

Shakespeare's *King Lear*

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smart

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These study materials are produced for use with the
Bob Jones University Classic Players production.

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Costumes and sets for this production have been designed by Jeffrey Stegall in the style of Edwardian England.

Gabrielle Prairie as Cordelia, and Ron Pyle as King Lear, Classic Players 2018

An Introduction to **King Lear**

Written records suggest that Shakespeare had completed **King Lear** by May 1606. It is the dynamic centerpiece of three great tragedies he wrote between the years 1604 and 1606: **Othello**, **King Lear**, and **Macbeth**. **Lear** was first performed at court for King James I on December 26, 1606.

King Lear is a wrenching, profound, and very poetic tragedy, set in the pre-Norman, quasi-mythical period of British history. Although

the play is 400 years old, it makes us think about the realities of life today. An elderly parent gives up his title and lands and becomes dependent on his adult children. This parent, however, is a king, one around whom the affairs of a whole nation revolve.

As both father and king, Lear reveals his selfish desire to command and control to a degree that is destructive, even as he relinquishes his kingdom to his two elder daughters. Rather than prematurely abdicat-

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Introduction to *King Lear*

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ing his office, Lear might have chosen to serve out his days as king and allow the laws of inheritance to take over after his death. His error in judgment brings disorder and eventually chaos to his family and his kingdom. Shakespeare, in fact, goes beyond the domestic and national spheres of human responsibility in *King Lear* to issues of cosmic significance, raising such questions as “What role do the gods play in human affairs?”

Among the timeless themes Shakespeare asks his audience to consider in *King Lear* are family duty and discord; the struggle between good and evil; natural bonds of love versus unnatural behavior; order and chaos; wisdom, folly, and madness; sight and blindness; anger; ingratitude; despair; human suffering; and divine justice and injustice. Such themes unfold clearly through character and incident. Shakespeare does not weave them into a parable. Instead he allows us to consider each theme from the multiple perspectives of the characters.

By the culmination of the plot, civilization itself seems perilously close to destruction because men and women have given free rein to their evil passions. Yet some characters remain untouched by the evil around them, and others are transformed in a positive sense. Lear, for example, after being stripped of his power and his very sanity and exposed to the raw elements of nature, comes to understand poverty, misery, and suffering. Seeing himself as he really is, the old king denounces his unjust actions that have brought suffering to others and decries his lifelong apathy toward those less fortunate than he. Gloucester, another spiritually blind father who is deceived by his wicked offspring, undergoes a similar transformation.

Finally both Lear and Gloucester realize the reconciliation and peace they have longed for. In the end the evil characters are eaten up by their own appetites, but not before bringing great suffering and, in Cordelia's case, destruction upon the good.

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“Better is a poor and wise child
than an old and foolish king,
who will be no more
admonished.”

—ECCLESIASTES 4:13, THE GENEVA BIBLE



Annette Pait as Goneril, Lauren Hamblen as Regan, and Rebecca Hervas as Cordelia, *Classic Players* 2005

“Flatterers are the
worst kind of
traitors, for they
will strengthen
thy imperfections,
encourage thee in
all evils, correct
thee in nothing,
but so shadow and
paint all thy vices
and follies as thou
shalt never, by their
will, discern good
from evil or virtue
from vice.”

—SIR FRANCIS BACON

King Lear Plot: The Long of It

After the Earl of Gloucester with wanton humor introduces his illegitimate son, Edmund, to the Earl of Kent, the aging King Lear enters with his court. He has decided to retire from the throne and divide his kingdom among his three daughters. He implies that the one who publicly professes the greatest affection for him will inherit the largest portion. Goneril and Regan each speak of their love in a hyperbolic manner that gratifies Lear, and he responds by giving each of them a large portion of land.

When Cordelia, the king's youngest and favorite daughter, refuses to compete with her sisters in extravagant, self-interested flattery of their father, Lear disinherits and banishes her. He also banishes his loyal courtier Kent, who dares to defend her position.

