



THE CLASSICAL THEATRE OF HARLEM, Inc.

KING LEAR

The title "KING LEAR" is rendered in a stylized, metallic, three-dimensional font. The letters are jagged and sharp, with a blue and gold color scheme. The text is set against a dark, textured background that appears to be a close-up of a person's face with a beard, partially obscured by the title.

STUDY GUIDE

Prepared for Classical Theatre of Harlem's production of *King Lear*
by Debra Cardona, Dramaturg



James Barry: *King Lear Weeping over the Dead Body of Cordelia* (1786-88) Tate Gallery, London

KING LEAR: THE PLOT

The elderly King Lear has decided to retire and divide his kingdom among his three daughters, Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia. He makes his announcement at a court ceremony, where he will also decide which of Cordelia's two suitors — the Duke of Burgundy or the King of France — will be given her hand in marriage.

In order to get their share of the kingdom, Lear's daughters must tell him which of them loves him the most. The oldest, Goneril, gives an impressive declaration of love. Lear is pleased and gives her a third of the kingdom. His second daughter, Regan, outdoes Goneril. Lear is delighted and gives her a third as well. Lear then asks his youngest and favorite daughter, Cordelia, what she has to say in order to receive the richest third of the kingdom. Cordelia, disgusted with the insincere answers of her greedy sisters, replies: "Nothing."

Lear flies into a rage and disinherits Cordelia, ordering his other two daughters and their husbands, the Dukes of Albany and Cornwall, to split the final third between them. The Earl of Kent, Lear's closest

advisor, tries to intervene, but Lear banishes him for his interference. Now that Cordelia has no dowry, the Duke of Burgundy is unwilling to marry her, but the King of France, moved by Cordelia's beauty and honesty, gladly accepts her as his wife. Lear announces that he will split his time between his remaining daughters, spending a month with each, accompanied by a hundred knights. Goneril and Regan are not pleased with this and decide to join forces against their father.

The Earl of Gloucester, meanwhile, becomes the victim of a cruel plot by his illegitimate son, Edmund, who dupes him into thinking that Edmund's brother, the legitimate Edgar, is planning to kill the Earl in order to take his title and property immediately, rather than waiting for his father's eventual death. Edmund then tricks his brother into fleeing. Edgar disguises himself as a mad beggar, Poor Tom, and goes into hiding.

King Lear spends the first month with Goneril and her husband, the Duke of Albany. During his first weeks there Lear's Fool constantly uses his biting

wit to remind Lear of the magnitude of his folly, the banished Kent returns in disguise in order to serve to the King, and Goneril complains bitterly about the havoc caused by Lear's knights. The incensed daughter, backed up by her insolent servant, Oswald, disrespects the King at every turn. She then demands that he cut his entourage in half. Lear roundly curses her and storms out, declaring that he will stay instead with Regan. Goneril sends Oswald with a letter to her sister informing her what has happened and warning her that Lear is on his way.

Lear is disappointed by Regan's reception. She insists that he return to Goneril since she is not prepared to take care of Lear and his retinue. Goneril, in the meantime, has turned up for a showdown with her father. The sisters order Lear to dismiss all of his knights. In a fury, Lear leaves and finds himself in the middle of a thunderstorm with only Kent and the Fool for company. Kent finds them some shelter in a hovel, where they discover mad Poor Tom — the hiding Edgar. The trauma of Lear's rejection by his daughters, the realization that he has

now lost everything, and the violence of the storm, all begin to drive the king into insanity. Gloucester seeks them out and offers them a place to spend the night and supplies Lear and Kent with the means to get to Dover, where an army from France, headed by Cordelia, has landed in order to restore Lear to his throne.

Edmund, who has curried favor with the Duke of Cornwall, tells him of Gloucester's plan to aid Lear. Cornwall accuses Gloucester of treason and gouges out his eyes. When one of Cornwall's servants protests this cruel act, the two fight and are killed. Regan finds this most convenient: She fancies Edmund and now plans to have him take her husband's place.

