Often a scene seems to be coming to an end, or a character appears about to exit, when someone else interrupts or delays that action. For example, in Act I, scene 1, Cordelia chastises her sisters as she prepares to leave the stage with the King of France:

I know what you are,
And like a sister am most loath to call
Your faults as they are named. Love well our father:
To your professed bosoms I commit him,
But yet alas, stood I within his grace,

I would prefer him to a better place;
So farewell to you both.

But before Cordelia is able to exit, Regan and Goneril both respond, with Goneril employing another rhymed couplet, and that is followed by more exit lines and another rhymed couplet by Cordelia before she actually leaves the stage.

Shakespeare wrote for the company of actors who made up the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, later the King’s Men. Heroic roles were fashioned around the talents of their leading actor, Richard Burbage. As he grew older, the roles conceived for him also matured so that early in his career Burbage played Romeo and Hamlet, then later he assayed King Lear, Macbeth, and Othello. Will Kemp played the lower, broader, comic roles like Dogberry in Much Ado About Nothing. He apparently broke off with the theatre and was replaced by the more ethereal singer and dancer, Robert Armin. For him Shakespeare conceived a totally different sort of comic role more appropriate to his talents and temperament. He played Feste in Twelfth Night, Touchstone in As You Like It, the Drunken Porter in Macbeth, and perhaps the Fool in King Lear.

The women in Shakespeare’s plays were all played by boys, and they must have developed great acting skills to portray such complex personalities as Juliet, Lady Macbeth, and Cleopatra. Their careers, however, were short-lived since it would have stretched believability too far to have kept them in such parts after their voices had changed in about their fourteenth year.

Shakespeare himself acted in the company, his most famous role being that of the Ghost in Hamlet, but his influence as a shareholder was obviously due to the enormous popularity of the plays he supplied rather than from his distinction as a performer. Tradition holds that Shakespeare played the role of Adam in As You Like It. It is thought by some critics that he may have performed the role of Duncan in Macbeth.

The demise of the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre occurred when violence, sex, and spectacle were substituted for an identifiable humanity in the plays, and sentimentality replaced true feeling. The acting quality no doubt also deteriorated when companies of children became fashionable; and the death knell of the most vital theatre in world history sounded when the Puritans took over the State and closed the theatres in 1642.

A SUMMARY OF THE STORY

Old and weary of ruling, Lear decides to divide his kingdom among his three daughters, Goneril, Regan and Cordelia. The first two are hypocritically eloquent in expressing their devotion before the assembled court. Cordelia, however, refuses to flatter her father, and Lear mistakes her honesty for lack of affection. Angered at what he considers her ingratitude, he renounces her and divides Britain between Goneril and Regan. The faithful Earl of Kent is banished for coming to Cordelia’s defense. Despite these events, the King of France takes the disgraced daughter as his Queen.

By agreement, Lear retains his title and a retinue of one hundred knights. He plans on spending alternate months with Goneril and Regan, but the two soon conspire to humiliate and degrade him, first reducing his entourage and finally driving him away, penniless and lacking shelter even for himself.
Lear is left with only two followers, the Fool from his court and Kent, who has returned in disguise to serve him. Seeking refuge from a terrible storm in a hovel on a desolate plain, they come upon Edgar, the son of the Earl of Gloucester. Edgar too has been forced to flee by the treachery of his half-brother, Edmund. Disguised as a madman, he goes unrecognized by the now unbalanced monarch.

Gloucester offers to help his destitute king, but his kindness is reported by Edmund as treason and, as punishment, Regan’s husband blinds the old man. In doing so, however, he is himself set upon by a servant and fatally wounded. Edgar, the disinherited son, finds and cares for his father, who has been set to wander on the moors. Cordelia, learning of her father’s plight, persuades her husband to send troops to England. Reunited with Lear, she tries to restore his mind and health, but the French army is defeated by English troops under Edmund’s command. Both Lear and Cordelia are taken prisoner. Goneril, jealous of Regan’s advances to Edmund, poisons her sister but her husband’s discovery of her treachery leads her to commit suicide. Edmund is killed in combat with Edgar. It is too late to countermand his last order, which was to hang Cordelia and, overcome by this final calamity, Lear dies.

Quoted from Stratford Festival of Canada program

THE SOURCES OF THE STORY

Shakespeare’s genius did not usually extend to the invention of new material to accompany his rich characterizations and relationships, his clearly devised and exciting plot and structure, and his soaring poetry. He drew his ideas from Roman, Greek, and English history and mythology, other plays, and translations of continental novellas. Often he combined different tales into a new creation, and this was very much the case with King Lear.

As Geoffrey Bullough has pointed out, though the legend of King Lear may derive from Celtic legend, the story also follows a well-established fairy-tale, or folk-lore pattern which includes “filial ingratitude, the contrast between good and bad children’s treatment of aged parents,” and the use of a “love-test” to determine a child’s true love for a parent. In addition to the numerous occurrences of elements of the story in fairy tales, Bullough identifies six sources with which Shakespeare would have been familiar, as well as five other possible or probable sources.

