

*A Taste of  
Shakespeare  
King Lear*

**Teacher's Guide**

**Bullfrog Films**

# A TASTE OF SHAKESPEARE SERIES

## **HAMLET**

37 minutes

## **THE MERCHANT OF VENICE**

51 minutes

## **ROMEO AND JULIET**

43 minutes

## **A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM**

56 minutes

## **KING LEAR**

57 1/2 minutes

Color, Grades 9-12/College/Adult

Starring: David Fox

Designed by: Cameron Porteous

Directed by: Eric Weinthal

Produced by: Eugenia Educational Foundation

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# King Lear

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### **Program Description**

*A Taste of Shakespeare* is a thought-provoking series in which actors play the great scenes in Elizabethan English, but comment on the action in the language of today. Each video is under an hour in length and is designed to introduce the play to students in high school and college. The teacher's guide to the video gives a brief analysis of the play before inviting students to imagine themselves in the characters' situations. By grappling with conflicts and decisions facing Shakespeare's characters, students involve

themselves in the life of the play and become motivated to undertake a detailed study of the text.

## **Production Notes**

*King Lear* is not only a story about an old man who severely misjudges the sincerity of his daughters' love. It is also about the terrible need for love among young and old alike, and the deformities in character that result when a child is treated as "second best."

Lear's two older daughters - and Gloucester's bastard son - have become callous and cruel by the time the play begins. They display pitiless behavior toward a father enfeebled by age. In fact, it is quite likely that the audience will watch with satisfaction as they finally turn against each other and die themselves. We must acknowledge, however, that the stress of being Lear's least preferred daughters and Gloucester's outlawed bastard son has contributed to the character deformities that Regan, Goneril, and Edmund display.

Our interpretation of *King Lear*, therefore, includes a measure of sorrow for the villains, who longed for affection and respect: the two daughters whose father's preference for their younger sister negated their own worth, and the illegitimate son whose existence was treated as a dirty joke.

It is important to keep their pains in mind when watching the play, in order to avoid a sense of unequivocal loathing for the villains. To allow for their pain, even as we watch their despicable behavior, is not an easy task, but it is the task that Shakespeare set for his audience when he wrote this tragic play.

The saddest aspect of the plays we call “tragedies,” is that the action typically begins when it is already too late to avert the final catastrophe. The errors in judgment that the tragic hero displays at the beginning of the play are already the outcome of errors committed in the past. When these errors achieve critical mass, it becomes an avalanche of pain and destruction, overwhelming everyone in its path.

In real life, of course, a lucky break or the intervention of friends may well avert the consequence of human error, but a tragedy’s universe is closed, ruled by fate according to an implacable code of justice that makes no allowance for human weakness or fallibility. We watch Shakespeare’s tragic drama for the grim lessons it teaches as much as for the brilliance of the writing and the quality of performance.

After watching a tragedy, people generally feel battered yet exhilarated. We look more critically at our own lives, seeking to avoid, at least, the more obvious mistakes and hoping that, for us, it is not yet too late.

*King Lear* has a sobering message about the danger of divesting oneself of money and power, in the hope of being kindly looked after for the rest of one's life. Anyone who might once have considered a strategy, like Lear's misguided plan and misplaced trust, will be careful not to make the same mistake after viewing the play.

An equally sobering lesson can be learned from Lear's desire to hear his daughters proclaim, before the assembled court, how very much they love him. Then, when his youngest daughter "cannot heave [her] heart into [her] mouth," to express the love she genuinely feels, Lear throws her out of his kingdom and out of his heart. It was a foolish, wicked act for Lear to make his children compete for a disproportionate share of wealth and power, by making a speech about their filial love. It was especially dangerous since he had already picked Cordelia for his principal heir, planning to "set [his] rest in her kind nursery." If he had paid more attention he would have known that she loved him, but could not express her feelings in public. If he had considered how his second rate treatment of the two older girls would make them feel, he would have known that they had no reason to cherish him in his old age.