The eyeless Gloucester is thrown out onto the moors to fend for himself, where he is found by Edgar.

Still speaking in Poor Tom's voice so that his father will not know him, he leads him to Dover, where Gloucester asks to be placed on a cliff so that he may throw himself from the precipice. Edgar prevents the suicide by leading him to a small mound instead. Then, using yet another disguised voice, he tricks Gloucester into thinking he has miraculously survived the fall. The two encounter the now mad King Lear, who is later found by Cordelia's men and delivered into her care. Cordelia and Lear have a bittersweet reunion.

Goneril's servant Oswald comes upon Edgar and his father and attempts to murder Gloucester.

Edgar kills his attacker. On the dead body he finds a letter from Goneril to Edmund, now Earl, in which she declares her love for him and confesses her plans to murder her husband so that they will be free to marry. Edgar finds the Duke, gives him the letter, and tells him a champion will appear to fight Edmund when he commands the trumpets to sound three times. Edgar then reveals his identity to his father, who is happily reunited with his son, but dies from the shock.

Cornwall's troupes defeat the French army and capture Lear and Cordelia. Edmund orders them both to be hanged. Regan announces that she will marry Edmund, causing the jealous Goneril to poison Regan's drink, killing her. Albany accuses Edmund of teachery and has the trumpets sound three times. Edgar appears masked and the brothers fight. Edmund is mortally wounded. Goneril, confronted with the letter, commits suicide. After learning Edgar's identity, Edmund confesses his guilt and sends someone to stop the hanging of Cordelia and Lear — but it is too late for Cordelia. Lear enters carrying her lifeless body and dies in her arms of a broken heart. Kent vows to follow Lear in death, and Albany and Edgar are left to restore the kingdom.



Photo by Jill Jones

Christina Sajous as Cordelia and André De Shields as Lear

WHO'S WHO IN *KING LEAR*



Lear:
King
of Britain



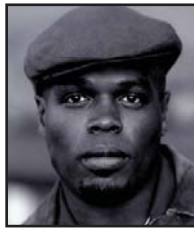
Edgar:
Gloucester's
older, and
legitimate, son



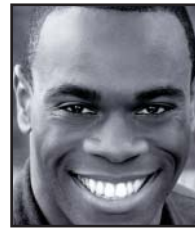
Duke of
Burgundy:
Suitor to
Cordelia



Goneril:
Lear's eldest
daughter



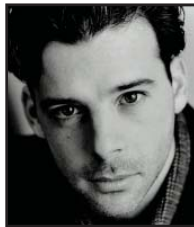
Edmund:
Gloucester's
younger, and
illegitimate, son



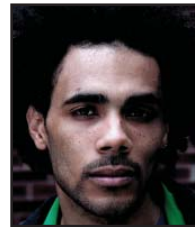
King of
France:
Suitor to
Cordelia



Regan:
Lear's middle
daughter



Duke of
Albany:
Husband of
Goneril



Musician and
member of
Lear's train



Cordelia:
Lear's
youngest
daughter



Duke of
Cornwall:
Husband of
Regan



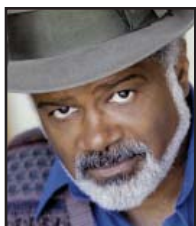
Servant,
Herald, and
member of
Lear's train



Earl of Kent:
Lear's
advisor



The Fool:
Lear's jester



Earl of
Gloucester:
Father of Edgar
and Edmund



Oswald:
Goneril's
servant

HOW DOES SHAKESPEARE THINK THIS STUFF UP?

The Origins and History of Shakespeare's Greatest Play

The tale of King Lear and his daughters was already well known by Shakespeare's audience at the time of its first performance for King James I at Whitehall on December 26, 1606. The popular tale existed in many forms, including plays, poems, essays, and a number of histories of Great Britain. Shakespeare's two most direct sources are the 1605 published script of *The True Chronical History of King Leir and his Three Daughters*, a play first performed in the 1590s, and Raphael Holinshed's *The Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Irelande* — an important source of material for several of Shakespeare's plays, including *Macbeth*.

