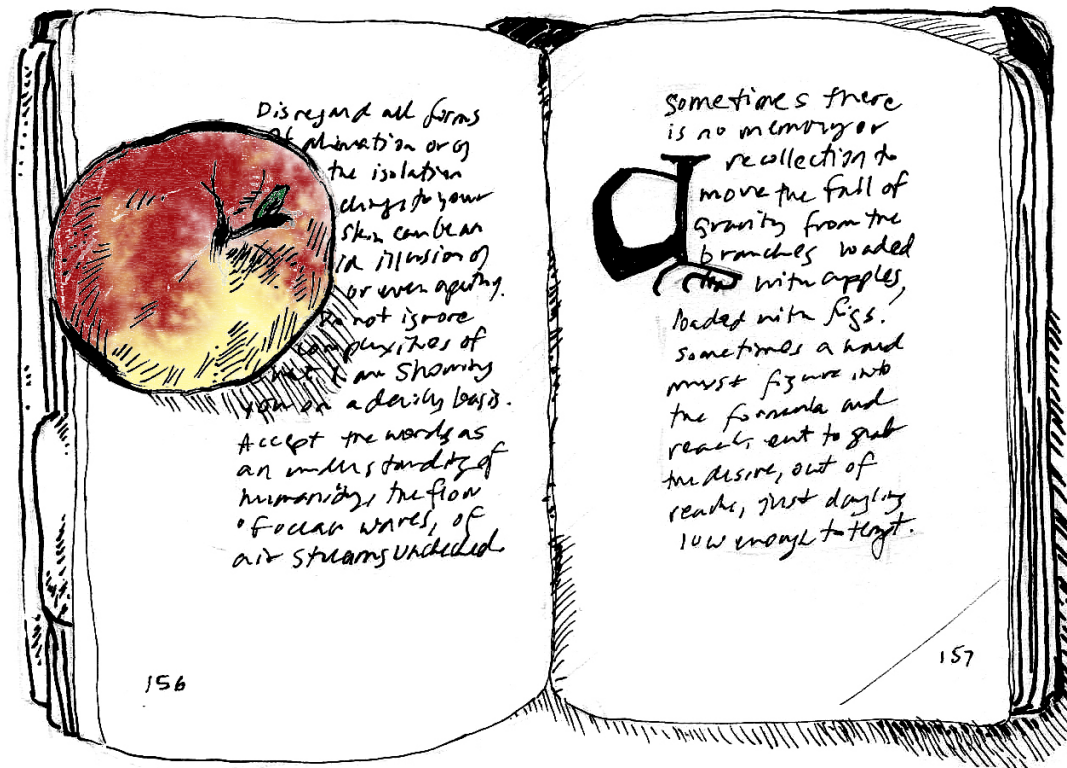


W. Shakespeare and *King Lear*



King Lear

This play is considered one of Shakespeare's greatest plays.

It was also disliked by many critics for over two centuries for various reasons.

- In one sense the drama was very much a head of its time.
- Modern viewers are quick to pick up on the apocalyptic metaphor hidden in the text; likewise the violence expressed by close family members against one another seem more likely a probable concept than a fictional invention based on reports shown on the twenty-four hour news channels.
- Shakespeare's version is based on three primary sources:
 - > the first is the account from Geoffrey of Monmouth in his *History*
 - > the second is a folk tale with a similar theme "Cap O'Rushes"
 - > and the third is a contemporary play titled *Leir*, with a similar storyShakespeare of course twists the ending of all three into tragic circumstances with somewhat surreal repercussions