Lear then gives his kingdom to his elder daughters, Goneril and Regan, with their husbands, Cornwall and Albany. He specifies that he will retain the title of king and its royal prerogatives but none of its accompanying responsibilities. Cordelia's suitor Burgundy casts off the disinherited princess, but the king of France, attracted to Cordelia's virtue, gladly agrees to marry her. The two leave together for France. Alone, Goneril and Regan belittle Lear's plans to live alternately with them and complain about the follies of his age.

Meanwhile, another father, the Earl of Gloucester, makes a similarly bad judgment between his sons. Edmund, Gloucester's illegitimate son who has been absent for nine years, is deeply jealous of his legitimate half-brother, Edgar. With Machiavellian skill he dupes his father into thinking that the loyal Edgar is plotting to murder him.

After Goneril speaks harshly of Lear to her steward Oswald, Kent appears at her castle, wishing to serve the old master who has banished him. He thus takes on the disguise of a servant named Caius, whom Lear accepts as an honest-hearted follower. After Oswald is discourteous to Lear, Kent trips him up at the heels.

Lear's long-time court jester, called the Fool, taunts him for giving his crown and lands to his daughters. Goneril complains to Lear about the size and conduct of the retinue of knights he has brought to her house, and a bitter quarrel ensues. Lear renounces Goneril and angrily announces he will move to Regan's house.

The Fool throws more barbs at Lear for the precarious position he has put himself in. Lear begins to fear that he will lose his sanity.

At Gloucester's castle Edmund persuades his brother, Edgar, to flee into the night because their father has brought false charges against him. As Gloucester approaches, Edmund draws his sword, pretending to defend himself against an attack by his brother. Edgar runs away, and Gloucester vows to have him captured and executed.

After Cornwall and Regan arrive at Gloucester's castle, the main plot and secondary plot converge when Cornwall takes Edmund into his service. Kent arrives as a messenger from Lear. He quarrels violently with Oswald, and Cornwall puts him in the stocks. There Kent muses upon a letter from Cordelia, who has heard of her father's humiliation.

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Interpreting **King Lear**

"The interpretation of **King Lear** as a revelation of the emptiness of life fails to consider at least two things.

First, there is an affirmation in those passages in which Lear comes, through heart-rending anguish, to see that he was not what he thought he was.

Second, ... [Lear's] recognition is several times associated with love or charity, as when Lear invites the Fool to enter the hovel first and then confesses his guilt in having cared too little for humanity. And this care for humanity is seen in Cordelia ... [and] in the nameless servant who at the end of III.vii promises to apply medicine to Gloucester's eyeless sockets.

No one would say that these actions turn **King Lear** into a happy vision, but it is perverse to ignore them and refuse to see that in this play love humanizes as surely as egoism dehumanizes. If the play dramatizes man's desolation, it also dramatizes the love that, while providing no protection against pain or death, makes man's life different from the life of 'a dog, a horse, a rat.'"

—*Types of Drama*, 6th ed., ed. Sylvan Barnet, Morton Berman, and William Burto

"Like the Old Testament prophets Shakespeare has the courage to admit that in this world the results of evil are sometimes uncontrollable. The end of **Lear** does not give Shakespeare's own considered judgment on all human life: but [the human capacity for evil] is one facet of our existence."

—Geoffrey Bullough

King Lear Plot: The Long of It

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Fleeing arrest, Edgar determines to disguise himself as an insane beggar named Tom O'Bedlam.

Lear arrives at Gloucester's castle, seeking Regan. After she and Cornwall appear, at Lear's insistence Cornwall releases Kent from the stocks. Goneril also arrives, and the two coldhearted sisters quarrel viciously with their father, demanding that he disband his retinue of knights. In the end Lear curses them both and goes out into the night.

The distressed old king and the Fool, followed by Kent-as-Caius, wander onto a storm-ravaged heath, where strange upheavals in nature reflect the anarchy in Lear's family and his kingdom. Ruminating on his dire situation, Lear seems to be losing his mind. As the storm rages around him, he vies with the elements in sound and fury until he goes mad.

