

# Teaching the end of *King Lear*

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# ***The King Lear* stew**

- Fairy-tale elements; love test; tyrannical father (comedy); France & Burgundy.
- Ugly sisters.
- Sub-plot.
- Disguises: Poor Tom, Kent/Caius.
- Storms
- The disappearing Fool.



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# The *King Lear* stew 2

- Blinding of Gloucester. Vile jelly.
- Love triangle of Edmund, Regan and Goneril.
- Madness of Lear.
- The 'cliff' at Dover.



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“All’s cheerless, dark and deadly.”

“It’s not the despair, Laura. I can stand the  
despair. It’s the hope.”



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# Professor Jennifer Roberts

- *The Power of Patience: teaching students the value of deceleration and immersive attention* (2013). Essay and video.
- 'A Boy with a Flying Squirrel' (1765) by John Singleton Copley.



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Chiaroscuro

Chiar oscuro

Light Dark



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# Caravaggio

- **1571-1610** [Shakespeare: 1564-1616].
- **‘The Taking of Christ’**
- National Gallery of Ireland.
- **1602** [*King Lear*: 1606].



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# The redemptive strain / 1

- Lear's journey from blindness to empathy. He learns. His insights into society, the poor, 'unaccommodated man'. Rebirth (resurrection) through suffering.
- A 'Christian' journey?
- Kent's unwavering loyalty.
- The heroism of the servant who kills Cornwall.



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# The redemptive strain / 2

- Cordelia's forgiving love and the reunion with Lear.
- Gloucester's journey towards 'seeing'. His 'smiling' death.
- The deaths of all the malignant people: Cornwall, Regan, Goneril, Edmund.
- Lear's consoling belief that Cordelia is alive at the end. Cordelia as a Christ-figure, a Pietà.
- Edgar's journey from gullibility to heroism.
- Edgar as King.



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# The tragic strain / 1

- Stupidity of the first scene. Division of the kingdom unleashes chaos.
- ‘Filial ingratitude’.
- Suffering, pain.
- The storm as a central metaphor.
- The relentless injustice.
- Lear’s breakdown; madness.
- Gloucester’s blinding. The horror of the actual scene.



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# The tragic strain / 2

- The dominance of Cornwall, Regan, Goneril, Edmund.
- The ineffectiveness of Albany, the Fool, Edgar, Kent.
- Gloucester's death.
- The message that was sent too late.
- Cordelia's death.
- Lear's pathetically mistaken belief that she is alive.
- The bleak lack of consolation at the end.



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# The ending / 1

## **James Shapiro: 1606.**

*'For those at the court performance familiar with earlier versions of the story in which the king is restored to the throne and reconciled with his youngest daughter, this must have been shocking, the image and horror of the collapse of the state and the obliteration of the royal family akin to the violent fantasy of the Gunpowder plotters a year earlier.'*



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# The ending / 2

- **James Shapiro:**
- 'Those in the audience who had seen King Lear or had read any of the other versions of Lear's reign in circulation already knew how the story ends ... nobody dies and all that is lost is restored'...
- 'Audiences in 1606 would have expected Shakespeare's play to end in much the same way, with Lear restored to his throne and Cordelia spared.'



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# The ending / 3

- **James Shapiro:**
- ‘At the point of the reconciliation between Lear and Cordelia, we are 3 hours/2,800 lines in ('the typical length of one of Shakespeare's plays')...’
- ‘But King Lear, which has another 500 lines to go, doesn't end there, and when it does and they are both dead; we are confronted with a desolate scene that is all the more crushing, denying us not only what we wish for, but also what we expect.’



