

CAMBRIDGE SCHOOL

Shakespeare

King Lear



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King Lear

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain

Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Commentary and notes Cambridge University Press 1996

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First published 1996

Ninth printing 2004

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 521 46697 0

Designed by Richard Morris, Stonesfield Design

Picture research by Callie Kendall

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Cambridge School Shakespeare

This edition of *King Lear* is part of the *Cambridge School Shakespeare* series. Like every other play in the series, it has been specially prepared to help all students in schools and colleges.

This *King Lear* aims to be different from other editions of the play. It invites you to bring the play to life in your classroom, hall or drama studio through enjoyable activities that will increase your understanding. Actors have created their different interpretations of the play over the centuries. Similarly, you are encouraged to make up your own mind about *King Lear*, rather than having someone else's interpretation handed down to you.

Cambridge School Shakespeare does not offer you a cut-down or simplified version of the play. This is Shakespeare's language, filled with imaginative possibilities. You will find on every left-hand page: a summary of the action, an explanation of unfamiliar words, a choice of activities on Shakespeare's language, characters and stories.

Between each act and in the pages at the end of the play, you will find notes, illustrations and activities. This will help to increase your understanding of the whole play.

There are a large number of activities to give you the widest choice to suit your own particular needs. Please don't think you have to do every one. Choose the activities that will help you most.

This edition will be of value to you whether you are studying for an examination, reading for pleasure, or thinking of putting on the play to entertain others. You can work on the activities on your own or in groups. Many of the activities suggest a particular group size, but don't be afraid to make up larger or smaller groups to suit your own purposes.

Although you are invited to treat *King Lear* as a play, you don't need special dramatic or theatrical skills to do the activities. By choosing your activities, and by exploring and experimenting, you can make your own interpretations of Shakespeare's language, characters and stories. Whatever you do, remember that Shakespeare wrote his plays to be acted, watched and enjoyed.

Rex Gibson

This edition of *King Lear* uses the text of the play established by Jay L. Halio in *The New Cambridge Shakespeare*.

Contents

List of characters 1

King Lear 3

Shakespeare finds his story 202

Different views of 'Nature' 206

Justice in *King Lear* 208

Madness 210

The politics of *King Lear* 212

The Fool 214

Family relationships 216

The language of *King Lear* 223

Staging the play 228

Quarto and Folio editions 232

William Shakespeare 236

List of characters

The Royal House of Britain

LEAR king of Britain *crown*
GONERILL his eldest daughter *red*
REGAN his second daughter *green*
CORDELIA his youngest daughter *purple*
THE DUKE OF ALBANY married to Gonerill *red crown*
THE DUKE OF CORNWALL married to Regan *green crown*

The Gloucester family

THE EARL OF GLOUCESTER
EDGAR his elder son and heir *black*
EDMOND his illegitimate son *"villain" hat*

Other characters in the play

FOOL *clown*
THE EARL OF KENT (later disguised as CAIUS) } in the king's service
blue denim
THE KING OF FRANCE *purple crown* } suitors to Cordelia
THE DUKE OF BURGUNDY } *army*
OSWALD Gonerill's steward *tan hat*
CURAN a courtier
A GENTLEMAN
AN OLD MAN Gloucester's tenant
A CAPTAIN
A HERALD
A SERVANT in Cornwall's household

Knights, gentlemen, soldiers, attendants, messengers, servants

The action of the play takes place in various parts of the kingdom of Britain.

Discussing King Lear's plan to abdicate and share out his kingdom, Kent and Gloucester are unsure about which of his two sons-in-law Lear prefers. Gloucester introduces Edmond, his illegitimate son.

1 Prediction

Sometimes a playwright suggests the themes of a play right at the start. Identify the main topics of conversation in the script opposite, and use them to make some predictions about how you think the play will develop. Write three sentences summarising your predicted story.

2 'Do you smell a fault?' (in pairs)

Gloucester's frank account of Edmond's conception and birth (lines 11–13) seems to provoke a non-verbal reaction from Kent at line 13. Kent may be shocked by Gloucester's story of his sexual conquest, or he may feel embarrassed for Edmond. As Gloucester and Kent, decide how you would speak and react to Gloucester's 'Do you smell a fault?'.