It is clear that Shakespeare knew Holinshed’s The Historie of England since he made extensive use of it when he wrote his history plays. The second book of Holinshed contains the story of “Leir . . . ruler over the Britaines” and of his three daughters “Gonorilla, Regan, and Cordilla, which daughters he greatly loved, but specially Cordilla the youngest farre above the two elder.” Holinshed describes a “love trial” and Leir’s repudiation of Cordella. Later the mistreatment of Leir by Gonorilla, Regan, and their husbands causes Leir to flee to France where he seeks aid from Cordella, “whom before time he hated.” Cordella and her husband lead an army into Britain and restore Leir to the throne. Upon his death, Cordella rules as Queen, but five years later becomes embroiled in civil war with her nephews, is imprisoned, and, despairing rescue, kills herself.

Another certain source seems to be The Mirror for Magistrates by John Higgins in which is related the story of Leire and his three daughters, Gonorell, Ragan, and Cordilla or Cordell. The tale is narrated by Cordell and includes a description of the love-test, the marriages of Gonerell to the “king of Albany,” and Ragan to the “Prince of Camber and Cornwall.” Again, as in Holinshed, Cordell marries the King of France, leads an army, and restores her father to the throne. Later she reigns as Queen until she quarrels with her nephews who imprison her.

Edmund Spenser’s The Faerie Queen was yet another source. In Book II Spenser tells of the reign of King Leyr and his three daughters, Gonorill, Regan, and Cordelle, the love-test, and the marriages of the daughters. In this version Cordelle leads the army herself that rescues Leyr and restores him to the throne. Again, she reigns after her father’s death until she is challenged by her nephews, and is imprisoned where she hangs herself.

Another major source for Shakespeare was an anonymous play, The True Chronicle Historie of King Leir, probably performed in 1594, though most likely as a revival, being written even earlier. The play was published in 1605. The story follows lines very similar to those of the other sources already mentioned but concludes with the reconciliation between Leir and Cordella and the restoration of Leir to the throne. The later story of Cordella’s reign and demise is ignored.

None of these sources has any of the sub-plot in King Lear, involving Gloucester and his two sons, Edgar and Edmund. For this story, Shakespeare borrowed from Book II of Sir Philip Sidney’s The Countess of Pembroke Arcadia in which the King of Paphlagonia is deprived of his kingdom “by the hard- hearted ungratefulnes of a sonne of his, deprived not onely of his kindome . . . but of his sight.” The king’s ungrateful son is illegitimate; the loyal, legitimate son leads the blinded father and prevents his father from his desire to leap off a cliff in his despair. Ultimately the legitimate son prevails against his bastard brother and is crowned king by his father who then dies of a broken heart.

Yet another source, A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures by Samuel Harsnott—an attack on Catholic belief in possession and in exorcising demons—probably gave Shakespeare ideas about the genuine madness of Lear and the feigned madness of Edgar, disguised as “Poor Tom.” Other possible or probable sources may include Geoffrey of Monmouth’s History of the Kings of England, William Warner’s Albion’s England, William Harrison’s
**THE DATE OF COMPOSITION**

The earliest reference to Shakespeare’s version of *King Lear* is made in the Stationer’s Register of November 1607, where the play—intended for publication—is described as having been performed before the king at the previous Christmas season of 1606. Jay Halio, a recent editor of the text, assumes that the play was probably performed earlier than that date at the Globe.

Since most commentators believe that Shakespeare made considerable use of a Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures by Samuel Harsnett, which was published in March 1603, the play must have been written sometime between 1603 and 1606.

Some editors see significance in Gloucester’s mention of “These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us” (1.2.103-104), and relate the line to actual eclipses of the moon in September 1605 and of the sun in October 1605, but others discount the importance of these, noting that there were several other eclipses in Shakespeare’s lifetime. Another of Shakespeare’s sources, *The True Chronicle Historie of King Leir* was published sometime after May 1605, and there is debate as to whether the publication of this old play was occasioned by the appearance of Shakespeare’s version on the stage or if Shakespeare was inspired to write his version as a result of this publication.

Generally, it is believed that Shakespeare began the play sometime in the spring of 1605, completing it by that fall.

**SPECIAL PROBLEMS WITH THE TEXT OF KING LEAR**

*King Lear* exists in two distinct versions, both of which are believed to reflect the work of Shakespeare. Published first in a Quarto version in 1608, the play was later reprinted in Quarto in 1619 with some revisions and corrections. In 1623, a significantly different version of the play was published in the First Folio, a collection of 36 plays by Shakespeare (*Pericles* was not included in the First Folio).