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A PELICAN  
BOOK

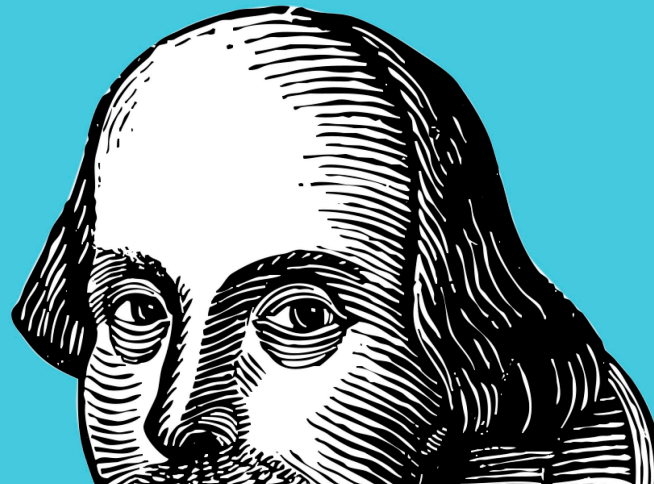
# This is Shakespeare

## How to Read the World's Greatest Playwright

# Emma Smith

'The best introduction  
to the plays I've read,  
perhaps the best book  
on Shakespeare, full stop'

ALEX PRESTON, OBSERVER



# The ending: Emma Smith

- 'There is already established a well-known story and part of what is well known about it is that it has a happy ending: reinstating Lear to his throne, to be succeeded by Cordelia.'
- 'The play's first audiences would probably have been expecting at least Cordelia's survival and perhaps also Lear's too.'
- 'The wreckage of these plots must have been bewildering. Kent's Is this the promised end? takes on a metatheatrical quality.' (234).




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“It’s not the despair, Laura. I can stand the  
despair.

It’s the hope.”



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# Act 5 scene iii: hope and despair / 1

27-40: Edmund instructs the Captain to kill Lear and Cordelia.

83: Albany arrests Edmund on 'capital treason', and 'this gilded serpent'.

123: Edgar answers the Herald's trumpet, confronting the 'toad-spotted traitor.' He vanquishes Edmund in the duel.

183: Edgar tells the story of their father's death, whose heart 'burst smilingly.'

223: The Gentleman and the bloody knife: 'O, she's dead!'

228: But 'she' is actually Goneril. And Regan has been poisoned. Relief.



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# Act 5 scene iii: hope and despair / 2

243: Edmund 'pants for life' and reveals his 'writ' is on the life of Lear and Cordelia. A Messenger runs out at 253 [cynical?]

259: Lear enters with Cordelia's body.

292: Kent: 'All's cheerless, dark and deadly.' He leaves on his 'journey'.

307: Lear's final words. 'Never' x5. His death.  
[delusion/consolation?]

328: Edgar's final words: irrelevant/consolation?



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THE  
HISTORY  
OF  
KING  
LEAR.

Acted at the  
Duke's Theatre.

---

Reviv'd with Alterations.

---

By *N. TATE.*

---

L O N D O N,  
Printed for *E. Fleisher*, and are to be sold by *R. Bentley*, and *M. Magnes* in *Russel-street* near *Covent-Garden*, 1681.



# *The History of King Lear* (1681) by Nahum Tate (1652-1715)

- No King of France; Cordelia stays in England.
- No Fool.
- Edgar saves Cordelia from the attentions of Edmund, and they are married at the end.
- Edmund makes no attempt to save Lear and Cordelia.
- 'Gloster' lives, surviving the shock of Edgar's revelation.
- Lear kills the two men who come to murder him and Cordelia.
- Albany hands the throne back to Lear.
- Lear recovers his mind.



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Your Kingdom, save what Part yourself confer'd  
On us in Marriage.

*Kent.* Hear you that, my Liege?

*Cord.* Then there are Gods, and Virtue is their Care:

*Lear.* Is't possible?

Let the Spheres stop their Course, the Sun make halt,  
The Winds be hush'd, the Seas and Fountains rest;  
All Nature pause, and listen to the Change.

Where is my *Kent*, my *Caius*?

*Kent.* Here, my Liege.

*Lear.* Why I have News that will recall thy Youth:  
Ha! didst thou hear't, or did th'inspiring Gods  
Whisper to me alone? Old *Lear* shall be  
A King again.

