



# Studying King Lear



**EMC**

Publications

An EMC Advanced Literature Resource

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Written and edited by Lucy Webster

Cover: Rebecca Scambler, [www.rebeccascambler.com](http://www.rebeccascambler.com)

English and Media Centre, 18 Compton Terrace, London, N1 2UN

© English and Media Centre, 2018

ISBN: 978-1-906101-58-9

Printed by: Stephens and George

USB production: 10th Planet Digital Media

Thanks to my colleagues Emma Barker and Andrew McCallum for their comments on the text.

Thanks also to Dr Eric Langley for lectures on Shakespeare's tragedies and *King Lear* and to the following teachers and academics whose articles, first published in the English and Media Centre's *emagazine*, are reproduced in this text: Professor Susan Bruce, Simon Bubbs, Professor Emma Smith, Professor Lisa Hopkins, Dr Laurence Coupe, Simon Wardle (Head of English at Silcoates School in Wakefield), Judy Carrick.

## Thanks to the following publishers for giving permission to reproduce copyright material:

Reprinted from Richard Halpern: *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation: English Renaissance Culture and the Genealogy of Capital*. Copyright © 1991 by Cornell University. Used by permission of the publisher, Cornell University Press; Graham Martin and Stephen Regan in *ed Kiernan Ryan in Shakespeare Text and Contexts*, 2000, Macmillan Press in association with Open University reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan; Copyright © Guardian News & Media Ltd 2018 for Kenneth Tynan: *King Lear*, directed by Peter Brook, with Paul Schofield as *King Lear*, RSC – review (1964); Michael Billington: *King Lear* review – Jonathan Miller keeps it all in the family (2015); Michael Billington: *King Lear* review – Sher joins ranks of Shakespeare royalty (2016); Andrew Dickson: *King Lear* review (2012); Jennifer Wallace, *The Cambridge Introduction to Tragedy*, (2007) © Jennifer Wallace 2007, published by Cambridge University Press, reproduced with permission. Janette Dillon, *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Tragedies*, (2007) © Janette Dillon 2007, published by Cambridge University Press, reproduced with permission as fair dealing. *Shakespeare is Hard but so is Life* by Fintan O'Toole, published by Granta (2002), Copyright © Granta Books, reproduced by permission of the author c/o Rogers, Coleridge and White Ltd, London; Humanities-Ebooks, Charles Mosely and Professor John Lennard for extracts from *Literature Insights: William Shakespeare King Lear*; extracts from the interview between Trevor Nunn and James Shapiro and the RSC *King Lear* timeline with permission of Royal Shakespeare Company; Pluto Books Limited for Paul O'Flinn: *Them and Us in Literature*, reproduced with the permission of the Licensor through PLSclear; articles published as part of the British Library *Discovering Literature* website are licensed under Creative Commons; fair dealing permission obtained from Manchester University Press for extracts from © Alison Findlay: *Illegitimate Power: Bastards in Renaissance Drama* (1994); Royal National Theatre for 'Everybody Dies' © National Theatre

## Thanks to the Royal Shakespeare Company for the following images:

On pages 10-13:

1. Gloucester and Edgar, d. David Farr (2010) photo by Manuel Harlan (© RSC); 2. Regan and the blinded Gloucester, d. David Farr (2010) photo by Manuel Harlan (© RSC); 3. Lear holds Cordelia's body, d. Trevor Nunn (2007), photo by Manuel Harlan (© RSC); 4. Gloucester is blinded, d. Greg Doran (2016), photo by Ellie Kurtztz (© RSC); 5. *King Lear* and the Fool, d. Bill Alexander (2004), photo by John Haynes (© RSC); 6. The Fool and Lear's entourage d. Greg Doran (2016), photo by Ellie Kurtztz (© RSC); 7. The Fool and Lear, d. John Gielgud and Anthony Quayle (1950), photo by Angus McBean (© RSC); 8. Cordelia talks with Regan and Goneril, d. George Devine (1953), photo by Angus McBean (© RSC)

On pages 43-46:

