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General Editor: Charles Moseley

# William Shakespeare

# *King Lear*

John Lennard

“...By the end  
almost everyone  
is dead or broken”

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Literature Insights

General Editors: C. W. R. D. Moseley

# William Shakespeare: *King Lear*

John Lennard

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## A Note on the Author

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Born and raised in Bristol, UK, John Lennard took a B.A. and D.Phil. at New College, Oxford, and an M.A. at Washington University in St Louis. He has taught for the Universities of London, Cambridge, and Notre Dame, the Open University, and Fairleigh Dickinson University on-line; he was from 2004–09 Professor of British and American Literature at the University of the West Indies—Mona. His publications include *But I Digress: The Exploitation of Parentheses in English Printed Verse* (Clarendon Press, 1991), *The Poetry Handbook* (OUP, 1996; 2/e 2005), with Mary Luckhurst *The Drama Handbook* (OUP, 2002), *Of Modern Dragons and other essays on Genre Fiction* (HEB, 2007; Troubadour 2008), and *Of Sex and Faerie: Further Essays on Genre Fiction* (HEB/Troubadour, 2010). He is General Editor of HEB's Genre Fiction Sightlines and Monographs series, for which he has written on Reginald Hill, Walter Mosley, Octavia E. Butler, Ian McDonald, and Tamora Pierce. For Literature Insights he has also written on *Hamlet*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, and Paul Scott's *Raj Quartet & Staying On*.

# Preface

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## 0.1 Introduction

For much of its four centuries of stage-life *King Lear* has (like Lear's daughters) been something of a problem child. Dr Johnson complained that “the extrusion of *Gloucester's* eyes [...] seems an act too horrid to be endured in dramattick exhibition” and, more seriously, alleged as a moral failing that “*Shakespeare* has suffered the virtue of *Cordelia* to perish in a just cause, contrary to the natural ideas of justice, to the hope of the reader, and, what is yet more strange, to the faith of chronicles”.<sup>1</sup> This view was so widely shared that from the later seventeenth to mid-nineteenth centuries the preferred text for performance was an adaptation by Nahum Tate (1652–1715) in which only villains die, Lear regains his throne, the Fool is omitted, and Cordelia marries Edgar in a redemptive comedic ending.<sup>2</sup> Today this seems strange, even absurd, but debates around the cautious, piecemeal restoration of Shakespeare's version to the stage in the early-mid nineteenth century give pause.<sup>3</sup> Many spectators were as honestly appalled as Johnson by Cordelia's death, and simply baffled by the Fool—a clear warning to all of the degree to which public sensibility and theatrical performances change, decade by decade.

Then again, once ‘Shakespeare's version’ was restored as the normative text for study and performance *King Lear* grew in public and critical reputation until in the later twentieth century it came to

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1 Samuel Johnson, ‘Notes on *King Lear*’ from his edition of 1765, reprinted in e.g. W. K. Wimsatt, ed., *Samuel Johnson on Shakespeare* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1960; as *Dr Johnson on Shakespeare*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969).

2 Tate's play is collected in Sandra Gilbert, ed., *Shakespeare Made Fit* (London: Dent, 1997).

3 The actor-managers who did so were Edmund Kean (1789–1833), in 1823; William Charles Macready (1793–1873), in 1838; and Samuel Phelps (1804–78), in 1845.

eclipse *Hamlet* as his ‘greatest tragedy’—a play that, like *Troilus and Cressida*, appealed precisely in its extremity of violence and unremitting bleakness of vision to sensibilities battered by the horrors of two world wars.<sup>1</sup> Yet in the last 30 or so years the very intensity of attention *King Lear* now attracts has sparked a sometimes bitter and often noisy debate about what exactly Shakespeare’s text is, or was, and how it should be printed—an apparently abstruse set of scholarly questions that lies at the centre of what has become the single most consequential argument in modern Shakespeare studies. Nor can students of the play practically avoid this textual question, for the purchaser of any recent annotated edition is certain to find the text prefaced by an editorial note that is longer and weightier than usual, and may well find themselves confronted either by pages that fairly bristle with textual notes, or not by a text at all, but two (or even three) significantly differing texts, that may be given (perhaps in parallel) in one volume or split the edition into distinct volumes offering distinct texts.

