

KING LEAR

by William Shakespeare

PRESTWICK HOUSE LITERARY TOUCHSTONE CLASSICS



Includes
Strategies for
Understanding
Shakespeare's
Language

UNABRIDGED WITH GLOSSARY AND NOTES

KING LEAR



William Shakespeare



Prestwick House

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STRATEGIES

Strategies for Understanding Shakespeare's Language

1. **When reading verse, note the appropriate phrasing and intonation.**

DO NOT PAUSE AT THE END OF A LINE unless there is a mark of punctuation. Shakespearean verse has a rhythm of its own, and once a reader gets used to it, the rhythm becomes very natural to speak in and read. Beginning readers often find it helpful to read a short pause at a comma and a long pause for a period, colon, semicolon, dash, or question mark.

Here's an example from *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV, Scene i:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd, (*short pause*)
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: (*long pause*) it is twice blest; (*long pause*)
It blesseth him that gives, (*short pause*) and him that takes; (*long pause*)
'Tis mightiest in the mighties; (*long pause*) it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown; (*long pause*)

2. **Read from punctuation mark to punctuation mark for meaning.**

In addition to helping you read aloud, punctuation marks define units of thought. Try to understand each unit as you read, keeping in mind that periods, colons, semicolons, and question marks signal the end of a thought.

Here's an example from *The Taming of the Shrew*: Act I, Scene i:

LUC. Tranio, I saw her coral lips to move,
And with her breath she did perfume the air;
Sacred, and sweet, was all I saw in her.
TRA. Nay, then, 'tis time to stir him from his
trance.
I pray, awake, sir: if you love the maid,
Bend thoughts and wits to achieve her.

The first unit of thought is from “Tranio” to “air”:
He saw her lips move, and her breath perfumed the air.

The second thought (“Sacred, and sweet...”) re-emphasizes the first.

Tranio replies that Lucentio needs to awaken from his trance and try to win “the maid.” These two sentences can be considered one unit of thought.

3. In an **inverted sentence**, the verb comes before the subject. Some lines will be easier to understand if you put the subject first and reword the sentence. For example, look at the line below:

“*Never was seen so black a day as this:*” (*Romeo and Juliet*, Act IV, Scene v)

You can change its inverted pattern so it is more easily understood:

“*A day as black as this was never seen:*”

4. An **ellipsis** occurs when a word or phrase is left out. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Benvolio asks Romeo’s father and mother if they know the problem that is bothering their son. Romeo’s father answers:

“*I neither know it nor can learn of **him***” (*Romeo and Juliet*, Act I, Scene i)

This sentence can easily be understood to mean,

“*I neither know [the cause of] it,
nor can [I] learn [about it from] him.*”

5. As you read longer speeches, keep track of the subject, verb, and object—*who* did *what* to *whom*.

In the clauses below, note the subject, verbs, and objects:

Ross: The king hath happily received, Macbeth,
The news of thy success: and when he reads
Thy personal venture in the rebel’s fight... (*Macbeth*, Act I, Scene iii)

1st clause: *The king hath happily received, Macbeth, / The news of thy success:*

SUBJECT – The king

VERB – has received

OBJECT – the news [of Macbeth’s success]

READING POINTERS

Readers should be aware of the following themes and concepts in *King Lear*:

1. Parents and Children

Compare the two sets of parents and children in the play.

- What do the children have to say about their duty towards their parents? Is duty the main reason for their actions?
- What do the parents feel they owe their children?
- Are the children and parents justified in their actions towards each other? Are Goneril and Regan, for instance, obligated to accommodate their father's raucous troops? Is Edgar entitled to seek more respect than he actually receives from his father?
- Are our ideas about parenting similar to those of the characters in the play?
- Why does Cordelia answer Lear as she does? Knowing her father to be willful, why does she say what is true, rather than what would please him?

