

*King Lear*  
Seminar notes

The play was performed in 1605 before James I (Elizabeth I reigned 1558-1603, James I 1603-1625).

*Lear* is about kingship and what a King should be – flattering to James. Lear is imperious and authoritarian but very human eg the recurring word 'love' indicating his need for his daughters. James constantly wanted declarations of love and loyalty (NB his court was predominantly male).

Act 1 sc i represents Lear as absolute ruler, reflecting James's belief in the divine right of Kings. Lear's entry is appropriately ceremonial, the pomp and circumstance indicating his status. His daughters enter last, reflecting patriarchal order. Later Goneril takes away Lear's knights, an essential expression of his rank. NB Keeping a retinue was a responsibility, a means of maintaining the hierarchy. 100 knights isn't excessive given his rank – it's essential.

Lear is presented as physically fit to begin with eg he loves hunting (James loved hunting and was accused of preferring it to his political duties).

James was obsessed with political unity and so would have rejected Lear's decision to divide the Kingdom (NB it is shown to be the wrong decision).

James stressed the role of the King as father of the state. Lear remains a father ie he doesn't abdicate his parental authority when he abdicates from his political role / authority.

The family was the central unit and political type in Elizabethan and Jacobean England but it was the subject of considerable debate. *Lear* is one of many myths which support patriarchal power and order ie masculinity gives the right to power.

We understand Lear's position in relation to Gloucester – they are both old, their families let them down and they suffer because of their children. Yet Lear's children are legitimate and have no cause for complaint. Gloucester's problems stem from vice. James I warned his son to be faithful to his wife because illegitimate children cause problems.

NB Contemporary controversy about political succession. Elizabeth I was accused of political irresponsibility because she had no named successor. Lear decides to divide the state to avoid 'future strife' while he has his mental faculties – he's trying to be responsible, doing his best. His problem is that he only has female heirs – James saw this as a disease with no possible good solution. Spenser and later Milton thought the question was wise (the question was in the older play, *King Leir*).

Lear and his daughters represent the traditional conflict between old and young but also political conflict - Cordelia challenges the hierarchy.

Without divine support, the hierarchy has nothing to appeal to. The only sanction of James's reign is divine – otherwise there is no cohesion, a pagan world with no social order.

Cordelia's 'Nothing, my lord' is honest, not hypocritical but it breaks decorum, which was key to Elizabeth and James's courts. Respect in language and attitude was almost as important as content for a contemporary audience – her response is shocking, almost vulgar. She's the youngest daughter and should therefore be the most respectful. Lear has to demonstrate anger – he's the King. James favoured an angry response to impertinence.

*Lear* as myth. The play gives the impression of universality, of being beyond a particular time and place (Dover is the only place mentioned). It explores what the world would be like without divinely ordained justice and balance. Existentialist view of the text – pessimism in the face of the horror of an empty and meaningless universe (NB Existentialism was early 20thc) ie Cordelia dies because she is good, a symbol of purity which has no place in such a world.

Cordelia is the core of probity in the play, the centre of our sympathy and Lear's only comfort in his suffering. Shakespeare altered his sources in having Cordelia die.

Clash of values – Medieval Catholic values were being challenged in Shakespeare's time by new commercial values related to Protestantism, the idea that integrity superseded one's duty to outward forms. Protestantism emphasised the individual and the significance of the individual's relationship with God (as opposed to stressing the authority of the priest).

Oppositions reflected in the play: individual v. authority; freedom v. order; democracy v. autocracy.

Negative examples of individualism in the play: Goneril, Regan and Edmund, who says he'll follow nature and his own interests - Machiavellian.

Aquinas and Bacon argued that nature is rational and divinely ordered.

Hobbes argued that man is governed by self-interest and appetite.

Morality tradition: Regan and Goneril are figures of evil. Regan kills a servant, Goneril puts out Gloucester's eyes – he's a Duke so her act is more evil, more damaging to the social order. Regan's a widow when she loves Edmund, which again disturbs the social order less than Goneril. Goneril finally poisons Regan.

Lear is the embodiment of suffering man of Job (*Bible*), a means of exploring the fundamental question of why the good suffer.

The Fool – licensed subversion, a kind of ludic authority (cf Feste in *Twelfth Night*). His jests remind Lear of his afflictions and may help to drive him mad. He's the sage/fool who sees the truth. He's also a safety valve for the audience, who might otherwise laugh at Lear and his insanity.

The play inverts the orthodox view of wisdom and foolishness. In the storm scenes Lear and Poor Tom show signs of madness but the Fool seems sane. He fades from the scene – Lear can act his own Fool. The King/Fool/madman was a common triangle in Renaissance literature.

The play explores the paradox of wisdom in madness. When sane Lear can't distinguish between Cordelia and her sisters. Lear acquires a kind of wisdom in insanity.

During the storm the old Lear dies – he is reborn when he is reunited with Cordelia.

Lear is driven insane by a series of shocks: Cordelia's rebuff, Goneril's attack, finding the loyal Kent in the stocks, rejection by Regan.

The storm is a projection in the macrocosm (outer world) of the tempest in the microcosm (inner world). Lear hears thunder and knows that what he's feared will come – 'I shall go mad'. Edgar arrives pretending to be mad as Poor Tom, representing what Lear fears becoming. Ironically Edgar's fake madness precipitates Lear's real madness. In response to Edgar's insane torrent of speech Lear calls him 'philosopher', 'learned Theban'. Rather than recoiling when confronted by madness, he identifies with it and renounces reason.

The storm symbolises the mental disintegration of Lear himself but also the break-up of society and the threat to the universe itself under the impact of ingratitude and treachery.

Madness provides a different perspective and enables a particular kind of truth of Hamlet, who can say things when apparently insane that it wouldn't be safe to articulate if he were deemed sane.

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