



Teaching Shakespeare's Greatest Plays & Sonnets

with Dr. Joshua Avery

Lecture 4: King Lear

Outline:

King Lear

- Preliminary comments:
 - This play is best read and discussed by older students.
 - This play deals with stoicism, fierce restraint, self-governance, a very pagan ethic.
 - The play set in pre-Christian pagan Britain is hinting at Christian themes.
 - What is the tension between a pagan ethic and Christian ideals?
- Act I, Scene I
 - There is an unfortunate falling out between Lear and Cordelia.
 - What is the point of what Cordelia actually does? What does it mean in terms of the questions of politics in Shakespeare's context?
 - If your students have read Thomas More's *Utopia*, they might remember a debate about the nature of serving a king. Part of the argument is, "To what extent should you always be telling the truth?"
 - This is presented as a difficult problem.
 - The problem: Kings demand flattery.
 - Cordelia says, "I refuse to play the game." Lear is outraged.
 - Cordelia is misleading. She makes it sound like she loves according to obligation only. Cordelia loves beyond social expectation and duty.
 - Why does Cordelia do it? She wants to stand up to the game.
 - Was it in the end a prudential move? Did she make the right call?
 - The word "nothing" comes up frequently in the play. "Nothing will come of nothing," is a theme throughout that pervades the play.
 - Love works by exchange. If you give me nothing, I will give you nothing back. Can something come from nothing, or not?
 - You are loving when there is no reason to love in Christianity.
 - France says if there is some condition, you cannot call it love anymore (hint at connection to Sonnet 116).
 - Why does Lear react in such an extreme way?
 - Notice how the other two sisters think of Lear.
 - The problem of counsel is all about self-knowledge. No one can know themselves without help.
- Act I, Scene II



- Rhetorical questions of Edmund in monologue to nature.
- If there is a moral law, for Edmund, it is nature itself. How would this be distinguished from a traditional notion of a moral law?
- Is he talking about Natural Law?
- In the traditional Christian understanding, the Natural Law is a kind of intermediary speaking to human beings but tied to a purpose.
- Is there a Transcendant, or are we simply left with observing the mechanics of things?
- Gloucester is commenting that society seems to be a little askew. Gloucester interprets it through the stars.
- Do we have something beyond nature? Gloucester is saying that the explanation of science is not enough. There must be something above it.
- Edmund argues that if you are going for these supernatural explanations, you are giving over agency. It has nothing to do with the stars, it's on us.
- Is it really true that the naturalist approach provides more agency?
- Edmund and the other villain characters speak in the more modern-leaning approach.
- The conservative figures (Gloucester and Lear) are also here.
- Neither of these escape a skewering criticism.
- Act I, Scene IV
 - How is the fool a figure of wisdom? The fool can give wisdom.
 - Can we produce something? Are we in a closed system or not?
 - The fool says that Lear has not even been good at the pagan stoic level.
 - Lear is conflating his human essence, his nonmaterial soul, with the trappings of his kingship. If he loses his kingship, he doesn't know who he is anymore.
 - This is part of the failure of the right.
- Act II, Scene I
 - This play plays on the word nature constantly.
- Act II, Scene II
 - There a very thematic scene with Kent and Cornwall.
 - Cornwall is saying that Kent is so proud of being a truth teller. This is the recurrent problem of council.
 - Act II, Scene IV: The fool is making fun of Kent. The fool is one of the wisest character in the play. Take note of the fact that you are about to fall into destruction.
 - Kent loves Lear, he is loyal in the right way.
 - There is some appeal to being measured in truth telling. This is the problem of council being brought up again.
- Act II, Scene III-Scene IV
 - He is going to make himself less like a human being and more like a beast.