2. Good and Evil

King Lear is based on an old tale reworked by Edmund Spenser. In the play, as in many legends, most of the characters are either extremely good or unmistakably evil. Lear and Gloucester, in fact, are the only characters who display change and growth. Lear's change is brought on by the increasing awareness of the evil around him and the realization that he allowed it to flourish. Gloucester also succumbs to the pressure of malevolent forces, attempting drastic measures once he is aware of his own culpability.

- What do various characters believe about good and evil? Do they feel themselves responsible, or do they blame supernatural forces like fate, devils, and celestial activities?
- Does either good or evil clearly triumph at the end of the play?

KING LEAR

BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

LEAR King of Britain

KING OF FRANCE

DUKE OF BURGUNDY

DUKE OF CORNWALL

DUKE OF ALBANY

EARL OF KENT

EARL OF GLOUCESTER

EDGAR son to GLOUCESTER

EDMUND illegitimate son to GLOUCESTER

CURAN a courtier

OLD MAN tenant to GLOUCESTER

DOCTOR

FOOL

OSWALD steward to GONERIL

A Captain employed by EDMUND

Gentleman attending on CORDELIA

A Herald

Servants to CORNWALL

GONERIL }
REGAN } daughters to LEAR
CORDELIA }

Knights of LEAR'S train, Captains, Messengers, Soldiers, and Attendants.

ACT I

K I N G L E A R

ACT I

SCENE I King Lear's palace.

[Enter Kent, Gloucester, and Edmund]

KENT: I thought the king had more affected¹ the Duke of Albany than Cornwall.

¹*favored*

GLOUCESTER: It did always seem so to us: but now, in the division of the kingdom, it appears not which of the dukes he values most; for equalities are so weighed, that curiosity in neither
5 can make choice of either's moiety.²

²*share*

KENT: Is not this your son, my lord?

GLOUCESTER: His breeding, sir, hath been at my charge: I have so often blushed to acknowledge him, that now I am brazed³ to
10 it.

³*hardened*

KENT: I cannot conceive⁴ you.

⁴*understand*

GLOUCESTER: Sir, this young fellow's mother could: whereupon she grew round-wombed, and had, indeed, sir, a son for her cradle ere she had a husband for her bed. Do you smell a
15 fault?

KENT: I cannot wish the fault undone, the issue of it being so proper.

GLOUCESTER: But I have, sir, a son by order of law, some year elder than this, who yet is no dearer in my account: though this
20 knave came something saucily into the world before he was sent for, yet was his mother fair; there was good sport at his making, and the whoreson must be acknowledged. Do you know this noble gentleman, Edmund?

EDMUND: No, my lord.

GLOUCESTER: My lord of Kent: remember him hereafter as my
25 honorable friend.

EDMUND: My services to your lordship.

KENT: I must love you, and sue⁵ to know you better.

⁵*plead*

EDMUND: Sir, I shall study deserving.

⁶fanfare of
trumpets

30 GLOUCESTER: He hath been out nine years, and away he shall
again. The king is coming.

[Sennet.⁶ Enter King Lear, Cornwall, Albany, Goneril, Regan,
Cordelia, and Attendants]

KING LEAR: Attend the lords of France and Burgundy,
Gloucester.

GLOUCESTER: I shall, my liege.

[Exeunt Gloucester and Edmund]

⁷royal "we"; see
glossary

35 KING LEAR: Meantime we⁷ shall express our darker purpose.
Give me the map there. Know that we have divided

⁸firm

In three our kingdom: and 'tis our fast⁸ intent

To shake all cares and business from our age;

Conferring them on younger strengths, while we

⁹unburdened

40 Unburthened⁹ crawl toward death. Our son of Cornwall,
And you, our no less loving son of Albany,

¹⁰publically
announce

We have this hour a constant will to publish¹⁰

Our daughters' several dowers,¹¹ that future strife

¹¹dowries; see
glossary

May be prevented now. The princes, France and

45 Burgundy,

Great rivals in our youngest daughter's love,

Long in our court have made their amorous sojourn,

And here are to be answered. Tell me, my daughters,—

Since now we will divest us both of rule,

50 Interest of territory, cares of state,—

Which of you shall we say doth love us most?