The Sources

The earliest source of the story of Lear is Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, written in the 12th century. In this history Leir (Lear) is a king of Britain based in Leircestre (Leicester), who is said to have ruled circa 800 BC. According to this account, Leir has a contest to see which of his daughters loves him the most. Gonerilla (Goneril) and Regau (Regan), after their declarations, are married to the Dukes of Albania (Albany) and Cornwall. Cordeilla (Cordelia) refuses to declare her love and is disinherited. Aganippus, King of Gaul (France), asks for her hand in marriage despite her change of fortune. The two older daughters overthrow Leir who, penniless and ragged, sails for France. When Cordeilla hears what has happened to her father, she gives him money, clothing, and servants, then raises an army and fights to get his kingdom back. She succeeds, and Leir reigns until his death. Cordeilla inherits the throne, but only serves a few years before being deposed and imprisoned by the sons of Gonerilla and Regau. Consumed by despair, Cordeilla commits suicide.

Although the name of Lear's youngest daughter in many of these earlier tellings of the story is Cordella or Cordeilla, Shakespeare may have gotten his spelling — Cordelia — from Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, which was published in 1590. In Spenser's version, as in Shakespeare's, Cordelia dies by hanging. The subplot of Gloucester and his sons was inspired by Philip Sydney's *Arcadia*, published in 1590. His characterization of Edgar as Poor Tom was influenced by the descriptions of demonic possession in Samuel Harsnett's 1603 pamphlet *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*. The storm scene may have had its roots in *The Chronical History of King Leir*. In it the two elder daughters hire an assassin to dispatch their father, but the killer is frightened off when lightning and thunder begin to shake the heavens just as he is about to commit the egregious deed. These are just a few of the many possible sources for Shakespeare's play.

M. William Shak-fpeare:

HIS
True Chronicle Historie of the life and
death of King L E A R, and his three
Daughters.

With the vnfortunate life of Edgar, sonne
and heire to the Earle of Gloster, and his
fullen and affumed humor of
T O M of Beclam :

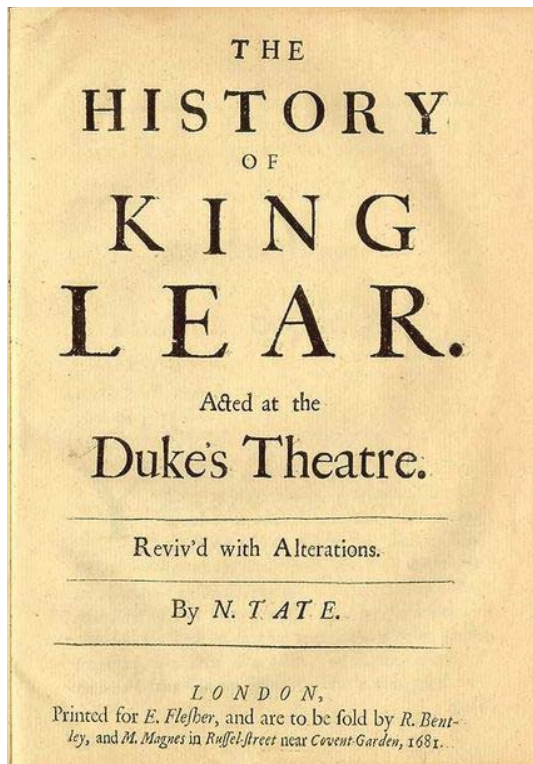
As it was played before the Kings Maiestie at Whitehall upon
S. Stephens night in Christmas Hollidays.

By his Maiesties seruantes playing vniually at the Gloabe
on the Bancke-side.



L O N D O N,

Printed for Nathaniel Butser, and are to be sold at his shop in Pauls
Church-yard at the signe of the Plide Bull neere
St. Dunstons Gate. 1 6 0 8.



