King Lear
by WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
Inside

THE PLAYWRIGHT
Comments About the Playwright • 3
A Selected Chronology of the Life and Times of William Shakespeare • 6

THE PLAY
Synopsis, Characters and Setting • 9
Comments on Some of the Characters • 10
Responses to King Lear • 12
Sources of the Play • 15
Another Version of the story of King Lear • 17

CULTURAL CONTEXT
The Language of the Play • 18
Edgar’s Demons • 19
Selected Glossary of Terms • 20

THE GUTHRIE PRODUCTION
Notes from the Creative Team • 24
The Role of a Lifetime • 26

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION
For Further Understanding • 28
The Playwright

William Shakespeare was born in 1564 and raised in Stratford-upon-Avon, in England’s West Country.

As the son of an up-and-coming town merchant, Shakespeare would have attended the village grammar school where he would have learned to read and write not only English, but also Latin and Greek. In 1582, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, and the couple would have three children. Shakespeare moved to London by 1592 and quickly began to make a name for himself as a prolific playwright. He stayed in London for about 20 years, becoming more and more successful in his work as an actor, writer, and shareholder in his acting company. His retirement took him back to Stratford to lead the life of a country gentleman. Shakespeare died there – on what is thought to be his birthday, April 23, in 1616. He is buried in the parish church, where his grave can be seen to this day. His known body of work includes 37 plays, 100 long poems and 154 sonnets.
Comments about the Playwright

And Shakespeare thou, whose honey-flowing vein, Pleasing the world, thy praises doth obtain, ... Live ever you, at least in fame live ever. Well may the body die, but fame dies never.

Richard Barnfield, *A Remembrance of Some English Poets*, 1598

He has a magic power over words: they come winged at his bidding; and seem to know their places. They are struck out in a heat, on the spur of the occasion, and have all the truth and vividness which arise from an actual impression of the objects. His epithets and single phrases are like sparkles, thrown off from an imagination, fired by the whirling rapidity of its own motion. His language is hieroglyphical. It translates thoughts into visible images. It abounds in sudden transitions and elliptical expressions.


He is like some saint whose history is to be rendered into all languages, into verse and prose, into songs and pictures and cut up into proverbs; so that the occasion which gave the saint’s meaning the form of conversation, or of a prayer, or of a code of laws, is immaterial compared with the universality of its application. ... He wrote the airs for all our modern music: he wrote the text of modern life.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Representative Men*, 1841

No other poet has given so many-sided an expression to human nature, or rendered so many passions and moods with such an appropriate variety of style, sentiment and accent. If, therefore, we were asked to select one monument of human civilization that should survive to some future age, or be transported to another planet to bear witness to the inhabitants there of what we have been upon earth, we should probably choose the works of Shakespeare.

George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, 1900

We do not understand Shakespeare from a single reading, and certainly not from a single play. There is a relation between the various plays of Shakespeare, taken in order; and it is work of years to venture even one individual interpretation of the pattern in Shakespeare’s carpet.

T. S. Eliot, *Dante*, Faber & Faber, 1929

Shakespeare's mind is the type of the androgynous, of the man-woman mind. ... It is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or a woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly.

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 1929

If one takes those thirty-seven plays with all the radar lines of the different viewpoints of the different characters, one comes out with a field of incredible density and complexity; and eventually one goes a step further, and one finds that what happened, what passed through this man called Shakespeare and came into existence on sheets of paper, is something quite different from any other author’s work. It’s not Shakespeare’s view of the world, it’s something which actually resembles reality. A sign of this is that any single word, line, character or event has not only a large number of interpretations, but an unlimited number. Which is the characteristic of reality. ... An artist may try to capture and reflect your action, but actually he interprets it – so that a naturalistic painting, a Picasso painting, a
photograph, are all interpretations. But in itself, the action of one man touching his head is open to unlimited understanding and interpretation. In reality, that is. What Shakespeare wrote carries that characteristic. What he wrote is not interpretations: it is the thing itself.


Shakespeare himself, indeed Shakespeare especially, does not describe from outside; his characters are intimately bound up with the audience. That is why his plays are the greatest example there is of people’s theater; in this theater the public found and still finds its own problems and re-experiences them.

Jean Paul Sartre, Sartre on Theater, 1959

Shakespeare can illuminate our knowledge of Western attitudes; an analysis of values can also illuminate some dark corners in Shakespeare’s work. For Shakespeare, unlike some of his critics, did not unthinkingly adopt the received wisdom of his time. He really probed, dramatically, the subjects of power and legitimacy, his own attitudes towards sex and women; he struggled all his life for a vision of a proper ordering of society.

Marilyn French, Shakespeare’s Division of Experience, 1981

If you cannot understand my argument, and declare “It’s Greek to me,” you are quoting Shakespeare; if you claim to be more sinned against than sinning, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you recall your salad days, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you act more in sorrow than in anger, if your wish is father to the thought, if your lost property has vanished into thin air, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you have ever refused to budge an inch or suffered from green-eyed jealousy, if you have played fast and loose, if you have been tongue-tied, a tower of strength, hoodwinked or in a pickle, if you have knitted your brows, made a virtue of necessity, insisted on fair play, slept not one wink, stood on ceremony, danced attendance (on your lord and master), laughed yourself into stitches, had short shrift, cold comfort or too much of a good thing, if you have seen better days or lived in a fool’s paradise – why, be that as it may, the more fool you, for it is a foregone conclusion that you are (as good luck would have it) quoting Shakespeare; if you think it is early days and clear out bag and baggage, if you think it is high time and that that is the long and short of it, if you believe that the game is up and that truth will come out even if it involves your own flesh and blood, if you lie low till the crack of doom because you suspect foul play, if you have your teeth set on edge (at one fell swoop) without rhyme or reason, then – to give the devil his due – if the truth were known (for surely you have a tongue in your head) you are quoting Shakespeare; even if you bid me good riddance and send me packing, if you wish I was dead as a doornail, if you think I am an eye-sore, a laughing stock, the devil incarnate, a stonyhearted villain, bloody-minded or a blinking idiot, then – by Jove! O Lord! Tut, tut! For goodness sake! What the dickens! But me no buts – it is all one to me, for you are quoting Shakespeare.

Bernard Levin, Enthusiasms, 1983

Shakespeare has two sides to him: one is the historical side, where he’s one of a group of dramatists working in Elizabethan London and writing for an audience living in that London at that time; the other is the poet who speaks to us today with so powerfully contemporary a voice. If we study only the historical, or 1564 – 1616 Shakespeare, we take away all his relevance to our own time and shirk trying to look into the greatest mystery of literature, the mystery of how someone can communicate with times and spaces and cultures so far removed from his own.

Northrop Frye, Northrop Frye on Shakespeare, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986

Every age creates its own Shakespeare. ... Like a portrait whose eyes seem to follow you around the room, engaging your glance from every angle, [his] plays and their characters seem always to be “modern,” always to be “us.”

Marjorie Garber, Shakespeare After All, New York: Anchor Books, 2004
# A Selected Chronology of the Life and Times of William Shakespeare