For a series like these *Literature Insights*, by policy determinedly short and far more concerned with practical study of literature than scholarly dispute *per se*, this textual battle poses a problem. Students want clear, straightforward discussion of substance, not a constant gibber of notes and caveats about textual issues; but alas, such issues are like the quality of air—while all is well one hardly notices them, but if it is ill they become a pressing urgency, affecting everything to claim priority. I therefore necessarily begin with my own longer-and-weightier-than-usual ‘Note on the Text’ to explain what is at stake—a set-up essential to the discussions that follow. But thereafter scholarly problems are ruthlessly relegated to notes, while links in the bibliography make available to interested readers the primary materials, that they may see the evidence for themselves.

A word is necessary about casting in the King’s Men, Shakespeare company, who premiered *King Lear*, probably in 1604–05. All casting matters are tricky, for there is almost no evidence about the first casting of any of Shakespeare’s plays and most of what is said is

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1 See R. A. Foakes, *Hamlet versus Lear: Cultural Politics and Shakespeare’s Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

speculation. But *someone* first played each role, and a pool of probable names *is* known: so the game can be compulsive. It is in no way necessary, but a grasp of the practical necessities and constraints Shakespeare faced in writing (which for a working playwright of his kind *means* casting) is very helpful, and inevitably brings more speculative territory into view. So sometimes I speculate, and when I do so it is properly flagged as such.

I assume readers have read *King Lear* at least once and know ‘what happens’. The only thing all readers—particularly those without theatrical experience—are asked to do is to think seriously about the business of acting *in a particular space*. If possible, visit a theatre, any theatre, sit, breathe, look, and absorb its design. Follow these links to images of a [Roman stage](#), [pageant-wagon](#), and [Elizabethan amphitheatre](#), and look hard at each for a minute. Shakespeare’s *King Lear* has over four centuries been done in, on, and round about many venues, and no performance is independent of the physical and institutional structures that enable and frame it—buildings, stages, actors, and audiences.<sup>1</sup> If these things are missing from your imagined understanding of the play’s text/s, it will (rightly) seem to you as lifeless as a TV without power; but turn the current on ...

Additionally, remember that ‘great’ need not mean ‘ponderous’, and that on stage *King Lear* (like most Shakespeare) almost always does better at a brisk canter than a solemn march—though it is not often done the favour of such briskness. Modern performance of Shakespeare rarely achieves anything as short as the ‘two hours’ traffic of our stage’ Shakespeare reckoned on: actors now learn more heavily punctuated texts and deliver lines more slowly and with more pauses; scene-changes slow all action, as may elaborate fights and other stage-business; and, as playing-time creeps ever upward, intervals—for most theatres a financial necessity, driving profits from bars and concessions—become equally a necessity for the audience’s bladders. Bustling comedies, full of happy confusions and wit-cracking dialogue, have some insulation from this pervasive ponderousness but histories and tragedies are vulnerable not only to tedious flat-

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<sup>1</sup> See also John Lennard & Mary Luckhurst, *The Drama Handbook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), ch. 14, ‘The Stage and Auditorium’.

ness as speech and action are denied natural buoyancy, but to besetting, po-faced earnestness. The comedian Rowan Atkinson, playing a schoolmaster, once growled the line ‘If Shakespeare had meant it to be funny, boy, he would have put a joke in it’—and the real joke (which isn’t so funny) is that Shakespeare *did* put jokes in it, lots of jokes in all of it, even the tragedies, and we carefully take most of them out, with calamitous results.

