STUDY MATERIALS FOR

KING LEAR
by William Shakespeare

Southwest Shakespeare Company
contact @ www.swshakespeare.org

Study materials written by
Dr. Susan Willis
Performing *King Lear* is like tackling Mount Everest. Not just the protagonist's role but the entire scope of the tragedy is titanic, not to mention stormy. Passions surge through the action—the usual tragic assortment of ambition, power, and lust, of course, and also simpler but in this case seemingly more difficult expressions of love and forgiveness. Amid the power grabs and personal betrayals, the play also turns on saying and hearing three monosyllables: "I love you." The fact that this expression comes in Acts 4 and 5 rather than Act 1 is the story of the tragedy for both families involved. Tragedy is often so big and yet so small, the one missed chance, the one burst of ego. Unlike other tragedies that use the "rooftop" structure with the *peripeteia* or turning point in the middle, *King Lear* plummets into tragedy within 102 lines of its opening. Once Goneril and Regan are "in" and Cordelia is "out," we can guess what's coming even if Lear cannot. Sudden actions have terrifying consequences in Lear or any tragedy, and it's a hard lesson for an 80-year-old man to learn once he no longer has the things he has relied on all his life, the power of a king and the love and obedience of his family and subjects.

And just in case one such terrifying circumstance isn't enough, Shakespeare gives it to us twice—once with Lear and again with Gloucester—two old men learning the hard way. Suddenly there are so few loyal souls and so many uncaring, self-seeking individuals: what has the world come to? That is indeed one of the major questions the play asks as Lear and Gloucester seek to find some meaning in their new, alienated existence. *King Lear* takes us over the edge into spaces we gaze into dizzingly; that is its power and lasting legacy, and why many feel it is Shakespeare's greatest tragedy.

---

**Characters**

King Lear, *king of Britain*  
Goneril, *his eldest daughter*  
Duke of Albany, *her husband*  
Regan, *Lear's middle daughter*  
Duke of Cornwall, *her husband*  
Cordelia, *Lear's youngest daughter*  
King of France  
Duke of Burgundy  
Kent, *lord loyal to Lear, later disguised as Caius*  
The Fool, *serving Lear*  
Earl of Gloucester  
Edgar, *his elder son*  
Edmund, *his illegitimate son*  
Curan, *a courtier*  
Oswald, *Goneril's steward*  
An Old Man, *Gloucester's tenant*  
Knights, soldiers, attendants, messengers

**Time and Place:** The text is set in ancient, pre-Roman Britain.

---

**Picture King Lear: A Story of Banishment**

In this crucial moment of Cordelia’s banishment, the sides are clear: two sisters casual and closed off on the right; the third, on the left, still turned to her father’s central, irrevocable gesture. With the upraised spears on each side, we sense the coming civil war. The dog, medieval tomb icon for loyalty, shows Cordelia’s fidelity and may hint at her unexpected death.
Specifics about the Materials

The study materials provide several units focused on an awareness and assessment of history, literature, language, and performance that support Arizona Common Core Standards.

All the activities can be adapted to serve as either discussion points—many either pre-show or post-show—or as writing prompts and can fit the specific critical focus or methods your students respond to best. Some can also serve as the basis for staging exercises or for additional research.

- **Unit 1**: Shaping the Action, about how the play develops its sources and how Shakespeare constitutes its structure, issues, tragic line
- **Unit 2**: Language and Ideas, about motifs/images and textual detail
- **Unit 3**: King Lear and Tragedy, about how the tragedy builds and how its tragedy is defined

Throughout the materials, topics for analysis and discussion are boxed in blue.

- Information about productions available on video
- Additional activity suggestions

---

Arizona State Standards and the Materials

These study materials will help teachers create lesson plans that support the following Arizona Common Core Standards:

- Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says (9-10.RL.1, 11-12.RL.1) through class discussion prompts, writing prompts, and staging activities.
- Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text (9-10.RL.2, 11-12.RL.2) through class discussion prompts and writing prompts.
- Analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful (9-10.RL.4, 11-12.RL.4) through writing prompts and the staging activity of Shakespeare's rhetoric.
- Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem ... evaluating how each version interprets the source text (11-12.RL.7) through class discussion prompts, staging activities, and seeing the Southwest Shakespeare production. (The talkback can also support this goal.)
- Use prewriting strategies to generate ideas, editing and rewriting (9-10.W.5, 11-12.W.5) through writing prompts.
- Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research (9-10.W.9, 11-12.W.9) through class discussion, writing prompts, and staging activities.
- Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussion, respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement (9-10.SL.1, 11-12.SL.1) through class discussion prompts and staging activities.
- Demonstrate effective speaking skills and behaviors for a variety of formal and informal purposes (9-10.SL.4, 11-12.SL.4) through class discussion and staging activities.

Opportunities in Assessing Performance

Because the play's rhetoric relies on argumentative persuasion, the following learning opportunities may apply:

- Demonstrate effective listening skills for a variety of purposes, and demonstrate understanding by critically evaluating and analyzing oral presentations. [What do we learn about the characters by the way they speak and what they say?]
- [Assess the] use of appropriate eye contact, body movements, and voice register for audience engagement in formal and informal speaking situations. [How does the actor embody and particularize the character and to what effect? How does the character behave privately and publicly?]
- Think critically about staging issues and how to translate Shakespeare's works from the page to the stage. [How are the large crowd scenes made clear so the relationships, action, and characterization develop appropriately? How are smaller private moments within large scenes handled? How are smaller scenes used in the play? How is the pace of the action adjusted or maintained?]
KING LEAR Fact Sheet

**Genre:** Tragedy

**Date of Composition:** 1605-6, after *Hamlet* and *Othello*, before *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*

**Source:** An earlier play, *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* (pre-1594) of unrecorded authorship is the primary source for the Lear plot line; it ends happily with Lear restored to his kingdom. King Leir comes from the fictive/legendary past of England, part of an effort to link its history with that of ancient Troy recorded by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1136). Tudor works such as *The Mirror for Magistrates* (1574) and Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1587, which Shakespeare often used) include and develop the Leir tale. The Gloucester plot line comes from Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* (1590).

**Textual Issues:** Two notably different versions of Shakespeare's King Lear exist: the First Quarto *History of King Leir* (1608), an often corrupt copy, and the First Folio text, *The Tragedy of King Lear* (1623), which cuts 300+ quarto lines, including an entire scene, perhaps to shorten the playing time, but also adds about 100 new lines. Whether these changes were Shakespeare's or his company's is uncertain, but the editorial tradition has combined the texts to include all the lines in a version Shakespeare would not have recognized.

**Length:** 3334 lines in conflated text, 67% verse, 33% prose

**Time and Setting:** BCE, pre-Roman England

**Longest Roles in Play:** Lear (697 lines), Edgar, Kent

**Plot:** Instead of dividing his kingdom equally between his three daughters and their husbands, as planned, King Lear's unexpected love contest ends with Cordelia banished without a dowry and married to the King of France, the protesting Kent also banished, while the kingdom is divided between Lear's two older daughters, Goneril and Regan, and their contentious husbands. Lear's expectation to keep his title evaporates as his daughters seize power, leaving him with few followers and no home; enraged, he runs into the storm and goes mad. Gloucester—who believes himself betrayed by his son Edgar through a lie told by his illegitimate, ambitious son Edmund—sends the king to Dover for safety. For this treasonous act, Regan and her husband blind him, and Edgar, fleeing disguised as a mad beggar, cares for his father in his despair and later kills his brother, who has prompted Goneril and Regan to die in jealous rivalry for his love. Cordelia returns and reconciles with her father, but her forces are defeated and her life taken on Edmund's order, in grief for which Lear dies.

