



Education

GRADES 9—12

SCHOOL-TIME  
PERFORMANCES

Student  
Study  
Guide

A close-up, black and white portrait of an older man with a grey beard and mustache, looking downwards and to the right. He is wearing a textured, greyish-brown jacket. The background is a dark, neutral grey.

# King Learn

Study guide written by Gwendolyn Kelso

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## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Welcome to the BAM study guide for the 2014 production of *King Lear*. We hope to make Shakespeare accessible by providing valuable background information and resources to enrich your classroom experience.

### Your BAM experience includes:

- Teacher and student study materials
- An in-class workshop led by a BAM teaching artist
- Post-show Q&A

## ABOUT BAM

BAM (Brooklyn Academy of Music) is a multi-arts center located in Brooklyn, New York. For more than 150 years, BAM has been the home for adventurous artists, audiences, and ideas—engaging both global and local communities. With world-renowned programming in theater, dance, music, opera, film, and much more, BAM showcases the work of emerging artists and innovative modern masters.



## SHAKESPEARE IN CONTEXT

When Shakespeare was originally performed, there weren't lights or fancy sets and costumes. In fact, Shakespeare used language and poetry to help his audience "see" and "feel" the worlds he created. Because much of the audience was comprised of rowdy Groundlings (or people who paid roughly a penny to stand in front of the stage), he had to quickly draw them into the story of the play—or risk having something thrown at one of the actors!

When Shakespeare was writing his plays, he never intended for them to be read quietly. He wrote them for actors—to say out loud! Believe it or not, even the most seasoned Shakespearean has to "tune their ears" to Shakespeare's language. It usually takes reading a scene or two out loud before the hearer can adjust to the language.

Shakespeare wrote his plays scene-by-scene. Actors would receive their "role", or a scroll that contained only the actor's lines and their cue (the line before). The complete texts as we know them today were compiled after the production by the stage manager and members of the acting troupe.

Because the actors did not have much time to rehearse their plays, Shakespeare wrote many clues into the text. Pay close attention to how the words appear on the page: is it prose or verse? Does it rhyme? Are the verse lines shared between characters? (clue: don't pause!) What do these clues tell us about what the character is feeling or going through in that moment?

## ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

This production of *King Lear* first opened October 2013 in England (West Sussex) at the Chichester Festival Theatre.

Learn more about the Chichester Festival Theatre [here](#)

## MEET THE ARTISTS

**Frank Langella** (*King Lear*) earned one of his three Tony Awards for his performance as Richard Nixon in the acclaimed production *Frost/Nixon* (Donmar Warehouse, West End and Broadway). He was also the recipient of an Olivier Award nomination, and was nominated for an Oscar for the play's film version. His additional Tonys were for roles in *Seascape* and *Fortune's Fool*, as well as three more nominations for *Man and Boy*, *Dracula*, and *Match*. Langella has spent more than four decades on Broadway, appearing in close to two dozen productions including *The Father*, *Present Laughter*, *A Man for all Seasons*, and *Amadeus*.

In 2013—14 Langella will star in six films, including *Grace of Monaco* opposite Nicole Kidman, *Muhammad Ali's Greatest Fight* (directed by Stephen Frears ) opposite Christopher Plummer, and *Draft Day* opposite Kevin Costner. Among his 65 films, recent

screen credits include the critically acclaimed *Robot and Frank*, *Starting Out In The Evening*, *Good Night and Good Luck*, *Dave*, and *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*.

Chichester Associate **Angus Jackson** (Director) directed the 2013 Olivier Award-winning production *Goodnight Mister Tom*, and will direct two Festival 2013 productions, *If Only*, and *Neville's Island*. Jackson's other Chichester credits include *The Browning Version* (also West End), *Bingo* (also Young Vic), *Wallenstein*, and *Funny Girl*. He has also directed *Elmina's Kitchen*, *Fix Up*, *Rocket to the Moon*, and *The Power of Yes* for the National Theatre.

**Robert Innes Hopkins** (Designer) renews his collaboration with Jackson following their previous Chichester productions: *Goodnight Mister Tom* (UK tour and West End), *Bingo* (also Young Vic), and *Wallenstein*. Other credits include *Clybourne Park* (Royal Court Theatre and West End), *The Malcontent* and *The Comedy of Errors* (both RSC), and the National Actors Theatre production of *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, which featured Al Pacino in the title role.

## PRODUCTION ROLES

### Actor:

It is the **actor's** job to transform into a character. With the guidance of the director, an actor must determine how his character talks, moves, and feels about everything that is happening in the world of the play. Watch an [interview](#) with Langella on acting.