*King Lear* is, for the most part, a tragedy about old age, especially irascible, unreasonable, hard-

to-get-along-with old age. It focuses attention on the tragic irony that older people tend to have the greatest need to feel loved at a time when their behavior or their condition may render them the least lovable.

When Lear is brought to Cordelia near the end of the play, father and daughter tenderly reconcile. With loving care she heals his broken spirit and, unafraid, she follows him to prison and death. Although his heart breaks again, when he comes out carrying her lifeless body, he has at last tasted that unconditional devotion that he longed to hear her proclaim at the beginning of the play.

## **Characters and Cast**

**KING LEAR** (David Fox) - a stubborn, proud, old man who decides to test his daughters' love before handing them their inheritance.

**GONERIL** (Philippa Domville) - Lear's eldest daughter whose extravagant description of her devotion to Lear is not matched by her subsequent behavior.

**REGAN** (Soo Garay) - Lear's second daughter who tries to outdo her sister in the verbal love test, but whose behavior also gives her words the lie.

**CORDELIA** (Waneta Storms) - Lear's youngest daughter who is heartsick at the game her sisters are playing, and becomes tongue-tied when asked to put her love in fancy words.

**KENT/NARRATOR** (Geoff Bowes) - Kent is Lear's devoted servant whom Lear banishes when Kent comes to Cordelia's defense. Kent steps out of character from time to time to comment on the action and tie the scenes together.

**THE FOOL** (Brian Tree) - The truth-telling Fool admonishes and comforts the king his master.

**EARL OF GLOUCESTER** (Gary Reineke) - King Lear's good friend, whose tragedy parallels the King's.

**EDMUND** (Michael McManus) - Gloucester's bastard son who tries to become "legitimate" by ruining his father and brother. Both Goneril and Regan are infatuated with this good-looking scoundrel.

**EDGAR** (Steve Cumyn) - Gloucester's legitimate and loyal son who disguises himself as "Poor Tom" a madman and beggar: at first to escape his father's misplaced wrath; later to care for his father in his affliction.

**DUKE OF CORNWALL** (David Jansen) - Regan's husband and a cruel, vicious man.

**DUKE OF ALBANY** (Kevin Hicks) - Goneril's husband, who has a good heart and disapproves of his wife's behavior.

## **Key Production Personnel**

Director- Eric Weinthal

Writer/Producer - Eric Weinthal

Executive Producer - Ada Craniford



Designer - Cameron Porteous  
Director of Photography - David Patrick  
Editor - Ralph Brunjes

## **References to Old Age**

(Line numbers from The New Folger Library  
Shakespeare)

1.1.40-44

‘tis our fast intent  
To shake all cares and business from our age,  
Conferring them on younger strengths, while we  
Unburthened crawl toward death.

1.1.146-152

I do invest you jointly with my power,  
Preeminence, and all the large effects  
That troop with majesty. Ourselves, by monthly  
course,  
With reservation of an hundred knights  
By you to be sustained, shall our abode  
Make with you in due turn. Only we shall retain  
The name, and th’addition to a king....

1.1.334-345

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 ....

‘Tis the infirmity of his age. Yet he hath ever but  
slenderly known himself.

The best and soundest of his time hath been but  
rash. Then must we look from his age to receive  
not alone the imperfections of long-engrafted  
condition, but therewithal the unruly waywardness  
that infirm and choleric years bring with them.

1.2.75-78

But I have heard him oft  
maintain it to be fit that, sons at perfect age and  
fathers declined, the father should be as ward to  
the son, and the son manage his revenue.

1.3.17-21

Idle old man  
That still would manage those authorities,  
That he hath given away. Now by my life,  
Old fools are babes again, and must be used  
With checks as flatteries, when they are seen  
abused.

1.4.247

As you are old and reverend, should be wise.