**Language/ Words and Images:**

Major motifs:
- blindness/sight
- madness/stepping over the edge
- storm
- stripping away layers

Caroline Spurgeon notes that the play's verbs and imagery emphasize "buffeting, strain, and strife ... bodily tension to the point of agony" —wrenched, pierced, stung, slayed, gashed, broken.

Wolfgang Clemen argues that Shakespeare uses imagery a new way here, not as illustration but as direct vision. Expressions dense in imagery no longer appear only in monologues, but become, for Lear, "a characteristic form of utterance" as he turns inward and goes mad.

**Elements to Watch:**
- appearance and reality: disguise, actions
- use of blindness and sight; madness
- "edge of the cliff" moments
- questions of larger purpose in existence
- motivations/actions of power, lost power

"...unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal."
How Shakespeare Adapts His Sources in *King Lear*

What if the Harry Potter series ended with Voldemort winning? Or if Huckleberry Finn let Jim stay in slavery? Or if Grendel killed Beowulf? Impossible to conceive, shocking to consider, couldn't happen.

Welcome to the reaction of Shakespeare's audience on opening afternoon of *King Lear*. They know how the story ends—and then it doesn't. The jolt of Lear's last entrance for that crowd must have been seismic; it can still wrench even a knowing theatregoer. What if you're expecting smiles and a happy ending, as they were in the Renaissance? What is Shakespeare doing? Delving into the depths of tragedy. If Oedipus can re-enter blinded from his catastrophes, Lear can re-enter carrying the dead body of his youngest daughter.

The Original Story of King Leir

As Geoffrey of Monmouth (c. 1136) filled in the empty spaces of English history in an effort to link his world with ancient Troy, he added some legendary kings to the mix. One of these was Leir, whose story of three daughters, two bad and one good, shows its kinship with folk tales—we know that tale as "Cinderella."

In Geoffrey's version of the Leir story:

- we get the love contest for the largest share of the kingdom; Cordelia only says she loves him as a daughter should. He denies her a share but lets her marry the king of the Franks as he chooses all the daughters' husbands.
- Lear gives his other two sons-in-law half the kingdom now and half after his death, though they quickly rebel and take power.
- One son-in-law, Duke of Albania, takes Lear in with sixty knights, but after two years asks for fewer. The king goes to his other son-in-law, Duke of Cornubia, where within a year, Regan wants only five knights. Gonorilla refuses to take more than one.
- Lear goes to France, where Cordella and her husband mount an invasion that restores Lear to his throne, where he rules until his death three years later.
- Cordella rules Britain for five years, until her nephews overthrow her. She commits suicide when imprisoned.

What Shakespeare's Audience Expected

This Leir story was repeated in most Tudor chronicles, including the ones Shakespeare liked to use for his history plays. His major source, however, was an earlier Leir play: an unidentified author between 1588 and 1594 wrote *The True Chronicle History of King Leir*, which was registered for publication in 1594 but not published until 1605—perhaps because of the popularity of Shakespeare's new play.

- This earlier play has the happy ending of Lear's restoration to power.
- On the way it focuses on Cordella's plight, alone and imperiled until she is found by the French king and his comic sidekick disguised as palmer, intent on checking out Leir's daughter whom he might marry. He falls in love with her and woos her still in disguise; when she says she loves the palmer, he confesses his identity and marries her.
- Meanwhile Lear is driven from Gonorill's home and Regan hires a murderer to kill him. Frightened by a thunderstorm, the murderer only shows Leir his orders.
- Leir heads to France disguised as a sailor only to meet Cordella and her husband headed to England disguised as peasants. She recognizes Leir's voice and they reconcile. Their invasion restores Leir to the crown.

This play is not a tragic but descended from the medieval romance, an adventure tale full of imperiled love and focused on restoration.

Shakespeare's Changes

- He grabs the juicy bits, collapses the time frame (leaving out all the passing years, as he does in his history plays), and follows Lear's journey.
- He leaves Cordelia offstage from her banishment until her reunion with her father. The French king isn't seen again.
- Her story of isolation and need becomes Lear's story. Lear gets help but there are no comic sidekicks; the Fool is satiric and involved, not a buffoon.
- He changes the ending, picking up Geoffrey's later history of Cordelia's suicide and overlaying that coup with the invasion, so her army loses.
- He then explores Lear's experience of loss step by step and dramatizes a world in which such a thing could happen.
Thinking about the Shape of the Action

- Why do we get such onstage gore in Lear? Is it excessive, the equivalent of our arterial spray in films, a cheap thrill for the groundlings? or does it say something about these people and their values? Do we need that violence to get the point? Does it matter that we watch it (and that a servant intervenes, even at the cost of his life) rather than have it reported?
- Is Cordelia an antagonist, a protagonist, both? When and why?
- How much of the motivation and action of the play’s antagonists is covert? Why? What do they want, and why must they get it this way? How long have their needs and actions been building up in them?
- Chart and analyze how the Lear plot and Gloucester plot alternate and intersect. Why does Gloucester’s death occur offstage?

The Shape of Shakespeare’s King Lear

The action of both plot lines in King Lear plummets like Gloucester’s planned jump from Dover cliff. At the end of each parallel plot line, there is a brief moment of respite and reunion, but then it drops again to death.

Shakespeare artfully weaves the strands of these plots—the protagonist and antagonists of the Lear plot, the protagonists and antagonist of the Gloucester plot.

How Settings Shape the Action

- Act One starts at Lear’s, watching his fatal decisions and their aftermath at Goneril’s, plus the seed of Edmund’s betrayal.
- Act Two moves to Gloucester’s for the flight of Edgar and locking Lear out in the storm.
- Act Three is the great storm sequence, as Kent, the Fool, and Gloucester try to shelter Lear, discovering mad Tom (Edgar in desperate disguise), ending with Gloucester’s blinding and expulsion.
- Act Four shows Goneril and Regan vying for power and Edmund, plus Cordelia’s arrival with the French army. It peaks with the “Dover cliff” scene of Gloucester’s “jump” and his meeting mad Lear, followed by Lear’s reunion with Cordelia.
- Act Five is the battlefield where everyone loses what they value.

Inclusion/Exclusion

There is an inherent "who’s in" and "who’s out" to the action. Lear and Gloucester thrust themselves "out" of power without realizing it by doubting those who love them and trusting those who do not. The opportunists—Goneril, Regan, and Edmund—ruthlessly seize every chance to indulge their need for political and sexual power. Locking a desperate old man out in a torrent pales compared to blinding another on stage, two horrifyingly fast moments of theatre gore.