Nahum Tate's "Improvement" of *King Lear*

The horrific and tragic ending of Shakespeare's *King Lear* caused many problems, especially during the Restoration, many years after Shakespeare's death. His ending was surely quite different than the more satisfying ones in earlier versions of the story in which Lear was restored to his throne. Some distinguished critics, basing their opinions on reading the play (which they had never seen performed), thought it not fit to be staged.

Dr. Johnson thought the blinding of Gloucester too much to be displayed to an audience. Tolstoy called it "unnatural." Samuel Coleridge wrote, "I was many years ago so shocked by Cordelia's death, that I know not whether I ever endured to read again the last scenes of the play till I undertook to revise them as an editor."

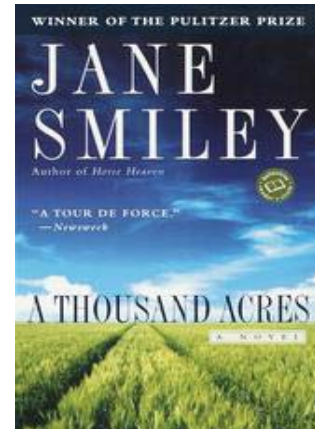
In 1681 Nahum Tate revised Shakespeare's text, making it, he believed, more acceptable to an audience. He considered *King Lear* "a heap of jewels, unstrung and unpolish't." The play, he thought, worked against the rules of probability and poetic justice. Tate modified some of Shakespeare's plot, constructing a secret love affair between Edgar and Cordelia, so that her refusal to profess her love and obedience to her father would not trap her into being forced into a marriage with the Duke of Burgundy. It also gave Edgar a more positive motive for disguising himself — to shadow and protect Cordelia. Tate did not like the role of the Fool, and completely omitted it, however he reinforced the idea that the storm scenes serve as a kind of dark night of the soul for the King. He invented a happy ending in which Edgar and Cordelia are betrothed, Lear restored to his kingdom, and the moral of the story is that evil men and women are punished and "truth and virtue shall at last succeed." Tate's *King Lear* was performed until the 1800s.

Edmund Kean restored the tragic ending, but would not restore the role of the Fool, possibly because he believed that comedy and tragedy should not be mixed. William Macready restored the role in 1838, casting a 19-year-old girl in the role. Because Cordelia and the Fool never appear in a scene together (the Fool does not make his first appearance until after Cordelia leaves Lear's kingdom and vanishes just before Lear and Cordelia are reunited) and as Lear holds the dead Cordelia in his arms he says, "And my poor fool is hanged," it was thought by some that the role could have been played in Shakespeare's time by the same actor. From what we know about Robert Armin, who originated the role of the Fool and was Shakespeare's regular clown, however, it would be unlikely that he would ever have played a convincing tragic heroine.

FUN FACTS

***King Lear* is still being adapted!**

Jane Smiley's novel *A Thousand Acres*, sets the story of Lear and his daughters on a farm in Iowa. It is also a 1997 film starring Michelle Pfeiffer and Jessica Lange.



***King Lear* on Film**

King Lear (1971): Peter Brook's version, shot bleakly in black and white, captures on film the performance of Paul Scofield, considered one of the best Lears in history.

Ran (1985): Akira Kurosawa's Japanese masterpiece gave Lear three sons instead of daughters.

Korol Lir (1969): This Russian film by Grigori Kozintsev, with music by Dmitri Shostakovich, is considered one of the best adaptations of the King Lear story.

King Lear (1987): Jean-Luc Godard made Lear a gangster named Don Learo and cast Molly Ringwald as Cordelia.

King Lear (1984): Sir Lawrence Olivier was in his 80s when he did this BBC-TV production of the play. John Hurt portrays the Fool and Diana Rigg is Regan.

More Fun Facts



In Shakespeare's play *King Lear* divides Britain in three and suffers tragic consequences for it. King James I of England, the son of Mary Queen of Scots who ruled after the death of Queen Elizabeth I, declared he would unite England (which included Wales) and Scotland. For the first time in history the country would be called Great Britain.