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE</th>
<th>BRITISH AND WORLD HISTORY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1564</td>
<td>William Shakespeare is born to John Shakespeare and Mary Arden of Stratford-upon-Avon, their third child and first son. (Traditionally, Shakespeare's Day is celebrated on April 23.)</td>
<td>Galileo Galilei is born. Playwright Christopher Marlowe is born. Voyages of exploration, trade and colonization are undertaken throughout the “New World,” primarily by England, Spain, Portugal, France and the Netherlands.</td>
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<td>1565</td>
<td>Giambattista Giraldi Cinthio writes Ecatommiti, 112 stories that includes “The Moor of Venice.”</td>
<td>St. Augustine, Florida, is founded by the Spanish and will become the oldest continuously settled city in the U.S. founded by Europeans.</td>
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<td>1576</td>
<td>Shakespeare’s family finds itself in serious debt and mortgages Mary’s house in Wilmcote to raise cash.</td>
<td>James Burbage opens The Theatre, London’s first playhouse used by professional actors.</td>
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<td>1577</td>
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<td>Holinshed publishes the <em>Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland</em>, a primary source for Shakespeare’s history plays and one of the sources for <em>King Lear</em>.</td>
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<td>1578</td>
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<td>Interest in Roman and Greek antiquities leads to the discovery of the catacombs in Rome.</td>
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<td>1580</td>
<td>John Shakespeare is involved in lawsuits regarding several mortgaged family properties.</td>
<td>Sir Francis Drake completes his circumnavigation of the world.</td>
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<td>1582</td>
<td>A marriage license is issued to William Shakespeare and Agnes (Anne) Hathaway in November. She is eight years his senior and pregnant at the time of their marriage. The following May their first daughter, Susanna, is born.</td>
<td>The Gregorian calendar is adopted in Spain, Portugal, France, the Netherlands and Scandinavia. (England does not adopt the Gregorian calendar until 1752.)</td>
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<td>1585</td>
<td>Twins, Hamnet and Judith, are born in February to William and Anne Shakespeare.</td>
<td>Spanish writer Miguel de Cervantes writes the pastoral novel <em>Galatea</em>.</td>
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<td>1585–91</td>
<td>No records document Shakespeare’s life during these “lost years.” At some point, he made his way to London without his family, perhaps joining a troupe of traveling actors.</td>
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<td>1586</td>
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<td>Mary, Queen of Scots, is accused of plotting the murder of Elizabeth I. A number of other conspirators are put on trial and executed. Mary is executed the following year.</td>
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<td>1588</td>
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<td>The Spanish Armada attempts to invade England but fails due to bad weather at sea and the ability of smaller English ships to out-maneuver the attackers in the English Channel. The event establishes England as a major naval power.</td>
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<td>1592</td>
<td>Shakespeare is listed as an actor with the Lord Chamberlain's Men in London. Writer and dramatist Robert Greene scathingly lashes out at “an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers” at the time when Shakespeare’s first known play, <em>King Henry VI, Part One</em>, is successfully performed.</td>
<td>ca. 1590 An anonymous play title <em>King Lear</em> is produced. It is a source for Shakespeare’s play. 15,000 people die of the plague in London. Theaters close temporarily to prevent the spread of the epidemic.</td>
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<td>1593–94</td>
<td>During the course of the plague, it appears that Shakespeare has written several plays (their dates of composition have not been established with certainty in all cases): <em>King Henry VI, Parts Two and Three, Titus Andronicus, Richard III</em>, and the comedies <em>Love’s Labour’s Lost, The Two Gentlemen of Verona, The Comedy of Errors, The Taming of the Shrew</em>, as well as the poems “Venus and Adonis” and “The Rape of Lucrece.”</td>
<td>Christopher Marlowe is killed in a tavern brawl (1593). His tragedy <em>Edward II</em> is published the following year. London’s theaters reopen in 1594 when the threat of the plague has abated.</td>
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<td>1596</td>
<td>John Shakespeare, the dramatist’s father, is granted a coat of arms. Shakespeare’s only son, Hamnet, dies at the age of 11.</td>
<td>The Blackfriars Playhouse, later to become the winter theater for Shakespeare’s company, opens in London.</td>
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<td>1597–98</td>
<td>Shakespeare’s sonnets circulate unpublished. The two parts of <em>King Henry IV, The Merry Wives of Windsor</em>, and probably <em>Much Ado About Nothing</em> are written. He purchases the New Place, one of the largest estates in Stratford. He is listed as a player in a production of Ben Jonson’s <em>Every Man in His Humor</em>.</td>
<td>A second armada of Spanish ships en route to attack England is dispersed by storms. Sir Francis Bacon’s <em>Essays, Civil and Moral</em>, is published. The English Parliament passes an Act prescribing that convicted criminals be sentenced to deportation to distant colonies.</td>
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<td>1599</td>
<td>The Globe Playhouse opens. Shakespeare is part owner by virtue of the shares divided between the Burbage family of actors (half) and five others, including the dramatist. Approximate year of composition for <em>King Henry V, Julius Caesar, and As You Like It</em>.</td>
<td>The Earl of Essex is sent to command English forces in Ireland. He fails to secure peace and returns to England against the orders of Elizabeth I.</td>
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<td>1600</td>
<td>Shakespeare’s poem, “The Phoenix and the Turtle” and his plays, <em>Twelfth Night, All’s Well That Ends Well, Hamlet</em> and <em>Troilus and Cressida</em> date approximately from this period (1600–02).</td>
<td>The international trading corporation, the English East India Company, is founded. The capital of Japan moves from Kyoto to Tokyo.</td>
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<td>1601</td>
<td>Shakespeare's father dies.</td>
<td>Ben Jonson, offended by a satirical portrayal of himself in a play, returns the insult, sparking a series of plays known as the War of the Theaters in which playwrights ridicule each other from the stage.</td>
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<td>1603</td>
<td>Approximate year of composition for <em>Othello</em> and <em>Measure for Measure</em>. James I is crowned King of England, and the acting company known as Lord Chamberlain’s Men, with which Shakespeare is affiliated, becomes The King’s Men. They will perform 12 plays per year for the court of James I.</td>
<td>Elizabeth I dies. She is succeeded by her cousin, James I. (The era of his reign is called the Jacobean period.) Sir Walter Raleigh is arrested as a suspect in a plot to dethrone James I. He is tried for treason and imprisoned. A new outbreak of the plague in London.</td>
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| 1605 | Shakespeare’s name is included among England’s greatest writers in *Remaines of a Greater Worke Concerning Britaine*, published by the antiquarian William Camden.  
*King Lear* appears. | The Gunpowder Plot – a plan to blow up the House of Lords during an address by James I – is foiled in November. Guy Fawkes and other conspirators are arrested and eventually executed the following year. |
| 1606 | *Macbeth* appears. | A 13-year war between Austria and the Ottoman Empire ends with the peace of Zsitvatörök. |
| 1607 | Shakespeare’s daughter, Susanna, marries Dr. John Hill; they make their home in Stratford.  
*Anthony and Cleopatra*, *Pericles* and *Timon of Athens* are written. | English colonists in America, led by John Smith, establish the city of Jamestown, Virginia. |
| 1608 | Shakespeare’s acting company signs a lease for the use of the Blackfriars Playhouse.  
*Coriolanus* appears.  
Shakespeare’s mother dies. | Galileo Galilei uses a design by Dutch scientist Johan Lippershey to construct his own telescope. |
| 1609–10 | Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* are published.  
His late plays *The Winter’s Tale*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Tempest* belong to this period. | Tea from China is shipped to Europe for the first time, by the Dutch East India Company. |
| 1612 | Records show that, by this time, Shakespeare “of Stratford–upon–Avon, gentleman” has returned to live in his birthplace. | John Webster’s tragedy *The White Devil* is staged and published. |
| 1613 | Two plays, *King Henry VIII* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, are attributed to both Shakespeare and John Fletcher. | The Globe Playhouse burns down during the first performance of *King Henry VIII*. |
| 1616 | Shakespeare’s daughter Judith is married.  
Shakespeare dies on April 23 and is buried in Stratford’s Holy Trinity Church. | The Catholic Church prohibits Galileo from further scientific work. |
| 1623 | Heminge and Condell of The King’s Men compile Shakespeare’s complete dramatic works in the *First Folio*.  
Anne, William Shakespeare’s widow, dies. | John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* is published.  
Dutch colonists settle in New Amsterdam (in 1664, seized by the English, it will be renamed New York). |
Lear has peacefully and prosperously led Britain as its king. Approaching the comfort and tranquility of old age, Lear turns his attention to the inheritance of his three daughters: Goneril, Regan and Cordelia. He plans to divide the kingdom among them, but first he wants them each to say how much she loves him. Goneril and Regan flatter their father, saying that nothing can surpass their love. When Cordelia, the youngest and Lear’s favorite, is asked to speak she remains silent, and finally answers with “nothing.” Outraged and hurt, Lear disowns Cordelia and banishes her from his sight, along with his advisor the Earl of Kent, who has defended Cordelia. With the King of France as her last powerful ally, Cordelia leaves Britain to marry him and take the throne in France.

The family of Gloucester also wrestles with power and inheritance in Lear’s court. The Earl of Gloucester has, after years of feigned indifference, openly acknowledged his bastard son, Edmund, marking him as the second son behind Gloucester’s older son and heir, Edgar. Edmund immediately uses his new position deceitfully: he fakes a letter from Edgar to frame him for treachery, enraging Gloucester. Not knowing that Edmund is responsible, Edgar heeds Edmund’s advice and flees to the countryside, disguising himself as a madman.

