



SHAKESPEARE'S THEATRE

WORKSHEET 6: *KING LEAR* (c. 1605)

I. The 'Love Test': Lear, Gonerill, Regan and Cordelia (Act I, Scene i)

1. Name the most relevant (historical, literary, popular) sources of *King Lear*. Why, according to Alessandro Serpieri, in his chapter "The Breakdown of Medieval Hierarchy in *King Lear*" (1992), did the "allegory of the unfortunate consequences deriving from the division of a kingdom" (p. 85) resonate with Elizabethan audiences?
2. In his opening speech, Lear submits his daughters to a love test, the prize of which is a part of the kingdom. However, as Gloucester and Kent discuss, the division of the kingdom has already been made (ll. 3-4). What does this reveal about Lear as a king? Read Lear's speech (ll. 31-49). Which are his reasons for dividing up the kingdom? What is his understanding of love and affection at this point in the play?
3. Serpieri asserts that, in his opening speech, Lear, as representative of the old medieval order, "sees everybody in terms of a scale of comparatives" (p. 88). What does he say are the problems of a socio-political structure that relies on constant comparisons between individuals (pp. 87-89)? Do Gonerill's (ll. 50-56) and Regan's (ll. 64-71) answers attempt to break at all with this logic of comparison and the equation of love and property?
4. Read Cordelia's answer to Lear in ll. 82-101. According to Serpieri (pp. 90-91), and to your own reading of the scene, to what extent is she being subversive regarding the power Lear represents? Does she break any of the 'golden rules' for women? What is the significance of her answer in relation to the whole play? Compare Cordelia's "divided duty" speech (ll. 90-98) with Desdemona's in *Othello*. Which one do you find most challenging, and why? What about Gonerill and Regan's behaviour, bearing in mind the whole play?
5. According to Kathleen McLuskie in her chapter "The Patriarchal Bard: Feminist Criticism and Shakespeare: *King Lear* and *Measure for Measure*", "Cordelia's saving love, so much admired by critics, works in the action less as a redemption for womankind than as an example of patriarchy restored" (1985, p. 99). Bearing the whole play in mind, do you agree with McLuskie that Cordelia finally conforms to the rules of patriarchy?
6. How does Lear react to Cordelia's answer, and how do the male characters (Burgundy, France and Kent) respond to that? How can the characters be grouped so far in terms of their ideologies?

7. Watch and compare the opening scene as depicted by Grigori Kozintsev (1970), Trevor Nunn (Royal Shakespeare Company, 2008) and Nancy Meckler (Shakespeare's Globe, 2017). How does each rendering portray the main characters and what dramaturgic strategies does each one use?

II. Gloucester, Edgar, Edmond and Providentialism

1. Read the conversation between Gloucester and Kent in the opening lines of act I, scene i (II. 1-28). In what terms does Gloucester, another representative of Providentialist values, talk about his sons Edgar and Edmond, and what does this tell us about Gloucester's values and view of the world? Pay attention to the words "saucily" and "sport". What is Gloucester associated with from the very beginning of the play? Compare Nunn's and Meckler's different renditions of this scene. Which one emphasises Gloucester's unfair treatment of Edmond, and the negative effect his words have on his son, most clearly, in your own view? Why?

2. Read Edmond's soliloquy in I, ii (II. 1-22). Do you find his soliloquy subversive *vis-à-vis* Providentialism? Which contradictions does he detect in this ideology, and what new historical type does he represent? According to Serpieri, which are the problems or limitations of Gloucester's treatment of Edmond and in Lear's division of the kingdom (pp. 86-87)? Watch Gregory Doran's (Royal Shakespeare Company, 2016) rendering of the soliloquy and discuss if you find it effective in depicting Edmond's condition as an outcast. When arguing your point, try to focus on elements such as acting, characterisation, or any other aspects of the *mise-en-scène* that you may consider relevant.

3. Read Gloucester and Edmond's conversation in I, ii (II. 91-116). What different views of the world do they show in their speeches? What exactly is Edmond mocking about Gloucester's words? To what extent do you agree with Jonathan Dollimore's claim, in his book *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, that Edmond is characterized by a contradictory "sceptical independence" (1989, p. 201) towards the society of his time?

4. After his blinding in III, vii, Gloucester rejects Providentialism and its notion of divine justice, adopting an openly nihilistic attitude to society and existence. Read II. 36-37 in IV, i and discuss the limitations of both views, regarding human responsibility.

III. Lear's Doomed Quest for Identity

1. In I, iv and in II, iv, Gonerill and Regan seek to deprive Lear of his knights. Read II. 149-302 in I, iv, and II. 119-302 in II, iv. In what ways can these scenes be seen as an inversion of the love test? To what extent do Lear's responses to his daughters' disobedience show his disempowerment as a patriarchal figure? Discuss how Lear's gradual loss of identity is dramatised throughout the play and the extent to which it can be understood in historical terms.

2. Lear's speech at the end of II, iv, "O reason not the need", contains one of the most famous passages in the play (ll. 257-264). What paradox is he asserting about beggars, and what statement is he making about human identity? In what ways can this be seen as a turning point for Lear? Do you find this speech subversive regarding Providentialism? If so, why? Watch Nunn's rendition of this scene. How does it suggest that Lear is losing his former power as the uppermost patriarchal figure of authority in both the family and society? When arguing your point, try to focus on elements such as acting, characterisation, or any other aspects of the *mise-en-scène* that you may consider relevant.