1. Gloucester is blinded, d. Greg Doran (2016), photo by Ellie Kurtztz (© RSC); 2. Regan taunts the blinded Gloucester, d. Trevor Nunn (2007), photo by Manuel Harlan (© RSC); 3. Regan and the blinded Gloucester, d. David Farr (2010) photo by Manuel Harlan (© RSC); 4. Cornwall blinds Gloucester, d. David Farr (2010) photo by Manuel Harlan (© RSC)

*Every effort has been made to trace and acknowledge copyright, but if accidental infringement has been made, we would welcome information to redress the situation.*

## Accessing the Additional Resources

The USB supplied with this publication includes:

- ▶ The complete publication in PDF format
- ▶ A video lecture in MP4 format
- ▶ An audio lecture in MP3 format
- ▶ Resources to accompany the lectures
- ▶ Colour production stills (where available)

## CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Before Reading and a First Experience of the Play</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Act by Act</b>	<b>29</b>
▶ Act 1	30
▶ Act 2	37
▶ Act 3	40
▶ Act 4	49
▶ Act 5	51
<b>After Reading – An Overview</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>Key Aspects</b>	<b>63</b>
▶ Themes	64
▶ Character	75
▶ Dramatic Context – Tragedy	99
▶ Sources and Re-tellings	116
▶ Language	120
▶ The World of <i>King Lear</i>	141
▶ Structure	150
▶ <i>King Lear</i> on Stage	155
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>161</b>
▶ The Video Lectures	162
▶ Articles from <i>emagazine</i>	165
▶ List of Further Resources	175



# INTRODUCTION

## Introduction

### For Teachers

'*Studying King Lear*' is designed primarily for use with advanced level students working on the play in class. It also offers plenty for students working independently, for homework, revision or because they want to explore the play in more depth.

The complete publication is provided as a PDF on USB allowing you either to make copies for students or to show it on your whiteboard. The USB also includes one video and one audio lecture given at the English and Media Centre by Dr Eric Langley (see pages 162-163 for details) and, where available, colour versions of the production stills (see pages 10-13 and 43-46).

The book is divided into five sections:

1. **Before Reading and a First Experience of the Play:** Introductory activities to prompt speculation and prime the first reading. It is suggested that students' first experience of the play is fast and immersive – if you can, use an unabridged audio dramatisation, allowing students to experience the whole play in a little over 3 hours. This section also includes ideas for keeping track of responses and key ideas as students embark on a second, act-by-act exploration of the text.
2. **Studying *King Lear* Act by Act:** Activities specific to each act, with a focus on supporting students' understanding and developing their abilities to engage with the language, themes and dramaturgy.
3. **After Reading:** Activities exploring personal response, meaning and an overview of the text.
4. **Key Aspects:** Activities and critical and contextual materials on character, theme, language, structure, sources and re-tellings, dramatic context (including tragedy) and *King Lear* on stage. Each section is self-contained and can be covered in the order which suits you best.
5. **Appendices:** Prompts for exploring Dr Eric Langley's video and audio lectures on *King Lear* and Shakespeare's tragedies, articles from *emagazine*, and further recommended resources.

Extracts from *King Lear* have been checked against the RSC edition, edited by Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (2008). Where relevant, *King Lear: Parallel Text Edition* (Longman Annotated Texts) edited by Rene Weiss (2009), has also been used.

### For Students

You are likely to work through '*Studying King Lear*' in class, as you read and explore the play. The book also offers many activities and resources that you will not have time to work on together. Use the activities and materials to help you further develop your independent understanding and interpretation of the play and to increase your confidence in exploring challenging ideas.

1. Throughout the book there are statements to reflect on and debate. Use these to challenge your own interpretation and sharpen up your thinking.
2. The articles included throughout the book provide a range of critical readings of *King Lear*. They will give you insights into some of the key aspects it's important to have grappled with, as you develop your own interpretation.
3. Use the activities to help you engage actively with the text – a much more effective approach than simply re-reading.



## **BEFORE READING AND A FIRST EXPERIENCE OF THE PLAY**





# BEFORE READING

## Characters and Ingredients

Included here are the characters from *King Lear*. On page 9 are some of the things you will come across in the play – its ‘ingredients’.