Goneril and Regan prove unkind to their father as they refuse to lodge him and his knights, eventually stripping him of everything he once possessed. As a storm tears through Britain, Lear begins to descend into madness as he deals emotionally and physically with the real and perceived betrayal of all three of his daughters. With no other options, and only the Fool and a disguised Kent accompanying him, Lear turns to the stormy wilderness where his sanity continues to crumble. Furthering his treachery against his family, Edmund betrays the trust of Gloucester, who seeks to give comfort to the old king and is violently maimed for this breach. Now in possession of the earldom of Gloucester himself, Edmund begins to align himself politically and romantically with Goneril and Regan and sets his eyes on the British throne.

Abandoned, vulnerable and powerless, Lear and Gloucester are only able to see the reality of their terrible mistakes when blinded by madness and violence. Now the Queen of France, Cordelia returns to Britain to rescue her father. Finding Lear a miserable madman, Cordelia goes to battle against her sisters’ and Edmund’s machinations while, in a moment of clarity, Lear recognizes the pure love of Cordelia and the loyalty of Kent. As the storm clears, we are left with the pieces of a once proud kingdom, with only those whose nature has deemed fit to rule surviving.

**Setting**

Britain. Various locations include King Lear’s Palace, Gloucester’s Castle, Albany’s Palace, a heath near Gloucester’s Castle, and Dover.

**Characters**

Lear, King of Britain
Goneril, his eldest daughter
Regan, his middle daughter
Cordelia, his youngest daughter
Duke of Albany, husband of Goneril
Duke of Cornwall, husband of Regan
King of France, suitor of Cordelia
Duke of Burgundy, suitor of Cordelia
Earl of Gloucester, a nobleman loyal to Lear
Edmund, bastard son of Gloucester
Edgar, eldest son of Gloucester
Earl of Kent, a nobleman loyal to Lear
Oswald, steward of Goneril
Fool to King Lear
Old Man
Gentleman
Herald
Knights, Officers, Messengers, Soldiers, Servants, Attendants
Comments on Some of the Characters

CORDELIA
In this opening scene, in Cordelia’s despairing counsel to herself – “What shall Cordelia speak? Love and be silent” (1.1.60) – we have the beginning of a highly significant dramatic and performative mode in Shakespeare, what might be called the rhetoric of silence. Some things cannot be said, cannot be given words. To abjure language in such cases is not a refusal of speech, like Iago’s final words, but rather an acknowledgement of the limitations of language, and the place of the ineffable or the unutterable. The modest and silent claim of a love according to her bond will distinguish Cordelia’s language, and her silence, throughout the play. Like Hamlet in the court of Claudius, dismayed by the falseness of ceremony and the role playing all around him, Cordelia refuses to play the game, refuses to involve herself in playacting and willful deception. While Hamlet makes use of theatricality as a trap, Cordelia occupies what might be called the vanishing point of theatricality. We may think that Cordelia’s rigidity here is too pure a gesture, that she could bend, could compromise – but she, like her sisters, is her father’s daughter, suborn and proud. Her motive in this moment seems plainly to disclaim artifice, to assert, again, something that in her understanding needs no assertion: the true and natural relationship between parent and child. But once disrupted, this “bond” is not restored until tragedy has overtaken both Lear and Gloucester.

Marjorie B. Garber, “King Lear,” Shakespeare after All, New York: Pantheon, 2004

EDMUND
The injury done by [the presence of] Edmund to the simplicity of the action is abundantly recompensed by the addition of variety, by the art with which he is made to cooperate with the chief design, and the opportunity which he gives the poet of combining perfidy with perfidy, and connecting the wicked son with the wicked daughters, to impress this important moral, that villainy is never at a stop, that crimes lead to crimes, and at last terminate in ruin.

Samuel Johnson, Notes from The Plays of William Shakespeare, 1765

THE FOOL
The institution of the court fool (or jester) is typical of western Europe of the Middle Ages, and it arises out of the early Christian attitude toward madness. In pagan times the madman was felt to be touched by the divine and was treated with awe and respect (a feeling that plays its part in Hamlet, for instance…).

To the early Christians, on the other hand, thanks in part to the tales of possession in the New Testament, madmen were felt to be infested with demons as a result of their sins. In that case, where mad antics were not extreme enough to inspire fear or disgust, they merely amused. In Shakespearean London, and for a considerable length of time afterward, it was considered fun to visit Bethlehem Hospital and watch the madmen, very much as we today go to see a zoo, except that the animals are much better treated and much more sympathetically viewed than the madmen were.

If a madman were sufficiently harmless and amusing – if, for instance, he could make “witless” remarks that were nevertheless humorous – he might be kept for the purpose by a family that was sufficiently well off to afford to feed a useless mouth. Naturally, a shrewd but poor fellow could see that if he but pretended to be slightly mad and took care to be pungently clever, he might get a good job.

The court fool became a standard part of the palace scene then, and was the analogue of the modern television set, for ideally, he could do comic songs and dances, make witty comments, do sight gags, and so on. ... In Shakespeare’s time the court fool still flourished, though they were to vanish from the scene within a generation of his death.

Naturally, such a fool could say and do things an ordinary man could not possibly get away with. Behind the protection of his own madness and the amusement of his royal patron, he could mock arrogant lords and stately bishops and cast
The Fool would be a role unlike any Shakespeare had ever written before or after – witty, pathetic, lonely, angry, and prophetic in turn, a part rich in quips and snippets of ballads and the kind of sharp exchanges for which [comedian Robert] Armin was famous. Armin’s range was extraordinary and it’s not surprising that this almost bewildering role was cut for much of King Lear’s stage history. It wasn’t only Shakespeare’s relationship with both [tragedian Richard] Burbage and Armin that had matured, but also the relationship of the star comedian and tragedian with each other. In the past, Shakespeare had tended to keep clowns and kings apart; this time he would force them together, creating an unusually intimate and endearing bond, one that also depended on the personal familiarity and mutual understanding of his two lead actors. The poignancy of one of Lear’s most heartbreaking lines, written for Burbage – “and my poor fool is hanged” – depends on it, reminding us not only of the manner of Cordelia’s death but also of the loss of his beloved Fool, Armin, who disappears from the action midway through the play.


**GONERIL AND REGAN**

How then can we call Regan and Goneril double-dyed fiends? They played the hypocrite for a kingdom; but which of us might not? Having got what they wanted and more than they expected they found good excuse for not paying the price for it. Like failings have been known in the most reputable people. Their conduct so far, it could be argued, has been eminently respectable, level-headed and worldly-wise.


**KENT**

Why is Shakespeare’s Kent called Kent? ... As Ralph Berry suggests, the names of all King Lear’s male principals are “hieroglyphs of value, from which an entire system can be reconstructed.” ... We can begin to reconstruct those values by considering William Wordsworth’s 1803 sonnet invoking the stereotype of the proud and rugged “Men of Kent” as the “Vanguard of Liberty,” a stereotype that was already well established in Shakespeare’s day. It is a stereotype that seems, at first glance, entirely consistent with the character Shakespeare creates, the volatile yet supremely loyal counselor, who insists that it is his duty to be “unmannerly/When Lear is mad.” But Wordsworth, arriving late on the scene, and writing in a highly compressed form, tells only part of the story. When Wordsworth refers to “the charters that were [theirs] before,” which the men of Kent had preserved from Norman influence. Thus, Shakespeare’s Kent is at once the epitome and the antithesis of the stereotypical “man of Kent.” Such complex and contradictory local associations combine with the play’s attempt, in both the main plot and the subplot to disengage inheritance and succession from familial affection (or rather, to display the tragic consequences of linking them). Without turning the play from a political and familial tragedy into a dramatized controversial tract, these features mark King Lear as an intervention into contemporary debates about inheritance practice, a defense of early modern England’s particularly strict system of primogeniture.