Edmund’s bastardy automatically puts him "out" of inheritance and title, even were he not the younger brother. But Shakespeare’s Richard III has no trouble gaining power from last birth position, so Edmund will try to claw his way into respectability.
The two cognate plotlines of *King Lear* involve children grasping for power and parents who jump to conclusions and wield their power impulsively. As a king, Lear believes he rules his world; in trying to establish a peaceful future he destabilizes and destroys that future as well as the present due to relationships that may have been shaped over decades. For his part, Edmund finds himself excluded but seeks a way to rule his world—and his father's estate—by displacing his brother. Hunger for power and recognition fuel the plotlines. Watch their similarities.

**King Lear and his Daughters**
- Lear plans to divide his kingdom and decides to offer the largest piece to the daughter who says she loves him most.
- Cordelia's wedding will take her to France.
- His plan goes awry when Cordelia chooses not to match her sister's "loving" lies.
- Lear acts hastily, disowning Cordelia, banishing Kent, and dividing his kingdom between Goneril and Regan.
- Once they get power, Goneril and Regan renege on their promises to Lear and lock him out of the castle in a storm.
- Lear's fury at such ingratitude matches the storm's intensity, then he begins to go mad.
- Cordelia has returned to defend her father and Kent tries to get him to her at Dover. Her sisters vie for Edmund and amass troops.
- Mad Lear meets blind Gloucester on the heath and "sees" how his world works; flees Cordelia's troops sent to find him.
- Cordelia reunited with her father, who asks her pardon.
- Cordelia and Lear are captured in battle; Edmund sends them to prison and orders them killed. Albany challenges Goneril. Goneril poisons Regan, then commits suicide after Edmund is wounded. Lear enters with Cordelia's body, hanged on Edmund's order, and dies.

**Gloucester and his Sons**
- Gloucester does not plan to divide his property; Edgar will inherit.
- He does plan to send Edmund, who is home after a long absence, away again.
- His plan goes awry when Edmund lies about Edgar's filial attitude.
- Gloucester acts hastily, threatening to arrest Edgar and pledging to make Edmund his heir.
- Edmund curries Cornwall's favor and betrays his father's plan to aid Lear; Cornwall promises Edmund the earldom.
- Gloucester is seized and blinded by Regan and Cornwall, then thrust out of his castle.
- Edgar, disguised as a mad beggar, sees his blinded father and leads him toward Dover. Regan sends Oswald to kill Gloucester.
- Gloucester thinks he jumps off Dover cliff; Edgar counsels him. Gloucester meets mad Lear on the heath, and Edgar defends his father from Oswald.
- Edgar gives Albany Goneril's letter to Edmund seeking Albany's death.
- Edmund fights unknown knight (Edgar) and is mortally wounded. Edgar tells of revealing himself to his father and of his father's death.

**For Analysis and Discussion**
- Compare Lear's character, attitudes, and experiences to Gloucester's.
- Watch how Shakespeare weaves the plot lines together—do they alternate or does one take precedence and then the other?
- Compare Lear to Edmund—shaping the world overtly and covertly to suit themselves.
- Compare Goneril and Regan to Edmund in terms of self-awareness, motives, lying, and ruthlessness.
- Compare Cordelia and Edgar in terms of character and actions.
- What is the balance of good and evil or selfishness to selflessness in the play? What is the sense of the ending?
The Major Motifs of Shakespeare’s *KING LEAR*

**Blindness/Sight**

Reality checks depend on recognizing what reality is; *King Lear* reminds us that act is not as easy as it may seem. Lear knows his regal reality; Gloucester knows he has his sons' love and respect. Both are, in fact, blind to their realities, but too soon they "see." "See better, Lear," Kent urges, trying to wake up Lear to prevent the banishment of Cordelia.

Gloucester, who has stood in the storm near his falsely accused son Edgar without recognizing him, chastizes Regan and Cornwall for locking Lear out: "But I shall see / The wingèd Vengeance overtake such children," a vow which triggers Cornwall's move to blind him, "See 't shalt thou never." Only through blindness do these men see; only in extremis can they come to terms with reality—with who loves them, how ambition lies and grasps, what is important in their lives and the world.

**The Storm**

Shakespeare scripts cataclysms in a number of his plays; they reflect the inner strife of protagonists' lives and worlds, such as the unnatural occurrences in the violent storm the night Macbeth kills Duncan, the storm that apparently costs Pericles his wife, the tempest that initiates Prospero's one magical chance to rejoin society.

Such meteorological humbling puts humanity amid forces larger than itself and for the sufferers in *Lear* often overlays questions of the gods or larger moral or amoral forces at work.

**Stripping Off Layers**

Costumers often highlight this motif in Lear's progression: he enters as the proud king in full regalia, then every time we see him he has lost not only a garment but some of his clout, men, and/or position until he is raging in the storm in his "shirt" or linen robe (like a long nightgown). Edgar parallels this motif, for his beggar disguise depends on his being in rags, often just a loincloth plus blotches of dirt and detritus. Shakespeare has us and some of the characters confront or become the "bare, forked animal" that is a human and see what comes of that moment. In a tragedy, it can be transforming.

**Madness**

Sanity, reason, and self-control serve as baselines of human existence; to lose one's mental gyroscope again questions reality and posits alternate realities.

In *Lear*, the king goes mad, but at the same time the actions of his older daughters and Edmund seem equally mad, a tunnel vision of selfish grasping for power and gratification of every desire. Are their actions "sane" and only Lear's "mad"?

Likewise, Edgar's mad beggar reflects Lear's disorientation, using the language of demon possession. What "demons" (motives and individuals) actually possess the world and lives of these people?

**The Edge of the Cliff**

Linking with the other motifs is the major moment of Gloucester's stepping off Dover cliff, for even if he is not actually at the cliff edge, he believes he is and takes that last step. Lear, without intending it, also steps off a cliff edge into a void of no longer being king or sane. His older daughters progressively take steps into power and desire and go beyond the bounds.

The destructive vein in the play runs deep: those who apparently win also lose; those who try to preserve themselves or their position sacrifice it.

Edgar turns the faux-Dover cliff experience into a teachable moment that we have to endure the apparent worst: "Why I do trifle thus with his despair / Is done to cure it," Edgar tells us.

**Exploring Motifs**

- The motifs saturate the play. They can appear in setting, costuming, action, character, and language. Watching the constellation of these motifs shows how widespread and key to the ideas and meaning they are.

- Exploring the motifs makes an effective individual or group project, especially for discussion and group presentation. Having more eyes and ears awaiting them in performance and considering them afterward, pursuing how they link to larger context of issues and actions in the tragedy, helps build a sense of how intricate and pervasive Shakespeare's artistry is.
Every meaningful quotation in the play draws meaning from its context in situation, character, and arc of action as well as its pungency and expression. Seek the meaning.

In 1.1, Lear begins the play with force:
- "Meantime we shall express our darker purpose." (1.1.36)
- "Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again." (1.1.88)

Lear: So young, and so untender?
Cordelia: So young, my lord, and true.
Lear: Let it be so! Thy truth then be they dower! (1.1.107-8)

Out of my sight!

Sith thus thou wilt appear,
Freedom lives hence and banishment is here. (1.1.158-9, 183-4)

His orders are met with a belated, simple testimony from Cordelia and a forceful argument from Kent, yet both obey his commands, however damaging. Might this scene develop differently if it were not public?