During the storm the three are joined by a crazed beggar named Tom O'Bedlam, who is actually Edgar in disguise, fleeing arrest. Given his own chaotic mental state, Lear finds the babbling demagogue an appropriate companion. As the quartet of men endure a night of brutal disorder in nature, Lear undergoes extreme mental anguish, musing on Goneril and Regan's cruel torment of him and on his own unjust treatment of Cordelia. Lear's suffering completely transforms his thinking about himself and others. Regarding his poor Fool's plight in the storm, the once proud king for the first time feels sympathy for another human being.

Gloucester, who is put out of his own house by Goneril and Regan, reveals to Edmund that French forces have been summoned to

avenge the wrongs done against King Lear. Then he departs to inform Lear of this news.

Edmund immediately betrays his father's secret to Regan and Cornwall, who eventually arrest Gloucester for treason and sadistically gouge out his eyes. In the fray a servant fatally wounds Regan's husband, Cornwall. In turn Regan kills the servant. She and Goneril are thus responsible for both Lear's insanity and Gloucester's blindness.

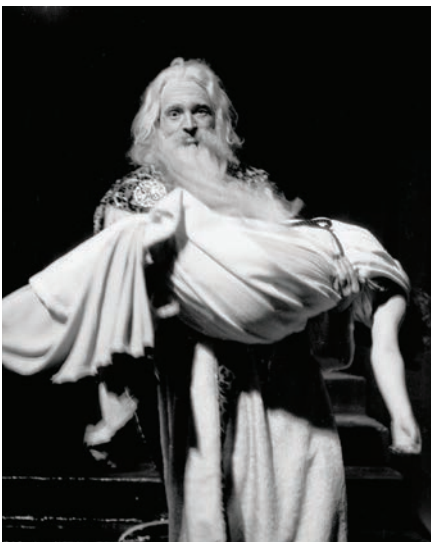
Kent-as-Caius conveys Lear to Dover, where Cordelia has landed with the army of France to take up his cause.

Edgar-as-Tom meets his blind father, Gloucester, on the heath. Without revealing his identity, he prevents the despairing old man from committing suicide and leads him safely to Dover. There Lear and Cordelia are eventually reunited and reconciled. In the battle that ensues between the forces of Goneril and Regan and those of France, both Lear and Cordelia are captured.

Goneril and Regan become rivals for the love of Edmund. When Goneril's husband, Albany, learns of his wife's proffered infidelity, he charges Edmund with treason. He also calls his champion, an unknown knight in armor, to fight Edmund in single combat. The knight deals Edmund a mortal wound and then reveals his own identity as Edgar. A messenger reports that in jealousy over Edmund, Goneril has poisoned Regan and then committed suicide.

The dying Edmund repents and confesses that he has ordered both Lear and Cordelia to be executed in prison. He attempts to reprieve the command, but his order comes too late.

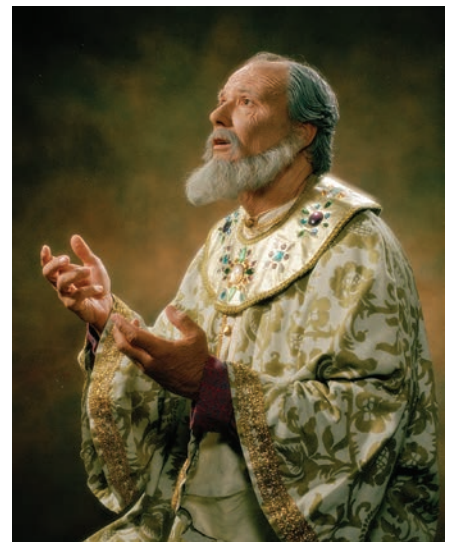
King Lear over the Years



Bob Jones Jr. as King Lear, *Classic Players* 1939



Bob Jones Jr. as King Lear, *Unusual Films* video, 1991



Lonnie Polson as King Lear, *Classic Players* 1991

Shakespeare's Sources for **King Lear**

The story of an ancient king of Britain named Lear, who wanted to divide his kingdom among his three daughters, was well-known in Shakespeare's England. Scholars have identified over 40 versions of the plot from the playwright's day.