Until 1986, it was virtually impossible for the ordinary reader to realize that *King Lear* actually existed in two distinct versions, since every published edition included an editorial conflation—or mixture—of both versions in order to assure that every line of Shakespeare’s was retained. The Folio actually cuts 300 lines that are found in the Quarto text, and adds about 100 lines. The Folio cuts include an entire scene in which the mad Lear puts his daughters on trial (III.6.17-55); that is to say, this scene appears in the Quarto version but simply does not in the Folio. Beyond the cuts and additions of lines, editor Jay Halio, has identified “nearly 1,500 substantive variants between Q[uarto] and F[olio] that require choices for a modernised text.”

Once thought to be a pirated text, since the early 1980s the Quarto has generally been accepted as an earlier version of the play; most probably derived from Shakespeare’s own working draft, usually referred to as “foul papers”—so called because the manuscript was probably “messy” with text possibly crossed out, with words inserted and with text added in the margins. The Folio, in contrast, is believed to derive from the printed Quarto of the play—but a Quarto that has been amended to reflect the actual playing version of the work, based on the official promptbook. In other words, the Quarto represents Shakespeare’s unrevised, or partially revised, thoughts on the play, while the Folio reflects his final revision of the work. Steven Urkowitz was especially influential in proposing this theory in his work, *Shakespeare’s Revision of King Lear*. As Urkowitz writes in summary: “Except for only a very few variants that are obviously the result of errors in copying or printing, the vast majority of the changes found in the Folio must be accepted as Shakespeare’s final decisions. The modern practice of printing a composite text eclectically chosen from the Quarto and Folio seriously distorts Shakespeare’s most profound play.”

A FEW CRITICAL COMMENTS

“For me the Fool remains one of the most intriguing characters Shakespeare wrote, elusive and difficult to read on the printed page, but often very effective in performance. In some ways you could describe the writing as half-finished, a sketch; for the actor this is challenging and also flattering because Shakespeare is allowing us to fill in the missing spaces. However, as often happens in the theatre, we tend to focus too obsessively on our own role; in the end it is Lear’s play, Lear’s story, and seen in that context the Fool’s disappearance is not difficult to explain at all - he has simply been absorbed by Lear, replaced by his madness, digested as fodder for his new perception of the world. For me one of the most moving moments in the play is when the mad Lear meets the blind Gloucester and comments to him, ‘When we are born, we cry that we are come / To this great stage of fools.’ Lear’s journey through the play is a terrible and traumatic one, but before he dies he has learned compassion, humility, gentleness. Although no longer present to witness this transformation, the Fool would definitely have approved; of that I am sure.”

—Antony Sher

“The theme of *King Lear* is the decay and fall of the world. The play opens like the Histories, with the division of the realm and the king’s abdication. It also ends like the Histories, with the proclamation of a new king. Between the prologue and the epilogue there is a civil war. But unlike the Histories and Tragedies, in *King Lear* the world is not healed again. In *King Lear* there is no young and resolute Fortinbras to ascend the throne of Denmark; no cool-headed Octavius to become Augustus Caesar; no noble Malcolm to “give to our tables meat, sleep to our nights.” In the epilogues to the Histories and Tragedies the new monarch invites those present to his coronation. In *King Lear* there will be no coronation. There is no one whom Edgar can invite to it. Everybody has died or been murdered. Gloucester was right when he said: ‘This great world / Shall so wear out to naught.’ Those who have survived—Edgar, Albany and Kent—are, as Lear has been, just ‘ruin’d piece[s] of nature’.”

—Tony Church

“So *King Lear* is not just a play about a foolish king. It is about a king who loses his palace, his crown and his robes and finds himself an unsheltered mortal. It is also about a man without his dignity, lurking in hovels, without authority, without reason. We all live in societies that depend upon our belief in them and the belief of others. Without that belief they afford no shelter. I think Shakespeare, in his greatest years, was much preoccupied with that theme. He wanted here to express it unequivocally, if necessary cruelly. Sanity, dignity and love depend upon a structure of belief which might even be a structure of illusion. He shows us the rats gnawing at the holy cords and the collapse of the structure which is like the end of the world. In that situation we find ourselves naked, blind, deprived of reason. We babble the dialects of privation. Our life is as cheap as beasts. That is why *King Lear* is the cruelest play.”

—Frank Kermode

“This is a play on so many levels. It is about relationships between fathers and their children. Practically all the horrors that occur within families occur here in enlarged or extreme form. There is massive love, horror and jealousy, together with emotional blackmail for all kinds. There is also a great deal of social criticism about the way that things are ordered and the hypocrisy of power as well as its injustice. It is also a study of the rise of Renaissance man, embodied in the person of Edmund, who cuts his way through the old world by climbing up on the shoulders of everybody else. Other themes include personal responsibility and the encounter of men and madness. We know so much more about schizophrenia than they did in Shakespeare’s time, yet psychologists have told me that Shakespeare seems to be delineating a casebook schizophrenic, particularly in the beginning of the Dover scene. There is also a vast amount of animal imagery in the play, which seems to say that the underlying nature of human beings is that of the worst of jungle animals. Throughout, Shakespeare conducts a detailed investigation into, and a searching assessment of, what man’s relationship to man should be. Finally, the play is concerned with man’s confrontation with the end of his life. Edgar says in his last line to Gloucester ‘Men must endure their going hence, even as their coming hither’.

