

Teaching the ending of *King Lear*

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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.”



Chiaroscuro

Chiar oscuro
Light / Dark



‘Redemptive’? (the comic and the Christian strain).

- **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.**
- **Cordelia’s 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.**
- **Edgar’s journey from gullibility to heroism.**
- **Edgar as King.**



'Bleak'? (the tragic strain)

- **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.**
- **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 lack of consolation at the end.**



JAMES SHAPIRO

AUTHOR OF *1599*,
WINNER OF THE SAMUEL JOHNSON PRIZE

1606

*William
Shakespeare
and the
Year of Lear*

'A book for anyone interested in history, or literature,
or in the creation of the greatest play ever written.' Richard Eyre



The ending of King Lear

James Shapiro (1)

‘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.’



The ending of King Lear

James Shapiro (2)

'Those in the audience who had seen *King Leir* 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.'



The ending of King Lear

James Shapiro (3)

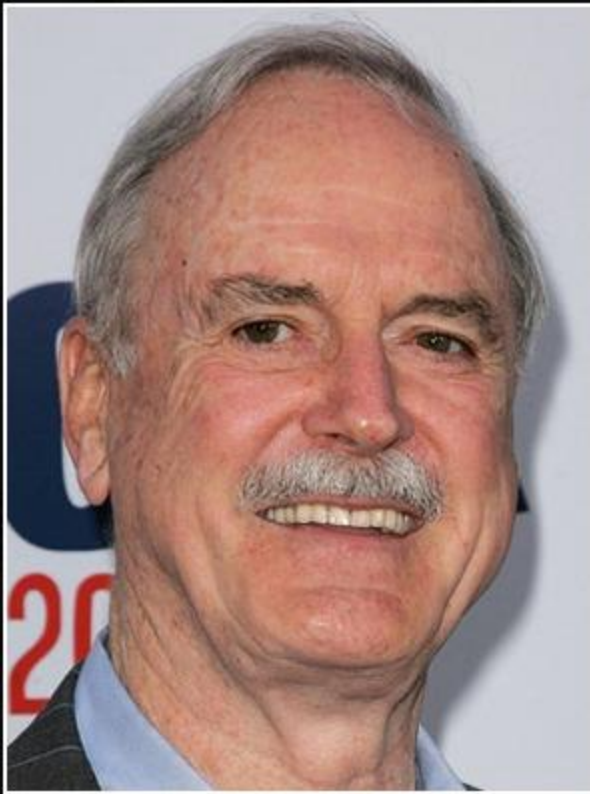
At the point of the reconciliation between Lear and Cordelia, we are 3 hours/2,800 lines in ('the typical length of one of Shakespeare's plays')...

'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.'





The ending of *King Lear*



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

— *John Cleese* —

AZ QUOTES

Act 5 scene iii: hope, despair.

1. 27-40: Edmund instructs the Captain to kill Lear and Cordelia.
2. 83: Albany arrests Edmund on 'capital treason', and 'this gilded serpent'
3. 123: Edgar answers the Herald's trumpet, confronting the 'toad-spotted traitor.' He vanquishes Edmund in the duel.
4. 183: Edgar tells the story of their father's death, whose heart 'burst smilingly.'
5. 223: The Gentleman and the bloody knife: 'O, she's dead!'
6. 228: But 'she' is actually Goneril. And Regan has been poisoned. Relief.
7. 243: Edmund 'pants for life' and reveals his 'writ' is on the life of Lear and Cordelia. A Messenger runs out at 253 [cynical?]
8. 259: Lear enters with Cordelia's body.
9. 292: Kent: 'All's cheerless, dark and deadly.' He leaves on his 'journey'.
10. 307: Lear's final words. 'Never' x5. His death. [delusion/consolation?]
11. 328: Edgar's final words: irrelevant/consolation?



A PELICAN BOOK

This is Shakespeare Emma Smith



Emma Smith: This is Shakespeare

'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).



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 2 men who come to murder him and Cordelia.**
- **Albany hands the throne back to Lear.**
- **Lear recovers his mind.**



Re-enter Edgar with Gloster.

Alb. Look, Sir, where pious *Edgar* comes

Leading his Eye-lefs Father: O my Liege!

His wondrous Story will deserve your Leisure:

What He has done and suffer'd for your Sake,

What for the Fair *Cordelia's*.

Gloft. Where is my Liege? Conduft me to his Knees to
hail

His second Birth of Empire; my dear *Edgar*

Has, with himself, reveal'd the King's blest Restauration.

Lear. My poor dark *Gloster*;

Gloft. O let me kiss that once more sceptred Hand!

Lear. Hold, Thou mistak'ft the Majesty, kneel here;

Cordelia has our Pow'r, *Cordelia's* Queen.

Speak, is not that the noble Suffering *Edgar*?

Gloft. 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 expir'd;

What more will touch you, your imperious Daughters

Gonerill and haughty *Regan*, both are Dead,

Each by the other poison'd at a Banquet;

This, Dying, they confest.

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

Lear. Ingratefull 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 distrest *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 Head.

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 my Self o'er-paid

For all my Sufferings past.

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

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

Thou,



Thou, *Kent* and I, retir'd to some cool Cell
 Will gently pass our short reserves of Time
 In calm Reflections 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 Thought 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 Vertue shall at last succeed.

[*Ex. Omnes.*]

FINIS.



Re-enter Edgar with Gloster.

Albany

Look, sir, where pious Edgar comes
Leading his eyeless father. O my liege!
His wondrous story will deserve your leisure,
What he has done and suffered for your sake,
What for the fair Cordelia's.

Gloster

Where is my liege? Conduct me to his knees to
hail
His second birth of empire. My dear Edgar
Has, with himself, revealed the king's blest
restoration.

Lear

My poor, dark Gloster.

Gloster

O let me kiss that once-more sceptered hand!

Lear

Hold, thou mistak'st the majesty, kneel here.
Cordelia has our power, Cordelia's queen.
Speak, is not that the noble suffering Edgar?

Gloster

My pious son, more dear than my lost eyes.

Lear

I wronged him too, but here's the fair amends.

Edgar

Your leave, my liege, for an unwelcome message.
Edmund (but that's a trifle) is expired.
What more will touch you: your imperious
daughters
Gonerill and haughty Regan, both are dead,
Each by the other poisoned at a banquet.
This, dying, they confessed.



Cordelia

O fatal period of ill-governed 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 served'st distressed Cordelia; take her
crowned,
The imperial grace fresh blooming on her brow.
Nay, Gloster, thou hast here a father's right.
Thy helping hand to heap blessings on their head.

Kent

Old Kent throws in his hearty wishes too.

Edgar

The gods and you too largely recompense
What I have done. The gift strikes merit dumb.

Cordelia

Nor do I blush to own myself overpaid
For all my sufferings past.

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.

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.

END



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