Edmund opens 1.2 with comparable force:
- "Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law My services are bound...." (1.2.1-2, 22)

After a scene of giving and decreeing, Edmund says he will not "permit" himself to be "deprived" by custom—such as law, morality, the tradition of patriarchy. What does he mean by "Nature"? His oath ends:
"Now, gods, stand up for bastards!" (1.2.1.2-22)

In helping that to happen, he in essence trades places with Edgar, pretending loyalty and painting Edgar as "bastard" and disloyal in his falsified letter: "If our father would sleep till I waked him, you should enjoy half his revenue..." (1.2.53-4). Once aroused, Gloucester calls Edgar "Unnatural, detested, brutish villain!" (1.2.78-9), continuing the array of meaning for what is "natural" (trace the word's use throughout the play) and ponders:
- **Gloucester:** He cannot be such a monster—
  **Edmund:** Nor is not, sure.

Gloucester: To his father, that so tenderly and entirely loves him...I would unstate myself to be in a due resolution. (1.2.96-9, 101-2)

Of course, un stating Gloucester is Edmund's plan and now his father pledges ironic aid. Seeking significance, Gloucester looks to astrology, and in so doing inadvertently sees the future: "We have seen the best of our time. Machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves" (1.2.115-7).

The next two scenes at Goneril's register the changed power and identities. She declares herself "not to be overruled" (1.3.17), and Lear opens 1.4 with "what art thou?" to disguised Kent (1.4.9) and then asks disdainful Oswald, "Who am I, sir?" and the idea echoes into his talk with the Fool, "Dost thou call me fool, boy?" As he confronts Goneril and gets no royal respect he declares brashly:

Does any here know me? This is not Lear.
Does Lear walk thus, speak thus? Where are his eyes?...
Who is it that can tell me who I am?

Fool: Lear's shadow. (1.4.223-4, 227)

This questioning of identity registers the shock of the change and leads to his complete loss of self in madness on the heath—loss of the old self, awakening to a clearer vision. Note, too, how the vision motif weaves in here. When Goneril crosses Lear, asking him to "disquaint" his train, he immediately calls her "degenerate bastard!" So the verbal element weaves into the ideas of the parallel plot lines, and Lear now calls on Nature himself in his curse:

Hear, Nature, hear! Dear goddess, hear!
Suspend thy purpose if thou didst intend To make this creature fruitful!... that she may feel


How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
To have a thankless child! (1.4.274-6, 286-8)

Albany spends the scene half a step behind, unaware of Goneril's plans until she enacts them. As she insults him for his "milky gentleness" (effeminacy), he wisely notes: "Striving to better, oft we mar what's well" (1.4.346). The Fool makes a comparable remark to Lear in the next scene: "Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise" (1.5.42). As the stripping motif begins in 1.1, wisdom is the first aspect cast away along with Cordelia and thus the first lamented along with her, as the Fool reiterates.

---

**Track the Echoes**

- Words such as "nothing" and "nature/natural" and ideas such as identity gain force as they recur in the play, moving between the plot lines and characters, weaving greater meaning and depth.

For instance, "nothing" is Cordelia's response that triggers Lear's disdain and banishment of her. When Edgar is forced suddenly to flee his home, his 2.3 soliloquy ends with a change in identity, "Poor Tom! / That's something yet. Edgar I nothing am" (2.3.21).

The very next action, Lear confronting Kent in the stocks early in 2.4, links to the identity theme: "What's he that hath so much thy place mistook / To set thee here?" (2.4.11-12).

Decide which other words have such meaningful echoes and track their use.
KING LEAR as a Political Tragedy

About Tragedy

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle suggests that tragedy deals with those of high position, like us or better in character. The fall of the great could serve as a cautionary tale, evoking pity and fear that such faults might occur in anyone. A tragic protagonist might fall through *hubris* (willful wrongdoing) or through *hamartia* (a fault or error). In classical tragedy, one could be fated by the gods to disaster, but more often the fall came from human choice.

In the Middle Ages, tragedy was often described in terms of blind(folded) Fortune and her ever-turning, seemingly fickle Wheel, so that all on high met a fall. In fact, to be on high meant being vulnerable to the next sudden turn or change. Fortune gets mention in *King Lear* as events complicate; Kent beseeches, "Fortune, good night. Smile once more; turn they wheel!" (2.2.176).

These concepts influenced ideas of tragedy in the Renaissance, and Shakespeare regales us with the fates and fortunes of kings and queens, triumvirs and consuls, generals and the nobles seeking their "rightful" positions. He also shows us the children of two wealthy families, the Capulets and the Montagues, a somewhat different approach to tragedy. In addition, during the Renaissance interest grew in domestic tragedy based on reported stories of household disasters such as a wife seduced by her husband's best friend—a Renaissance version of our reality television.

Interpreting the Politics of King Lear

Monarchy for the legendary King Lear was one-man rule, though a wise king always had and heeded trusted advisors. Lear, now over 80 ("fourscore and upward," 4.7.62), has apparently ruled for decades. He may not well remember a time when he has not been the one voice of rule. Now he is concerned for the future of his land, his kinship group from which the next king should be chosen being three daughters and their husbands.

In political terms the opening scene is both a change of command and a new alliance, another royal wedding. Gloucester notices the equal shares allotted to Albany and Cornwall, although Kent says, "I thought the king had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall" (1.1.1-2), so there’s no favoritism. As Lear clarifies, this careful division is made so "future strife / May be prevented now" (II. 64-65). Is he anticipating strife; has it perhaps already started?

The Political Conclusion?

The opening is fraught with political issues and questions—why things seem unstable in Lear’s kingdom: is it Lear? the system? the ambition of others?—but what is the resolution of these political concerns? An open war and the entire royal family dead. Now who will reign? Albany tries to give the crown to Kent and Edgar. Kent refuses; Edgar doesn’t answer. Does his having the play’s last speech mean he accepts? Who will rule Britain now?

Yet this idea of division has a number of political implications. One kingdom is now divided into three smaller regions—less for everyone. And since Cordelia’s suitors are both French, is giving her and hence the French a share of Britain part of the original deal or news once Lear gets started, part of his "darker purpose"? Since the matter has obviously been discussed with advisors, what’s the "darker" part suddenly? the division itself? the basis for dividing being the love contest? Lear makes authoritative, independent decisions here that redound on himself and the future kingdom(s). Is tragedy inherent in the idea of division itself? Will ambitious younger leaders be happy with one third or one half? Or will they each want to be number one and have it all? Is the division into three a buffering tactic, like the Romans used with the triumvirate? Does Lear’s default into halving the kingdom now doom the division to "future strife"?

Another interpretive issue is how in or out of control Lear is in this scene. Is the "retirement" his choice or his advisors? Could he continue to rule capably? Are his sons-in-law already becoming restive, vying for power?