3 Gloucester gossips ... Edmond listens (in groups of three)

Edmond hears himself described as the result of one of his father's sexual adventures, as a 'knave' and a 'whoreson'. He learns that he will soon be sent away again. But do you think Gloucester is speaking incon siderately, or with humour and affection?

Take parts and speak lines 7–28. Swap roles and read the lines again, so that each person can try a different way of speaking Gloucester's words: discreetly, furtively, jokingly, boastfully, or in some other way. Afterwards, talk together about your impressions of Gloucester, and about what Edmond may be thinking in response to his father's conversation with Kent.

affected favoured
for qualities are so ... either's
moiety their merits are so evenly
balanced, no one can predict what
share of the kingdom they will
receive
brazened to't hardened to it

issue result
by order of law born within
marriage
whoreson bastard, son of a
prostitute
out nine years away for nine years

The tragedy of King Lear

opening line
important!

themes
preference
division of assets

ACT I SCENE I King Lear's palace

Enter KENT, GLOUCESTER, and EDMOND

King's advisor
favoured
"stump" hat
P bastard son

KENT I thought the king had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall.

GLOUCESTER It did always seem so to us: but now in the division of the kingdom, it appears not which of the dukes he values most, for qualities are so weighed that curiosity in neither can make choice of either's moiety.

5

KENT Is not this your son, my lord?

GLOUCESTER His breeding, sir, hath been at my charge. I have so often blushed to acknowledge him, that now I am brazed to't.

KENT I cannot conceive you. I don't understand you - 34 husband joke

10

GLOUCESTER Sir, this young fellow's mother could; whereupon she grew round wombed, and had indeed, sir, a son for her cradle ere she had a husband for her bed. Do you smell a fault?

KENT I cannot wish the fault undone, the issue of it being so proper.

GLOUCESTER But I have a son, sir, by order of law, some year elder than this, who yet is no dearer in my account; though this knave came something saucily to the world before he was sent for, yet was his mother fair, there was good sport at his making, and the whoreson must be acknowledged. Do you know this noble gentleman, Edmond?

15

EDMOND No, my lord.

GLOUCESTER My lord of Kent; remember him hereafter as my honourable friend.

EDMOND My services to your lordship.

KENT I must love you and sue to know you better.

EDMOND Sir, I shall study deserving.

GLOUCESTER He hath been out nine years, and away he shall again. The king is coming.

20

25

sign of
respect

Lear intends to divide Britain between his daughters. He sets them a test: whoever expresses the greatest love will be given the largest portion. Gonerill voices limitless love for him and wins a share.



From left to right: Cornwall, Regan, Gonerill, Lear, Cordelia and Albany. What do you think is the significance of the sword?

1 The royal 'we'

Monarchs often use the plural 'we' and 'our' instead of 'I' and 'my'. Speak lines 31–49, pointing at yourself each time Lear refers to himself.

Sennet trumpet fanfare
son son-in-law
constant will firm intention
several dowers separate marriage gifts
amorous sojourn visit as suitors
divest us both of part with

bounty generosity
nature ... challenge natural affection and good qualities are well matched
bounds limits, boundaries
champains plains
meads meadows

Sennet. Enter KING LEAR, CORNWALL, ALBANY, GONERILL, REGAN, CORDELIA, and Attendants

LEAR Attend the lords of France and Burgundy, Gloucester.

GLoucester I shall, my lord.

Exit 30

LEAR Meantime we shall express our darker purpose.

Give me the map there. Know, that we have divided

In three our kingdom, and 'tis our fast intent

To shake all cares and business from our age,

Conferring them on younger strengths while we

Unburdened crawl toward death. Our son of Cornwall,

And you, our no less loving son of Albany,

We have this hour a constant will to publish

Our daughters' several dowers, that future strife

May be prevented now. The princes, France and

Burgundy,

Great rivals in our youngest daughter's love,

Long in our court have made their amorous sojourn,

And here are to be answered. Tell me, my daughters

(Since now we will divest us both of rule,

Interest of territory, cares of state),

Which of you shall we say doth love us most,

That we our largest bounty may extend

Where nature doth with merit challenge? Gonerill,

Our eldest born, speak first.