Concentrating on the issues of inheritance that arise from this historical detail illuminates the play’s participation, not merely in a generalized patriarchal ideology, but also in the specifically patrilineal ideology that so powerfully shapes early modern England’s social order and economic history. Through the figure of Kent, Shakespeare evokes the distinctive Kentish character celebrated in Wordsworth’s sonnet, and in Shakespeare’s day, in works such as William Lambarde’s *Perambulation of Kent* (1576). But when Kent upbraids the king for his folly in dividing his estate, he seems to repudiate the inheritance practices for which his county was famous, “the charters that were [theirs] before,” which the men of Kent had preserved from Norman influence. Thus, Shakespeare’s Kent is at once the epitome and the antithesis of the stereotypical “man of Kent.” Such complex and contradictory local associations combine with the play’s attempt, in both the main plot and the subplot to disengage inheritance and succession from familial affection (or rather, to display the tragic consequences of linking them). Without turning the play from a political and familial tragedy into a dramatized controversial tract, these features mark King Lear as an intervention into contemporary debates about inheritance practice, a defense of early modern England’s particularly strict system of primogeniture.


Concentrating on the issues of inheritance that arise from this historical detail illuminates the play’s participation, not merely in a generalized patriarchal ideology, but also in the specifically patrilineal ideology that so powerfully shapes early modern England’s social order and economic history. Through the figure of Kent, Shakespeare evokes the distinctive Kentish character celebrated in Wordsworth’s sonnet, and in Shakespeare’s day, in works such as William Lambarde’s *Perambulation of Kent* (1576). But when Kent upbraids the king for his folly in dividing his estate, he seems to repudiate the inheritance practices for which his county was famous, “the charters that were [theirs] before,” which the men of Kent had preserved from Norman influence. Thus, Shakespeare’s Kent is at once the epitome and the antithesis of the stereotypical “man of Kent.” Such complex and contradictory local associations combine with the play’s attempt, in both the main plot and the subplot to disengage inheritance and succession from familial affection (or rather, to display the tragic consequences of linking them). Without turning the play from a political and familial tragedy into a dramatized controversial tract, these features mark King Lear as an intervention into contemporary debates about inheritance practice, a defense of early modern England’s particularly strict system of primogeniture.

The greatness of Lear is not in corporal dimension, but in intellectual: the explosions of his passion are terrible as a volcano: they are storms turning up and disclosing to the bottom that sea, his mind, with all its vast riches. It is his mind which is laid bare. This case of flesh and blood seems too insignificant to be thought on; even as he himself neglects it. On the stag we see nothing but corporal infirmities and weakness, the impotence of rage; while we read it, we see not Lear, but we are Lear, — we are in his mind, we are sustained by the grandeur which baffles the malice of daughters and storms; in the aberrations of his reasons, we discover a mighty irregular power of reason.


It is useful to remember that the word theater has the same root as the word theory. The best of theater operates in the interrogative mode, asking and posing questions about things which fascinate us, amuse, mystify, trouble, frighten, and terrify us. Suzanne Langer has written that one defines an age not necessarily by the answers its people are able to provide, but by the questions they are able to propound. Bad art simplifies and tames; great art questions, challenges complexity and enlarges both our vision and perception. Ours is a complex and often bewildering age, and we have asked innumerable troubling questions, returning again and again to the most basic ones. King Lear appeals to us because of its complexity, its unyielding refusal to simplify and sentimentalize, the musculature of the questions it asks. “What a piece of work is man!” declares Hamlet in one of his well-known speeches. How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! How admirable! The beauty of the earth! On and on. And then the final demanding question, “And yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust?” What indeed. King Lear continues this questioning started by Shakespeare’s first great tragedy. “Is man no more than this?” Lear asks in the storm, considering the nearly naked Edgar disguised as Tom o’Bedlam. “Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, are, forked animal as thou art.”


By the time Shakespeare came to write King Lear, the old system of Roman numerals and calculation on the abacus was on the way out, and the new system of Hindu/Arabic numerals based on zero was on its way in. So the play’s preoccupation with questions of counting, fractions, worth, and “nothing” (not to mention whether anything could actually come of nothing) was, we may say, “overdetermined.” That is to say, it came from many motivations at once – from the old Lear story, from the new capitalism, from the old theology, and from the new science and philosophy. King Lear, in this sense, is a play about nothing. Shakespeare scholars had long discussed “nothing” in King Lear from standpoints physical and metaphysical: in the Renaissance, the word was a slang term for female sexual organs; because an “O” was an unbroken circle it also, paradoxically, connoted “everything.” Rotman, a mathematician, saw the relevance of zero in this connection, and made the link from cultural history to the play.

Cordelia’s “Nothing, my lord,” is a powerful affirmation, if only Lear could hear it as such. She claims that her love for him is right and natural – “according to my bond.” What she resists is the love test, not the love. (And what Lear tests is the love test, not the love.) When the scene is replayed, in the fourth act, and Lear again asks her the same question, tell me how much you love me, it is striking – to me – that she answers it again in the negative.


The scene is perhaps the most moving episode in the whole play: Lear has awakened (“you do me wrong to take me out of the grave”) and does not know whether he is alive or dead (“Would I were assured of my condition”). Cordelia, heartbroken, kneels before him: “No cause, no cause.”

The mime creates a scenic area: the top and bottom of the cliff, the precipice. Shakespeare makes use of all the means of anti-illusionist theatre in order to create a most realistic and concrete landscape. A landscape which is only a blind man’s illusion. There is a
The non-existent cliff is not meant just to deceive the blind man. For a short while we, too, believed in this landscape and in the mime. The meaning of this parable is not easy to define. But one thing is clear: this type of parable is not to be thought of outside the theatre, or rather outside a certain kind of theatre. In narrative prose Edgar could, of course, lead the blind Gloucester to the cliffs of Dover, let him jump down from a stone and make him believe that he was jumping from the top of a cliff. But he might just as well lead him a day’s journey away from the castle and make him jump from a stone on any heap of land. In film and in prose there is only the choice between a real stone lying in the sand and an equally real jump from the top of a chalk cliff into the sea. One cannot transpose Gloucester’s suicide attempt to the screen, unless one were to film a stage performance. But in the naturalistic, or even stylized theatre, with the precipice painted or projected onto a screen, Shakespeare’s parable would be completely obliterated.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Notes on King Lear,” Lectures and Notes on Shakspeare and Other English Poets, ca. 1817

Lear’s progress – dramatic and spiritual – lies through a dissipation of egoism; submission to the cruelty of an indifferent Nature, less cruel to him than are his own kin; to ultimate loss of himself in madness. Consider the effect of this – of the battling of storm without and storm within, of the final breaking of that Titan spirit – if Shakespeare merely let us look on, critically observant. From such a standpoint, Lear is an intolerable tyrant, and Regan and Goneril have a case against him. We should not side with them; but our onlooker’s sympathy might hardly be warmer than, say, the kindly Albany’s. And Shakespeare needs to give us more than sympathy with Lear, and something deeper than understanding. If the verity of his ordeal is really to be brought home to us, we must, in as full a sense as may be, pass through it with him, must make the experience and its overwhelming emotions momentarily our own. ...

The storm is not in itself, moreover, dramatically important, only in its effect upon Lear. How, then, to give it enough magnificence to impress him, yet keep it from rivaling him? Why, by identifying the storm with him, setting the actor to impersonate both Lear and – reflected in Lear – the storm. That, approximately, is the effect made when – the Fool cowering, drenched and pitiful, at his side – he launches into the tremendous:

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow! ... This is no mere description of a storm, but in music and imaginative suggestion a dramatic creating of the storm itself; and there is Lear – and here we are, if we yield ourselves – in the midst of it, almost a part of it. Yet Lear himself, in his Promethean defiance, still dominates the scene.


Lear’s society is primitive. On the other hand, it is clearly not primitive Stonehenge because if you go back to that you find another falsity, which is that Lear is, at the same time, a very sophisticated society. For it is not a society of people that live in the open air surrounded by ceremonial stones. To put the play back to that period is to lose the essential cruelty, which is the cruelty of turning a man outdoors. The people who are indoors feel the difference between the elements and the man-made solid world from which Lear is expelled. If the King is used to sleeping out of doors, the play is shattered. Furthermore the language of the play ... is true language of high Renaissance. So it seems to me that the problem one has to face is that one has to create a pre-Christian society which for present-day audiences has the smell of belonging to an early

Jan Kott, “King Lear or Endgame,” Shakespeare, Our Contemporary, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964

Of all Shakespeare’s plays Macbeth is the most rapid, Hamlet the slowest, in movement. Lear combines length with rapidity, — like the hurricane and the whirlpool, absorbing while it advances. It begins as a stormy day in summer, with brightness; but that brightness is lurid, and anticipates the tempest.