- Which characters do you think might be connected and why?
- Drama relies on conflict. Which characters or groups of characters do you think might come into conflict and why?
- Now look through the ‘ingredients’ on page 9. Do they confirm or call into question your expectations of *King Lear* and the type of play it is? Talk about how these ingredients might fit together.
- In twos or threes, create your own story, using what you know so far about the set-up, the characters and the ingredients in *King Lear*. Share these as a class.

### Characters

▶ Lear, King of Britain	▶ Old man, a tenant of Gloucester
▶ Goneril, Lear’s eldest daughter	▶ Curan, a retainer of Gloucester
▶ Regan, Lear’s second daughter	▶ Lear’s Fool
▶ Cordelia, Lear’s youngest daughter	▶ Oswald, Goneril’s servant
▶ Duke of Albany, Goneril’s husband	▶ Gentleman, attendant on Cordelia
▶ Duke of Cornwall, Regan’s husband	▶ Doctor
▶ King of France, suitor, later husband to Cordelia	▶ Servants of Cornwall
▶ Duke of Burgundy, suitor to Cordelia	▶ Herald
▶ Earl of Kent (later disguised as Caius)	▶ Captains
▶ Earl of Gloucester	▶ Servant
▶ Edgar, eldest son of Gloucester, later disguised as Poor Tom	▶ Knight
▶ Edmund, bastard (illegitimate) and younger son of Gloucester	▶ Messenger
	▶ Knights of Lear’s train
	▶ Attendants, Soldiers, Trumpeters, Others

# AFTER READING ACT 1

## As You Read and Explore Act 1

- As you read and explore Act 1, pay attention to Shakespeare's use of the words 'service', 'duty' and 'bond'. (The activity on page 33 explores the significance of these words in more detail.)

## After Reading Act 1

### Exploring What Happens in Act 1

The main events in Act 1 are listed on page 31.

- Look at the list of events for no more than a snapshot of 30 seconds. As a class, share anything that immediately strikes you about it.
- Now read the list in detail, discussing with a partner anything you find particularly interesting about the events of Act 1.
- Explore the connections between the different events, in terms of:
  - **The plot:** what happens and why, the consequences (seen and unforeseen)
  - **Characters and their relationships**
  - **Themes**
  - **Dramatic development** of the act and its impact (look particularly at repetition, oppositions, the relationship between the beginning and end of the act).
- Use the suggestions below to discuss what you think is most interesting or most important about this first act as the opening of the play:
  - ▶ **Sets up several plot-lines** and begins to show how these will play out
  - ▶ **Establishes conflict** on a number of different levels (family members, generations, different values, contrasting ways of viewing the world and our place in it)
  - ▶ **Creates tension and drama** from the outset – a scene staged by King Lear for dramatic effect leads to real dissent
  - ▶ **Shows a world collapsing** as long-held values are placed under strain and shown to be breaking
  - ▶ **Establishes a strong connection** between the story about Lear and his daughters and that about Gloucester and his sons
  - ▶ **Raises difficult questions** for the audience
  - ▶ **Provokes discussion** about ideas of duty, obligation, service, obedience and value
  - ▶ **Creates uncertainty** about where our sympathies are supposed to lie.

# AFTER READING – AN OVERVIEW

## A Play About...

- On your own, try to capture your thoughts on what the play *King Lear* is about. To focus your mind, complete the following phrase in no more than 80 words.

King Lear is about...

- Take it in turns to read your statements out loud. When you have heard from everyone, discuss the similarities and differences in what different people chose to foreground and why.
- Now read the short selection of critical responses below. In pairs, discuss the angles taken on the play. Do they chime with your own views? Or do they offer you something new to consider?

*King Lear* is, at its heart, a play about the relationships between two powerful men – King Lear and the Earl of Gloucester – and their ungrateful children.

Carol Atherton, *British Library Discovering Literature* (2017)

We are dealing with madness, the dismembering of the state, old age as total failure, bullying, fatal sibling rivalry (twice), exile, despair, disinheritance, gratuitous torture, civil war, a failed attempt at suicide, and a model of survival that depends on acting mad. Shakespeare offers us a story without redemption, a devastating story, about the breaking of society, the state, individuals. As in all spectacle, we the audience are complicit, by our presence we allow it to happen. *King Lear*, like all great tragedy, asks us – can you bear this?

