

THE
CONNELL GUIDE
TO SHAKESPEARE'S



KING
LEAR

“A perfectly concise read-in-a-single-sitting guide to
this tragic masterpiece”

RICHARD E. GRANT

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE
PLAY IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by Valentine Cunningham

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Introduction

Lear is too much. There's too much to stomach, an overdoing of massive wickednesses which rightly provoked perhaps the most famous reaction to *King Lear* ever, Dr Samuel Johnson's horror in his Prefaces to his *Shakespeare* (1765) over the blinding of Gloucester – “an act too horrid to be endured in dramattick exhibition” – and the death of Cordelia: “contrary to the natural ideas of justice, to the hope of the reader, and, what is yet more strange, to the faith of the chronicles”.

There are indeed just too many awful enhancements of the *Lear* stories Shakespeare drew on, a superfluity of terrible things – and of course these are uneasily central to a play which teaches the immorality of the well-off having a “superflux” of money and things when the poor have so little (III.iv.35: *superflux* is a Shakespeare coinage); in which frustrations over losing the “addition” (I.i.137) of a king help dement Lear; and where he is driven to strip off his rich man's excess of clothing in sympathy with the nakedness of Edgar and of all “unaccommodated men”.

This is irony indeed, you might think, in a play gravely overburdened with Shakespeare's many plot additions, his busy borrowing from all over, his own superflux of textual stuff. And there are so many things that they need a kind of gabbling to cram them into the drama's few allowed hours on

stage. Everything, from Lear's shockingly hasty turning against Cordelia onwards – Kent banished, the King of France departing in anger, Lear departing for Goneril's place – occurs, as Gloucester puts it of the play's rapidly spinning opening moves, “upon the gad” (I.ii.23-6): all hurriedly, like an animal goaded with a metal spike or gad; on the rapid move, the gad; gaddingly.

And it's an abrupt pile-up, or switchback, of events which leaves little space anywhere for examination, explanation, motivation – the kind of extended analysis of character and motives, the inspection of decision-making, which would become normal in 19th-century classic realist fiction, in the novels of George Eliot, say, or Leo Tolstoy. An overall thinness of explanation which greatly disappointed A.C. Bradley, the most influential of all commentators on Shakespeare's tragedies, in his *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth* (1904, and in print ever since).

And yet, Bradley conceded, this play was the “fullest revelation of Shakespeare's power” – up there with Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Beethoven's symphonies and Michelangelo's statues; the most moving and daunting of tragic experiences the world has ever known promoted by a greatly trashy plot, or, as the poet and critic D. J. Enright puts in his lively book about teaching Shakespeare, *Shakespeare and the*

Students (1970): “It is possible that Shakespeare never did anything more awe-inspiring, more improbable-seeming than this – to take a petulant old retired monarch, drive him mad and stick flowers in his hair, and still end with a figure of tragedy.”

THE CHARACTERS

LEAR

GONERIL, *Lear’s eldest daughter*

REGAN, *Lear’s second daughter*

CORDELIA, *Lear’s youngest daughter*

DUKE OF ALBANY, *husband to Goneril*

DUKE OF CORNWALL, *husband to Regan*

EARL OF GLOUCESTER

EARL OF KENT

EDGAR, *Gloucester’s son*

EDMUND, *Gloucester’s illegitimate son*

OSWALD, *steward to Goneril*

FOOL

KING OF FRANCE, *suitor to Cordelia*

DUKE OF BURGUNDY, *suitor to Cordelia*

CURAN, *a courtier*

Old man, Tenant of Gloucester, A Doctor, an Officer employed by Edmund, a Gentleman attending on Cordelia, a Herald, Servants to Cornwall, Knights of Lear’s Train, Officers, Messengers, Soldiers, and Attendants

A note on the text

The text of *King Lear* has caused more arguments than the text of any other Shakespeare play. The standard *King Lear* of modern times – and the one mainly used in this volume – is the version in the handiest modern edition of *King Lear*, edited by R.A. Foakes for the 3rd series of the Arden Shakespeares (1997). In the usual modern way Foakes’s text is basically *The Tragedie of King Lear* as it appeared in the expensive Folio collection of Shakespeare’s plays (big books, known in the critical trade as F) published by a pair of Shakespeare’s fellow-actors John Heminges and Henry Condell in December 1623, seven years after Shakespeare’s death, with some prominent bits of the earlier 1608 cheapo Quarto version (half the size of F and known as Q), the *True Chronicle Historie of the life and death of King Lear and his three Daughters*, thrown in. There are many differences between Q and F. For a full discussion of these, see p.124.