GONERILL Sir, I love you more than word can wield the matter,

Dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty;

Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare,

No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honour;

As much as child e'er loved, or father found;

A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable;

Beyond all manner of so much I love you.

CORDELIA [*Aside*] What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent.

LEAR Of all these bounds even from this line, to this,

With shadowy forests and with champains riched

With plenteous rivers and wide-skirted meads,

We make thee lady. To thine and Albany's issues

Be this perpetual. What says our second daughter,

Our dearest Regan, wife of Cornwall?

Regan claims that her greatest joy is her father's love. Lear gives her land equal to Gonerill's share. Cordelia refuses to join in the love test, saying that she simply loves her father as a daughter should.

1 'Nothing' (in pairs)

If she speaks pleasingly, as her father wishes, Cordelia, Lear's 'joy', will win the richest third of the kingdom (lines 80–1). But she refuses to compete with her sisters' flattery. While they offer exaggerated praise, she answers Lear's request for a declaration of love with 'nothing', a word which will be used repeatedly throughout the play. Should Cordelia speak quietly and politely, or loudly and emphatically for all to hear? Does Lear respond with instant rage or with embarrassed patience? In one production, Lear and his courtiers thought Cordelia was joking and laughed indulgently at her words.

Take parts and speak lines 80–102 in various ways to discover which interpretation you prefer.

2 Cordelia's explanation (in pairs)

In lines 90–8, Cordelia explains that she loves Lear according to her duties as a daughter. She also casts doubt on the sincerity of her sisters' extravagant praise. If they love Lear totally, why do they have husbands? Cordelia says that when she marries, her love will be divided between her husband and her father.

- a One person speaks Cordelia's lines 90–8. At each mark of punctuation, the partner interrupts with one of Lear's lines at 85, 89–90 or 99. Cordelia tries to make her message clear and persuasive, despite the frequent interruptions. Lear tries to show the different emotions he feels.
 - b Contrast Cordelia's lines 90–8 with Gonerill's and Regan's declaration of love for Lear. Talk together about what the contrast suggests about the differing personalities of the sisters and about their attitudes to their father.
-

self-mettle same spirit
 square of sense human body,
 perfect feeling
 felicitate happy
 ponderous heavy, valuable
 validity value
 interested admitted, married

opulent rich
 bond duty as a daughter
 mar damage
 begot fathered
 take my plight accept my wedding
 vow

REGAN I am made of that self-mettle as my sister
And prize me at her worth. In my true heart 65
I find she names my very deed of love.

competition b/w Regan & Goneril

Only she comes too short, that I profess

Myself an enemy to all other joys

Which the most precious square of sense possesses,

And find I am alone felicitate

In your dear highness' love. *-not relating to family But throne* 70

CORDELIA [*Aside*] Then poor Cordelia,

And yet not so, since I am sure my love's

More ponderous than my tongue.

sincere love not as articulate

LEAR To thee and thine hereditary ever

Remain this ample third of our fair kingdom, 75

No less in space, validity, and pleasure

Than that conferred on Gonerill. Now our joy,

Although our last and least, to whose young love

The vines of France and milk of Burgundy

Strive to be interested. What can you say to draw 80

A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.

CORDELIA Nothing, my lord.

(Cordelia speaks nothing)

LEAR Nothing?

CORDELIA Nothing.

LEAR Nothing will come of nothing, speak again. 85

CORDELIA Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave *she can't put her*

My heart into my mouth: I love your majesty *feelings into words*

According to my bond, no more nor less.

LEAR How, how, Cordelia? Mend your speech a little,

Lest you may mar your fortunes.

CORDELIA Good my lord, 90

You have begot me, bred me, loved me. I

Return those duties back as are right fit,

Obey you, love you, and most honour you.

Why have my sisters husbands, if they say

They love you all? Happily, when I shall wed,

That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry

Half my love with him, half my care and duty.

Sure, I shall never marry like my sisters.

love will be b/w husband & Lear

LEAR But goes thy heart with this?

CORDELIA Ay, my good lord.

question's sisters' sincere love & Lear (why married?)

Enraged, Lear disowns Cordelia and divides her inheritance between Gonerill and Regan. He proposes that he and his one hundred knights live with Gonerill and Regan in turn. Kent protests.