The Baron of Muncaster's jester, Tom Fool, was the inspiration for the Fool in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, giving the word 'tomfoolery' to the English language.



Who's More Important—a Duke or an Earl?

Answer: A Duke. Besides kings and princes are five levels of nobility in Great Britain. A Duke is a nobleman of the highest hereditary rank. Below the title of Duke are Marquess, Earl, Viscount, and Baron.

Legitimate Edgar vs. Illegitimate Edmund

Edmund is the illegitimate, or bastard, son of the Earl of Gloucester. This means that Gloucester was not married to Edmund's mother when he was born — quite a scandal, especially in Shakespeare's time. Because of this technicality of his birth he has no status within his family or society, and lives only by the charity of his titled father. His older brother Edgar is the legitimate son of Gloucester, meaning that Edgar was born within the bonds of marriage. Being the legitimate son, Edgar will inherit his father's title. Edmund can never inherit — unless Edgar either dies or is disinherited by his father.



Norman Rockwell, *Jester*, 1939

What's a Fool?

A Fool or jester is a type of clown mostly associated with the royal courts of the Middle Ages. Fools wore brightly colored clothing in a motley pattern — a patchwork of red, blue and green diamonds. Their hats, called the “cap’ n ’bells” or “coxcomb”, were especially distinctive; made of cloth, they were floppy with three points. At the end of each hung a jingle bell. The three points of the hat represent the asses’ ears and tail worn by jesters in earlier times. Fools also carried mock scepter, known as a bauble or marotte.

The earliest written description of a Fool was of a dancing dwarf brought to the Egyptian Pharaoh’s court circa 2100 B.C. Dwarves and hunchbacks became very popular as jesters. A Fool could get away with saying just about whatever was on his mind. As Jester Shi, who served the Duke of Xian in seventh-century B.C. China, once said, “I am a jester, my words cannot give offense.” Fools tended to reveal things as they really are, and this is what set them apart from other court entertainers. Very often a Fool had talent for music or poetry, and made his point through ditties and comic verse. He was also responsible for curing a king’s foul mood so that some other member of the court would not lose their head. It was thought that a Fool’s pranks and witty banter brought luck to his noble patron. A good Fool was well treated, respected, and even beloved by his monarch.

William Dyce.
*King Lear and the
Fool in the Storm*,
c. 1851.
National Gallery
of Scotland,
Edinburgh



THE THEMES OF THE PLAY

Divine Justice: “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport”

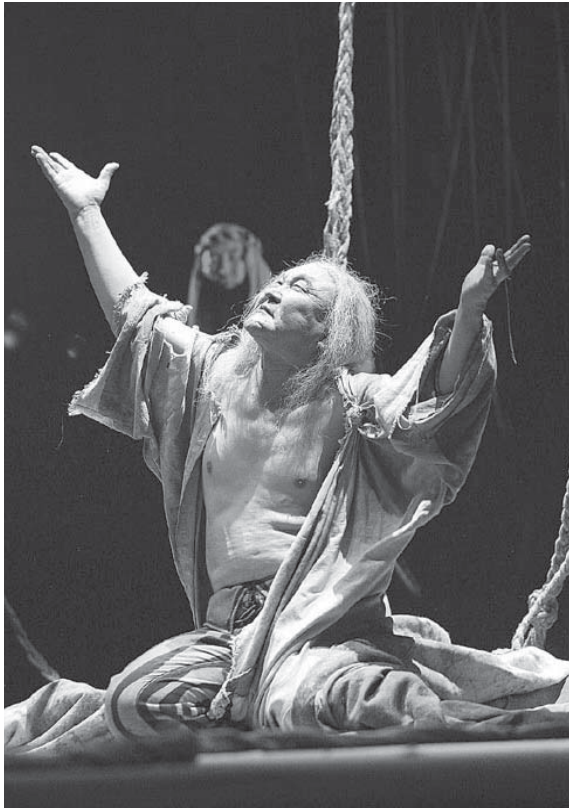
The characters in *King Lear* live in a cruel and seemingly unjust world. Lear and Gloucester's errors in judgment begin a series of events that make it appear that the greedy and untrustworthy (Goneril, Regan, Cornwall, and Edmund) will be rewarded, while the good (Edgar and Cordelia) will be punished. The consequences of their mistakes are excessive — Gloucester loses his eyes, and Lear loses his family, his kingdom, and his mind. Justice does triumph, but not without a great cost. The betrayers turn on one another and in the end the wicked characters die. But so do good characters — Gloucester, Cordelia, and Lear himself. Although order is restored, there is no rejoicing at the end of this play.