*Kent.* The Prince, that like a God has Pow'r, has said it.

*Lear.* *Cordelia* then shall be a Queen, mark that:  
*Cordelia*, shall be Queen; Winds catch the Sound,  
And bear it on your rosy Wings to Heav'n—  
*Cordelia* is a Queen.

*Re-enter Edgar with Gloster.*

*Alb.* Look, Sir, where pious *Edgar* comes,  
Leading his eyeless Father. O my Liege!  
His wond'rous Story well deserves your Leisure;  
What he has done and suffer'd for your Sake,  
What for the fair *Cordelia*'s.

*Gloster.* Where's my Liege? Conduct me to his Knees, to  
His second Birth of Empire: My dear *Edgar* (hail  
Has with himself reveal'd the King's blest Restauration.

*Lear.* My poor dark *Gloster*!

*Gloster.* O let me kiss that once more scepter'd Hand!

*Lear.* Hold, thou mistak'st the Majesty, kneel here;  
*Cordelia* has our Pow'r, *Cordelia*'s Queen.  
Speak, is not that the noble suffer'ing *Edgar*?

*Gloster.* My pious Son, more dear than my lost Eyes.

*Lear.* I wrong'd him too, but here's the fair Amends.

*Edg.* Your Leave, my Liege, for an unwelcome Message.  
*Edmund* (but that's a Trifle) is expired.

What more will touch you, your imperious Daughters,  
*Goneril* and haughty *Regan*, both are dead,  
Each by the other poison'd at a Banquet:  
This, dying, they confess'd.

*Cord.*

*Cord.* O fatal Period of ill-govern'd Life!

*Lear.* Ingrateful as they were, my Heart feels yet  
A Pang of Nature for their wretched Fall.—

But, *Edgar*, I defer thy Joys too long:

Thou serv'dst distress'd *Cordelia*; take her crown'd,  
Th' imperial Grace fresh blooming on her Brow:  
Nay, *Gloster*, thou hast here a Father's Right,  
Thy helping Hand t' heap Blessings on their Heads.

*Kent.* Old *Kent* throws in his hearty Wishes too.

*Edg.* The Gods and you too largely recompence  
What I have done; the Gift strikes Merit dumb.

*Cord.* Nor do I blush to own myself o'er-paid  
For all my Suff'rings past.

*Gloster.* Now, gentle Gods, give *Gloster* his Discharge;

*Lear.* No, *Gloster*, thou hast Business yet for Life;

Thou, *Kent*, and I, retir'd to some close Cell,  
Will gently pass our short Reserves of Time  
In calm Reflexions on our Fortunes past,  
Cheer'd with Relation of the prosperous Reign  
Of this celestial Pair; thus our Remains  
Shall in an even Course of Thoughts be past,  
Enjoy the present Hour, nor fear the last.

*Edg.* Our drooping Country now erects her Head,  
Peace spreads her balmy Wings, and Plenty blooms.

Divine *Cordelia*, all the Gods can witness

How much thy Love to Empire I prefer!

Thy bright Example shall convince the World

(Whatever Storms of Fortune are decreed)

That Truth and Virtue shall at last succeed.

[*Ex. Omnes.*]

# The Nahum Tate *Lear*

Gloster: Now, gentle gods, give Gloster his discharge.

Lear: No, Gloster, thou hast business yet for life.  
Thou, Kent and I, retired to some cool cell,  
Will gently pass our short reserves of time  
In calm reflections on our fortunes past,  
Cheered with relation of the prosperous reign  
Of this celestial pair. Thus our remains  
Shall in an even course of thought be passed.  
Enjoy the present hour, nor fear the last.



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# The Nahum Tate *Lear* end 2

Edgar

Our drooping country now erects her head,  
Peace spreads her balmy wings, and plenty blooms.  
Divine Cordelia, all the gods can witness  
How much thy love to empire I prefer!  
Thy bright example shall convince the world  
(Whatever storms of fortune are decreed)  
That truth and virtue shall at last succeed.