1 Cursing Cordelia (in large groups)

In lines 102–14, Lear invokes ancient beliefs to curse and reject Cordelia. He is bitterly angry at her unwillingness to declare unqualified love for him. Here's one way to help you explore the force of Lear's rage and its effect on Cordelia. One person (volunteer only!) plays Cordelia. The others stand in a circle around her. Each one chooses a short section of Lear's words which they feel conveys his rejection of Cordelia. This extract can be five or six words, or as much as three lines. In turn, speak the words you have chosen. When you have spoken your words, turn your back on Cordelia. Repeat the activity, adding suitable gestures to illustrate your words. Cordelia can try ways of gesturing and speaking lines from earlier in the script to respond to these attacks, but may not leave the circle.

After you have tried several versions of the activity, talk together about the way in which the language expresses Lear's feelings and the effect it has on Cordelia.

2 The king's commands

Lear asserts his authority in lines 115–33. He issues orders and proclaims his intentions. But to whom? Work through the lines, a sentence or small section at a time, identifying the person being addressed.

3 What's your choice?

Line 137 may mean 'stop blathering and get to the point' or 'I've made up my mind. Shut up or I'll make you suffer'. Which do you prefer and why?

Hecate goddess of witchcraft
operation of the orbs astrological
influence of the stars
Propinquity and property
closeness and relationship
Scythian cruel savage

makes his generation messes eats
his children (messes = meals)
Pre-eminence high status
th'addition titles, honours
sway control
coronet crown (see cover picture)

LEAR So young, and so untender?

100

CORDELIA So young, my lord, and true.

LEAR Let it be so, thy truth then be thy dower.

For by the sacred radiance of the sun,
The mysteries of Hecate and the night,
By all the operation of the orbs

105

From whom we do exist and cease to be,
Here I disclaim all my paternal care, *disowns Cordelia*
Propinquity and property of blood,

And as a stranger to my heart and me *consumes children*
Hold thee from this forever. The barbarous Scythian,

110

Or he that makes his generation messes
To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom
Be as well neighboured, pitied, and relieved,
As thou my sometime daughter.

KENT

Good my liege – *Kent*

LEAR Peace, Kent,

interrupts 115

Come not between the dragon and his wrath.

ho wants Cordelia to be his mother
I loved her most, and thought to set my rest
On her kind nursery. Hence and avoid my sight!

So be my grave my peace, as here I give
Her father's heart from her. Call France. Who stirs?

120

Call Burgundy. – Cornwall and Albany,
With my two daughters' dowers digest the third. *÷ Cordelia's land to G&R*
Let pride, which she calls plainness, marry her.

I do invest you jointly with my power,
Pre-eminence, and all the large effects

125

That troop with majesty. Ourself by monthly course,

With reservation of an hundred knights

By you to be sustained, shall our abode

Make with you by due turn; only we shall retain *gives all land except power and*
The name and all th'addition to a king: the sway,

130

Revenue, execution of the rest,

Beloved sons, be yours; which to confirm,

This coronet part between you.

KENT

Royal Lear,

Whom I have ever honoured as my king,

Loved as my father, as my master followed, *Kent kinder for Cordelia*

135

As my great patron thought on in my prayers –

LEAR The bow is bent and drawn, make from the shaft.

Kent challenges Lear's decisions. Kent swears loyalty, but continues to criticise the king's actions. Lear warns Kent to stop his protest on pain of death. Lear is furious, and begins to declare Kent's punishment.

1 Kent's plain speaking (in pairs)

In lines 138–48, Kent accuses Lear of madness, criticises the older daughters' empty flattery, urges Lear to hold on to power and defends Cordelia's sincerity. He addresses Lear as 'thou', an inappropriately intimate term for a subject to use to his monarch (who would expect the courtesy of the plural 'you').

One student speaks Kent's lines while the other, as Lear, moves around the room, changing direction as often as he wants. Kent must keep reading aloud, following Lear as closely as possible to make him listen. Lear must stop and turn round when Kent says something which bites deep into his feelings as a king and father. Afterwards, talk together about which of Kent's remarks you think Lear would find the most hurtful.