That we our largest bounty may extend

Where nature¹² doth with merit challenge. Goneril,

Our eldest-born, speak first.

55 GONERIL: Sir, I love you more than words can wield the
matter;

Dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty;

Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare;

No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honor;

60 As much as child e'er loved, or father found;

A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable;

Beyond all manner of so much I love you.

CORDELIA: [Aside] What shall Cordelia do? Love, and be
silent.

65 LEAR: Of all these bounds, even from this line to this,
With shadowy forests and with champains¹³ riched,

¹³countryside

With plenteous rivers and wide-skirted meads,¹⁴
 We make thee lady: to thine and Albany's issue¹⁵
 Be this perpetual. What says our second daughter,

70 Our dearest Regan, wife to Cornwall? Speak.

REGAN: Sir, I am made

Of the self-same mettle¹⁶ that my sister is,
 And prize me at her worth. In my true heart
 I find she names my very deed of love;

75 Only she comes too short: that I profess
 Myself an enemy to all other joys,
 Which the most precious square of sense possesses;
 And find I am alone felicitate¹⁷

In your dear highness' love.

80 CORDELIA: *[Aside]* Then poor Cordelia!
 And yet not so; since, I am sure, my love's
 More richer than my tongue.

KING LEAR: To thee and thine hereditary ever
 Remain this ample third of our fair kingdom;

85 No less in space, validity, and pleasure,
 Than that conferred on Goneril. Now, our joy,
 Although the last, not least; to whose young love
 The vines of France and milk of Burgundy
 Strive to be interest;¹⁸ what can you say to draw

90 A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.

CORDELIA: Nothing, my lord.

KING LEAR: Nothing!

CORDELIA: Nothing.

KING LEAR: Nothing will come of nothing:¹⁹ speak again.

95 CORDELIA: Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave
 My heart into my mouth: I love your majesty
 According to my bond; nor more nor less.

KING LEAR: How, how, Cordelia! mend your speech a little,
 Lest it may mar your fortunes.

100 CORDELIA: Good my lord,
 You have begot me, bred me, loved me: I
 Return those duties back as are right fit,
 Obey you, love you, and most honor you.
 Why have my sisters husbands, if they say
 105 They love you all? Haply,²⁰ when I shall wed,
 That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry
 Half my love with him, half my care and duty:
 Sure, I shall never marry like my sisters,

¹⁴meadows

¹⁵children

¹⁶stuff, material

¹⁷joyful

¹⁸involved

¹⁹an Aristotelian maxim; see glossary

²⁰perhaps

GLOSSARY AND VOCABULARY

Act I, Scene I

Albany – Scotland

alms – charity

amorous – full of love

appertains – relates

attend – serve

aught – anything

begot – fathered

clamor – a loud outcry

conferring – bestowing

dispositions – tendencies

divest – to strip

dominions – a governed territory or country

dowry – the property or money that a woman gives to her husband when they are married

fairest – most lovely

flourish – a fanfare of trumpets

forbear – hold off, stop

forsaken – abandoned

fortune – fate

gorge – satisfy, overindulge

Hecate – goddess of witchcraft, associated with Hades and the underworld

hence – away from here

infirmities – physical ailments

liege – a lord

mar – damage

miscreant – a wicked person

“Nothing will come of nothing...” – a credo accepted by Christians in the Middle Ages, (“*Ex nihilo nihil fit*”); Lear is warning Cordelia that she will not receive anything from him unless she professes her love.

opulent – characterized by abundance

pawn – a chess piece

perpetual – lasting forever or for an indefinitely long time

plaited – tightly woven

plight – a pledge

pre-eminence – excellence above others

recreant – a disloyal person; traitor

saucily – rudely

Scythian – a notoriously savage inhabitant of European Russia, regarded as the home of barbarians

sojourn – to visit; to live somewhere temporarily

soundest – healthiest