Interpreting the Opening in Performance

This opening situation, given how fast the tragedy starts, poses an interpretive crux for critics but more so for performance. The question is: is it time or past time for this decision? Is Lear being responsible or should he already have stepped down, i.e. is he somehow in decline? Two productions that make clear choices on this score in their openings are Kurosawa’s *Ran* and the 2009 RSC *King Lear* with Ian McKellen. *Ran* is set in Shogunate Japan. Following a boar hunt the emperor falls asleep during a discussion amid growing dissent. Is this sleep old age—he cannot even stay awake to consider the important issues—or strategic—a way of buying time or making everyone else cool down? The others wait and then leave; only the Fool chops down some saplings to provide shade for the sleeping king.

McKellen as Lear in a more modern setting of braided uniforms and strapless gowns uses note cards to stay on point, shuffling them to find his place. Are the note cards his idea or his advisors’, letting him still seem to be in control?

What choices does Southwest Shakespeare make? How does this production use blocking, gesture, tone, and pace?

The Wheel of Fortune turning—notice that the wheel appears to turn over a chasm into which the lowest figure falls

Matters of State

- rule/ the crown
- knights/ military force
- allegiance/ sway/ authority
- power of king(s)/ divided kingdom(s)
- 2 vying kingdoms: within England/ England vs. France

Interpreting the Politics of our reality television.

The Political Conclusion?

The opening is fraught with political issues and questions—why things seem unstable in Lear’s kingdom: is it Lear? the system? the ambition of others?—but what is the resolution of these political concerns? An open war and the entire royal family dead. Now who will reign? Albany tries to give the crown to Kent and Edgar. Kent refuses; Edgar doesn’t answer. Does his having the play’s last speech mean he accepts? Who will rule Britain now?

Yet this idea of division has a number of political implications. One kingdom is now divided into three smaller regions—less for everyone. And since Cordelia’s suitors are both French, is giving her and hence the French a share of Britain part of the original deal or news once Lear gets started, part of his “darker purpose”? Since the matter has obviously been discussed with advisors, what’s the “darker” part suddenly? the division itself? the basis for dividing being the love contest? Lear makes authoritative, independent decisions here that redound on himself and the future kingdom(s). Is tragedy inherent in the idea of division itself? Will ambitious younger leaders be happy with one third or one half? Or will they each want to be number one and have it all? Is the division into three a buffering tactic, like the Romans used with the triumvirate? Does Lear’s default into halving the kingdom now doom the division to “future strife”?

Another interpretive issue is how in or out of control Lear is in this scene. Is the “retirement” his choice or his advisors? Could he continue to rule capably? Are his sons-in-law already becoming restive, vying for power?

Interpreting the Opening in Performance

This opening situation, given how fast the tragedy starts, poses an interpretive crux for critics but more so for performance. The question is: is it time or past time for this decision? Is Lear being responsible or should he already have stepped down, i.e. is he somehow in decline? Two productions that make clear choices on this score in their openings are Kurosawa’s *Ran* and the 2009 RSC *King Lear* with Ian McKellen. *Ran* is set in Shogunate Japan. Following a boar hunt the emperor falls asleep during a discussion amid growing dissent. Is this sleep old age—he cannot even stay awake to consider the important issues—or strategic—a way of buying time or making everyone else cool down? The others wait and then leave; only the Fool chops down some saplings to provide shade for the sleeping king.

McKellen as Lear in a more modern setting of braided uniforms and strapless gowns uses note cards to stay on point, shuffling them to find his place. Are the note cards his idea or his advisors’, letting him still seem to be in control?

What choices does Southwest Shakespeare make? How does this production use blocking, gesture, tone, and pace?
If the 20th century is any indication, totalitarian or despotic strong-man rule can be orderly but not benign. An autocrat can organize a Holocaust or genocide; he can dismantle a society and re-ideologize it; he can enrich the inner cadre and himself. Does he embrace "the least of these" in society? Does he better all lives? Apparently not. No checks, no balances. An "us" and "them" mentality seems to arise, and "they" are expendable. Violence is no obstacle, and efficiency demands automatic weapons, Zyklon B gas, slave labor, and will power.

In the play, the death toll covers most of two families; we never see the battles or that larger death toll. In our world, when super-tyrants rule, tens of millions die. In quite different ways, Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and Mao Zedong—the major 20th-century examples but far from the only ones—cut swathes through their countries. Hitler not only prompted World War II but undertook the Holocaust; between these actions about 34 million people died. Joseph Stalin purged his society, sending millions to death in the gulags; overall some 20 million died. While reforming the Chinese economy, Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward caused a famine that itself killed roughly 30 million Chinese. Other killings brought the total to about 40 million deaths.

By comparison, tyrants such as Pol Pot, whose state-led genocide in Cambodia slaughtered only 2 to 2.5 million people, can seem less consequential, but the globe was covered with such power figures across Africa, the Middle East, and Asia that re-defined Louis XIV's adage, "I am the State." As a result, the number of the "disappeared" mounted.

Driven by fear of economic instability and social change, whole societies fell prey to manipulation of the masses—emotional appeals, repetition of simplified ideas and catch phrases that promised answers, guarantees of ends without having to consider the means: a greater Germany, a greater Russia, a greater China, a greater domination. Underneath the promises, the army and secret services purged the opposition, the suspect, the vulnerable, the trusting. By providing one answer and enforcing it, societies changed but did not necessarily improve. The people got, as historians note, "powerful, prosperous, disciplined state[s]," but at the cost of their freedom, for justice, defense, bureaucracy, church all spoke with one voice, a voice that rarely revealed its actual agenda.

What the Modern World Offers King Lear

A modern setting offers the play's king a greater scope of power, a larger arsenal of firepower and influence, and more that ambition can seize, for now one can imagine controlling not just a large share of an island but the bulk of a continent. One can be a world power, could even aspire to being the world power. High stakes.

It also suggests vast responsibility—and recognition and responsibility are the core of tragedy for the protagonist. The fatal deed gets done; now how will the protagonist deal with the aftermath? Will he or she understand what happened and be able to own it? Some tragedies emphasize build-up to the moment; some the aftermath—Lear is that kind of play, all aftermath for the title character, though it offers build-up to their own crises for the antagonists.

For anyone with so much power, can the protagonist's motivation be hamartia, a mistake, an error? In this context, do we believe Lear is "more sinned against than sinning" when he loses power and is abandoned? Or does such power mean action is the result of choice and grasping for more, a willful action, and almost always involving wrongdoing? Is it inevitably hubris in such a setting? What do the lessons of recent history suggest?
**Unit 3: Tragedy and King Lear**

**Questions about Family**
- What is the effect of the wife’s/ mother’s seemingly long absence from Lear’s and the daughters’ lives? Has he or they been a greater burden on the other?
- Did all the daughters have the same mother? (The text does not tell us. Do we draw a conclusion?)
- How do the siblings view each other? What is their relationship when the action opens? How does the ending of 1.1 clarify their family bond? Does it offer us a glimpse of the past?
- How close and happy has the Lear family been? Was it ever close? Have the daughters’ growing up and marrying changed the family dynamic? Is the present a payback?
- What effect on family affairs is Lear’s position? Would they behave differently if he weren’t king? Or can inheritance issues sometimes reveal hidden truths or bring out the worst in families?