Julian Walker, *British Library blog*, 'Nahum Tate's *King Lear*: A Happy Tale?' (2016)

For *King Lear* is about suffering represented as a condition of the world as we inherit it or make it for ourselves. Suffering is the consequence of a human tendency to evil, as inflicted on the good by the bad; it can reduce humanity to a bestial condition, under an apparently indifferent heaven.

Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare's Language* (2000)

Bleak tragedy of political, psychological and familial breakdown.

Professor Emma Smith, *The Cambridge Shakespeare Guide* (2012)





## KEY ASPECTS

Themes	64
Character	75
The Dramatic Context – Tragedy	99
Sources and Re-tellings	116
Language	120
The World of <i>King Lear</i>	141
Structure	150
<i>King Lear</i> on Stage	155



# THEMES

## Introducing the Themes – A First Exploration

Listed here are some of the themes that audiences, readers and critics have recognised in *King Lear*.

- |                                  |                             |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Nature                        | 12. Compassion              |
| 2. Madness and folly             | 13. Reconciliation          |
| 3. Duty                          | 14. Betrayal                |
| 4. Truth/honest speaking         | 15. Justice                 |
| 5. Obedience and disobedience    | 16. Governance and kingship |
| 6. Conflict                      | 17. Love                    |
| 7. Appearance and reality        | 18. Value                   |
| 8. The natural order             | 19. Cruelty                 |
| 9. Custom                        | 20. Sin                     |
| 10. Power and the abuse of power | 21. Virtue                  |
| 11. Revenge                      | 22. Belief                  |

- Discuss the list as a class and add any further themes you think are significant.
- Explore the themes by:
  - Experimenting with different ways of clustering them
  - Discussing which themes you'd associate most closely with each character
  - Considering whether certain themes are most significant at different points in the play.
- Take one of the themes and investigate:
  - How it is dramatised (for example, plot, images, a character addressing the theme directly)
  - Its relationship with other themes
  - What you think the play is saying about this theme.

## Female Characters

Included here is some information and some statistics about the different roles in *King Lear*, including those of female characters.

- Share your first response to the information and statistics. What do you find interesting? Is there anything that surprises you?
- Do the statistics reflect the impact of the female characters in this play? What other ways could you measure impact, beyond the raw statistics given here? Share your ideas.

### King Lear Statistics

Character	No. of lines	% of total lines	No. of utterances	No. of scenes	Soliloquies
KING LEAR	747 lines	22	188	10	
EARL OF KENT	352 lines	11	127	12	2 (1.4, 2.2)
EARL OF GLOUCESTER	330 lines	10	118	12	
EDGAR	393 lines	11	98	10	2 (2.2; 4.1)
EDMUND	305 lines	9	79	9	4 (1.2 x 2; 3.3; 5.2)
FOOL	213 lines	7	58	6	1 (3.2)
GONERIL	192 lines	6	53	8	
REGAN	182 lines	5	73	8	
CORDELIA	116 lines	3	31	4	
ALBANY	161 lines	5	58	5	
CORNWALL	108 lines	3	63	5	

### The Female Roles in *King Lear*

- ▶ Out of the 27 characters in *King Lear* (18 of which are speaking parts), three are female: Cordelia, Goneril and Regan.
- ▶ There are no older women.
- ▶ The three women are presented as daughters, sisters, wives and, in the case of Goneril and Regan, rivals for Edmund's love.



## Exploring A Literary Concept – A Case Study on Anagnorisis

The following activity gives you chance to explore in more detail a key idea about tragedy – ‘the moment of recognition’ (or **anagnorisis**). It looks at both the insights it can give us into *King Lear* and the ways in which critics have used it to help them grapple with the play.

Aristotle’s ‘moment of recognition’ refers to the point in a tragedy where the protagonist (the tragic hero or heroine) realises the truth of their situation or comes to some sort of self-knowledge.