Parent-child relationships: “The younger rises when the old doth fall”

At the center of *King Lear* is the relationship between the two fathers and their children. Both Lear and Gloucester make hasty decisions that lead to the complete breakdown of their families. Each has children that are eager to cast aside the old so that they, the young, can take over. Lear's favorite is his youngest daughter, Cordelia. It is to her that he plans to give the largest and most choice third of his kingdom. When Cordelia enrages Lear with her honest and reasonable answer — that she loves her father only according to her bond and that she must split her love between her father and her husband — he feels betrayed and disinherits her. This opens the door for Goneril and Regan to take advantage their elderly father. They would otherwise have had to wait for him to die in order to obtain his kingdom, and according to tradition, only one of them could inherit. Lear's actions cause his daughters to replace familial love with greed. Thus begins a competition between the sisters that take them all to their graves. They are not satisfied merely retaining their halves of the kingdom, they must also make sure that their father is stripped of all his authority and left with absolutely nothing. They do not seek their father's love — they seek his position. Once they have his power, they grow impatient with their father, and have no desire to be responsible for his care. They call him “old” at every opportunity. Ultimately, they leave him to wander the heath in the middle of a violent storm, homeless and insane.



Julia Margaret Cameron, *King Lear allotting his Kingdom to his three daughters. What shall Cordelia do, “Love and be silent”*, 1872



Alexander Salchak as Lear, Tuva Theatre, Moscow

Similarly, Gloucester is easily led by Edmund into thinking that his beloved Edgar is plotting his death. Gloucester's advanced age is the argument given. "I have heard him oft maintain," the lying Edmund says of his brother, "that sons at perfect age, and fathers declining, the father should be as ward to the son." The too-trusting Edgar is as gullible as his father when he is convinced to flee his father's wrath until Edmund has smoothed things over. With Edgar out of the way, the traditional order of the family, with Edgar as heir to Gloucester, is upset. Edmund becomes the preferred son. He, like Goneril and Regan, is not really interested in gaining his father's love — he seeks the power and title he would normally be denied, and he is willing to do so at the expense of his father's well-being. Edmund denounces his father as a traitor for helping the former king, and Gloucester's eyes are plucked out. He is then cast out to wander sightlessly upon the same moors as Lear.

Both men are accountable for the disastrous situations created by their bad choices. Yet it is the betrayed children — Edgar and Cordelia — who bring about the restoration of order. Despite their treatment at the hands of their fathers, they maintain the deep bonds of familial love. Cordelia raises an army in order to reclaim her father's throne. Edgar, disguised as Poor Tom, guides his father to Dover and prevents him from coming to any more harm. Before they die, Lear and Gloucester are reunited with the children they so rashly cast aside, and receive their forgiveness.

Nature: "These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us"