**KING LEAR as a Family Tragedy**

Whether a man has built a shoe shop from nothing or long been CEO of a major corporation, he will consider the fruits of his labor, the legacy of his efforts, and what will come of his business or realm once he steps down. The transition from present activity to the future may prove far more uncertain than anticipated. Perhaps he can be happy playing golf and enjoying the grandkids; perhaps he needs more.

Lear opens with the overlap of two major family moments—the father’s retirement after long years of responsibility and involvement in important matters and also the youngest daughter’s engagement announcement, one in which she does not yet know the name of her fiancé. Because the family is wealthy and of high social position, some realignment of responsibility and wealth is implied in such momentous decisions. The players all have a vested interest in the choices made, for all see themselves as standing to gain or lose by the results. No one wants to lose.

**Assumptions and New Issues**

With Dad stepping down and no mother in evidence, apparently for years (Lear seems more a man with daughters rather than a widower, though he is certainly that as well), he seems to be breaking up housekeeping or downsizing as well as curtailing his professional life. There is the question of where he will live and with whom, a question to which he has assumed the happy answer—with Cordelia. Once he disowns her, however, more plans must change; now he must live elsewhere, with his remaining two daughters, a possibility none of them had contemplated. Nonetheless, there it is:

> Ourself by monthly course,  
> With reservation of an hundred knights  
> By you to be sustained, shall our abode  
> Make with you by due turns. (1.1.32-35)

He assumes he will still be given a retinue, a following, someone with whom to share hunts and feasts, even without the means to pay for them.

**Family Matters**
- patriarchy
- influence on character/ psyches
- importance of husbands/ women with or without power
- elderly parent: who has power
- divided sons-in-law

**The Possibility of Remedy in the Tragedy**

In stepping away from power, Lear cannot quite give it all up. He needs to retain some vestiges of what he was, be seen as regal even if he no longer wants the responsibility or day-to-day tasks of the job. He stipulates:

> Only we shall retain  
> The name and all th’ addition to a king.  
> The sway, revenue, execution of the rest,  
> Beloved sons, be yours.....

He gives the power and money to others, but keeps the title. But what good is the title without the power or the revenue? He’ll find out.

So for the first time in decades, Lear puts himself in the power and at the mercy of others. Where Cordelia and Kent love and respect him and continue to treat him as he prefers, the others, at least Goneril, Regan, and Cornwall, prove increasingly bereft of mercy or the quality he counts on their having, gratitude. They see no need for gratitude: "in good time you gave it" (2.4.252), as if it were their due—and, in fact, overdue.

So the knights are asked to leave and their number whittled from 100 to zero ("What need one?") in that great whittling scene, 2.4, in which Lear enters as a king and from which he leaves with his psyche cracking and accompanied only by the Fool, though pursued by Kent and Gloucester. The major characters in the scene may be kin but they are no longer "family" in any positive sense of the word.

**In terms of power and support, the French army cannot remedy what Lear has lost; only Cordelia can give him a loving daughter. The 4.7 reunion scene is the one redemptive moment in the long descent of the play’s action; the two are finally together and have forgiven the earlier breach without blame. They now want the future they once thought they had, yet because they are in a tragedy they will not get it. It seems comparatively little to ask in the scope of the conflict, but it is more than the action can grant. Only death can end this tragedy.**

---

**An illustration of the sisters parting at the end of 1.1**
Looking at Lear—King, Father … and Madman

Lear in His Daughters’ Eyes
Lear does not begin to analyze himself or his behavior and actions until well into Act 3. To that point he sees himself as the victim of others’ ingratitude—the word echoes through Acts 1 and 2. But his daughters offer insight into his character in Act 1, if we believe them.

“Which of you shall we say doth love us most, / That we our largest bounty may extend / Where nature doth with merit challenge,” Lear demands (1.1.51-3). Goneril and Regan respond adroitly and dishonestly to this sudden command to demonstrate their “merit” even if concealing their true “nature.” Their rhetorical comparatives and superlatives about loving Lear “more” and “most” please Lear but stymie Cordelia, who cannot “say” so much in this way: “What shall Cordelia speak?” (l. 62). Two can talk but not do; one can do but at the moment does not talk.

Why doesn’t Cordelia placate her father’s perhaps understandable moment of insecurity (and why else would someone ask for a public declaration of love?). She chooses to say nothing. Why? Is she apologetic or defiant in her “nothing”? Is she disgusted that Lear seems pleased and taken in by her sisters’ shallow show? Is her love really something she has no words for, but slowly works to express:

You have begot me, bred me, loved me. I Return those duties back as are right fit, Obey you, love you, and most honor you.

The truth behind those words permeates the play, but Lear does not or cannot hear them. He hears only the “nothing.” What kind of man in what kind of need would set up such a contest and then respond this way against everything their lives have attested? What kind of horrible disconnect happens here? Do we think this is typical or a radical disjuncture?

Cordelia bares her verbal nails to her sisters on her exit: “I know you what you are, / And like a sister am most loath to call / Your faults as they are named.” So people talk about her older sisters, apparently not nicely. Goneril coldly responds, “You have obedience scanted, / And well are worth the want that you have wanted.” No love lost there. Do we have three catty women, or has their family dynamic with Lear contributed to their dysfunction? Have they long lived a “love contest” that Cordelia has always previously won?

The Force of Will
Lear decrees how things will be; as king he has that power. How many other characters in the play try to make things the way they want them by sheer force of will (and some scheming)? Is this the only option?

When alone, Goneril and Regan discuss their father: “You see how full of changes his age is…,” citing his “poor judgment” in his decision about Cordelia that benefitted them, and now they anticipate only “the unruly waywardness that infirm and choleric years bring with them” (1.1.292, 294-5, 301-2). “‘Tis the infirmity of his age. Yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself”, Regan observes (ll. 296-7). They are not looking forward to caregiving for their elderly parent. Are their challenges typical or not?

The Socratic watchword: know thyself.
What happens if Lear does not know himself and the action of the play gives him that information? Can we view the action as a set of lessons in the school of very hard knocks? Is it easy to learn at his age? How might it feel to realize you have been wrong or blind all your life? What kind of ruler of his own life has Lear been?

Using the "lose one's life to gain it" principle, Lear loses his sanity in order to gain a clearer perception of his rule, other people, and himself. Only on the heath after asking the gods to destroy humanity and declaring, “I am a man / More sinned against than sinning” does he pause to see the Fool shivering in the storm and say, “How does, my boy? Art cold? / I am cold myself.—Where is this straw?” (3.2.68-9). Having experienced the blast and at last found shelter, he pauses and considers others:

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? O, I have ta'en
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp; Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel, That thou mayst shake the superflux to them And show the heavens more just.

(3.4.28-36)

From this point, though the madness takes Lear on a longer journey than his way to Dover, Lear can see the world anew. He finally sleeps and awakes to more settled spirit and clearer sight—and then he sees Cordelia for what she truly is. Valuing what he had thought forever lost, this promise of a second chance restores Lear, and having it snatched from him again by violence is enough to break his heart.
Renaissance Aspects of *KING LEAR*: Fools and Madmen

To analyze the full extent of the play's portrayal of humanity, we need to consider the Renaissance view of fools and madmen, for we now use these terms somewhat differently than they did in the early 17th century.