Shakespeare chose as his major source an anonymous play dating from around 1590 but first printed in 1605: **The true Chronicle History of King Leir, and his three daughters**. He changed the ending of the original story significantly, transforming the plot from a tragicomedy to a tragedy. In Shakespeare both Cordelia and Lear die, whereas in the older versions of the story Cordelia lives and thrives, and Lear finally resumes the kingship. Shakespeare also eliminated the strong Christian tone of the anonymous play, choosing instead a pre-Christian setting for the story.

Kent acts as an agent of both Lear, the king of Britain, and Cordelia, the queen of France, and also indirectly of Gloucester and Edgar, the virtuous characters of the secondary plot. Kent is the only character who converses with all the other characters, and he appears in all the play's various geographical settings. He thus serves to draw the two diverse plots together and move the action toward its dramatic end.

Shakespeare echoes passages from Raphael Holinshed's 1587 edition of **Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland**, a

work that draws upon the writing of medieval historian Geoffrey of Monmouth. He took other details of the Lear story from sources that include Edmund Spenser's epic romance, **The Faerie Queene** (1589), and Ben Jonson's **Sejanus** (1605), a play in which Shakespeare is thought to have performed.

Since *King Lear* hails from Britain's ancient, undocumented past, some historians question whether he was a real king or a creature of Celtic folklore. But according to accounts in Shakespeare's day, the historical King Leir reigned in the ninth century B.C. His rule paralleled Jereboam's in Israel and Uzziah's in Judah. He died around 50 years before the founding of Rome.

Shakespeare interweaves with the story of Lear a second story of a family in turmoil, that of the Earl of Gloucester and his two sons, Edmund and Edgar. He derives it from Philip Sidney's prose romance, **Arcadia** (1590). It is the tale of a father who trusts his evil son and rejects his virtuous one. After the evil son blinds and deposes the father, the virtuous son rescues and cares for him. Some scholars view **Arcadia** as an even more influential source of inspiration for Shakespeare than the **Chronicle History of King Leir**.

"The honor of parents consists ... in loving them, and that not feignedly, but from the very bottom of the heart; and in wishing unto them all good things from God.

Make much of thy father in his age and grieve him not as long as he liveth. And if his understanding fail, have patience with him, and despise him not in thy strength. For the good deed that thou showest to thy father shall not be forgotten; and when thou thyself wanteth, it shall be rewarded thee.

Finally, the honour of parents consists in concealing, hiding, covering, and interpreting all their parents' faults, vices, and incommunities unto the best, never objecting nor upbraiding them by any thing done amiss; but quietly and patiently to bear all things at their hands, considering that in thus doing they greatly please God and offer unto Him an acceptable sacrifice."

—THOMAS BECON (1512-1567), **NEW CATECHISM**, 1559

Becon, a Catholic priest under Henry VIII who converted to evangelicism in the 1530s, became a notable preacher and religious writer under Elizabeth I. He wrote New Catechism to instruct his own three children. In the passage above he discourses on a child's duty to show forbearance toward an erring parent.

The Tragedy of

KILL

The Family

Lear

King of Britain



Goneril

Lear's eldest daughter
marries the Duke of Albany



Cordelia

Lear's youngest daughter
marries the King of France



Regan

Lear's middle daughter
married to the Duke of Cornwall

NG AR

The Court



Earl of Gloucester

Father of Edmund and Edgar



Edgar

Legitimate son



Edmund

Illegitimate son

The Servants



The Fool

Lear's companion



Earl of Kent

Banished courtier to Lear

**Also
Oswald**

Goneril's steward

Religion in **King Lear**

King Lear is set in the pre-Roman period of English history, a quasi-mythical era suited to a story of strongly distinguished good and evil characters not unlike those in fairy tales. Medieval and Renaissance historians regarded Lear as a real king who reigned in Britain from c. 850 to 800 B.C.

Geoffrey of Monmouth, writing a detailed account of Lear in the 12th century, identifies him as the tenth British king following Brut. He characterizes him as a person with an angry temperament who had to learn the error of his ways the hard way. Although Lear died some 50 years before the founding of Rome, Shakespeare's characters allude to the Roman deities Jupiter, Jove, and Juno. Such anachronisms were common in the 17th century, even in historical writing.