“Lear has to endure more, it seems, than Job.”

—Jan Kott

“Directed by Peter Brook. Production is often described as Beckett-like, and influenced by Jan Kott’s essay on *King Lear* and *Endgame*.
“On the wide canvas of this play three persons stand out with more vivid life than the rest: Edmund, Lear, Cordelia. They correspond to three periods in man’s evolution—the primitive, the civilized, and the ideal.”
—G. Wilson Knight

“From Henry VI onward, Shakespeare never ceased to be concerned with the problem of chaos, or, as we would be more likely to say today, of disintegration. Sometimes it may be no more than a hint of chaos in an outburst of individual passion or social disorder. Often it is chaos under its extreme aspects of insanity or war. Always the easy and obvious remedy for chaos is force. But the best force can do is to impose order, not to elicit harmony, and Shakespeare spurns such a superficial and temporizing solution. ‘How with this rage,’ he perpetually asks,

How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea, Whose action is no stronger than a flower?

In play after play he pits some seemingly fragile representative of beauty against the forces of inertia and destruction: a dream, the spirit of innocence or play, love, art—whether as poetry, drama, or music especially. Force and Imagination: they are the ultimate foes. Force or Imagination: that is the ultimate choice. But always up to King Lear the conflict seemed to fall short of finality. It remained for Shakespeare’s supreme play to oppose physical force with imagination in its quintessential form of metaphorical Vision. ..................

“In this, his version of The Last Judgment, Shakespeare has demonstrated that hatred and revenge are a plucking-out of the human imagination as fatal to man’s power to find his way in the universe as Cornwall’s plucking out of Gloucester’s eyes was to the guidance of his body on earth. The exhibition, in fearful detail, of this self-devouring process is what makes King Lear to many readers the most hopeless of Shakespeare’s plays. But King Lear also exhibits and demonstrates something else. It shows that there is a mode of seeing as much higher than physical eyesight as physical eyesight is than touch, an insight that bestows power to see ‘things invisible to mortal sight’ as certainly as Lear saw that Cordelia lives after her death.”
—Harold C. Goddard

“But the nature that dominates Lear is completely different from the friendly green worlds of the comedies. It is harsh and violent, a dimension of cataclysms, of ugly, deformed creatures whose entire existence seems to be devoted to poisoning or maiming life, and hideous animals and plants that serve for loathsome but necessary food. Nature in Lear is like that in Timon, predatory, cruel, and hostile to human life.

“To depict nature as hostile to human life, however, is to suggest that humans are not part of nature, that they are a transplant, a foreign body which the planet seeks to reject. The two perceptions—that humans are intrinsically part of nature and that they are foreign to it—work throughout the play until the reuniting of Lear and Cordelia. The two ideas do not clash with each other: they coexist.”
—Marilyn French

“Shakespeare, who spares us nothing in this play, knows also how to let us have it all at once from time to time in little speeches, in single pregnant lines that pierce us literally to the heart. If the whole is as vast and shaggy as the cosmos is to fearful man, the parts are fitted in with wonderful refinement. Nothing in all his work is more impressive than these two extremes of skill. Line after line carries in its apparently frail

I stumbled when I saw. (IV.1.21)
Too well, too well. (IV.6.66)
You do me wrong to take me out o’ the grave. (IV.7.45)
I fear I am not in my perfect mind. (IV.7.63)
No cause, no cause. (IV.3.75)
Ripeness is all. Come on. And that’s true too. (V.2.11)
Is this the promis’d end? (V.3.263)
Her voice was ever soft,
Gentle, and low; an excellent thing in woman (V.3.272-3)

Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life, And thou no breath at all? Thou’lt come no more, Never, never, never, never, never! (V.3.306-8)

In King Lear, however, they mean everything. What the play means it means all of the time; which must be the last way now of saying that it is not only wide but deep, not only pitiful but huge.”
—Mark Van Doren

ABOUT THE PLAY ON THE STAGE

The first record of King Lear on the stage is of a performance at court in December 1606, presented by Shakespeare’s company, the King’s Men, for King James I. We know of this performance because it is recorded as having occurred in the Register of the Company of Stationers of November 1607, indicating the intention to publish the play. The title page of the actual publication of the Quarto in 1608 repeats the claim that it was publishing the play “As it was played before the Kings Majestie at Whitehall upon/St. Stephans night in Christmas Hollidayes.” According to Jay Halio, the only other record of King Lear prior to the Restoration is a production given by a provincial company in Yorkshire in 1610. The fact that the text of King Lear underwent revision, suggests to Halio that the play may or may not have been popular, but that there were early attempts to revive the play after its first production.

