

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-61538-0 – King Lear

Rex Gibson Edited by Elspeth Bain and Nic Amy General Editor Vicki Wienand and Richard Andrews

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**Cambridge School  
Shakespeare**

# KING LEAR



**CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS**

Edited by Elspeth Bain and Nic Amy  
Series editors: Richard Andrews and Vicki Wienand  
Founding editor: Rex Gibson

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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781107615380](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107615380)

Commentary and notes © Cambridge University Press 1996, 2015

Text © Cambridge University Press 1992, 2015

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First published 1996

Second edition 2009

Third edition 2015

Printed in India by Replika Press Pvt. Ltd

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

ISBN 978-1-107-61538-0 Paperback

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# Introduction

This *King Lear* is part of the **Cambridge School Shakespeare** series. Like every other play in the series, it has been specially prepared to help all students in schools and colleges.

The **Cambridge School Shakespeare** *King Lear* aims to be different. It invites you to lift the words from the page and to bring the play to life in your classroom, hall or drama studio. Through enjoyable and focused activities, you will increase your understanding of the play. Actors have created their different interpretations of the play over the centuries. Similarly, you are invited to make up your own mind about *King Lear*, rather than having someone else's interpretation handed down to you.

**Cambridge School Shakespeare** does not offer you a cut-down or simplified version of the play. This is Shakespeare's language, filled with imaginative possibilities. You will find on every left-hand page: a summary of the action, an explanation of unfamiliar words, and a choice of activities on Shakespeare's stagecraft, characters, themes and language.

Between each act and in the pages at the end of the play, you will find notes, illustrations and activities. These will help to encourage reflection after every act and give you insights into the background and context of the play as a whole.

This edition will be of value to you whether you are studying for an examination, reading for pleasure or thinking of putting on the play to entertain others. You can work on the activities on your own or in groups. Many of the activities suggest a particular group size, but don't be afraid to make up larger or smaller groups to suit your own purposes. Please don't think you have to do every activity: choose those that will help you most.

Although you are invited to treat *King Lear* as a play, you don't need special dramatic or theatrical skills to do the activities. By choosing your activities, and by exploring and experimenting, you can make your own interpretations of Shakespeare's language, characters and stories.

Whatever you do, remember that Shakespeare wrote his plays to be acted, watched and enjoyed.

## **Rex Gibson**

Founding editor

This new edition contains more photographs, more diversity and more supporting material than previous editions, whilst remaining true to Rex's original vision. Specifically, it contains more activities and commentary on stagecraft and writing about Shakespeare, to reflect contemporary interest. The glossary has been enlarged too. Finally, this edition aims to reflect the best teaching and learning possible, and to represent not only Shakespeare through the ages, but also the relevance and excitement of Shakespeare today.

## **Richard Andrews and Vicki Wienand**

Series editors

This edition of *King Lear* uses the text of the play established by Jay L. Halio in **The New Cambridge Shakespeare**.

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‘Know that we have divided / In three our kingdom’. *King Lear* dramatises the consequences of an elderly British king’s decision to give up his power and land – while wanting to keep the title and status of king. Lear’s three daughters, Gonerill, Regan and Cordelia, are asked to declare publicly how much they love him before learning how much of his kingdom they will have. In this production, Lear’s Fool sits at his feet.



Gonerill and Regan flatter their father and are rewarded with shares of the kingdom. Here, Regan is trying to outdo her older sister Gonerill’s flattery.



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‘What can you say to draw / A third more opulent than your sisters?’ Cordelia, the youngest sister and her father’s favourite, is the last to speak. She loves Lear deeply but refuses to play his flattery game, claiming only to love her father as a daughter should. Lear, hurt and enraged by her apparent defiance of his authority, publicly disowns and curses her.

‘What wouldst thou do, old man?’ The plain-speaking Duke of Kent intervenes on Cordelia’s behalf and is rewarded with banishment. Although the Duke of Burgundy rejects the disgraced and disinherited Cordelia, the King of France – another of her suitors – willingly accepts her as his wife.



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► ‘Edgar I nothing am.’ The Duke of Gloucester, a shocked witness of events, also has family problems. His illegitimate son Edmond is secretly plotting to frame his elder brother Edgar and steal his inheritance. Soon, Edgar has to flee for his life, disguising himself as Poor Tom, a madman beggar.

▼ The Earl of Kent (seen here on the right) has not gone into banishment but has also assumed a disguise, obtaining a position as the old king’s servant. Lear’s Fool (on the left) also remains with Lear.



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◀ ‘Not only, sir, this, your all-licensed fool, / But other of your insolent retinue / Do hourly carp and quarrel’. Lear plans to live alternately with Gonerill and Regan for six months at a time, but the arrangement soon breaks down. Gonerill is vexed by the king’s insistence on retaining one hundred knights, plus his Fool, as his companions.

▼ ‘O fool, I shall go mad.’ Enraged by Gonerill’s suggestion that he reduce the number of his knights, Lear sets off to stay with Regan, meeting up with her at the Duke of Gloucester’s castle. Gonerill arrives and both sisters insist that Lear has no real need of any followers. Lear is distraught and fears he will go mad. He leaves the castle accompanied only by his Fool. The night becomes stormy.





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▲ ‘This tempest in my mind’. As the storm rages, Kent finds the king and his Fool wandering on the heath. There, they also encounter Edgar in his disguise as Poor Tom. Lear’s mind gives way completely, but in his madness he develops a new concern and sympathy for the ‘poor naked wretches’ of this world.

► ‘Go thrust him out at gates, and let him smell / His way to Dover.’ Gloucester helps get Lear to safety in Dover, where Cordelia has landed with a French army. This loyalty to the king enrages Gonerill, Regan and her husband, the Duke of Cornwall, who gouges out Gloucester’s eyes in punishment and throws him out into the storm. However, Cornwall is fatally wounded by one of his own servants, who was trying to protect Gloucester.



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‘Alack, I have no eyes.’ Edgar, still acting the part of a madman beggar, meets his blind father and agrees to guide him to Dover, where Gloucester plans to throw himself off a cliff. Edgar, however, has a plan of his own that he hopes will make his father believe his life has been miraculously saved, and so decide to live.



‘How fares your majesty?’ In the French camp at Dover, Cordelia and Lear are reunited. The king, now calm, recognises his youngest daughter and attempts to kneel before her to ask forgiveness. Cordelia says he must not kneel and asks for his blessing. Meanwhile, at the British camp nearby, Gonerill and Regan are in competition for Edmond, jealously eyeing each other.