Nature and natural phenomena are mentioned throughout *King Lear*. Since Edmund has no rights under man's law because he is illegitimate, he calls on Nature to be his law. He uses this speech to begin the series of deceptions that cause the unraveling of his family and hasten the destruction of Lear's family and kingdom. Early in the play Gloucester talks about the eclipses that have recently occurred as a sign that all is not well in the world: "love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide: and the bond cracked 'twixt son and father." When Lear and Gloucester reject Cordelia and Edgar, the natural order of their family is upset. In Lear's case, he has put his entire kingdom in danger. Goneril, Regan, and Edmund upset the natural order of their world by betraying their fathers so completely. Their actions toward their fathers, as well as the deadly competition between Goneril and Regan for Edmund, also throw the kingdom into chaos. Nature itself responds with the eclipses and the storm. It is not until Gloucester has lost his eyes and Lear has lost his mind (which represent Gloucester's blindness and Lear's lack of wisdom) and they are thrown back into nature to wander about the moors do they begin to truly understand the enormity of their mistakes. "I have no way, and therefore want no eyes," says Gloucester. "I stumbled when I saw." Lear cries, "I have taken too little care of this!" A healing begins that reunites them with their wronged children and starts setting the natural order back into place. It is after these reconciliations that things completely fall apart for Goneril, Regan, and Edmund, who pay for the unnatural betrayal of their fathers with their deaths.

IMAGERY

Blindness

Both Gloucester and Lear suffer from an inability to see the truth of their situations. It is not until Gloucester actually loses his eyes and Lear loses his mind that they begin to truly “see”. The words “eye”, “sight”, and “see” are used repeatedly through the play. It is only fitting that they meet near Dover toward the end of the play and commiserate about how their blindness has cost them dearly. “If thou would weep my fortunes, take my eyes,” says Lear.

Storm

The storm works as a symbol on several levels. It is a physical expression of the state of Lear’s world — the country is in complete political disarray and society is out of order — and occurs at the precise moment Lear loses all of his authority. It foreshadows his madness and is a reflection of Lear’s internal confusion. Finally, the violent storm demonstrates the awesome power of nature, which seems to cry out against the events of the play. Its turbulence forces the powerless king to recognize his own mortality and human frailty and to at last develop a sense of humility.

Madness

Madness in the play is associated with both disorder and hidden wisdom. The Fool’s mad babble and nonsense rhymes attempt to drive home the idea that Lear has made a terrible mistake when he split up his kingdom and disinherited Cordelia. Later, when Lear himself goes mad, the turmoil in his mind mirrors the chaos that has descended upon his kingdom. At the same time, his madness leads to wisdom and strips him to his bare humanity. During Lear’s encounter with the blind Gloucester Edgar notes the king’s “reason in madness.” Edgar uses a feigned insanity so that he will not be recognized by Lear, Kent, the Fool and especially, his father. His madness, however, contains bits of insight for Lear, and the king dubs him his “philosopher”. Edgar’s time as a madman cures him of his innocence. It hardens him and prepares him to defeat Edmund at the close of the play.

Animal Imagery

Lear is referred to by the Fool as an ass, a snail, and a hedge sparrow whose head is bit off by its young. These words set him up as the victim he will become. The words used for Goneril and Regan (“detested kite”, “gilded serpent”, “tigers, not daughters”) describe them as predatory animals that, in their unnaturalness, have lost their humanity. Edgar, as the mad Poor Tom, describes himself to Lear as having been “hog in sloth, fox in stealth, wolf in greediness, dog in madness, lion in prey.” The underhanded Oswald is called a dog, a cur, and a rat.



James Earl Jones as Lear, Public Theater, New York

Questions for Discussion

1. Would you have told King Lear exactly what he wanted to hear at the beginning of the play, or, like Cordelia, would you say what you really thought?
2. One of the themes of the play is Justice. Do you think that everyone in the play got what they deserved? If not, do you think some of the justice in the play is unfair? If so, why do you think it is unfair?
3. Do you think you would have ended the play the same way as Shakespeare, or would you have changed it, like Nahum Tate? What would your ending be?
4. What does the violent storm symbolize? Does it represent in some way what is happening to Lear and other characters?
5. What was the role of the Fool in the play? How effective do you think he was? Why do monarchs keep a fool in their courts?
6. Is Lear a sympathetic character? Is Gloucester? How do our impressions about them change during the course of the play?
7. What does blindness symbolize in the play? Who in the play is blind?
8. How do the actions of the play effect order in Britain? Is only Lear to blame for this? If not, who else?
9. How does the relationship between Cordelia and Lear compare to the relationship between Gloucester and Edgar?
10. How does nature play a major role in this play?