In *King Lear* Shakespeare includes 40 allusions to pagan gods and forces of nature. These passages are crucial in Shakespeare's creating a non-Christian world to be inhabited by pre-Christian characters. This world reflects the composite character of religion in ancient Britain.

Four of these characters articulate four different views of the universe. Gloucester sees it as immoral, its gods as malevolent forces who bear ill will toward human beings. The villain Edmund regards the universe as amoral, devoid of any spiritual significance. Kent ascribes to determinism—the belief that every person's lot in life is predetermined regardless of his actions—and the influence of the stars.

It is Edgar, Gloucester's loyal son, whom Shakespeare has voice the view of a moral universe and a personal, benevolent deity. His view ultimately supplants the other three views. By the end of the play Gloucester has embraced Edgar's view. He petitions the "evergentle gods" to take away his breath rather than allowing him to give in to the temptation to die before they so will.

King Lear seems to invite us to think about the role the gods play in human lives, especially in human suffering. After the cruel blinding of Gloucester, it is two servants who raise the question of justice in the universe. They observe that if Cornwall comes to good, everyone will have license for wickedness; that if Goneril lives to a ripe old age, "Women will all turn monsters." In a later scene Albany remarks that unless heaven sends down some powers to tame the vile creatures Goneril and Regan, humanity will devour itself.

The playwright sheds light on the issue of whether the universe is just by bringing about the untimely deaths of Cornwall, Goneril, Regan, and Edmund. The heavens, in effect, do avenge their wrongdoing. Gloucester and Lear also pay for their sin even though they both develop positively in the course of the drama and die "ripe." It is, of course, more difficult to regard the universe as just in the death of Cordelia. She has been a victim, first, of her father's folly and last, of Edmund's villainy. But the play seems to suggest that she dies fulfilled, ministering to her father; that death is a fact of life in a fallen world where villainy thrives; and that Cordelia is ready for death.

Shakespeare wrote for an audience that thought in terms of the Christian religion and, in the words of George Walton Williams, "brought that attitude with them to the Globe." Williams further argues that every prayer addressed directly to the gods in **King Lear** is answered—and in a way that audience members who thought in Christian terms would consider "Providential," or in keeping with God's will for His people. Thus the picture Shakespeare gives us of the gods is not one of arbitrary or malign powers but of supernatural beings who consistently answer prayer positively.



Gary Moore as Oswald, David Burke as Edgar, and William Pinkston as Gloucester, *Classic Players* 1981

Edmund and Edgar

Edgar and Edmund are sons of Gloucester, a nobleman in the court of King Lear. Edgar, the legitimate son, is a year or so older than Edmund, the illegitimate son. When the action of **King Lear** begins, Edmund has been away for nine years. In the first scene his father makes degrading remarks about his engendering. Soon thereafter Edmund reveals to the audience his resentment of his position and his father's attitude toward him. He immediately sets in motion a plan to trick Gloucester into disinheriting Edgar so that later he can take his father's titles and possessions, thereby creating a form of legitimacy for himself.

Like his stage ancestor in medieval drama called the Vice, Edmund is characterized by self-awareness and delight in his villainy. One of the few characters in the play whose thought processes are revealed to the audience, Edmund reasons that since he is Gloucester's "natural" or illegitimate son, he will act in accordance with the dictates of Nature, to whom he prays as his goddess. Further, he will accomplish his evil goals without any regard for conventional morality.

In this sense Edmund also represents a second type of Shakespearean villain, the Machiavel, or one who adopts the philosophy of the Italian politician Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527). In *The Prince* Machiavelli argues that evil deeds may be justifiable if the perpetrator's ultimate goal is a good one. Because Edmund has suffered unjust treatment, he reasons that he is justified in using any means at his disposal to gain the desired end. Edmund is a skilled dissembler whose



Jack Sterner as Edgar, Classic Players 2018



Wilbur Mauk as Edmund, Classic Players 2018

schemes are so successful that he manipulates and destroys almost every other character in the play.

