



### Discussion Questions: *Learwife*

#### “Words, Words, Words” Book Club—September 2022

1. What are your first impressions of the novel? If asked, what would you say this novel is about?
2. Were you familiar with *King Lear* before reading this story? What echoes of Shakespeare's plot did you notice? If you weren't familiar with *King Lear*, did you feel something was lacking or does the story stand on its own?
3. The queen is not given a name until the very end. What do you make of this decision? Were you conscious of its absence while reading? Why did the author choose to reveal it when she did? Would you have chosen to reveal it?
4. How did you respond to Berte? Did you root for her? Why or why not? Who did you most identify with?
5. Who would you have chosen as the new abbess and why? How would you have approached that decision? Do you agree with Berte's methods?
6. On page 39, Berte reflects: “There are women like Ruth in altar pieces she has never seen, Italian. Background figures, shouldering a plough or a scythe in kerchiefs as Christ rides across the foreground, twice their size, picked out in gold leaf. Women who perhaps observe the holy with gentle incomprehension . . . sweating and shadowless in eternal sun, as God passes by.” What does it say to have to have these thoughts voiced by a figure who is herself absent in a work of art? What earns someone a place in the foreground?
7. Throughout, we see glimpses of Berte's parenting style, such as the example of Goneril and the combs (pg 114) or her use of her daughters to prove a point (pg 230). To what extent do you think Berte's treatment of her daughters shaped their characters? Does this novel hold her responsible for their actions in *King Lear*? She reflects "The girls healed. They always did." Do you agree?
8. What similarities or differences do you notice between her treatment of her daughters and her treatment of the nuns?
9. Why do you think Thorp chose to make Lear Berte's second husband?
10. On page 185, Berte admits "I'll be a little vicious, I have time." Earlier she connects cruelty to boredom. In what ways do you see leisure in this book leading to ill behavior? Why do you think the two are linked in this way?