King Lear

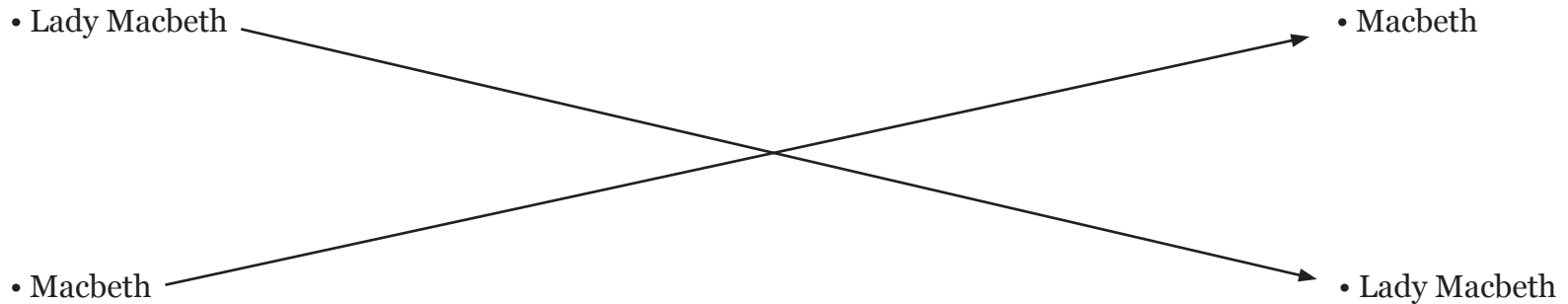
Shakespeare loves to show his central players in transformations.

His characters are always shown in a state of flux; never static.

- Macbeth is a classic example. A obvious shift in personality can be seen by the audience when watching interactions on stage, either through the actors' dialogue or internal soliloquies.

Beginning of playEnd

Control of facilities /actions
move plot forward; certainty in goals



Lack of control / fate moves
plot forward; character is
uncertain in goals

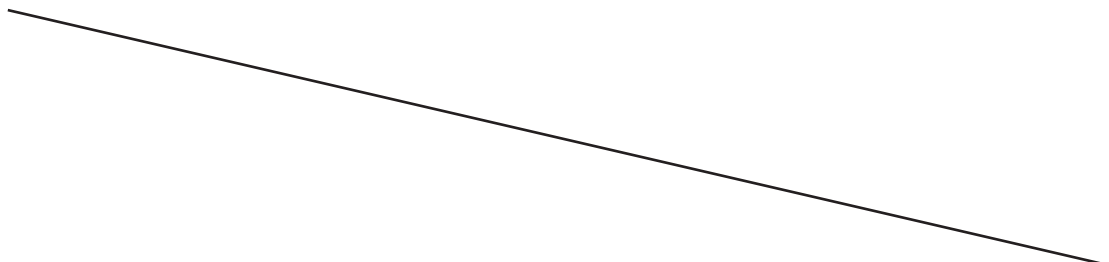
King Lear

The character King Lear follows a similar approach.

Beginning of playEnd

Shown in control of facilities /sane
hints of irrational senility;
audience resents him, feels anger at his choices;
he is shown as the instigator of his own disaster

• KingLear



• King Lear
Gains some reason
back.

• King Lear
Losses all control over
action in the play.
Audience pities him for the
state of affairs and tragic
circumstances he brought
on himself.

King Lear

There are many background stories told alongside the main focus.

To keep the action in proper order, envision the material as family clans.

King Lear wants to retire and divide up his kingdom among his daughters in the hopes they will marry good suitors.

Goneril (eldest daughter) married the Duke of Albany.

Albany is a good character, misled by the company he keeps.

Regan (middle daughter) married the Duke of Cornwall; **Cornwall** ends up to be a very violent man. He will die from a fatal wound, leaving Regan a widow.

Cordelia (youngest daughter) marries the King of France.

King Lear

Earl of **Gloucester** has two sons:

Edmund is illegitimate and causes many problems for all characters.

Edgar is legal heir to Gloucester's property. Will be in disguise as **Poor Tom**.

Duke of **Kent** is loyal to King Lear despite the fact he has been exiled for providing an opinion contrary to the king. Will be disguised as well as **Caius**.

Likewise, the timing of the play is crucial to the development of the plot in a subtle fashion.

It is important to remind yourself that the setting for the play's actions are pre-Roman occupation of the island, and therefore pre-Christian values.