King Lear was one of just nine plays of Shakespeare initially selected by William Davenant at the start of the Restoration theatre in 1660. Davenant promised that he would “reform and make fitt” these plays for his acting company. Records from the Restoration indicate that King Lear was performed in 1664 at Lincoln’s Inn Fields
and in 1675 at Dorset Gardens. According to the memoirs of the stage prompter, John Downes, in these performances the play was staged “as Mr. Shakespeare wrote it; before it was alter’d by Mr. Tate.” It is probable that the great Restoration actor, Thomas Betterton, played Lear.

In 1681 Nahum Tate rewrote *King Lear* changing the ending back to the happy one that was traditionally found in the versions and sources of the story that existed before Shakespeare wrote his play. In Tate’s version Cordelia and Edgar fall in love, and at the end of the play Lear turns the kingdom over to them. Lear, Kent, and Gloster “retir’d to some cool Cell” plan to pass their remaining time “In calm Reflections on our Fortunes past.” Tate also completely eliminated the role of the Fool and added Arante, a confidante for Cordelia. According to Sandra Clark, the Fool was not restored to the text until 1838 when it was “played by a pretty young woman.”

*King Lear* was hardly the only play of Shakespeare’s to undergo adaptation or to be “regularised” in the Restoration. Adaptations were also made of *The Taming of the Shrew* as *Sauny the Scot*, *The Tempest*, *Antony and Cleopatra* as *All for Love*, *Richard III*, and *Romeo and Juliet* as *Caius Marius*. These adaptations often simplified Shakespeare’s language and sought to clarify the more complex plots of the originals. They also addressed the sensibility of the age and alluded to the politics of the time. In some cases little of the original play remained.

In 1756 David Garrick made some adjustments to the Nahum Tate adaptation, restoring some of Shakespeare’s lines but continued to omit the fool, retain the happy ending, and the love affair between Edgar and Cordelia. In the mid-18th century Spranger Barry also performed Lear, competing with Garrick. Barry’s Cordelia was Mrs. Cibber.

Finally, in 1838, William Charles Macready restored most of Shakespeare’s original play, including the Fool and eliminated the Edgar/Cordelia love affair—though the play was cut significantly. A further restoration of cuts was made by Samuel Phelps in his production of 1845.

All of the great actors of the 18th and 19th centuries essayed the role of Lear, though often in the “happy ending” version by Nahum Tate. Memorable Lears included Thomas Betterton, James Quin, David Garrick, Edmund Kean, William Charles Macready, and Henry Irving. Mrs. Cibber and Ellen Terry were memorable Cordelias.
According to William Winter, the first American Lear was a Mr. Malone who performed the role at the Theatre in Nassau Street, New York City, in 1754. Later American Lears included Edwin Booth, Edwin Forrest, E.L. Davenport, Lawrence Barrett, John McCullough, and virtually every other actor of any distinction!

Actor, playwright, scholar, and stage director, Harley Granville-Barker wrote a remarkable set of essays on staging Shakespeare. In 1940, he assisted John Gielgud in Gielgud’s second production of *King Lear*.

As Harley Granville-Barker has noted, many critics, including Charles Lamb and A.C. Bradley have considered Lear “impossible to be represented on a stage,” but Granville-Barker refuted that notion with the assertion that “Shakespeare meant it to be acted,” and, of course, the number of great actors who have essayed the role attests to Granville-Barker’s assertion.
Donald Wolfit as Lear, c. 1944. A famous Lear between the wars, Wolfit served as the model for “Sir” in Ronald Harwood’s play, *The Dresser*.


Laurence Olivier as Lear, Old Vic, 1946

Paul Scofield as Lear, Royal Shakespeare Company, 1962. Directed by Peter Brook.

Anthony Nicholls as Kent, Charles Laughton as Lear, Ian Holm as the Fool, and Albert Finney as Edgar, Royal Shakespeare Company, 1959. Directed by Glen Byam Shaw.

Diana Rigg as Cordelia, Irene Worth as Goneril, and Patience Collier as Regan, Royal Shakespeare Company, 1962. Directed by Peter Brook.
Kent placed in the stocks.


Brian Cox as Lear and David Bradley as the Fool, Royal National Theatre of Great Britain, 1990. Directed by Deborah Warner.

Richard Briers as Lear and Emma Thompson as the Fool, 1990.

Linda Kerr Scott as the Fool and John Wood as Lear, Royal Shakespeare Company, 1990. Directed by Nicholas Hytner.
In the 20th century, the role and the play has continued to be a kind of Mount Everest for major Shakespearean actors and directors. Michael Redgrave, John Gielgud, Charles Laughton, Paul Scofield, Laurence Olivier, Donald Wolfit, Eric Porter, Tony Church, Robert Stephens, Donald Sinden, Michael Gambon, Michael Hordern, Anthony Hopkins, Brian Cox, John Wood, and Ian Holm have all played the role on the English stage—several on more than one occasion. John Gielgud performed the role four times between 1931 and 1955, and then, for a fifth time in 1994, performed it in a BBC radio broadcast, at the age of 90!