**The Renaissance Fool**

A fool could be a term of pity or endearment in the Renaissance, as Lear's "and my poor fool is hanged" is if it refers to Cordelia (5.3). It also has the usual meaning of dupe or victim, as Kent accuses Oswald of being: "None of these rogues and cowards / But Ajax is their fool" (2.2). Yet it also means, according to Onions's glossary, in terms no longer used today, "a born idiot," and the term idiot is used interchangeably with fool in this regard.

A fool in this sense is someone who was born or who has become mentally or physically challenged. Such people were often outcasts of Renaissance society; their comments were taken as laughably simple, but also at times seen as having a penetrating truth. They could be left to local care (minimal) or find ways to endear themselves, becoming entertainers. Thus the profession of "fool" had two branches—the "natural fool," the challenged individual who was tolerated for his very simplicity and vulnerability and sometimes seen as being "touched" ["tetched" in the parlance still heard in the South] by God, or the "professional" who played this role along with tumbling and juggling and who found an occupation among the servants in great houses and royal courts, becoming well known as he (or she) joked with or critiqued those in power. Such fools were "regarded as pets or mascots," coddled and punished depending on how well they pleased.

In 1598 the Lord Chamberlain's Men, of which Shakespeare was a member and sharer [part owner], lost its principal comedian, Will Kempe, who specialized in clown or rustic roles. The company hired Robert Armin, who had quite a different skill set—he was a singer and a quick wit who could play the professional fool, and so Shakespeare began in *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, to feature such characters as Touchstone and Feste, the court fools. Though many of Shakespeare's tragedies have comic elements, *King Lear* is the only tragedy to feature a fool.

But which kind of fool should he be? Theatre tradition varies, with some playing natural fools and some professionals, wearing the full regalia of motley coat, hood, bells, and carrying a bauble. The role takes on varying colors and implications depending on the interpretation and relationship with Lear.

**Madness**

The Renaissance viewed deranged or mad people not so much as in need of medical care as subjects for the amusement of others. For several hundred years, mad people who were non-violent were forced onto the roads to beg their keep, for the shires and parishes did not want the burden of their care. The violent were kept from harming themselves or others under conditions that were more like being jailed.

Two other famous Renaissance plays feature scenes of mad characters, both involving antics and "shows" they perform for others, Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* and Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling*. The public display of the mad occurs in both plays, and in that era dropping by the local madhouse to take in a bit of the spectacle was as common as driving through McDonald's is in our day.

The role of Tom o’ Bedlam that Edgar takes on would provide him cover because seeing the mad roaming the countryside begging was common in his society. (Bedlam was the truncated pronunciation of Bethlehem Hospital in London, which treated mental patients.) No one would give such a beggar a second glance—which is the point of hiding in plain sight, just as the homeless often go unseen in our society. His ravings would be half-heard but not heeded, and he might have kinship with the Fool.

**Discussing this Topic**

- Lear's Fool is loyal, truthful, protective, and also vulnerable and low in status. Consider the implications of these traits for each kind of fool he might be and what difference the choice might make.
- Does which kind of fool Lear's Fool is affect why he disappears from the text and often from the performance after 3.6?
- How do we understand Edgar's role as Mad Tom and the response he gets from those who meet him? Others cast him aside but Lear heeds him. Is this part of Lear's recognition that even the least of humanity may deserve to be seen and heard?
- Do we "see" the homeless in our world?
Looking at the Younger Generation

As the Wife of Bath, Goneril, and Regan would all agree, the answer to the question "what do women want" is sovereignty—and a young man; here, that young man is Edmund, who is seeking his own route to power.

The action of the play begins with decisions, life-changing decisions, so we have to pick up the background information from clues, such as the noticeable difference between the way Goneril and Regan address their father in the "contest" and how the discuss him in private. Their "complete" love is, in truth, very little love, just as Edmund's protests of concern and affection to his father and brother only conceal his devotion to Nature and the survival of the fittest, which is what he considers himself—the most conniving, the one who can maneuver himself to get what he wants.

This trio of characters drives the action through the middle and end of the play while their parents suffer and learn or change. At the end Goneril and Regan are in bitter rivalry for Edmund's love and willing to go to any lengths, including murder, to prevent the other from gaining it. Apparently, when they have no further external rivals or need to curry royal favor, they turn on each other; theirs was an uneasy alliance at best.

Cornwall's death results from a moment that contrasts the lord's values with a servant's. Servants and followers (Gloucester's servants and tenant, Kent, Gloucester himself for Lear, Lear's godson Edgar) show concern and compassion; those in power show none. Thus Lear's recognitions have a sharp reality as we watch obliviousness and disdain in the mighty.

By contrast, Albany questions, thinks, and begins to step away from sanctioning his wife's actions even by the end of the first act. He continues to confront her or challenge her values and decisions, and when he has her letter to Edmund he challenges her fidelity. Her insults bring strong critiques in return. However we perceive him in the early scenes, he seems to enhance or clarify his integrity as the play progresses.

Thinking about the Antagonists

- Through much of the play, the antagonists—Goneril, Regan, and Edmund—have the active roles and their parents and siblings reactive roles. Do we begin to perceive or understand why the antagonists behave as they do, or do we just label them as bad or evil and move on? Does Shakespeare give their motives and characters depth? Are their personal reasons for their actions?
- In this regard, because of his 1.2 soliloquy, do we understand Edmund differently or in more depth than we understand Lear's daughters in the early scenes? Why does he feel as he does? Do we understand his decision making? His desires for power and love? How do we assess his choices?
- Of the principal characters in the parallel plots, only Edgar survives the last scene. How do we assess each death and the array of deaths at the end? Where does the tragedy leave us?

Cornwall's death results from a moment that contrasts the lord's values with a servant's. Servants and followers (Gloucester's servants and tenant, Kent, Gloucester himself for Lear, Lear's godson Edgar) show concern and compassion; those in power show none. Thus Lear's recognitions have a sharp reality as we watch obliviousness and disdain in the mighty.

By contrast, Albany questions, thinks, and begins to step away from sanctioning his wife's actions even by the end of the first act. He continues to confront her or challenge her values and decisions, and when he has her letter to Edmund he challenges her fidelity. Her insults bring strong critiques in return. However we perceive him in the early scenes, he seems to enhance or clarify his integrity as the play progresses.
Some 20th-Century Critics on *King Lear*

- **A. C. Bradley**: Character generates deeds, and the central feeling of Shakespeare's tragedy is waste. Despite the disadvantageous subplot that complicates the structure and the array of improbabilities, the play has a sense of vastness. *Lear* is universal rather than particular in its sense of good and evil. What chance have weakness and innocence in this world?

- **Granville-Barker**: Lear's progress is a dissipation of egoism. His supreme moment, his turning point, is when he kneels to pray in the storm.

- **G. Wilson Knight**: The play works out the problems of human suffering and human imperfection. "Man's ethics, his show of civilization, are surface froth only. The deep instinctive currents hold their old course, in earth, beast, and man. Man's morality, his idealism, his justice—all are false and rotten to the core." The play is a kind of purgatory.