In the end Shakespeare lightly sketches Edmund as a developing character, one who grows internally, becoming aware of the blackness of his own deeds and adopting a changed attitude toward evil. As he is dying, Edmund repents and attempts to make amends by rescinding his order for Cordelia's execution.

The victim of Edmund's machinations, Edgar is barely introduced into the play before he becomes an impoverished outcast on the run, one who has been misjudged by his father. As such, he assumes the disguise of a madman he calls Poor Tom O'Bedlam. But he finds a way to be with Lear in his distress on the heath, where he is joined by Gloucester, who does not recognize his own virtuous son. Pretending to be a demoniac, Edgar-as-Tom becomes an appropriate companion to Lear in the storm as he descends into genuine insanity before recognizing his lifelong apathy toward wretched, suffering creatures.

Then after Gloucester has been cruelly blinded, Edgar-as-Tom supports him in body and mind as he stumbles in the darkness, depressed by guilt. Motivated by love and a sense of duty toward the father who has treated him unjustly, Edgar patiently brings Gloucester from the brink of suicide to a state of contented endurance just before his death.

Disguised as a knight in armor, Edgar at last engages in chivalric combat against Edmund, whom he fatally wounds. In the play's final moments, after the death of Lear, Albany invites Edgar and Kent to share rulership of the kingdom with him.

King Lear as Tragedy

In **King Lear** Shakespeare dramatizes the destructive consequences of a single choice and action by the main character. The rash, impetuous Lear creates his own destiny when he gives away his land, his title, and his loving youngest daughter. By the end of the first scene Lear's abdication and division of the kingdom have already begun to have disastrous consequences. As the drama unfolds, Lear's family and his realm are ruined as a result of his irresponsible course of action.

The action of Act I, scene i begins with an old European plot device called the love-test, in which Lear displays a vain, selfish form of parental love when he attempts to coerce his three daughters into making elaborate, ceremonial professions of their love for him. He motivates them to be lavish, saying that their words will determine the amount of real estate he gives them individually. Although Lear is old, he is not wise to associate genuine love with enforced social rituals or to encourage his children to compare their love for him. He also fails to recognize that professions of love can disguise evil intent.

Although Goneril and Regan comply and compete to Lear's gratification, Cordelia is unable to "heave [her] heart into [her] mouth." She states that her love for her father and king is natural and honorable, but for the purpose of gaining a larger share of his kingdom than her sisters, she can say "Nothing." Lear responds, in effect, "If you say nothing, you will get nothing." Then using angry, violent language, he completely casts off the virtuous Cordelia. Further, he confers his crown on the husbands of Goneril and Regan—Albany and Cornwall—and banishes the loyal Kent, who says in defense of Cordelia, "To plainness honor's bound, / When majesty falls to folly."

In taking Lear's penniless daughter for his wife, the King of France introduces the theme of selfless love. It will recur throughout the play, finally becoming the force that transforms Lear and sets things right in his kingdom.

Before the first act ends, the consequences of Lear's initial action begin to come down on his head when Goneril turns him out of her house. Immediately a sense of isolation and loss of identity set in on the old king, who asks his Fool, "Who is it that can tell me who I am?" The Fool predicts that Regan, like Goneril, will prove an ingrate who betrays her father-benefactor. He sums up the cause of Lear's growing dilemma with, "Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise."

Before Act III begins, Goneril and Regan have stripped Lear of all his power. They have no natural love for their father, nor do they show him any gratitude or courtesy. Turned out of house by both, Lear finds himself on a stormy heath. This natural setting, subject to the disruption of nature's elements, symbolizes the personal and political disorder Lear's love-test and abdication have caused.

Lear becomes a self-exile on the heath, where he sheds all the robes and rituals of society that have concealed from him the truth about



Ron Pyle as King Lear, Classic Players 2018

life. In this condition he temporarily loses his mind. But he ultimately finds patience, sympathy, and regard for those less fortunate creatures of whose existence he had heretofore been unaware. In a mock trial of Goneril and Regan, staged with the Fool and Edgar-as-Tom, Lear demonstrates that he has developed insight into his own family tragedy as well. His progress in growth from folly toward wisdom is clear at this point.

