

THE STORY

Lear, king of Britain, a petulant and unwise old man, has three daughters: Goneril, wife of the duke of Albany, Regan, wife of the duke of Cornwall, and Cordelia, for whom the king of France and duke of Burgundy are suitors. Intending to divide his kingdom among his daughters according to their affection for him, he bids them say which loves him most. Goneril and Regan profess extreme affection, and each receives one-third of the kingdom. Cordelia, disgusted with their hollow flattery, says she loves him according to her duty, not more nor less. Infuriated with this reply, Lear divides her portion between his other daughters, with the condition that he, with 100 knights, shall live with each daughter in turn. Burgundy withdraws his suit for Cordelia, and the king of France accepts her without dowry. The earl of Kent takes her part and is banished.

Goneril and Regan reveal their heartless character by refusing their father the maintenance they had promised, and finally turning him out of doors in a storm. The earl of Gloucester shows pity for the old king, and is suspected of complicity with the French, who have landed in England. His eyes are put out by Cornwall, who receives a death-wound in the affray. Gloucester's son Edgar, who has been traduced to his father by his bastard brother Edmund, takes the disguise of a lunatic beggar, and tends his father till Gloucester dies. Lear, who has gone mad from rage and ill-treatment, is taken by the disguised faithful Kent to Dover, where Cordelia receives him.

Meanwhile Goneril and Regan have both turned their affections to Edmund. Embittered by this rivalry, Goneril poisons Regan and takes her own life.

The English forces under Edmund and Albany defeat the French, and Lear and Cordelia are imprisoned, by Edmund's order. Cordelia is hanged, and Lear dies from grief. The treachery of Edmund is proved by his brother Edgar. Gloucester's heart has "Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief, Burst smilingly." Albany, who has not abetted Goneril in her cruel treatment of Lear, takes over the kingdom

ABOUT PRODUCTION

The rule for producing Shakespeare's plays is that no words are ever to be added. Directors often move lines, though, or assign them to other characters and are always free to cut words, lines, or whole scenes. The director must also add stage "business," since the text gives little.

There is no "right" way to do a Shakespeare play since setting, too, always reflects directorial—not authorial—decision. So directors must decide in what general place and time they are going to set a play. Shakespeare's plays get "moved" frequently. We've seen *The Tempest* set in tropical islands, fantasy islands (yes!), and outer space. We've seen Hamlet wearing everything from armor to pyjamas to jeans and cowboy boots.

Tonight's production of *King Lear* will use modern dress and sets.

Now *you* think as a producer/director:

- What setting will you use?
- What kinds of costumes will you choose for each of the characters? What colors will you have dominate the sets and costumes?
- What one special effect will you use to enhance your production? (Money's no object.)
What music will help your production, and in what scenes?

SIX IDEAS

King Lear can be studied as a definition. Choose one or two major characters and watch what they say and do to give definition to one of these terms:

love	duty	madness
loyalty	evil	sight/blindness

The summary of *King Lear* is adapted from Margaret Drabble, *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, revised 5th ed., Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995. Print.



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THE FOOL

Fools were popular well before Elizabethan times. In the Middle Ages, jesters were common as household servants to the rich. They often wore the traditional costume of the coxcomb (jester's cap) with bells, and a motley (multi-coloured) coat. Their role—to entertain with witty words and songs, and to make critical comment on contemporary behaviour. An 'allowed fool', such as Feste in *Twelfth Night*, was able to say what he thought without fear of punishment.

Lear's Fool is 'all-licensed', and so can speak frankly and critically about anything and anyone, especially his master, the king. He acts as a kind of dramatic chorus, an ironic commentator on the action he observes, constantly reminding Lear of his folly. Lear is relentlessly used as the butt of the Fool's barbed comments.

The Fool moves easily between different styles of humour: stand-up comedy ('Thou hadst little wit in thy bald crown when thou gav'st thy golden one away'), song ('Fools had ne'er less grace in a year ...'), rhyme or proverb ('Fathers that wear rags / Do make their children blind ...'); and innuendo ('She that's a maid now . .')

Some of the Fool's words may be puzzling, but all carry significance for Lear's plight. For example, 'So out went the candle, and we were left darkling', spoken as Goneril begins to undermine Lear's sanity, eerily prophesies the blindness and confusion that follow. From his first appearance, his special relationship with Lear is evident. It allows him to escape punishment for his stinging criticisms, and sees him following Lear selflessly into the storm, almost as if he were Lear's *alter ego*, his second, more sane self.

One production highlighted the relationship between Cordelia and the Fool by beginning with an ominous tableau of them with their necks linked by a hangman's noose. And... it's not unusual to cast the same actor to play both roles, another way to leave an echo in an audience's mind.

SOME GRAMMAR OF EARLY MODERN ENGLISH

"Familiar" pronouns:

Modern English has dropped a set of pronouns and verbs called the "familiar" or "thee and thou" forms once used among close friends and family and to inferior children, animals, and inanimate objects. These old forms did, though, survive into Elizabethan England and appear frequently in Shakespeare.

Singular			
1st	I	me	my, *mine
2nd	thou	thee	thy, *thine
3rd	he, she	him, her	his, hers
Plural			
1st	we	us	our, ours
2nd	you (ye)	you	your, yours
3rd	they	them	their, theirs

*forms used before a noun beginning with a vowel or unpronounced 'h'

Verb forms:

The second person singular (familiar) adds the ending **-est**, **-st**, or **-st**.

Examples: *thou gives*, *thou sing's*

Here are the forms of some "irregular" verbs:

present	you	are	have	will
	thou	art	hast	wilt
past	you	were	had	would
	thou	wert	hadst	wouldst

present	you	can	shall	do
	thou	canst	shalt	dost
past	you	could	should	did
	thou	couldst	shouldst	didst

Third-person verb endings:

The third person singular often substitutes **-th** for **-s**.

Examples: she *giveth* (for she gives)
it *raineth* every day (for rains)

HEARING SHAKESPEARE

We talk about "seeing" or "going to," a play or a movie. People in Renaissance England, though, spoke of "hearing" a play. We watch to see what happens. They knew what was to happen; they listened for how it sounded.

The biggest challenge Shakespeare's plays pose for us is not that the language is old; it isn't; it's Modern English. The challenge is that it's poetry. Nearly all of *Lear* is written in "blank verse," that is, in unrhymed iambic pentameter—lines of five "feet," each one an iamb, or set of two syllables, the first of which is unstressed and the second of which is stressed—like the word 'to-DAY.' Cordelia tells her father that she loves him, "according to my bond, no more, nor less." Although that rhythm is entirely natural to English speech, Shakespeare will often do things we are not used to in order to accommodate the beat. Words will come in an unusual order, as when France says, "Thee and thy virtues here I seize upon" instead of



"Here I seize upon thee and thy virtues."

Words even disappear at times, as in "Let's away" for "Let's go away."

It takes most people about 15 minutes to get used to the rhythms and word order and to be comfortable with the language. The best advice is to relax and listen to it as music. The meaning will come. Honest.

The second challenge comes from the grammar (see the panel to the left).

The third challenge is Shakespeare's huge vocabulary. There are a few tricks for dealing with it, but in the theater it's best to let the actors help define the words with tone and gesture. This table might help with six common words:

	here	there	where
to	<i>hither</i>	<i>thither</i>	<i>wither</i>
from	<i>hence</i>	<i>thence</i>	<i>whence</i>