3. What do you think is the Fool's function in *King Lear*? Look at the Fool's prophecy in III, ii (ll. 78-93). What does he identify as the problems of Lear's kingdom, and do you find his words subversive in relation to the system and the king? Read ll. 82-190 in I, iv and try to choose a sentence by the Fool which you think is particularly memorable. It has been said that the Fool is Cordelia's alter ego in the play. In what ways does the play connect these two characters? The Fool disappears from the play in III, vi (l. 41). How can his absence from this point onwards be understood?

IV. The Storm, the Heath and Lear's Madness

1. The 'heath scenes', at the centre of the play, have a profound significance in many ways. In III, ii and III, iv, Lear and the Fool find themselves on the heath in the middle of a huge storm and are helped by Kent and Gloucester. How can the storm be read, bearing in mind the events in the play that lead to it? In this respect, see especially how Lear addresses the Fool in ll. 65-71 in III, ii, and Lear's speech about the 'naked wretches' of his kingdom in III, iv, ll. 28-36. In what ways can the storm be considered as a turning point for Lear?

2. Gloucester's speech on distributive justice, which takes place in IV, i, ll. 59-66, has been greatly admired by cultural materialist critics. What is Gloucester claiming, how does he contrast sight and feeling, and what political effect might it have? Compare Lear's aforementioned speech about his kingdom's poor in III, iv, ll. 28-36 to Gloucester's words. Which of these two speeches, do you think, is more questioning?

3. Read Lear's reaction when he sees Poor Tom (Edgar in disguise) in III, iv, ll. 91-97. Why is this speech significant, and does Lear still operate within the values of the old order? Why, do you think, he takes off his clothes, and what does this gesture signify? What do you make of the fact that Lear is telling this to a nobleman in disguise? Does the fact that Poor Tom is not really a poor man add some connotations to Lear's speech? Now watch Nunn's rendition of this specific moment. How does the scene contribute to emphasise Lear's progressive discovery of alternative understandings of the human being? When arguing your point, try to focus on elements such as acting, characterisation, or any other aspects of the *mise-en-scène* that you may consider relevant.

4. Mad Lear and blind Gloucester finally meet in IV, v, a scene that contains some of Lear's most transgressive, questioning speeches. In ll. 147-151, for instance, Lear gives a definition of power and authority. What is authority for him, or what leads some people to obey others? Read the whole conversation between Lear and Gloucester (ll. 138-167). What does Lear say about rank and position, and why are his speeches subversive?

5. How does Serpieri interpret Lear's speech in IV, v, ll. 168-175, when Lear refers to the world as a "stage of fools"? Discuss different possible reasons why Lear uses this image, and what it may signify in the context of the play. How have Lear's values changed in comparison to the ones he held in his earlier speeches (see for instance I, i, ll. 228-229)?

6. Does Lear's process of change mirror that of any other character in the play? Which one? Now read p. xxxix of Kiernan Ryan's "Introduction" (2015). Why does he think Shakespeare chose this mirroring structural device?

7. *King Lear* presents a mosaic of characters, some belonging to the old medieval order, and some to a new, modern order. What different ideologies do they embody? How does the play regard the options, and does it seem to foresee a viable alternative?

V. The Ending: The Great Epistemological Crisis of the Early Modern Period?

1. *King Lear* has been read from liberal humanist, cultural materialist, and feminist points of view, amongst others. A.C. Bradley, for instance, claimed that Lear and the order he represents are ennobled by his and Cordelia's suffering and death, and that the play might as well have been called *The Redemption of King Lear* (1992, pp. 284-285). On the other hand, Serpieri asserts that *King Lear* is "a tragic parable of the breakdown of the medieval system of signs which still precariously held the world view together in the Elizabethan age" (p. 93). How does the play dramatise this, both thematically and structurally, and how does Serpieri interpret Lear's madness, nihilism and negations at the end of the play? Now read pp. xlix-lii of Ryan's "Introduction". What specific perspective does he adopt? Finally, which of these interpretations convinces you most?

2. Read pp. xli and xlii of Ryan's "Introduction". Why does he think *King Lear* is such a revolutionary, even "seditious" (p. xli) play? What effect does he think it might have had when it was first performed in James I/VI's times? And how does Nahum Tate's subsequent adaptation of the play in 1681 confirm the radical modernity of Shakespeare's play, according to him?

3. Watch Nunn's final scene. What specific meanings and resonances of the play do you think his adaptation emphasises? Do you consider this to be a liberal humanist reading of the play, stressing Lear's redemption, or rather, a political, cultural materialist reading? When arguing your point, try to focus on elements such as acting, characterisation, or any other aspects of the *mise-en-scène* that you may consider relevant.

Reference List

- Bradley, A.C. (1992). *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth* (3rd ed.). Basingstoke and London: Macmillan.
- Dollimore, J. (1989): *King Lear* and Essentialist Humanism. In *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (2nd ed., pp. 189-203). New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- McLuskie, K. (1985). The Patriarchal Bard: Feminist Criticism and Shakespeare: *King Lear* and *Measure for Measure*. In J. Dollimore and A. Sinfield (Eds.), *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism* (pp. 88-188). Manchester: Manchester UP.
- Ryan, K. (2015). Introduction. In W. Shakespeare, *King Lear* (G. Hunter, Ed.) (xxi-lxiv). London and New York: Penguin.
- Serpieri, A. (1992). The Breakdown of Medieval Hierarchy in *King Lear*. In J. Drakakis (Ed.), *Shakespearean Tragedy* (pp. 84-95). London: Longman.

Visual Material

- Doran, G. (Director). (2016). *King Lear*. United Kingdom: Opus Arte.
- Kozintsev, G. (Director). (1970). *King Lear*. Soviet Union: Goskino.
- Meckler, N. (Director). (2017). *King Lear*. United Kingdom: Opus Arte.
- Nunn, T. (Director). (2008). *King Lear*. United Kingdom: Metrodome.