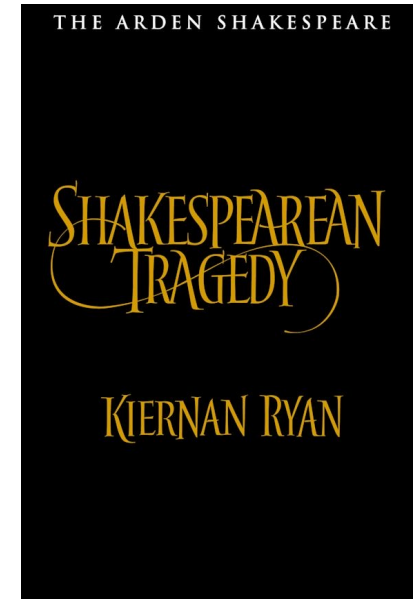
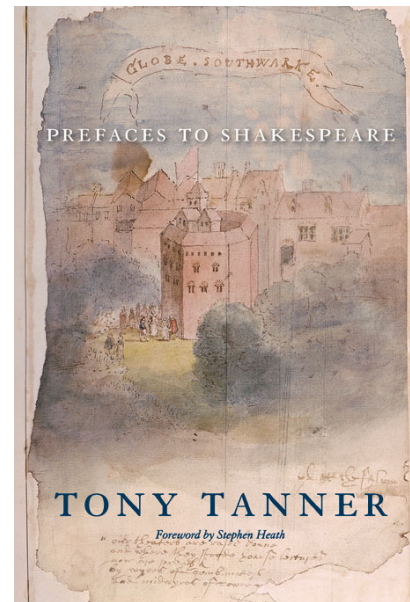
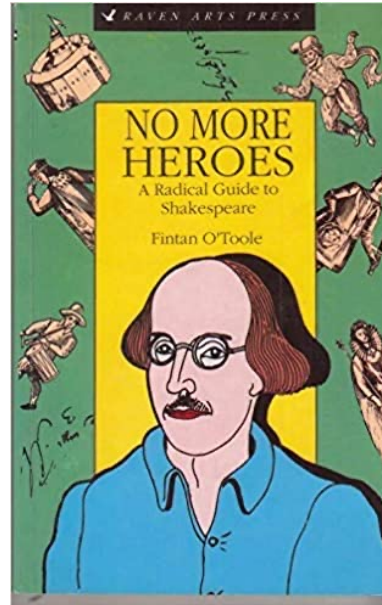
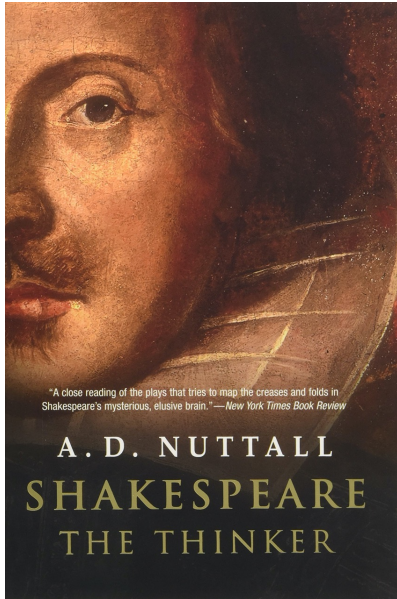
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It's not the despair, Laura. I can stand the  
despair. It's the hope."



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# Some books



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# Questions for discussion

How close is *King Lear* to comedy?

What is the effect of the parallel sub-plot (the only one in Shakespeare's tragedies) on the ending?

How is there what Frank Kermode calls 'authorial savagery' in this play, a 'terrible calculatedness'?

Fintan O'Toole: 'Shakespeare makes us feel superfluousness, excess, as something immensely painful.'



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Quizlet flashcards

Retrieval grids

Sequence grids

Podcasts

Book recommendations



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