2 Lear versus Kent (in pairs)

Work out ways of bringing out the tension and conflict between Lear and Kent in lines 149–61. For example, you could use pauses or speak very quickly without pausing. (It is a theatrical convention that when a line is shared, there is no pause between speakers.)

3 Loyal Kent ... the 'true blank'

Sight and blindness will become key themes in the play. In lines 152–3, Kent implores Lear to 'See better', and offers to act as 'The true blank of thine eye'. The 'blank' could be the centre of a target or the line of sight. Imagine that the actor playing Kent asks you, 'Does it mean here that Lear should always keep Kent in view, or does it mean that Kent is the model of an honest truth-teller, or what ...?' Make your reply.

fork arrow-head

Reserve thy state keep your powers

Reverb no hollowness do not echo
like an empty vessel

wage stake, make war

Apollo god of the sun

vassal wretched slave

Miscreant unbeliever, scoundrel

forbear stop

Revoke cancel, alter

vent clamour make noise

recreant traitor

- KENT Let it fall rather, though the fork invade
 The region of my heart. Be Kent unmannerly
 When Lear is mad. What wouldst thou do, old man? 140
 Think'st thou that duty shall have dread to speak
 When power to flattery bows? To plainness honour's
 bound,
 When majesty falls to folly. *keep your powers* Reserve thy state,
 And in thy best consideration check
 This hideous rashness. Answer my life, my judgement: 145
 Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least,
 Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sounds
 Reverb no hollowness.
- LEAR Kent, on thy life no more.
- KENT My life I never held but as a pawn
 To wage against thine enemies, ne'er feared to lose it, 150
 Thy safety being motive.
- LEAR Out of my sight!
- KENT See better, Lear, and let me still remain
 The true blank of thine eye.
- LEAR Now by Apollo –
- KENT Now by Apollo, king,
 Thou swear'st thy gods in vain.
- LEAR O vassal! Miscreant! 155
- ALBANY, CORNWALL Dear sir, forbear.
- KENT Kill thy physician, and thy fee bestow
 Upon the foul disease. Revoke thy gift,
 Or whilst I can vent clamour from my throat,
 I'll tell thee thou dost evil.
- LEAR Hear me, *traitor* recreant, 160
 On thine allegiance hear me.
 That thou hast sought to make us break our vows,
 Which we durst never yet; and with strained pride,
 To come betwixt our sentence and our power,
 Which nor our nature nor our place can bear, 165
 Our potency made good, take thy reward.
 Five days we do allot thee for provision
 To shield thee from disasters of the world,

Lear banishes Kent from Britain, threatening execution if he remains. Kent praises Cordelia's honesty, and urges Gonerill and Regan to fulfil their words of love. Lear offers Cordelia in marriage to Burgundy, without a dowry.

1 Kent's parting words

Enraged by Kent's plain speaking, Lear banishes him. Kent must leave Britain in six days. If he is still in the kingdom after ten days, he will be executed. In lines 174–81, Kent welcomes banishment if Lear is to act so tyrannically. Before he leaves, he addresses Lear, Cordelia and her sisters in turn, speaking in rhyming couplets. Write responses in the same style for Lear, Cordelia, Gonerill and Regan.

2 Choose the speaker

No one is really sure whether Shakespeare intended line 182 to be spoken by Cordelia, Gloucester or Cornwall. Which speaker would you choose to deliver the line? Give reasons for your choice.

3 Cordelia's price (in pairs)

- a Lear speaks about Cordelia as though she were a thing of little saleable value. Take turns to speak lines 190–5, emphasising Cordelia's lack of worth, treating your partner as Cordelia, the object of your scorn.
- b 'Take her or leave her?' In lines 196–8, Lear states the five conditions on which he will give Cordelia to Burgundy. How do you think she feels about being discussed by Lear and Burgundy as if she were a commodity? Imagine that, at the end of each condition (after each of the first five commas), Cordelia speaks an aside. What might she say?

trunk body
Jupiter ruler of the gods
large speeches grand words
Flourish trumpet fanfare
rivalled competed
present dower marriage gift
tender offer, give

ought anything
little seeming substance small
deceptive thing
pieced added
fitly like suitably please
owes possesses