1.4.305-306

But let his disposition have that scope  
As dotage gives it.

1.4.342-347

'Tis politic and safe to let him keep  
At point a hundred knights! Yes, that on every  
dream  
Each buzz, each fancy, each complaint, dislike,  
He may enguard his dotage with their powers  
And hold our lives in mercy.

1.5.40-44

If thou wert my Fool, nuncle, I'd have thee  
beaten for being old before thy time....  
Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst  
been wise.

2.4.164-169

O, Sir, you are old.  
Nature in you stands on the very verge

Of his confine. You should be ruled, and led  
By some discretion that discerns your state  
Better than you yourself.

2.4.218-221

O heavens,  
If you do love old men, if your sweet sway  
Allow obedience, if you yourselves are old,  
Make it your cause. Send down and take my  
part.

4.7.16-19

O, you kind gods,  
Cure this great breach in his abused nature!  
Th' untunes and jarring senses, O wind up,  
Of this child-changed father.

4.7.97-98

You must bear with me.  
Pray you now, forget and forgive. I am old and  
foolish.

5.3.52-54

Sir, I thought it fit  
To send the old and miserable king  
To some retention (and appointed guard,)

5.3.333-335

I have seen the day, with my good biting falchion  
I would have made him skip. I am old now,  
And these same crosses spoil me.

5.3.394-395

The oldest hath borne most; we that are young  
Shall never see so much nor live so long.

## Classroom Activities

### **Part 1: What would you do under the following circumstances?**

1. You are in love with two men (or women) and want to find out which of them loves you the most. How would you test their love?
2. You are old. You can no longer take care of yourself. Two of your daughters have offered to have you live with them. The third has not offered, but you would prefer to live with her. What would you do?
3. You are the eldest child in your family and have always felt less loved than the others. Now your parents are asking for a huge favor from you. What favor might they ask of you, and how would you respond?
4. You have been unofficially adopted by a family, and have been told that you will not inherit anything when your parents die. How would you feel and what would you do?
5. Your brother warns you that there is a contract out on your life. You don't quite believe it, but must take steps to protect yourself. What steps would you take?
6. Your father has deeply wronged you, and

now he needs your help. How would you feel and how much help would you give to him?

7. You are asked to stand up in public and make a speech about your feelings for your parents. You are a shy, undemonstrative person and you find it difficult to express your feelings. If you do not make this speech, you risk losing your inheritance.

## **Part 2: Essay or discussion topics**

1. Find the section of the play that tells of Goneril and Regan's attraction to Edmund. Pretend that you are Edmund and explain why the two sisters find you irresistible.

2. Find five references in the play to the gods. Is there a consistent theme relating to the gods? If so, what is it? If not, how do the gods function in this play?

3. Debate the theory that justice is served at the end of *King Lear*, because all the villains are dead. What is your definition of "justice"?

4. The characters in *King Lear* are defined as much by what they say as by what they do. Find speeches in the text that define Edmund, Edgar, the Earl of Gloucester, the Duke of Albany, the Duke of Cornwall, and the Earl of Kent.

5. Describe your feelings at the various “flashpoint scenes” of the play: the throne room and love-test, before Gloucester’s gates where the girls whittle down Lear’s followers; the gouging out of Gloucester’s eyes, the discovery by Albany of Goneril’s treachery, and the death of Cordelia and Lear. Which scene do you find the most disturbing?

6. Examine the context of the various references to old age given in this guide, and discuss their relation to the character who spoke them. Decide which phrases merely reflect the prejudice of the speaker, and which phrases have validity.

### **Recommended Text**

The New Folger Library Shakespeare edition of King Lear, edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. See especially the essay “*King Lear: A Modern Perspective*” by Susan Snyder, the richly annotated bibliography, and the “*Key to Famous Lines and Phrases.*”

### **Recommended Video**

The BBC production of *King Lear*

## **Acknowledgments**

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