### Director:

A **director** has a vision (or concept) for the play that he communicates to actors and designers. A director runs rehearsals by providing the actors with ideas and feedback about their performances and offering insight about what is happening in the world of the play. Ultimately, it is the job of the director to make sure that the all aspects of the play are cohesive and make sense.

### Designer:

There are many types of designers in theater: sound designers, scenic designers, lighting designers, and costume designers. A **sound designer** works with the director to create the sounds you will hear (music, sound effects, etc.) A **scenic designer** collaborates with the director to create the set you see on stage. A **lighting designer** works with the director to determine how a show should look (is it bright, dark, are there special lights that illuminate one actor at a time)? **Costume designers** determine what the actors will wear on stage. Ultimately, all designers collaborate with the director and each other to create a uniform look and feel to the production.

## ENRICHMENT ACTIVITY

### Before the Show

Think about all the elements and people that make a play come together: director, actors, designers (lights, costumes, set, sound). Pay close attention while watching the play to see how all these elements come together.

## ENRICHMENT ACTIVITY

### After the Show

What story do you think the director was trying to tell? How did the design serve that story? Support your answer with examples from the production.

- What sound effects did the designer use? What effect did that have on the scene?
- What did the costumes tell us about the characters? What about the costumes made you think that?
- What effect did the lights have on the mood of the play? How did it make you feel? What did the lights tell you about what was happening in that moment on stage?



## THE CHARACTERS

**King Lear** \* titular character; aging king full of pride and rage. As Lear's plan to divide his kingdom unravels, he slowly goes mad.

**Goneril** \* Lear's eldest daughter. Although she is married to Albany, she wants Edmund to be her husband. Goneril poisons Regan and then commits suicide.

**Regan** \* Lear's middle daughter. Married to Cornwall; she also wants a relationship with Edmund. Poisoned by Goneril.

**Cordelia** \* Lear's youngest and most honorable daughter. She is banished by her father at the beginning of the play for refusing to exaggerate her love for him. She marries the King of France and returns to save her father. Cordelia is imprisoned and then killed on Edmund's command.

**Gloucester** \* Edmund and Edgar's father; believes Edmund's lies and turns against Edgar. Blinded by Cornwall. His heart "bursts smilingly" at the end of the play.

**Edmund** \* the illegitimate son of Gloucester. Plagued by being born out of wedlock, Edmund turns to treachery. He woos the married Goneril and Regan. Killed by his brother Edgar.

**Edgar** legitimate son and heir of Gloucester. He is forced to flee and assume the disguise of Poor Tom. Helps his blinded father.

**Kent** nobleman loyal to Lear. After confronting Lear about his treatment of Cordelia, Kent is banished. Kent returns to Lear's service disguised as Caius.

**Duke of Cornwall** \* husband of Regan. In an act of violence, he blinds Gloucester. He is later killed by a horrified servant.

**Duke of Albany** husband to Goneril. He is a supporter of Lear and disapproves of his wife's behavior.

**The Fool** \* remains by Lear's side for most of the play. He teases and challenges Lear. He is hanged at the end of the play.

\* dies or is killed

## ENRICHMENT ACTIVITY

### The Role of Lear

For most actors, playing Lear is considered the ultimate acting challenge. Watch a few of the clips below to see some of the famous actors who have tackled the part of King Lear. Take notes as you watch: what are the differences between these portrayals? What are the similarities? Based on your observations, make a few predictions about Frank Langella's performance in the production before the show. Or, after the show, compare the clips to Frank Langella's interpretation and/or the text, citing specific examples.

1953 **Orson Welles**  
1974 **James Earl Jones**  
1984 **Laurence Olivier**  
2009 **Ian McKellen**

### Want to see more? Check out the following clips:

Full production of **Ian McKellen** in the 2008 RSC production  
**Sir Laurence Olivier & John Hurt**: Act 1 Scene V

## CONNECTING WITH THE PLAY

*King Lear*, written around 1605, is considered one of Shakespeare's greatest and most challenging plays. It deals with complicated themes, complex relationships and explores the vulnerability of humanity.

You probably don't know an aging King who goes mad, but you've probably encountered someone with a big ego who acts rashly.

**If you have a brother or a sister, you probably know what it's like to compete for attention.** Talk about sibling rivalry! In *Lear*, sisters Regan and Gonerill compete for their father's affection and then later for the love of Edmund. Shakespeare knew how to make sibling rivalry dramatic.

**As you read the play, pay attention:** how do Gonerill and Regan treat each other? How do they treat their younger sister Cordelia?

### Looking for a place in the world.

Edmund is the bastard son of Gloucester. In Shakespeare's time, being born out of wedlock would have been a major social stigma and prevented Edmund from inheriting anything from his father. Edmund chooses a life of treachery, a choice that ultimately leads to his death.