JOHN GIELGUD
“EVERY INCH A KING”
ON FOUR OCCASIONS

John Gielgud as Lear, Old Vic, 1931. Directed by Harcourt Williams.

John Gielgud as Lear, Old Vic, 1940. Directed by Lewis Casson and Harley Granville-Barker.


John Gielgud as Lear, Old Vic, 1931. Directed by Harcourt Williams.

John Gielgud as Lear and Claire Bloom Cordelia, Palace Theatre, 1955. Costumes were designed by Isamu Noguchi.
In Canada, Lears include John Colicos, Peter Ustinov, Douglas Campbell, and William Hutt, who has played the role four times, three of them at the Stratford Festival, and on another occasion played the Fool to the Lear of Peter Ustinov.

**WILLIAM HUTT—FOUR KINGS AND A FOOL**


Notable American Lears have included Orson Welles, Morris Carnovsky, who played the role three different times in Stratford, Connecticut, James Earl Jones, Fritz Weaver, Hal Holbrook, and Ruth Maleczech, who performed Lear in a gender-bending production of the play done by Mabou Mines.

20th-century Cordelias have included Jessica Tandy, Peggy Ashcroft, Claire Bloom, Zoë Caldwell, Diana Rigg, Anna Calder-Marshall, Cherie Lunghi, Alice Krige, Martha Henry, and Ruby Dee.

The Fool has been played by Alan Badel, Alec Guinness, Ian Holm, Alec McCowen, David Suchet, William Hutt, Edward Atienza, Nicholas Pennell, and Antony Sher.

NOTABLE LINES
(as cited in the Bantam edition of the play)

Nothing will come of nothing. (Lear I.1.90)

Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich being poor,
Most choice, forsaken, and most loved, despised . . .
(France I.1.254 – 255)

Thou, Nature, art my goddess. (Edmund I.2.1)

Now, gods, stand up for bastards! (Edmund I.2.22)

Have more than thou showest,
Speak less than thou knowest,
Lend less than thou owest. (Fool I.4.116–118)

Ingratitude, thou marble–hearted fiend . . . (Lear I.4.257)

Hear, Nature, hear! Dear goddess, hear!
Suspend thy purpose if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful! (Lear I.4.274–276)

How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is
To have a thankless child! (Lear I.4.287–288)

You see me here, you gods, a poor old man,
As full of grief as age, wretched in both. (Lear II.4.274–275)

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow! (Lear III.2.1)

Singe my white head! And thou, all–shaking thunder,
Strike flat the thick rotundity o’ the world! (Lear III.2.6–7)

Here I stand your slave,
A poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man. (Lear III.2.19–20)

Let the great gods,
That keep this dreadful pother o’er our heads,
Find out their enemies now. (Lear III.2.49–51)

I am a man
More sinned against than sinning. (Lear III.2.59–60)
The art of our necessities is strange,
And can make vile things precious. (Lear III.2.70–71)

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe’er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? (Lear III.4.28–32)

O, I have ta’en
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel.
(Edgar III.4.32–34)

Is man no more than this? (Lear III.4.101–102)

Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked
animal as thou art. (Lear III.4.105–107)

'Tis a naughty night to swim in. (Fool III.4.109–110)

Child Rowland to the dark tower came. (Edgar III.4.182)

I am tied to the stake, and I must stand the course.
(Gloucester III.7.57)

The lamentable change is from the best;
The worst returns to laughter. (Edgar IV.1.5–6)

World, world, O world!
But that thy strange mutations make us hate thee,
Life would not yield to age. (Edgar IV.1.10–12)

Full oft 'tis seen
Our means secure us, and our mere defects
Prove our commodities. (Gloucester IV.1.19–21)

The worst is not
So long as we can say, “This is the worst.”
(Edgar IV.1.27–28)

As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods;
They kill us for their sport. (Gloucester IV.1.36–37)

If that the heavens do not their visible spirits
Send quickly down to tame these vile offenses,
It will come,
Humanity must perforce prey on itself,
Like monsters of the deep. (Albany IV..2.47–51)

This shows you are above,
You justicers, that these our nether crimes
So speedily can venge! (Albany IV.2.79–81)

Ay, every inch a king. (Lear IV.6.107)

But to the girdle do the gods inherit;
Beneath is all the fiends’. (Lear IV.6.126–127)

There thou mightst behold the great image of authority; a dog’s
obeyed in office. (Lear IV.6.157–159)

When we are born, we cry that we are come
To this great stage of fools. (Lear IV.6.182–183)

I am bound
Upon a wheel of fire. (Lear IV.7.47–49)

I fear I am not in my perfect mind. (Lear IV.7.64)

Men must endure
Their going hence, even as their coming hither;
Ripeness is all. (Edgar V.2.9 – 11)

and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news, and we’ll talk with them too—
Who loses and who wins; who’s in, who’s out . . .
(Edgar V.3.13–15)

The gods are just,. and of our pleasant vices
Make instruments to plague us. (Edgar 5.3.173–174)