- Shakespeare proposes concepts hundreds of years before his time, during the First Century of English history
- Cultural and court traditions appear in the play, anachronistically

King Lear

Going back to my introductory comments:

- This play is considered one of Shakespeare's greatest plays; it was also disliked by many critics for over two centuries for various reasons until modern times.
- One of the reasons for past negative commentary is the fact Lear himself is perhaps the most complex of all Shakespeare's characters.
- His transformation process carries him through many different **archetypal** levels— many critics are still discussing the various psychoanalytical symbols which Lear can assume: sacrificial winter king, madman, child; Yahweh, Job, Prometheus, Christ (Driscoll 159).
- His characterization alone range from gullible old man, delusional mad king, sympathetic victim.
- As with every good Shakespearean king, Lear is blind to the repercussions of his actions; which is ironic considering how Gloucester's own blindness turns into a physical, violent reality opposed to Lear's psychological, symbolic, blindness.

Driscoll, James P. "The Vision Of King Lear." *Shakespeare Studies* 10.(1977): 159. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 1 July 2013.

King Lear

From the beginning the audience sees Lear’s weakened mental state.

There are hints that his irrational reactions towards Cordelia are rooted in past behavior.

- When she states she has “Nothing, my lord” (Act 1, Scene 1, l. 78) to express her devotion, this acts as a catalyst of emotions due to the fact she is his favorite daughter of the three. He expected some open, *public* declarations of her *private* feelings—phrases of profound nature. In the end, due to her lack of rhetoric, he erroneously takes her silence as a lack of emotion.
- His over-reaction results in a hasty speech calling on the name of the Greco-Roman goddess of witchcraft, Hecate. With the play placed in the era of pagan culture, Shakespeare wants to show the disaster of speaking rashly in public. To the ancient cultures, mentioning a deity’s name would bring forth a result from the god/goddess— positive or negative. In this case, due to the fact Lear calls out to a figure later to be demonized by Christians, tragedy is imminent.

King Lear

- His full anger can be seen likewise by the nature of his delivery— notice he switches from a sacred, positive element, the sun, and transforms his speech to a cold symbol of indifference:

Let it be so; thy truth, then, be thy dower:

For, by the sacred radiance of the sun,

The mysteries of Hecate, and the night;

By all the operation of the orbs

From whom we do exist, and cease to be;

Here I disclaim all my paternal care,

Propinquity and property of blood,

And as a stranger to my heart and me

Hold thee, from this, for ever. (Act 1, Scene 1, ll. 99-105)

In this fashion, his mental capabilities are shown beginning to crumble, just as his relationship with Cordelia crumbles.

- His decision to abdicate the throne is shown as wise; his methods— foolish.

King Lear

Cordelia follows the archetype of a dutiful daughter who has been misunderstood.

Through a miscommunication she is misidentified as insubordinate, disrespectful, and insolent.

- Usually in these cases, within folk stories, the daughter is the youngest and more likely the prettiest in the family.
- Ironically, this character is only on stage for a very limited time; however, her absence causes the audience to reflect back on her frequently. She is a strong contrast to her sister's and their disrespectful treatment of their father.
- One method Shakespeare uses to encourage a sense of contrast, he lets the audience know that Cordelia sees through her sister's compliments.

King Lear

She states before the close of Scene 1:

The jewels of our father, with wash'd eyes

Cordelia leaves you: *I know you what you are;*

And like a sister am most loath to call

Your faults as they are named. Use well our father:

To your professed bosoms I commit him

But yet, alas, stood I within his grace,

I would prefer him to a better place.

So, farewell to you both (Act 1, Scene 1, ll. 257-264; my emphasis).

Cordelia is shown as a strong creature with her own resilience, much like the original folk story heroine.

King Lear

The two sisters close out the scene plotting amongst themselves.

This in turn immediately shows characters with identifiable personality traits which contrast with Cordelia's admirable traits.

- Both of the older two sisters attribute their father's mood shifts to old age. Goneril notes: "You see how full of changes his age is [...] He always loved our sister most, and with what poor judgment he hath now cast her off appears too grossly" (Act 1, Scene 1).
- Review full closing conversation between the two on page 1369 of the *Longman Anthology*.
- What results: by close of scene 1, all the important players are introduced and all their affiliations shown.

King Lear

In fact, duality in the play effectively adds complexity to the plot through the use of comparisons and contrasts of personalities—

Lear / Gloucester

Cordelia / her sisters

Regan / Goneril

Edmund / Edgar

Kent (in disguise) / Oswald

Albany / Cornwall

Burgundy / France

Earl of Kent / Caius

Edgar / poor Tom

Lear / Edgar