A summary of the plot

ACT I. scene i Scene: a royal palace, somewhere in ancient Britain. The aged Duke of Gloucester comes on with his bastard son Edmund, just returned from nine years away somewhere, boasting to King Lear’s faithful courtier Kent about how good the sex was in his fathering the

foxy young man. This is the short prelude to old and would-be valetudinarian Lear's theatrical test on his two older daughters, Goneril and Regan (married to the Dukes Albany and Cornwall) and the as yet unmarried young Cordelia. Dividing up his kingdom, the King says he'll give the largest portion to the daughter with the amplest declaration of absolute love for her father (though clearly he's fixed the gifting quantities in advance: Coleridge famously labelled the whole show a "trick").

Cannily greedy, Goneril and Regan play ball effusively and get their shares. Cordelia, daddy's favourite, and in line for the meatiest portion, won't play their hypocritical game – how could she love her father more than the husband she hopes for? She will say nothing that her father wants to hear and so gets nothing but a disowning curse from the peeved Lear. The other sisters share Cordelia's destined handout. Staunch Kent is banished with hateful words from Lear for daring to protest. One of Cordelia's suitors, the King of Burgundy, turns her down now she's penniless; the other, the King of France, admiring her "virtue", will take her as his queen. She leaves for France with prophetic words about trouble in store at the hands of the newly empowered daughters. Rather shocked by Lear's ill-treatment of Cordelia and Kent, they mutter conspiratorially about how they'll have to control his "unruly waywardness"

when he stays with them, as he plans to do.

I.ii Edmund, annoyed at being a "bastard" – the "natural" but illegitimate son – uses a letter he's forged, to trick Gloucester into believing his legitimate son Edgar wants to kill his father and thus come straightaway into his inheritance. Gloucester blames recent eclipses of sun and moon for such a breakdown in the natural relations between father and son; Edmund, cynical about astrology, knows it's not the stars that make crooks, liars, drunkards and adulterers but human nature. He'll be your naturally bad man – a bastard in the modern colloquial sense. He easily cons his brother Edgar into believing his life is threatened by an angry father.

I.iii Goneril, enraged at the rowdy behaviour of her father's 100 knights, lodging at her place in the first of Lear's planned stays with his older daughters, orders her Steward Oswald to be rude and unhelpful so as to incite Lear and his gang into going off to sister Regan's.

I.iv The banished Kent, in disguise, offers his services to Lear, proving instantly useful in insulting, tripping up and pushing out the insulting Oswald. Lear's Fool does his normal professional job as awkward, goading, truth-telling commentator on the mess Lear has got himself

into. Goneril and Lear quarrel bitterly over Lear's rumbustious mob of knights and squires; he must cut it down to 50 men. Lear, enraged, berating himself for foolishness, curses her as a "thankless child" and wishes childlessness on her. Albany urges patience on Lear, but also starts to show concern at Goneril's behaviour. Goneril sends Oswald with a warning letter to sister Regan, and lays into Albany for showing undue kindness towards Lear.

I.v Unaware of Goneril's correspondence with Regan, Lear heads off with his men to Regan's place, sending Kent on ahead with letters for Gloucester.

ACT II. scene i Edmund is the recipient of gossip about possible dissension between Cornwall and Albany. He persuades Edgar to flee for his life, and, pretending his self-inflicted sword-cuts came from his alleged father-hating brother, has Gloucester organise a hue and cry. Cornwall commends Edmund as a good son and takes him into his employment.

II.ii Arriving disguised at Regan's place with those letters from Lear, Kent picks a fight with Goneril's postman Oswald, beats him up and is put in the stocks as punishment by Cornwall, with Regan cruelly upping the duration of the sentence – let

him stay there all night! Kent reads a letter from Cordelia about seeking remedies for what's going on.

II.iii Edgar, escaped from his pursuers, purposes to go around in disguise as a ragged, filthied-up, mad tramp called "poor Tom", begging for a living with lunatic shouts and prayers.

II.iv Lear's anger at finding his man Kent in the stocks turns into mounting hysteria as Kent puts all the blame on Regan and Cornwall. These two refuse to meet Lear and then, Goneril having arrived, she and Regan beat down to five, and then none, the number of Lear's allowed entourage. "What need one?" is Regan's final contribution – so much for the better treatment Lear looked forward to from her. More and more demented at his girls' hostility, vowing vengeance on "you unnatural hags", Lear storms off into the terribly stormy night. Contemptuously, the women and Cornwall scorn Gloucester's concern about Lear being outside in such bad weather and lock their doors.

ACT III. scene i Out in the storm, searching for Lear, Kent (still disguised) dispatches one of Lear's knights to Dover to report to Cordelia "how unnatural and bemadding sorrow" is afflicting the ex-king.