The meaning of this parable is not easy to define. But one thing is clear: this type of parable is not to be thought of outside the theatre, or rather outside a certain kind of theatre. In narrative prose Edgar could, of course, lead the blind Gloucester to the cliffs of Dover, let him jump down from a stone and make him believe that he was jumping from the top of a cliff. But he might just as well lead him a day’s journey away from the castle and make him jump from a stone on any heap of land. In film and in prose there is only the choice between a real stone lying in the sand and an equally real jump from the top of a chalk cliff into the sea. One cannot transpose Gloucester’s suicide attempt to the screen, unless one were to film a stage performance. But in the naturalistic, or even stylized theatre, with the precipice painted or projected onto a screen, Shakespeare’s parable would be completely obliterated.

GUTHRIE THEATER
part of history. At the same time, that early part of history has to be a moment of history where, for these people, they were in as high a state of development as was the Mexican society before Cortez or ancient Egypt at its peak. So Lear is barbaric and Renaissance; it’s those two contradictory periods.


The Fool in the tragedy of Lear is one of the most wonderful creations of Shakespeare’s genius. The picture of his quick and pregnant sarcasm, of his loving devotion, of his acute sensibility, of his despairing mirth, of his heartbroken silence — contrasted with the rigid sublimity of Lear’s suffering, with the huge desolation of Lear’s sorrow, with the vast and outraged image of Lear’s madness — is the noblest thought that ever entered into the heart and mind of man.

Charles Dickens, “The Restoration of Shakespeare’s Lear to the Stage,” The Examiner, 1838

King Lear cannot possibly be acted, it is too titanic. At the beginning of the play Lear, in his old age, has grown half mad, choleric and despotic, and therefore cannot brook Cordelia’s silence. This play shows a state of society where men’s passions are savage and uncurbed. No play like this anywhere — not even the Agamemnon— is so terrifically human.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Some Criticisms on Poets, 1883

King Lear, which was written about 1605, is by common consent one of the very greatest of tragedies. It embodies the most comprehensive vision of human experience in its heights and depths that Shakespeare ever wrote. Its many characters live with intense, imaginative, and sharply individual life; and all is lifted to the level of poetry by the power of Shakespeare’s language.


Mythological and biblical stories about the creation of the world from Chaos provide an informing principle in King Lear. Such narratives familiar to Elizabethans include Hesiod’s Theogony, Ovid’s Metamorphoses, and the book of Genesis. A characteristic feature of these narratives is a cyclical pattern of creation followed by destruction and the return to a state of chaos. Moreover, in classical and biblical accounts of creation, while harmony among the elements that make up the world is the desired end, it is achieved only through their division or separation. King Lear has been called ‘a play about the end of the world,’ but it is also a story of creation and destruction, and especially of separation and division. But, whereas in the earlier myths the very world is born of Chaos – of the void – of nothing – central to the play is Lear’s assertion that ‘Nothing can come of nothing’ (1.82), an expression recognizable to Elizabethans as both a commonplace saying, and a controversial doctrine, ex nihilo nihil fit, denying creation ex nihilo.

Sources of the Play

Chronologically following *Hamlet* (1600) and *Othello* (1603) and preceding *Macbeth* (1606), *King Lear* ranks among Shakespeare’s four major tragedies of his mature period. Its first recorded performance was in December 1606, but it may have been performed earlier and is usually dated to 1605. The first Quarto was published in 1608, and *King Lear* was included in the Folio, which was published in 1623. There are significant differences between the Quarto and the Folio texts. The Quarto lacks 102 lines that the Folio contains while the Folio lacks 288 lines that are included in the Quarto. (This does not take into account many other differences, such as word substitutions, between the two versions.)

These differences in the Quarto and Folio have led some scholars to think the Folio is a revision by Shakespeare’s own hand of the earlier Quarto script, perhaps influenced by seeing it in production. We may never be able to verify if this is true, but the two versions offer many choices and options for a producer of the play to evaluate. Typically what is performed on stage is an amalgamation of the two scripts, as is the case for the Guthrie’s production.

The main source for Shakespeare’s play is an older anonymous play called *The True Chronicle History of King Leir and His Three Daughters Gonorill, Ragan and Cordella*. The *Leir* play likely predates Shakespeare’s tragedy by at least a dozen years. In addition to this earlier play, Shakespeare would have been familiar with the story of *King Lear* from several other sources. The oldest is Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain* written in the 12th century. Formalizing an extant British legend, Monmouth’s pseudohistory places Lear’s reign in ancient Britain, some 3,000 years before Julius Caesar invaded Britain. In that version of Lear, the story of Shakespeare’s play can be discerned: an aging Leir, after 60 years of successful rule, divides his kingdom among his three daughters but first puts them through a “love trial,” in which his youngest and favorite daughter Cordella refuses to participate. Gonorilla and Regau marry and each gets half the kingdom. Cordeilla marries the king of the Franks and goes to Gaul. After some time, Leir’s sons-in-law rebel against him, he goes to Calais and sends a message to Cordeilla, who has Leir fed and clothed so he can present himself to her at court with his former dignity. Cordeilla restores Lear to his throne, and when he dies, she succeeds him to the throne. She reigns for five
years until her nephews rebel and imprison her, and she kills herself in prison.

Another version of the history was included by Raphael Holinshed in his *Chronicles of England, Scotlande and Irelande* (1577), which Shakespeare used as a source for many of his history plays. Six stanzas of Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, in Book II (see below), also tells the story of Leir (Leyr) with the familiar ending of Leir’s restoration to the throne.

Other contemporary writing that is thought to have influenced Shakespeare’s version of Lear includes Philip Sidney’s *Arcadia*, which may have inspired the subplot of Gloucester and his sons; Samuel Harsnett’s *Declaration of Egrious Popish Impostures*, from which the names of Edgar’s demons were taken; and Michel de Montaigne’s Essay “Of the Affection of Fathers to their Children,” which touches on many themes about parenting which can be seen in the play.

In writing *King Lear*, Shakespeare departed from both the earlier anonymous *Leir* play and from the historical sources in several ways. The most significant change is that both Lear and Cordelia die at the end of Shakespeare’s tragedy. Lear is not restored to his throne, and Cordelia dies before Lear does. Additional alterations to the story by Shakespeare include renaming earlier characters from the anonymous play to their now-familiar Kent and Oswald, and the addition of the subplot of Gloucester and his sons, a storyline that parallels and contrasts the main plot in poetic and powerful ways. Shakespeare also added the storm, the presence of madness (both Lear’s genuine and Edgar’s feigned madness), the character of the Fool and the theme of folly that runs through the play.

Nahum Tate, a poet laureate of England during the 17th century, adapted *King Lear* in 1681 during the Restoration, making changes to suit contemporary tastes. Gone were the Fool and the tragic ending (Lear is restored to the throne) and added was a love story (Cordelia marries Edgar). Whatever popularity *King Lear* enjoyed during the 18th century and into the 19th, it was most likely Tate’s version, or one strongly influenced by it, that was performed in both the U.K. and U.S. During the Regency (1810-1820), in which George III was incapable of ruling Britain because he suffered bouts of insanity, *King Lear* was banned from the stage.

The Guthrie Theater has produced *King Lear* twice before. In 1974, acting company member Len Cariou played the king under the direction of Michael Langham, and in 1995, Richard Ooms played Lear under the direction of Garland Wright. Nathaniel Fuller and Stephen Yoakam, who alternate playing Lear in our current production, played the Duke of Albany and Earl of Kent, respectively, in the 1995 production. In 2007, the Royal Shakespeare Company presented its *King Lear* featuring Ian Kellen in the title role on the Guthrie’s thrust stage in a production directed by Trevor Nunn.
Another Version of the Story of *King Lear*

From Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, Book 2, Canto X, 1590

Next him king Leyr in happeie peace long raynd,
But had no issue male him to succeed,
But three faire daughters, which were well uptraind
In all that seemed fitt for kingly seed:
Mongst whom his realme he equally decreed
To have divided. Tho, when feeble age
Nigh to his utmost date he saw proceed,
He cald his daughters, and with speeches sage
Inquyred, which of them most di love her parentage?