**Think about this:** Are there still social stigmas today? How do you think these stigmas impact people's choices and decisions and relationships?

Although there are many themes and questions in *Lear*, ultimately the play is about the choices we make - good and evil.

## SYNOPSIS

The play takes place in ancient Britain. At the top of the play, Lear is king. He has three daughters: Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia.

An aging Lear decides to divide his kingdom between his three daughters and spend the remainder of his years rotating living with each of them. Lear asks each of his three children to prove they love him the most in order to win a piece of the kingdom. Both Goneril, the oldest, married to the Duke of Albany, and Regan, the middle child, married to the Duke of Cornwall, express their affection for their father. Cordelia, the youngest and most beloved daughter, refuses to exaggerate her love, which enrages Lear. He divides the kingdom between Goneril and Regan and banishes Cordelia. One of Cordelia's two suitors, the Prince of Burgundy, promptly withdraws his suit. The second suitor, the King of France, proposes marriage and takes Cordelia with him to France. Kent, a loyal servant to Lear, accuses the King of rashness; Lear in turn banishes him from court. An ever-loyal Kent disguises himself as Caius and returns to Lear later in the play.

Upon visiting both Goneril and Regan, Lear learns that his two daughters were not honest in their declarations of love. Lear is shut out of his daughters' homes and forced to endure a severe storm

in the company of his Fool and the disguised Kent. Lear begins his decent into madness.

In a parallel plot, Gloucester, a dear friend of Lear's, is convinced by his scheming illegitimate son Edmund that his legitimate son, Edgar, is plotting to have him murdered. In order to escape his father's vengeance, Edgar flees and disguises himself as Poor Tom.

Outraged by the treatment Lear has received from Regan and Goneril, Gloucester vows to see the King avenged. Regan's husband Cornwall blinds Gloucester. Banished, blind, and alone, Gloucester encounters Poor Tom (his son Edgar in disguise). Without his sight, Gloucester sees the true nature of his children.

After hearing of her father's condition, Cordelia returns to Britain with a French army to fight her sisters and save Lear. Poor Tom thwarts Gloucester's suicide attempt, and Gloucester is reunited with Lear. Cordelia sends a search party to find her father and they are reconciled.

Appalled by Regan and Cornwall's actions, Cornwall's servant kills him. Afraid that the newly widowed Regan will marry Edmund, Goneril plots her husband and sister's murders.

Cordelia's army is overpowered, and Edmund imprisons Cordelia and Lear. Poor Tom (Edgar in disguise) challenges Edmund, and his identity is revealed. Edgar tells Edmund their father's heart "burst smilingly" when he heard Edgar's tale. Edmund and Edgar duel; a dying Edmund reveals that he has ordered Lear and Cordelia's murders. As men are sent to stop the killing, Lear enters with Cordelia's dead body. It is reported that Goneril poisoned Regan and, upon hearing of Edmund's death, committed suicide. Lear learns that his Fool has been hanged; Lear, now totally mad and distraught, believes he sees Cordelia breathe and dies. Kent explains he must follow his master. Albany is left to rule Britain. Edgar speaks the final words of the play.

Need a visual? Look at the Folger Theatre's [Lear family tree](#)

## DID YOU KNOW?

*King Lear* is unique among Shakespeare's plays in that it has a similar main and subplot. By having similar plots, Shakespeare is able to underscore his themes and propel the main plot forward.

## THINK ABOUT IT

How is Lear's relationship to his daughters similar to that of Gloucester and his sons? How do these men view their children? How and when do these views change? Show examples from the text that support your thoughts.

## CONNECTING WITH THE THEMES

### Family Relationships

*"How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child"*  
Act 1, Scene 4

Have students pay close attention to how the relationships between fathers and children inform the play. How do the fathers (Lear and Gloucester) treat their children? How does Edmund feel about being Gloucester's illegitimate son? How do each of the children (Regan, Goneril, Cordelia, Edgar and Edmund) react to their parents?

### Nature and the Natural Order

*"Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!"* Act 3, Scene 2

In Shakespeare's time, there was a specific belief in natural order, or the Great Chain of Being. At the top of the chain was God; appointed by God was the king. When Lear gives up his kingdom, he upsets the Great Chain of Being.

Nature plays a huge role in *Lear*. As the world around Lear begins to crumble, nature seems to follow suit. Shakespeare's audience would have understood that Lear's abdication of the throne would have upset the Great Chain of Being.

### Madness

*"O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven"* Act 1, Scene 5

Once Lear has upset the natural order, he begins a descent into madness. Ask students to track Lear's madness and its meaning. Is Lear somehow redeemed by his madness? How does he grow and develop?