In the final two acts Lear and Cordelia are reunited, and Lear's mind is restored. Cordelia's first address to him begins, "O my dear father!" and her second, "How does my royal lord? How fares your Majesty?" The resolution to the plot thus picks up momentum. It will finally encompass the healing of Lear and Cordelia as a family unit and look forward to the political healing and restoration of order in England.

Lear acknowledges to Cordelia his errors and seeks her forgiveness. She humbly agrees to "forget and forgive." In the play's last act she ministers to her father's needs, motivated by selfless love. At the end the wicked characters destroy each other, Lear's position as king is restored to him, and enough good characters survive to verify Edgar's closing statement that the grisly events of Lear's last days will not come around again to haunt the young who have survived them.

Clowns, Fools, & Jesters in Shakespeare



Ron Pyle as King Lear and Anna Brown as the Fool, *Classic Players* 2018

In Shakespeare's cast of characters a Clown is a humorously foolish fellow, typically a country bumpkin who is unconsciously obtuse in his use of language. The Clown is usually not attached to the play's main characters or main plot. Shakespeare's most delightful clowns include Dogberry in ***Much Ado about Nothing***, Bottom the Weaver in ***A Midsummer Night's Dream***, the two gravediggers in ***Hamlet***, and the Porter in ***Macbeth***.

Aside from the Clown figure, Shakespeare employs two sorts of fools, or court jesters—the professional and the natural fool, sometimes referred to as the “artificial” and the “born” fool. In keeping with stage tradition, both types wear multicolored clothing and a cap with bells on it and carry a baton or mock scepter called a bauble. The professional fool has an erudite wit, which he uses to insult his betters and poke fun at their follies. Among Shakespeare's professional fools are Feste in ***Twelfth Night*** and Touchstone in ***As You Like It***. The natural fool is, in the words of Harry Levin, “a half-witted mascot, a simpleton inspired with the intuitive wisdom of nature.” Levin places Lear's Fool in the “natural fool” category although in recent years he has frequently been represented on the stage as a professional jester, one whose knowledge of the world is too shrewd for a simpleton.

Of Lear's Fool, Leslie Hotson writes, “In ***Lear*** tragic poignancy is sharpened by the bold stroke of turning from make-believe to realism. For in place of the philosopher playing the wit-crazed fool, this more universal tragedy presents the true idiot-fool or ‘natural,’ urging sharp truths in a vain effort to make his beloved master ‘see better.’ Masked as bitter jests, their gnomic wisdom is like that of a Greek chorus.” Hotson also points out that the actor in Shakespeare's company who played the role of the Fool, Robert Armin, had closely studied the unique qualities of living “natural” fools and recorded his observations in a book entitled ***Foole upon Foole***.

In ***Lear*** Shakespeare employs the Fool as a dramatic device for revealing the thoughts of the main character, who never speaks in soliloquy or aside. The Fool appears 600 lines into the action of the play; speaks 240 lines, almost all of them to Lear; and then abruptly disappears after playing in only six scenes. Some scholars regard him as Lear's alter ego, the voice of his master's psyche.

Lear's Fool enlivens the scenes he appears in with jokes, word games, proverbial wisdom, and songs. His ironic yet truthful comments about his master's folly in casting off Cordelia and empowering Goneril and Regan give the audience perspective on Lear's tragedy. He remarks, for example, “Thou had'st little wit in thy bald crown when thou gav'st thy golden one away.”

The Fool's loyal devotion to Lear also fosters audience sympathy for the old king. O. J. Campbell makes this observation on the Fool's fidelity: “Walking clear-eyed into the stormy night and to his probable death on the heath, [Lear's Fool] comes as close as any fool ever does to the heroic.... He is the supremely wise fool who expresses in his heartfelt devotion to Cordelia and his king the Christian virtues of patience, humility, and love.”

Only after Lear himself has learned these virtues does the Fool exit, saying, “And I'll go to bed at noon.” It is Lear's beloved Cordelia who replaces the Fool as the character through whom Lear's thoughts are revealed to the audience.



Bob Jones Jr. as King Lear and William Moose as the Fool, *Classic Players* 1970