The eldest, Gonorill, gan to protest
That she must more than her owne life him lov'd;
And Regan greater love to him profest
Then all the world, when ever it were proov'd;
But Cordeill said she lov'd him as behoov'd:
Whose simple answere, wanting colours fayre
To paint it forth, him to displeasaunce moov'd,
That in his crown he counted her no hayre,
But twixt the other twain his kingdom whole did shayre.

So wedded th' one to Maglan king of Scottes,
And thother to the king of Cambria,
And twixt them shayred his realme by equall lottes;
But without dowre the wise Cordelia
Was sent to Aggannip of Celtica.
Their aged Syre, thus eased of his crowne,
A private life ledd in Albania
With Gonorill, long had in great renowne,
That nought him griev'd to beene from rule deposed downe.

But true it is that, when the oyle is spent,
The light goes out, and weeke is throwne away:
So, when he had resigned his regiment,
His daughter gan despise his drooping day.
And wearie wax of his continuall stay.
Tho to his daughter Regan he repayred,
Who him at first well used every way;
But when of his departure she despayrd,
Her bountie she abated, and his cheare empayred.

So to his crowne she had him restord againe;
In which he dyde, made ripe for death by eld,
And after wild it should to her remaine,
Who peaceably the same long time did weld,
And all mens harts in dew obedience held;
Till that her sisters children, woxen strong,
Through proud ambition against her rebeld,
And overcommen kept in prison long,
Till weary of that wretched life her selfe she hong.
Editor’s note: The language in Shakespeare’s plays is written in two forms, poetry and prose. The form of his verse is called blank verse or iambic pentameter, with five unstressed-stressed pairs of syllables per line. Prose sounds more like everyday speech, and is most often used by lower-class characters, characters assuming a lower status or characters engaged in more casual conversation. Below is more information about how these forms are used in King Lear.

BLANK VERSE

The greater part of King Lear is in blank verse, the unrhymed, iambic five-stress verse, or iambic pentameter, introduced into England from Italy by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, about 1540, and used by him in a translation of the second and fourth books of Vergil’s Aeneid. Nicholas Grimald (Tottel’s Miscellany, 1557) employed the measure for the first time in English original poetry, and its roots began to strike deep into British soil and absorb substance. It is peculiarly significant that Sackville and Norton should have used it as the measure of Gorboduc, the first English tragedy. About the time when Shakespeare arrived in London the infinite possibilities of blank verse as a vehicle for dramatic poetry and passion were being shown by Kyd, and above all by Marlowe. Blank verse as used by Shakespeare is really an epitome of the development of the measure in connection with the English drama. In his earlier plays the blank verse is often similar to that of Gorboduc. The tendency is to adhere to the syllable-counting principle, to make the line the unit, the sentence and phrase coinciding with the line (end-stopped verse), and to use five perfect iambic feet to the line. In plays of the middle period ... written between 1596 and 1600, the blank verse is more like that of Kyd and Marlowe, with less monotonous regularity in the structure and an increasing tendency to carry on the sense from one line to another without a syntactical or rhetorical pause at the end of the line. ... Redundant syllables now abound, and the melody is richer and fuller. In Shakespeare’s later plays the blank verse breaks away from bondage to formal line limits, and sweeps all along with it in freedom, power, and organic unity. In the 2238 lines of blank verse in King Lear are found stress modifications of all kinds. There are 67 feminine (or double, redundant, hypermetrical) endings, 5 light endings, 90 speech endings not coincident with line endings, and 191 short lines, the greatest number of short lines in any Shakespeare play. Such variations give to the verse flexibility and power, in addition to music and harmony. ...

PROSE

In the development of the English drama the use of prose as a vehicle of expression entitled to equal rights with verse was due to John Lyly. He was the first to use prose with power and distinction in original plays, and did memorable service in preparing the way for Shakespeare’s achievement. ... It is a significant fact that in many of his earlier plays there is little or no prose, and that the proportion of prose to blank verse increases with the decrease of rhyme. In King Lear four kinds of prose may be distinguished:

(1) The prose of formal documents, as in [Edmund’s] forged letter; Goneril’s letter [to Edmund]; and the Herald’s proclamation. In Shakespeare, prose is the usual medium for letters, proclamations, and other formal documents.

(2) The prose of ‘lowlife’ and the speech of comic characters, as in the Fool’s speeches. This is a development of the humorous prose found, for example, in Greene’s comedies that deal with country life.

(3) The colloquial prose of dialogue, as in the talk between Kent, Gloucester, and Edmund, when the play opens.

(4) The prose of abnormal mentality. It is an interesting fact that Shakespeare should so often make persons whose state of mind is abnormal, or seemingly so, speak in prose.

Edgar’s Devils

When disguised as Poor Tom, Edgar mentions five fiends that torment him. The names are derived from Samuel Harsnett’s A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures, published in 1603, in which Harsnett details cases of public exorcisms when priests encountered people in Buckinghamshire in the 1580s who were possessed by demons. Harsnett, writing on behalf of the Anglican Church, was a skeptic about possession, and his ironic tone is present throughout the Declaration, but Shakespeare drew on Harsnett’s characterization of the demons, which might have been familiar to many audience members of the first performances of King Lear.

Flibbertigibbet
a dancing devil, who makes faces (“mopping and mowing” as Edgar describes it) and can cause eye diseases and harm crops. Harsnett calls him Fliberdigibet, a name previous used by others for a mischievous gossip.

Frateretto
the name of a fiend, associated with a fiddler, meaning “little brother.” That Frateretto and Nero, emperor of Rome, are mentioned together by Edgar suggests that Frateretto has seen a damned Nero in hell; and Nero is, of course, most famous for fiddling as Rome burned, so there is a natural connection between the two.

Mahu
a general dictator of hell. Edgar describes him as a fiend “of stealing.”

Modo
another name for the devil, grand commander over the seven deadly sins. Edgar describes him as a fiend “of murder.”

In Harsnett:
Maho was general Dictator of hell; and yet for good manners sake, he was contented of his good nature to make show that himself was under the check of Modu, the grand devil in Ma: Maynie. These were all in poor Sara at a chop, with these the poor soul travelled up and down full two years together, so as during those two years, it had been done all one to say, one is gone to hell, or he is gone to Sara Williams: for the poor wench had all hell in her belly. And had had it still to this day for anything we know, if it had not pleased Fat Weston and his twelve holy disciples to have delivered her of that devil-child.

Smulkin
a minor devil, perhaps in the form of a mouse or a cat. Edgar externalizes this demon, as though it is a demon following him rather than possessing him. He’s called Smolkin in Harsnett’s text.

In Harsnett:
Fratterato, Fliberdigibbet, Hoberdidance, Tacobatto were four devils of the round or Morris; whom Sara [Williams, a possessed maid] in her fits, tuned together, in measure and sweet cadence. And least you should conceive, that the devils had no music in hell, especially that they would go a-maying without their music, the Fiddler comes in with his Taber & Pipe, and a whole Morris after him, with motley visards for their better grace. These four had forty assistants under them, as themselves do confess.

- From Harsnett’s A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures and Shakespeare’s Demonology: A Dictionary by Marion Gibson and Jo Ann Esra.
Selected Glossary of Terms

A

addition
the honor or title Regan gives Edmund
“More than in your addition.” (Goneril, 5.3.49)

affected
favored, liked
“I thought the king had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall.” (Kent, 1.1.1)

all-licensed
free to do/say anything
“Not only, sir, this your all-licensed fool” (Goneril, 1.4.124-25)

anatomise
dissect
“Let them anatomise Regan” (Lear, 3.6.37)

Apollo
From Greek/Roman mythology: the god of the sun, archers, music and prophesy, also the god of diseases and their cure.
“Now by Apollo, king, thou swear’st thy gods in vain.” (Kent 1.1.137)

arraign
to interrogate, examine; to call up to answer to a criminal charge
“I will arraign them straight.” (Lear, 3.6.13)

avouch
declare, assert, affirm
“I dare avouch it, sir. What, fifty followers?” (Regan, 2.4.184)

B

base football player
tennis was played by aristocrats, football by the lower classes
“Nor tripped neither, you base football player” (Kent 1.4.57)

beard
symbol of an old man’s reverence; it was an extreme insult to pluck a beard
“Art not ashamed to look upon this beard?” (Lear, 2.4.146)