The wheel is come full circle. (Edmund V.3.177)

Howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones!
(Lear V.3.262)

Kent. Is this the promised end?
Edgar. Or image of that horror? (V.3.268–269)

Her voice was ever soft,
Gentle, and low, an excellent thing in woman.
(Lear V.3.277–278)

If Fortune brag of two she loved and hated,
One of them we behold. (Kent V.3.285 – 286)

The wonder is he hath endured so long. (Kent V.3.322)

Michael Gambon as Lear and Alice Krige as the dead Cordelia,

ABOUT THE PLAY IN OTHER FORMS

The works of Shakespeare have inspired numerous
other artistic creations, including other plays, ballets, musicals,
operas, and films. Romeo and Juliet exists as a memorable
ballet, as do A Midsummer Night’s Dream and The Taming of
the Shrew; among others. The Boys From Syracuse, Kiss Me,
Kate, West Side Story, and Catch My Soul [Othello] have been
successful musical theatre adaptations from Shakespeare.
Gounod’s Romeo et Juliette; Verdi’s Macbeth, Otello, and
Falstaff; Giannini’s Taming of the Shrew; Nicolai’s The Merry
Wives of Windsor; Thomas’ Hamlet; and Barber’s Antony and
Cleopatra are just a representative few of the hundreds of
operas inspired by Shakespeare’s plays. From early silent
treatments to Franco Zeffirelli’s wide-screen versions of Romeo
and Juliet and Hamlet, and the more recent films of Henry V
and Hamlet.
directed by Kenneth Branagh, many of Shakespeare’s plays have been given film treatment, though often in too literal or stiff a fashion for the big screen. 

*King Lear*, one of Shakespeare’s most monumental works, has both inspired and intimidated attempts at artistic recreation. It is famous for being the opera that Giuseppe Verdi long considered but never composed. Given his penchant for storms, powerful villains, and touching duets for fathers and daughters, one could well imagine such an opera from Verdi, but instead he composed three other Shakespearean operas, as mentioned above.

In 1978 German composer, Aribert Reimann, did compose an operatic *King Lear* for the renowned baritone, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. According to Gary Schmidgall, Reimann employed serial music techniques, including tone rows and tone clusters, and both the text and his music tended to emphasize the bleakness of Lear’s world. Schmidgall likens the opera to the world of Samuel Beckett and to the famous, bleak staging of *King Lear* by Peter Brook. Since the middle of the 19th century, more than 20 other composers have attempted operas based on *Lear*, but none have succeeded. Other works, inspired by *King Lear*, include an overture by Hector Berlioz and incidental music by Dmitri Shostakovich, who also composed music for the Russian film of *King Lear*, directed by Kozintsev.

Numerous film and television versions of *King Lear* have been realized, including a truncated version directed for television by Peter Brook (the credit lists him as Peter Brach) in 1953. This version, which still may be found on video tape, featured Orson Welles as Lear, Alan Badel as the Fool, Michael MacLiammoir as Mad Tom, Arnold Moss as Kent, Beatrice Straight as Goneril, Margaret Phillips as Regan, and Natasha Parry as Cordelia. The sub-plot involving Gloucester, Edgar and Edmund has been cut.

Much better known is Peter Brook’s film adaptation of his famous stage production, starring Paul Scofield. The film (1971) stresses Brook’s vision of bleakness and pessimism that he finds in the play and was in part influenced by Brook’s reading of Jan Kott’s essay on “*King Lear* or *Endgame*” in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. The film featured Paul Scofield as Lear, Jack MacGowran as the Fool, Irene Worth as Goneril, Susan Engel as Regan, and Anne-lise Gabold as Cordelia. Just a year prior to Brook’s film, a Russian version of *King Lear* was released, directed by Grigori Kozintsev. It also was photographed in a bleak landscape but seemed to present the story in a more optimistic way. Kozintsev’s Lear was Yuri Yarvet and Valentina Shendrikova was Cordelia. Both Brook and Kozintsev emphasized the antiquity of the play, depicting both costumes and settings that were rugged, perhaps from the Middle Ages or earlier.

In 1982 the BBC presented the play as part of its “Shakespeare Plays” television series. Directed by Jonathan Miller, it was costumed in Renaissance dress. The production featured Michael Hordern as Lear, Frank Middlemass as the Fool, Gillian Barge as Goneril, Penelope Wilton as Regan, and Brenda Blethyn as Cordelia.

In 1983 Michael Elliott directed the play for television, utilizing a kind of Stonehenge setting. This production featured Laurence Olivier as Lear, John Hurt as the Fool, Dorothy Tutin as Goneril, Diana Rigg as Regan, and Anna Calder-Marshall as Cordelia.

Bard Productions presented a relatively uncut *King Lear* in 1984 with Mike Kellan as King Lear, supported by an indifferent American cast. Thames Television released a version of *King Lear* in 1988 with significant cuts, starring Patrick Mc Gee as Lear. In 1998 Masterpiece Theatre presented a much more substantial version, starring Ian Holm as Lear.

