



Overview of King Lear

Dr. Alan Haffa

King Lear Summary

- King Lear divides Kingdom in three; daughters to receive inheritance based on expression of love
- Cordelia unable to flatter, married to France without dower
- Goneril and Regan's treatment of Lear and his men
- Gloucester and his sons; Blinding
- Storm
- Battle and results
- Death of Cordelia and Lear

Historical Context

- Quarto, 1608
- First recorded performance: Before King James at Whitehall, Dec. 26, 1606
- Unity of Crown and Kingdom: James Succession from Elizabeth and Absolute Monarchy
- After English Civil War and execution of Charles I, play was little performed. Happy ending written by Nahum Tate in 1681
- During mental illness of George III performance of play was suspended

Holinshed's History & Shakespeare's Changes

- Closely matches Shakespeare's play
- Addition of Fool, Kent and Oswald
- Lear's Madness and the Storm
- Sub-plot of Gloucester and sons
- Cruelty intensified: Cordelia dies before Lear; Lear locked out during Storm; Gloucester blinded
- Cordelia hung to appear as if she commits suicide, rather than having actually committed suicide.

Key Themes

- Proper Exercise of Power: Proper role of King and Father as head of family and state
- Threat of Female Power and Sexuality
- Nature: legitimacy and illegitimacy; Good and Bad
- Madness: Lear, Fool, and Edgar
- Justice and Gods

Power

- I.1: Division of Kingdom as Folly
 - England knew that a divided Kingdom meant civil war
- Lear fails to exercise power in family properly as well: Demand for Love to be expressed in concrete terms

Fathers and Fatal Flaws

- Father is properly head of home—yet Lear surrenders this to his daughters and sons-in-laws
- Worse, Lear exercises bad judgement in his trust—believing the lies of Goneril and Regan and not seeing the truth in Cordelia's
- Error in Judgement: Trust to material and verbal expressions of love
- Gloucester likewise errs: trusting the deceitful Edmund and being misled by the Letter
- **But if fathers are proper leaders of home, what does it mean that these two fail, and there is no Mother?**

Women, Power and Sex

- Goneril and Regan long to rule but as women must rule indirectly through husbands
- **Both women lust after Edmund: why?**
- Sex as Unnatural and Perverse—
Gloucester's comments on illegitimacy of Edmund (I.1)
- Lear's comments on legitimacy of Regan and Goneril

Unnatural Love and Gender Reversal

- 4.2: Goneril to Edmund: “It is the cowish terror of his spirit (Albany) that dares not undertake...I must change names at home and give the distaff into my husband’s hands. This trusty servant shall pass between us. Ere long you are like to hear—if you dare venture in your own behalf—a mistress’s command. Wear this; spare speech.
- She gives him a favor and kisses him.
- “This kiss, if it durst speak, would stretch thy spirits up into the air. Conceive, and fare thee well.”

Unnatural Love leads to Murder: Regan and Goneril and Edmund

- Regan assumes him as her lord in her place of her dead husband
- 5.3: Regan: “That’s as we list to grace him...”
- Goneril: “Not so hot. In his own grace he doth exalt himself more than in your addition.”
- R: “In my rights, by me invested, he compeers the best.”
- G: That were the most if he should husband you.
- R: Jesters do oft prove prophets
- Regan is poisoned by Goneril
- After Edmund is slain by Edgar, Goneril commits suicide

Madness in Elizabethan England

- Attitudes toward mental illness were different: Lunatic and Madman rather than mentally ill
- Madness caused by moral weakness or divine judgement
- Asylums functioned as places to hide the mentally ill and the poor or women (used by men to get rid of unruly wives or daughters)
- Fool and Edgar as artificial fools

Madness in Lear

- Lear's Madness evolves
- 3.2: "Blow winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow!
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
Til you have drenched our steeples, drowned
The cocks.
You sulph'rous and thought-executing fires,
Vaunt couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
Singe my white head. And thou, all shaking
Thunder,
Strike flat the thick rotundity o'th' world.
Crack nature's molds, all germens spill at once
That makes ingrateful man."
● He is calling for Nature to destroy the world
- "germens" are seeds; he wants nature to destroy life itself

Nature: Good and Bad

- What does it mean to be **Natural or Unnatural?**
- Good, Natural: Cordelia and Kent and Edgar
- Bad, Unnatural: Regan and Goneril, Oswald, Edmund
- **Social metaphor of Natural:** Natural for King and Father to rule absolutely
- Natural for children and servants to be loyal and obedient and loving
- **Yet, the Storm is the strongest symbol of real Nature—what does it mean in this context?**

Ending: Albany, Kent, Edgar

- 5.3.366 Albany:, “All friends shall taste / The wages of their virtue, and all foes / The cup of their deserving”
- But Lear immediately learns of the death of his “fool” and dies of heartache
- Kent is near to death: “I have a journey sir, shortly to go; My master calls me. I must not say no.”
- Edgar is left to rule, but rule in sadness: “The weight of this sad time we must obey, speak what we feel, not what we ought to say. The oldest hath borne most; we that are young shall never see so much nor live so long.”

Summary

- On the surface, there does not appear to be a force of Justice
- Good characters die: Gloucester, Cordelia and Lear
- Bad Army led by evil, unnatural Edmund wins the war
- But bad characters do meet with judgement and death: Cornwall killed by Loyal Servant; Edmund by Edgar, Goneril and Regan by each other
- **The Gods seem distant and at best unpredictable:
Storm and Nature**
- **Lesson: Stability of Throne and Succession is paramount; Order in the Home mirrors Kingdom**