Although Aristotle used anagnorisis when discussing the plays of the Greek playwrights Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, many critics have found it a useful concept when exploring tragedies by writers as diverse as Shakespeare, Ibsen and Arthur Miller. As these playwrights were not writing their plays in order to demonstrate the concept, it’s not always possible to identify one definite ‘moment of recognition’ – it’s up for debate. This is certainly true of *King Lear*.

### A Close Focus on the Text

- Read the four extracts from *King Lear* and share your response to them.
- Now read the short discussions of anagnorisis on page 110.
- As a group, share any insights this explanation of the tragic concept of anagnorisis gives you into the four extracts from *King Lear*.
  - In what ways does Lear gain insight or awareness or move from ignorance to knowledge in these extracts?
  - What about other characters such as Gloucester or Kent? Edgar or Edmund? What recognition do they come to?
  - You might want to consider other points at which you think a character (or the audience) experiences a moment of recognition.

#### Extract 1

This extract is taken from Act 1 Scene 4, beginning at line 234. Lear, having divested himself of the crown and divided his lands between his daughters Goneril and Regan, has just learned that Goneril will not allow him to stay with her, if he brings with him his entourage of servants.

LEAR:               Woe that too late repents! – Is it your will?  
                           Speak, Sir – Prepare my horses.  
                           Ingratitude, thou marble-hearted fiend,  
                           More hideous, when thou show’st thee in a child,  
                           Than the sea-monster!

ALBANY:           Pray, sir, be patient.



# KING LEAR ON STAGE

- Read the comments below on staging *King Lear*. Talk about the ideas they raise:
  - ▶ In what ways might *King Lear* be thought of as unstageable?
  - ▶ What do you think of Emma Smith's suggestion that performance, like criticism, is a form of re-writing the play? What might a production today emphasise?

*Lear* is essentially impossible to be represented on a stage.

*Charles Lamb, On the Tragedies of Shakespeare (1810)*

*King Lear* is too huge for the stage.

*A.C. Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy; Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth (1904)*

*King Lear* has been performed more often in the last 50 years than in the whole its 400 year stage history.

*Jonathan Croall, Performing King Lear (2015)*

The issue of how sad the play is has been constructed by critics. And in turn these critics are constructed by their historical cultural and aesthetic biases. We get the *Lear* we want or need by re-writing it through criticism and also through performance.

*Professor Emma Smith, iTunesU*

A collection of resources has been put together to help you explore the play on stage and the different insights each production affords.

- ▶ The original review of Peter Brook's ground-breaking 1962 RSC production (pages 156-157)
- ▶ Stills from eight RSC productions (pages 10-13; see page 2 for details of the production, including director and year)
- ▶ Extracts from reviews of three recent productions (pages 158-159).

Your overall aim in exploring these resources is to:

- ▶ Get a sense of the play's meaning and impact in performance
- ▶ Engage critically with the interpretations through stills and reviews, using these to sharpen up your own interpretation of the play
- ▶ Use a range of production stills to develop an understanding of the play's complexity.

You could either explore the collection of resources independently or use the activities suggested in this section to focus your exploration.



## Lecture 1: Shakespeare's Tragedies

Dr Langley explores the role dramatic tragedy plays in society – and how our interpretations of this role have changed through time.

You will need the following resources when watching this video lecture:

- Ambassadors.pdf – Colour PDF of Holbein's The Ambassadors
- EL\_TragedyHandout.pdf – Quotations discussed by Eric Langley in the lecture.

Use the headings below to guide you as you listen:

- Introduction
- Why do we go to see tragedy?
- Holbein's 'The Ambassadors'
- England in the Renaissance world
- Knowledge
- Identity and Renaissance 'self-fashioning'
- Death and religion
- Selling tragedy:
  - ▶ Helps us to see things properly
  - ▶ Exposes the wicked
  - ▶ Provides comfort, helps us make sense of life
  - ▶ Provides a solution – to the mystery of death
  - ▶ Provides value to life?
- The problem of the dominant individual in society
- The Wheel of Fortune
- Catharsis – the purging of difficult emotions
- The individual against the world
- A lesson learned?
- The changing meaning of individual
- A new kind of individual
- A new kind of world