The play has also inspired other playwrights. Edward Bond has written a play, *Lear*, which uses Shakespeare’s play as a springboard from which Bond explores the inhumanity of man and the atrocities occasioned by war. Howard Barker has taken a different tack and has written a play, *Seven Lears*, that explores events prior to Shakespeare’s play, including an exploration of the question of what happened to the mother of Lear’s daughters. Ronald Harwood wrote his play, *The Dresser*, inspired in part by the great touring actor of Lear, Donald Wolfit.
Filmmakers have also concocted other variations on the Lear plot, including *A Thousand Acres* (based on a novel by Jane Smiley) and *The Substance of Fire* (based on a play by Jon Robin Baitz), both of which explore conflicts between a parent and his children. Akira Kurosawa translated the Lear plot into samurai settings for his film, *Ran*. In literature, the Russian author, Ivan Turgenev, adapted the play for his novella, *A Lear of the Steppes*. 


Akira Kurosawa’s film, *Ran*
QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Before Seeing the Play
1. When we first meet King Lear does he give any evidence of his later madness?
2. What do you think Shakespeare is suggesting about the nature of the relationship between parents and children in this play?
3. King Lear has sometimes been described as an adult fairy tale. How does the play follow that pattern?
4. The word “Nothing” is used frequently in this play. Can you identify some of the scenes in which the word is used and why the word is significant?
5. Early in the play Lear asks “Who is it that can tell me who I am?” (Act I, scene 4). Does King Lear acquire self-knowledge as the play progresses? Does he acquire an answer to his question?
6. What do you think of Shakespeare’s characterization of the women in the play: Goneril, Regan, Cordelia?
7. The ending of King Lear has been the subject of much debate. Is the ending pessimistic (“Howl, howl, howl, howl,” “Is this the promised end?”, “Never, never, never, never, never.”) or is there room for optimism (“This feather stirs, she lives,” “Do you see this? Look on her! Look, her lips.”)?
8. Discuss the ways in which clothes reveal or disguise various characters in the play.
9. Flattery and truthfulness are juxtaposed in this play. Consider which characters are prone to flattery and which to truthfulness.

After Seeing the Play
1. Did the actors portray the characters on the stage the way you imagined them when you read the play? How were they similar? How different?
2. With whom did your sympathies lie? Did those sympathies change?
3. At what point were you most involved? At what point were you least involved? Why do you think this was so?
4. Did you find the various disguisings and pretendings easy to follow?
5. What did you find new or revealing in the play after seeing the production that you did not get from a reading of the text?
6. How do you see the play in terms of what you see on TV?
7. How do you think these actors and this production dealt with the relationship between Lear and his daughters? How did this production treat the madness of Lear? How did it present the ending and what meaning did the ending suggest to you?
8. How did the production make use of music to underline action?

A SELECTED READING LIST

About Shakespeare and His Plays

An easy-to-read absorbing biography.

An overview of Shakespeare. Very readable.

A richly illustrated look at Shakespeare’s times and his plays taken from the Folger Shakespeare Library traveling exhibit.

About Shakespeare’s Theatre

An informative account of the staging of Shakespeare’s plays in his time.

A well illustrated and readable attempt to reconstruct the Globe Theatre.

From a production point of view.


An excellent examination of the play as produced in four key stage productions (Gielgud/Granville-Barker, Scofield/Brook, Ustinov/Phillips, Gambon/Sher/ Noble), two films (Kozintsev and Brook), and two television versions (Hordern/Miller and Olivier).


Introductory material plus thirteen essays offering a variety of approaches to teach the play.

An extraordinary examination of the differences between the Quarto and Folio texts that both illustrates Shakespeare’s revising hand, and also makes a case for his remarkable sense of the theatre.
50 Years of Shakespeare
1950-1999

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HOFSTRA UNIVERSITY’S 50th ANNUAL SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL

Hofstra University’s Annual Shakespeare Festival began in 1950 with a production of *Julius Caesar*. Over its 50-year history the Festival has presented a varied selection of the plays of Shakespeare, lesser-known short plays from the period, musicals, and scenes from Shakespeare’s plays performed by high school groups. 1999 marks the first time that *King Lear* has been staged, representing one of 23 plays of the Shakespearean canon presented at the Festival.

Since 1951, the second year of the Festival, plays have been performed regularly on a 5/6 life-sized replica of the Globe stage as reconstructed by John Cranford Adams, later assisted by Irwin Smith. Dr. Adams was President of Hofstra University from 1944 to 1964. The replica was built under the supervision of Donald H. Swinney, designer and technical director in the Department of Drama. The Globe was erected each spring in the Calkins Gymnasium where the Festival was presented in its early years. Since 1958 the Festival has been held in the John Cranford Adams Playhouse. In most years the replica of the Globe has been used as the setting for the Shakespeare Festival. On a number of occasions a different setting has been used, and that will be the case for this year’s production of *King Lear*.

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