In approaching *King Lear* today, this is a central fact. I have been fortunate enough to have seen all of Shakespeare’s plays at least twice, and the major tragedies, including *King Lear*, in at least a dozen productions apiece. Over 35 years I have seen the slow return to stage-practice of an understanding that Shakespearean tragedy demands and responds to comedic awareness, and few now expect performances of *Titus Andronicus*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, or *Antony and Cleopatra* to be wholly sombre from beginning to end.<sup>1</sup> But not all tragedies have fared as well—*Coriolanus* tends to remain grimly humourless in performance, as does the rarely attempted *Timon of Athens*, and no Shakespearean play, despite its witty, wisecracking Fool and much haphazard effort, remains more stifled by tragicomic decorum than *King Lear*.<sup>2</sup> Only once have I seen a real attempt on stage to find comedy in the title role, a bizarre Anglo-Japanese production starring Nigel Hawthorne (1927-2001) that, while far from the best show overall, was probably the most instructive I have ever seen, yet undervalued by critics (see Part 3.1); to which may be added the performance by Laurence Olivier (1907–89) in a 1983 TV film of *King Lear* where he understood the relations of smiles and threats but in acting that was critically regarded as a curiosity rather than a revelation.

Those who disliked these productions commonly found even the idea of comedy misplaced. But the comedic in *King Lear* is *not* only to do with the Fool, nor with what is (often idiotically) referred to as

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1 On the distinction of *comic* and *comedic*, *tragic* and *tragedic*, see Part 1.3 below.

2 There is a useful summary of 53 UK productions, giving casts and brief extracts from reviews, in John O’Connor & Katharine Goodland, eds, *A Directory of Shakespeare in Performance 1870–2005, Volume 1: Great Britain* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 546–621.

‘comic relief’ (see Part 1.3 below). It *is* to do with the origins of its sub-plot, which Shakespeare took from Sir Philip Sidney’s *Arcadia* (1590), a Romance; with its first world/green world structure,<sup>1</sup> typical of his comedies; and above all with Lear’s position as a father of three daughters worrying about dowries—a situation reminiscent of fairy tales like ‘Cinderella’<sup>2</sup> and typical in *commedia dell’arte*.<sup>3</sup> As such, Lear has, in theatrical terms familiar to Jacobean audiences, a strong basic identity as a *senex*, the old man of Roman comedy who in *commedia dell’arte* became Pantalone, the pantaloone. In Shakespeare’s comedy the *senex* had already done duty as such father-figures as Baptista in *The Taming of the Shrew* and Egeus in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, while in tragedy the role fascinatingly informs Old Capulet in *Romeo and Juliet* and Polonius in *Hamlet*. And just as much as Polonius, from whom he descends theatrically, Lear is generically misplaced, a role built on a comedic armature with comedy’s typical lack of foresight and propensities to blather and meddle, but dropped into tragedy, given a vicious capacity for rage, and set from the beginning on a foolish, deadly course. Phaeton scrabbling at the reins as the horses of the sun ran away with him had as little control as Lear once he announces his plan of national partition and Britain slides inexorably into power-grabs, familial war, and national as well as theatrical catastrophe—yet the protagonist in his agony is underlyingly a stage-clown, and it is seeing that clown relentlessly broken on the wheel of his folly, amid the innocents and conspirators he dooms, that makes for the peculiar, lingering pain of Shakespeare’s play.

For the reader or spectator who fails to grasp this, the play can easily become a wilderness of horrors, as the massed fatalities of its ending

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1 Terms coined by Northrop Frye for the initial, typically urban or courtly world of Shakespeare’s comedies, and for the second, typically woodland world to which the principal characters sojourn.

2 Catherine Belsey, ‘*King Lear* and the missing salt’, in *Why Shakespeare?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), considers all the play’s possible sources, including ‘Cinderella’.

3 Italian, ‘comedy of the artisans’. A term coined by Carlo Goldoni (1707–93) for a very influential improvised theatre-form of sixteenth-century Venetian origin: actors play roles for which a mask, a walk, habitual props etc. are specified; the story is plotted but dialogue is improvised.

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