### Grief and Forgiveness

*"When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down and ask of thee forgiveness"* Act 5, Scene 3

Much of *Lear* deals with loss: loss of kingdom, loss of self, loss of life. Ask students how the characters in *Lear* deal with grief? Who in the play is able to forgive and who is not? What point do they think Shakespeare was trying to make?

### Appearance vs. Reality

*"They told me I was everything; 'tis a lie, I am not ague-proof"*  
Act 4, Scene 5

Goneril and Regan have all the outward appearance of loving daughters, but in reality they behave just the opposite. Are there other characters in *Lear* that outwardly appear one way, but in reality are completely different?

### Clothing and Disguise

*"And bring some covering for this naked soul"* Act 4, Scene 1

When they are no longer safe at home, Edgar assumes the disguise of Poor Tom and Kent becomes Caius. Lear loses his royal robes and wears a crown of weeds. Invite your students to track these disguises: How do clothes inform character?

### Justice

*"We that are young shall never see so much, nor live so long."*  
Act 5, Scene 3

Throughout the play there are many evil deeds. Discuss with students how and when is justice served? Does Lear find justice? Why or why not?

## ENRICHMENT ACTIVITY

### Before seeing the show at BAM

Write three sentences about what you anticipate the show will be like.

Be specific. Be honest! After you see the performance, revisit your first impression. What changed? Why?

### Vocabulary in Action

Shakespeare chose his words specifically. As you read and see *Lear* at BAM, pay attention to what words come up repeatedly. When *Lear* starts to unravel, what do you notice about the language he uses? What do you think this means?

As you are reading the play, you can create a *Lear* word jumble. Write down key words and phrases from each scene. Once you are finished reading the play, take a look at what words you wrote – what theme(s) begin to emerge?

## ADAPTATIONS AND ORIGINS

### Did You Know?

Shakespeare drew on a number of sources when writing *King Lear*. In particular, he would have been familiar with *Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* which told the tale of an unwise king who divided his kingdom between his daughters. There were other stage adaptations of the story during Shakespeare's time. One that Shakespeare was likely to have seen was *King Leir* in 1588 (unknown author). Interestingly enough, Shakespeare's *Lear* is the only version with a tragic ending.

There are two different versions of *King Lear*: the Quarto of 1608 and the Folio of 1623. In the Quarto, the last lines of the play are spoken by the Duke of Albany. In the Folio, Edgar speaks the last lines.

## LEAR IN ADAPTATION

In addition to being traditionally (or theatrically) staged, there have been various versions and adaptations of *King Lear*. To date, there are at least eight film versions of it. In 1971, two different directors, Peter Brook and Grigori Kozintsev, made two versions simultaneously. The directors famously compared notes and discussed their respective ventures. In 1831, Hector Berlioz wrote the orchestral piece *The King Lear Overture*. *Lear* has inspired a number of operas; Aribert Reimann's 1978 opera being the most famous.

### Adaptations to View

The final scene of the **Reimann's opera**

**Peter Brook's *King Lear***

Act 4 scene 7 from **Grigori Kozintsev**

**Act 1 scene 4 Grigori Kozintsev**

**Oregon Shakespeare's 2013 production** of *King Lear* (stage)

**Igor Dobrovolskiy's *King Lear*** for the Atlantic Ballet of Canada.

## ENRICHMENT ACTIVITY

### Endings

How important is it who speaks the last lines of a play? Why do you think a playwright would choose one character over another to close a play? If you were to stage a production of *Lear*, would Albany or Edgar end the play? Why? What do we know about Albany and Edgar from the play? Use examples from the text to justify your choice.



## Resource Bank

Many teaching resources can be found on the Folger Theatre website:

[Fun Facts](#)

[Lear guides and additional information](#)

Looking for images? [Image Gallery](#), [Folger Theatre](#)

[Teaching Lear: The Royal Shakespeare Company](#)

[Shakespeare's Globe Theatre](#)

[The PBS Series, In Search of Shakespeare](#) has many resources for Shakespeare

[Interview with Director Angus Jackson](#)

[Interview with Frank Langella on acting](#)

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Gwendolyn Kelso is an actor and teaching artist based in New York City. She has worked for a number of theatres throughout the country including Austin Shakespeare, Saint Louis Shakespeare Festival, ZACH Theatre, Appletree Theatre (Chicago) and The Repertory Theatre of Saint Louis. In New York, Gwendolyn is the co-founder of Hedgepig Ensemble Theatre, a company dedicated to creating powerful and accessible classic work. She received her BFA in acting from the Conservatory of Theatre Arts at Webster University and her MFA from the Academy of Classical Acting in Washington, DC.

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