Tom o’Bedlam
common name for a real or pretended madman; Bedlam is short for Bethlehem Hospital, a London lunatic asylum
“My cue is villainous melancholy, with a sigh like Tom o’Bedlam.” (Edmund, 1.2.101-102)

begot
fathered, bred, reared, educated
“You have begot me, bred me, loved me.” (Cordelia, 1.1.81)

cur
contemptuous: worthless dog
“My lord’s knave, you whoreson dog, you slave, you cur!” (Lear, 1.4.53)

D

darker
more secret, unrevealed
“Meantime we shall express our darker purpose.” (Lear, 1.1.25)

Dover
seaport in southern England situated on the English Channel; it is the closest English port to the Continent, and presumably the place the French army has landed “There is a litter ready. Lay him in’t / And drive towards Dover” (Gloucester, 3.6.49-50)

clotpoll
blockhead: clot – a clod of earth; poll – head
“Call the clotpoll back.” (Lear 1.4.30)

coxcomb
jester’s cap; often it featured a crest made of red flannel in the shape of a cock’s comb, though it might also have had a bell, ass’s ears and/or feathers attached.
“Let me hire him, too. Here’s my coxcomb” (Fool, 1.4.62)

cur
contemptuous: worthless dog
“My lord’s knave, you whoreson dog, you slave, you cur!” (Lear, 1.4.53)

child-changèd
changed by his children
“Of this child-changèd father!” (Cordelia, 4.6.15)
dowers
dowries; properties or wealth given with a wife
“Thy truth then be thy dower”
(Lear, 1.1.95)

E
earnest
earnest-money, payment to set a bargain
“There’s earnest of thy service.”
(Lear, 1.4.61)

entertainment
reception and care of guests
“Which shall be needful for your entertainment”
(Regan, 2.4.160)

F
fain
gladly, willingly
“I would fain think it were not”
(Edmund, 1.2.55)

fen-suck’d fogs
the vapors created by the sun hitting swampy fens were thought to be infectious
“Infect her beauty, / You fen-sucked fogs.”
(Lear, 2.4.126-127)

forsooth
In truth, certainly; an expletive generally used by persons of lower status
“Yes, forsooth, I will hold my tongue, so your face bids me”
(Fool, 1.4.122)

full-flowing stomach
fully angry or full of resentment
“Else I should answer from a full-flowing stomach”
(Regan 5.3.54)

G
gauntlet
a challenge, in the form of a thrown glove
“There’s my gauntlet. I’ll prove it on a giant.”
(Lear, 4.5.67)

Go to
an exclamation: “Quiet! Enough!”
“Go to, say you nothing.”
(Gloucester, 3.3.6)

H
Happily
Perchance, haply, maybe
“Happily when I shall wed / That lord who hand must take my plight...”
(Cordelia, 1.1.85-86)

horns
referring to the cuckold’s horns
“... and leave his horns without a case.”
(Fool, 1.5.19)

I
invest
give authority, empower
“I do invest you jointly in my power.”
(Lear, 1.1.110)

issue
offspring; result, consequence
“I cannot wish the fault undone, the issue of it being so proper”
(Kent 1.11)
“To thine and Albany’s issues / Be this perpetual.”
(Lear, 1.1.52-53)

J
jakes
privies, toilet
“I will tread this unbolted villain into mortar and daub the walls of jakes with him”
(Kent, 2.2.48-49)

Jesters do oft prove prophets
proverbial; e.g. many things said in jest turn out to be true
(Regan, 5.3.52)

Jupiter
From Roman mythology: the king of the gods (modeled on Zeus in Greek mythology)
“By Jupiter, / This shall not be revoked.”
(Lear, p.155-56)

K
knave
young fellow, a boy; or menial, servant, lackey; also scoundrel, rascal, rogue
“Though this knave came something saucily to the world before he was sent for,”
(Gloucester 1.1.13); “My lord’s knave, you whoreson dog, you slave, you cur!”
(Lear, 1.4.53)

L
liege
lord, sovereign; superior to whom allegiance is due
“I shall, my liege.”
(Gloucester, 1.1.24)

M
Marry
common exclamation, derived from the oath “by the Virgin Mary”
“Marry, here’s grace and a codpiece”
(Fool, 3.2.28)

matter and impertinency
sense and nonsense
“O matter and impertinency mixed, / Reason in madness.”
(Edgar, 4.5.125-126)

meet
fitting, proper
“If your honor judge it meet, I will
place you where you shall hear us confer” (Edmund, 1.2.72)

milky gentleness
mild and gentle course of action

Milk-livered
white livered, i.e. cowardly. Cowardice was believed to be caused by lack of blood in the liver. Milk is associated with maternal gentleness
“This milky gentleness and course of yours” (Goneril, 1.4.225-228)

“Milk-livered man, / That bear’st a cheek for blows, a head for wrongs;” (Goneril, 4.2.32-33)

milk is associated with maternal gentleness

“[This milky gentleness and course of yours]” (Goneril, 1.4.225-228)

“Take thou my soldiers, prisoners, patrimony.” (Regan, 5.3.56)

pelican
proverbially the pelican was known for feeding its children with its own flesh, and the pelican’s young were cruel to their parents

“‘Twas this flesh begot / Those pelican daughters.” (Lear, 3.4.53-54)

plight
troth-plight; solemn promise to marry

“Happily when I shall wed / That lord who hand must take my plight...” (Cordelia, 1.1.85-86)

plighted
pleated, folded, hence concealed

“Time shall unfold what plighted cunning hides.” (Cordelia 1.2.245)

practices
plots, machinations

“A credulous father, and a brother noble / On whose foolish honesty / My practices ride easy.” (Edmund 1.2.131-33)

ragemadness, frenzy

“Lest his ungoverned rage dissolve the life / That wants the means to lead it” (Cordelia, 4.3.11-12)

rage
madness, frenzy

“Nothing will come of nothing” Proverbial: Ex nihilo nihil fit (Lear 1.1.75)

nuncle
a contraction of “mine uncle”; the customary address of a licensed fool to his superiors

“Mark it, nuncle.” (Fool, 1.4.72)

patrimony
inheritance

“This milky gentleness and course of yours” (Goneril, 1.4.225-228)

mother
common name for hysteria
Histerica passio
Passio Histerica was another name for hysteria (passio means painful)

climbing
hysteria was thought to originate in the womb, then works its way up to the stomach and the heart and the throat

“O how this mother swells up toward my heart! / Histerica passio, down, thou climbing sorrow, / They place is below.” (Lear, 2.4.44-46)

motley
a fool’s costume, clothing

“The one in motley here” (Fool, 1.4.96)

Nature
multiple meanings here and throughout the play: Edmund as illegitimate is the “natural” son of Gloucester; Nature as a vital force; the Natural state of being before organizing or civilizing structures

“Though, Nature, art my goddess.” (Edmund, 1.2.1)

N

naut
worthless, wicked

“Beloved Regan, thy sister’s naut” (Lear, 2.4.101)

P

santed
slighted; been sparing of

“You have obedience scanted, and well are worth the want that you have wanted.” (Regan 11.243)

spirit
unnatural being, demon

“Come not in here, nuncle; here’s a spirit.” (Fool, 3.4.27)

sway
power of government revenue income

“the sway, / revenue, execution of the rest, / Belovèd sons, be yours” (Lear, 1.115-117)

temper
in proper mental condition

“Keep me in temper; I would not be mad.” (Lear, 1.5.31)

toward
coming, about to happen

“There is some strange thing toward, Edmund.” (Gloucester, 3.3.14)

T

Unaccommodated
Not clothed, naked

“Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare forked animal as thou art.” (Lear, 3.4.73-74)

U

varlet
rogue, rascal, knave

“What a brazen-faced varlet art thou” (Kent, 2.2.18)

vassal
servant; person owing homage and loyalty to a feudal overlord

V

22 \ GUTHRIE THEATER
miscreant, villain, wretch, rascal
“O vassal! Miscreant!” (Lear, 1.1.138)

KENT’S ABUSE OF OSWALD:
INSULTS EXPLAINED

three-suited
servingman were allotted three suits of clothes

hundred-pound
a large sum (may or may not be a swipe at James I’s creation of knights for this amount)

lily-liverd
cowardly

glass-gazing
vain, given to self-admiration, looking at mirrors

super-servicable
ready and willing to serve beyond one’s duties, even dishonorably; over-officious

one-trunk-inheriting
inheriting only enough things to fill up a trunk

composition
combination

worth the whistle
worth finding, seeking out
“I have been worth the whistle.” (Goneril, 4.2.30)

Sources include Shakespeare’s Words by David Crystal and Ben Crystal; Shakespeare Lexicon by Alexander Schmidt; Oxford English Dictionary; and notes to the Arden, Cambridge and Oxford editions of the play.
King Lear is about a lot of things, but what I think the play is mostly about is how close our worser selves are to our better selves and how little it takes for a very civilized world to become a very barbaric world. This seems to be a good theme to explore in this moment. The play is, of course, about power: what people will do to gain it, what it means to lose it, land, wealth, lovers, power to govern, power to govern one’s own mind, cognitive power. For all of King Lear’s vastness, scale and scope, kingdoms and kings, it seems to me a profoundly interior play. It’s a domestic play. It’s about fathers and daughters, fathers and sons, sibling rivalry, friendship, loyalty and infidelity. It’s about what happens when we can’t govern our own rage, when we can’t govern our own minds.