- **Spencer**: "This stripping off of layers of appearance to arrive at the bare truth is the final and tragic expression of that common Shakespearean theme which derides all affection, ... which questions the validity of ceremony, ... which tries to describe man as he really is." In *Lear*, goodness has to hide.

- **Heilman**: For Lear and Gloucester, physical and material loss is spiritual gain.

- **Maynard Mack** sees the structure of Renaissance tragedy involving a protagonist undergoing a cycle of change, often a psychic change: the hero is established in context with an opposing voice; then the hero tends to become his own antithesis and to undergo a tragic journey, until near the end he recovers or there is a synthesis.

More Recent Views of Tragedy

- One view, such as George Steiner's, argues that "in the very excess of his suffering lies man's claim to dignity. Powerless and broken ... he assumes a new grandeur.... In the final moments ..., a fusion of grief and joy, of lament over the fall of man and of rejoicing in the resurrection of his spirit."

- On the other hand, J. W. Lever argues socio-politically: "We are not greatly concerned with the characters as individuals.... In Jacobean tragedy it is not primarily the conduct of the individual, but of the society which assails him, that stands condemned" and that "in the present-day world the most urgent study of mankind would seem to be not the eternal human condition, but the prospect of survival in the face of impersonal power drives."

Discussing Tragedy

- Which, if any, view of tragedy and Lear do you agree with and why?
- What makes an action truly tragic and not just sad or unfortunate?
Studying Productions of *King Lear*

The stage history of *King Lear* shows how changing aesthetics and literary values affect a play. Scholars assume Richard Burbage, the leading actor of the King's Men, played the king. Few performances of it are recorded prior to 1642 when the theatres were closed, and only a few once the theatres re-opened following the Restoration in 1660, when Thomas Betterton, the era's leading actor, played the title role.

**Tate's *King Lear***

The Restoration brought back neoclassical values from France, where the court had been in exile during the civil war and interregnum of the 1640s-'50s. These values privileged classical principles such as the unities of action, place, and time as well as decorum and verisimilitude (meaning ideals of behavior and class should be observed in characterization). Many of Shakespeare's plays seemed to sprawl untidily across time and space and to need more credible motivation. Nahum Tate undertook a major revision of *King Lear* to bring it into line with neoclassical tastes, rewriting much of the play and rearranging it. His version opens with Edmund's "Nature" soliloquy, gives Cordelia a confidante, and cuts the Fool.

He re-wired the play from a tragedy to a romance, making Edgar and Cordelia a young couple in love. By the end, their love is rewarded, since Cordelia does not die in this version, nor do Lear or Gloucester. As in the chronicle play, *Lear* again had a happy ending. In one form or another, this version of *King Lear* held the stage from 1681 to 1847.

**Getting Back to Shakespeare***

Other actor-managers, such as Garrick, included more of Shakespeare's verse, but Shakespeare's ending was not seen again until Edmund Kean tried it in 1823, apparently unsuccessfully, and William Charles Macready in 1834. Yet to appear was the Fool, who had to wait until 1838, and Shakespeare's scene order, restored by Samuel Phelps in 1845. The Victorian era emphasized the play's spectacle, and only in the twentieth century did the conflicts resume the spotlight.

**Six Notable Productions Available on Video***


- Grigory Kozintsev's 1971 black-and-white Russian film, a socialist interpretation emphasizing the needs of the masses, whose mute presence frames the action. Yuri Jarvet stars, a king dwarfed by his children and court and happy to sport with his fool.

- The BBC's 1982 made-for-television *Lear* directed by Jonathan Miller, with Michael Hordern, is staged sparsely on a platform with curtain backdrops as if at the Globe.

- Laurence Olivier played an age-appropriate Lear for Thames Television in 1983 in a Stonehenge-like setting. All-star English cast includes Diana Rigg and John Hurt.

- Akira Kurosawa's *Ran* [Chaos], a brilliant 1985 adaptation of the play to feudal Japan. With three sons and their wives in an inheritance battle, Hidetora (the Lear character) endures the violence of a dynastic power struggle he cannot control.

- The more recent 2007 RSC stage version starring Ian McKellen in an Edwardian setting and directed by Trevor Nunn, filmed for television in 2009. Streams free on the PBS website @ http://www.pbs.org/wnet/gperf/episodes/king-learner/watch-the-play/487/
Additional Student Activities for **KING LEAR**

**Become A Chronicler!**
- Take the persona of someone chronicling the events in the play and write your blog or Facebook posts of the events and issues
- OR take the persona of a major character in the play and write your blog or Facebook posts of the events and issues.
What would be the best hashtags for your persona character in each act of the play?

**Popular Entertainment Then and Now**
- Compare *King Lear* to *Game of Thrones*, *House of Cards*, or any other popular politically-based film or television series. Are their issues our issues? Is their behavior our behavior? Is their politics our politics?

**Design**
- Design a poster for the show aimed at piquing the attention and interest of your fellow students.
- Design a poster for the show using only one graphic element—why choose that one?

**Individual**
- Lear deals with the loss of identity—for Lear, for Edgar, for Gloucester. What does it mean not to be who you were? What is our identity based on? Home? Family? Income or status? Faith? How did Hurricane Katrina or Sandy affect the identity of people living in the 9th Ward of New Orleans or near the shore in New York City and New Jersey? How has the economic crisis affected the identity of people who have lost jobs, homes, and more? Can such change happen? Who do we become then?
- How is power negotiated between generations—young adults and their parents or parents and their aging parents—and how does that power or relationship change?

**Analyzing King Lear Page and Stage**
- Compare/contrast 1.1 to 2.4, watching who is in charge in each scene, how the power figure(s) and those being addressed respond, and how actions evolve or devolve in the course of each scene. How do the scenes work as important steps in the play's tragic progression? Is Lear the only one " rushing into a storm" in the play?
- Lear is mad in the storm, but at what point does he show signs of this instability? Is 2.4 the trigger, or is it earlier—at Goneril's? Or even 1.1? What difference might it make how and when we perceive Lear as mad or unstable? How might that affect our view of him and of his daughters? Or our view of the decision to transfer power to others?
- When Shakespeare stages a storm, it seems to be of near apocalyptic proportions—an F-5 tornado or hurricane, a supercell thunderstorm, something that can do real damage. How do we see nature's force? Is it directed at humanity as a judgment or punishment? Lear asks the gods to heighten the storm to eradicate humanity, as has occurred in many mythic traditions, especially by flood. Is man alone or judged in this play?

---

**Tragedy and Comedy**
- If you also see Southwest Shakespeare's performance of *As You Like It* this season, how do Rosalind's and her father's banishment and Orlando's flight compare to Lear's lockout, Cordelia's banishment, and Edgar's flight? Do they change or benefit from their experiences? Why is some banishment comic and some tragic?
- If you saw Southwest Shakespeare's performance of *The Taming of the Shrew* last season, compare its dysfunctional family dynamic of father and daughters—and those daughters' marriages or routes to marriage—with those in *King Lear*. Shrew, like Lear, deals partly with the concept of obedience; how many other points and issues overlap between the plays? How is tragedy different from comedy in treating them?

---

**Henry Irving as King Lear (1892)**
with a "vigorous" gray beard; this production cut the blinding of Gloucester