- This is playing with the modern idea that maybe we have a kind of agency to enter into different roles.
 - He is playing the part of an animal, not becoming an animal.
 - His identity is erased.
 - This is a different kind of self-fashioning.
- How do you govern yourself to make the decision that needs to be made?
 - King Lear is in no position to handle the position he is in now.
 - He understands a stoic honor code. He realizes he is losing control. He is not reigning himself in.
 - Fool: Lear you are trying to beat down the heart, this is not the time to try to fix it. Lear cannot suddenly have control of his heart.
- Lear is getting more enraged. Lear thinks his power is Divine Law.
 - Regan's argument mirrors Edmund's point.
 - Once Lear is old, that's it, he should acknowledge it.
 - Edmund's cosmology seems to be Regan's. It is inevitably utilitarian. It is against the statement in Sonnet 116.
 - Lear cannot even understand where Regan is coming from. From Lear's point of view there is a dignity owed if you are older (this is opposite of Regan's view).
 - Lear is aware of a male honor code. I will maintain this rigid self-governance. He is trying now to be a good stoic. This is empty rhetoric.
- Act III, Scene IV
 - Why is it significant that Lear must enter the wilderness?
 - He had conflated transcendent truth with the trappings of his power.
 - There is not even a hint of trappings in nature.
 - Get out of your power a little bit, so that you can give some of your excess to others. Now we are thinking in terms of justice and equity. They will see justice in the kingdom, to show the heavens more just.
 - Is there really no more to me than being an animal? Now that I am here, I guess I am just a beast? If he is more than an animal now he is going to have to find a way to believe that.
- Act IV, Scene I
 - Lear is trying to figure out if he still exists.
 - Gloucester is in a state of nihilism. The gods are in sense random.
 - He echoes Lear. What happened to Lear happens to Gloucester. Gloucester is now capable of empathy, where he wasn't before.
 - There is theme that physical blindness connects with spiritual wisdom (liken this to prayer, remove yourself from the physical world to enter the metaphysical).
- Act IV, Scene II



- Albany to Goneril: This mirrors Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. This also mirrors the early modern debate about whether we are obliged that has objectivity in it.
- You cannot be inhuman and survive. If you behave inhumanly, you will self-destruct.
- Goneril calls Albany milk livered and mocks his manhood.
- Goneril's point of view is that there are limits, you can't simply ignore your nature.
- When you're evil and someone in front of you is good, it's impossible for you to recognize it as good.
- Act IV, Scene III
 - This is reported second hand regarding the news of the state coming to Cordelia.
 - Cordeilia cries. The expression of emotion is ok, even to a stoic.
 - The gentleman says it was more beautiful than sun and rain at once.
 - The tears are guests in her eyes. There is feeling rather than rigidity.
- Act IV, Scene IV
 - I go about my father's business (practically a direct quotation of Christ's). One can think of Jesus weeping for Lazarus (this is a choosing to have grief for someone else).
 - Lear is engulfed by nature with the possibility of being made new.
- Act IV, Scene VI
 - Gloucester realizes that something saves him. He is brought out of self-pity.
 - Even at the level of pagan ethic he will endure it. He will not try to take his own life again.
 - Lear is in a state of madness, but he is making an argument. All authority is a farce.
 - All authority is severed from justice.
 - If there is no right or wrong in any objective sense then all authority is tyranny.
 - Could Lear ever come to a more balanced place?
 - Repetition recreates the profound misery being inflicted again and again.
- Act IV, Scene VII
 - "I am, I am" from Cordelia, can be read as a repetition of the biblical.
 - Cordelia is presented as a cordial, as a possible salvation. It is said of Cordelia that she redeems nature from the general curse.
- Act V, Scene III
 - It is the rejection of politics. It is the rejection of serious worldly activity.
 - It is good to read this and ask if this is the right approach for Lear to take.
 - There is an appearance of Cordelia being possibly resurrected. There is a language of redemption.



- Is the ending of this play an ironic statement against hope in the Christian sense of things? Or is it more positive and pointing to the possibility of the Christian sense of things?
- We must express what is inside. Stoicism to an extreme is not the answer.