I wanted a container for the play, but I didn’t want a hundred moving parts to the set. There’s not a lot of flying in and out, nothing’s tracking and there are no sleds. There are a handful of big gestures in it that we felt to be important. And I wanted this enormous scaled room in which we can allow the actors to do what actors do best and what I think a thrust most invites, which is actors in space. Because finally what this play is about is the people within it and what those relationships are.

Early on in the conversation with designers, while we know that King Lear is a vaguely historical personage, we thought if we put it in a pre-history, pre-Christian Britain, it’s not easy for the play to become something, it just is something. So if you’re in a Stonehenge-y world, in a pre-civilized world, then there’s no way to track toward the barbarity that comes in the production. This decision led us to a place where we wanted a hyper, ultra-civilized world to begin the play, a functional world. And then the play can become something as that begins to fall apart.
Our King Lear costumes are early ’30s-ish, Europe-ish. What’s nice about the ’30s is the glamor and the civilized-ness of it. And if there was ever a play about a fall, it’s this one. So we need a place to fall from.

So the first scene in court is this glamorous white-tie event. The men are all in their white and black, very stark, very structured, tailored, buttoned up, masculine world. Into which there are these three lovely ladies out there, in their glamorous evening wear. But the color palette is really compressed. The women are still in this black, white and grey world; they’re contained in this masculine world.

When the men are all coming into Albany and Goneril’s home following the hunt, they’re tromping through the house in their big boots and they’re carrying their dead animals and throwing off their jackets and scarves, very much as when you come in from the cold. This is a cold world. One of the things that Joe is really keen on is that when Lear is thrust out onto the heath and into the world, it is cold out there. There’s a real danger to him being out there, there’s an urgency to get him to safety. Gloucester needs to get out there and help him. So there’s going to be a lot of coats and scarves and sweaters and hats and cold-weather accessories.
The Role of a Lifetime

Between them, actors Nat Fuller and Stephen Yoakam share 80 years of Guthrie history. Now they share Shakespeare’s most titanic role. A few weeks into rehearsals this January, they stopped by our Kitchak Donor Lounge to talk with Production Dramaturg Carla Steen about how a lifetime of theater, love and loss has prepared them for Lear.

CARLA STEEN: You’ve both been in King Lear before at the Guthrie [Fuller as Albany and Yoakam as Kent in Garland Wright’s 1995 production]. It’s been 22 years since you did Lear here –

NAT FULLER: Has it really? Oh, my god.

CS: Has your view of the play changed as you’ve aged, since the title character is an aging man?

STEPHEN YOAKAM: As we individually have gotten older in our lives and just had more life experience and love and loss, there’s just a deeper connection to the play now that we’re both older.

NF: And we both have daughters.

SY: Right.

NF: And our daughters have been a joy. But there have been moments when I know we’ve both felt “how sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is to have a thankless child,” as Lear says.

SY: [laughs] That’s true.

CS: This is an iconic role that you’re both playing and sharing. How do you begin to get your head around that? How do you prepare for it?

SY: My feeling is that my, and our, collective apprenticeship to this role has been our entire careers. It’s taken this long, first to get old enough to be able to do it, and also to have the lifetime of making art and making theater behind us in order to even think about attacking … no, not attacking, but attempting to do this role. I approach it very humbly and with a great deal of respect.

NF: You hear over and over again how gigantic a piece Lear is – the greatest play in English literature, the most popular play, the greatest role ever written, insurmountable –
SY: Unactable. 

NF: Unactable. Ultimately though, it is an acting job. And we have to figure out what the story is and how we want to tell it together. And then we have to act, moment to moment. I don’t think there’s an individual emotion in the play that Steve and I haven’t acted before at some point. There are times when we have to sit and watch. On the other hand, we learn things by sitting and watching.

SY: We’re picking stuff up from each other, which is great.

NF: And we also can share each other’s insights.

SY: Getting the role into your body is key at this point in the rehearsal process. And when you don’t get as many reps, you get up and you kind of go, “OK, what did I do last time? Oh, right, right, right.” I haven’t asked any of the other actors what it’s like for them yet.

NF: No, we’re too busy!

SY: I’m actually curious what that experience is for the rest of the cast. I imagine once we get into doing runs and into the performances that it’ll be a real kick for them because it’ll keep it very fresh, and it’ll be new every night.

CS: And when you’re not playing Lear, you’re playing the Old Man.

SY: Which means we’re in the show every day. That’s great. We stay in touch.

NF: Although, the scene that we do as the Old Man is not a scene with Lear. So unless we want to go down into the vom, we won’t be watching each other’s Lear performance.

CS: Would you want to watch the other’s?

NF: If we know the part well enough, we’ll be taking our own journey through it, which will be fully alive for us. Maybe if I’m hitting a part where I’m going, “This isn’t working for some reason,” I might sneak up and see how Steve’s doing it.

CS: So is this the first time you’ve been in a rehearsal room with Joe Haj since 1990 when you were all cast members in Shakespeare’s History Plays here at the Guthrie?

SY AND NF: Yes.

CS: You two have such a long history together, and then you have this shared history with Joe – does that help with shorthand or are you sort of learning each other again?

NF: I think it helps that Joe knows us and he also trusts us. He’s also had a great deal of experience with the thrust stage so he’s very aware of how to stage the play. And he’s a very collaborative director.

SY: Very.

NF: He really listens. He’s got plenty of his own ideas, but we feel like we’re working together to work it out.

SY: Joe’s very generous. Because he was an actor and he comes from the repertory experience as well, he knows how plays get made and how, without true collaboration, you don’t get very far. He’s a very loving, generous guy, who has a great sense of humor, which goes for miles in the rehearsal room.

Yes, this is King Lear, but we find ourselves laughing a lot as well.
EDITIONS OF KING LEAR


BOOKS ABOUT KING LEAR


FILMS

King Lear directed by Trevor Nunn. RSC production. Ian McKellen as Lear. 2008

King Lear directed by Richard Eyre. BBC. Ian Holm as Lear. 1998

King Lear directed by Michael Elliott. Granada TV. Laurence Olivier as Lear. 1984

King Lear directed by Grigori Kozintsev. In Russian with subtitles. Jüri Järvet as Lear. 1971

King Lear directed by Peter Brook. Paul Scofield as Lear. 1971

King Lear directed by Andrew McCullough. Orson Welles as Lear. 1953

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Scheeder, Louis and Shane Ann Younts, All the Words on Stage: A Complete Pronunciation Dictionary for the plays of William Shakespeare, New York: Smith & Kraus, 2001

WEBSITES

Folger Shakespeare Library www.folger.edu

The wealth of resources found on this site include lesson plans, study guides, and interactive activities.

Internet Shakespeare Editions http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/index.html

Collection of materials on Shakespeare and his plays, an extensive archive of productions and production materials.

The Global Electronic Shakespeare Conference www.shaksper.net

Educational mailing list for all things Shakespeare, edited by Hardy M. Cook.

Shakespeare Uncovered http://www.pbs.org/wnet/shakespeare-uncovered/

A series that goes in-depth into one play per episode. A host investigates the text, and its interpretations, visiting companies in rehearsal and in performance. Full episodes can be viewed online.


For Further Reading and Understanding