This production was made possible in part by a generous gift from William F. Haney, Jr., and Uncommon Productions.

King Lear was originally a co-production with the Boston University School of Theatre.

*member of Actors Equity Association, the union of professional Actors and Stage Managers in the United States.
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About the Company

Cast
  (in order of appearance)

Recording or taking photos of the performance is not permitted.

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The Cast

*Bill Barclay* (Oswald, Burgundy, Sound & Music Designer) Actors’ Shakespeare Project: Composer for Richard III; Decius Brutus and Music Director, Julius Caesar. Recent credits include Living in Exile (Vineyard Playhouse), The Rivals (Huntington Theatre Co.), Ophelia (4th Street Theatre), L’Histoire du Soldat (ALEA III Orchestra), Turn of the Screw and King John (Shakespeare & Co.). Bill has premiered his original musicals at the Eugene O’Neill Theatre Center, the University of Virginia and next year on tour for the National Players with Call of the Wild. Graduate of Vassar College and the National Theatre Institute. MFA Boston University School of Theatre.


*Ken Cheeseman* (Fool) Actors’ Shakespeare Project: Malvolio in Twelfth Night, Angelo in Measure for Measure, Lord Hastings in Richard III. Ken has performed in regional theatres around the country, including Trinity Rep, American Repertory Theatre, Yale Rep, Long Wharf Theatre, American Conservatory Theatre, Baltimore’s Center Stage and Shakespeare and Company. In New York he has performed at Classic Stage Company as Silvestre in the Commonwealth Shakespeare Company; La Dispute, Island of Anyplace, Othello (ART), Regional credits: Henry IV (Repertory Theatre of St. Louis); Amadeus (Pioneer Theatre); Sunrise at Monticello (Playwrights Theatre of NJ); Human Events, Wit, Ancestral Voices(George Street Playhouse); Waiting for Godot (Fleetwood Stage). New York credits:

Barons - $500-$999
- K.H. & M.H. Barney
- Ken Cheeseman
- Michael & Amy Contrada
- Nicci Cutsch
- Chester & Joy Douglass
- Kathleen Emrich & Robert Sherwood
- G. Anne Guenzel
- Belle Halpern

Knights - $100-$499
- Barry Andelman
- Eric Hall Anderson
- Jane Bachner
- Harriet Barry
- Kristen Belair
- Paul Brouillette & Neil Miller
- Joanne Burk
- Barbara and Winthrop Burr
- Judith Chaffee
- Peggy & Stanley Charren
- Michael Chubrich & Donna Saunders
- Dorothy & Richard Cole
- Nancy Curran-Willis
- Judith Epstein-Fisher
- Constance Everson
- Page Evett
- Nancy Galluccio
- Colin & Monika Gay
- David & Ellen Godolphin
- Stephen Goldfinger
- Dan & Claire Columb
- Gary F. Gut
- Deirdre Hill
- Emilia Hall
- Alison Hodges & Thomas Clarke
- Douglas M. Kalata
- Michael Kan
- Miles & Nan Kennedy
- David Killian
- Gabrielle King
- Richard & Jane Knowles

Barons - $500-$999
- Peter P. Homans
- Henry Jacoby & Martha Hughes Jacoby
- Daniel & Nora Kan
- Roger & Sheila Lockwood
- In Memory of Ellen Pemberton
- Dr. & Mrs. Peter B. F. Randolph
- Randolph & Sallie Wadsworth
- Joyce Walker & Jon Wakelyn

Knights - $100-$499
- Katharine Kush
- Claudia LaBollita-James
- Joy Lucas
- Charles & Tamara Marz
- Paul Master-Karnik
- Muriel Mayman
- Holloway McCandless
- Neil McDonough
- Raymond Meador
- Ellen & James Meadors
- Amy Merrill
- Howard & Judith Nelson
- Ronald & Selma Newburgh
- Samuel W. Overton
- Tina Packer
- Lisa Parker
- Mary Lee Payton
- Marcia Robinson
- In Memory of Duane Robinson
- Edgar & Mary Schein
- Rachel Seidel & Paul Malherbe
- John Charles Smith
- Richard & Susan Stottlemeyer
- Deborah Summer
- Maura Tighe Casting
- Laura Vennard
- Andrew & Sonja Weiner
- Dot & Dick Winer
- Antonia Woods & David Halloran
- Carolyn Woolen-Tucker

Regional credits: Henry IV (Repertory Theatre of St. Louis); Amadeus (Pioneer Theatre); Sunrise at Monticello (Playwrights Theatre of NJ); Human Events, Wit, Ancestral Voices(George Street Playhouse); Waiting for Godot (Fleetwood Stage). New York credits:
The Cherry Orchard (Atlantic Theater Company); Dog in the Manger (Repertorio Espanol); Shore Points (Irish Arts Center); Life and Death of Pier Paolo Pasolini (Abingdon Theatre). TV & Film: Hope and Faith, Third Watch, Blindfold, Gypsy Girl. Dan is a company member at NJ Repertory Company, has an MFA from the ART/MXAT at Harvard and studied at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts.

*Alvin Epstein* (King Lear) just finished a run of Tuesdays With Morrie at the Seattle Repertory Theatre, and performed off-Broadway as Nag in Endgame at the Irish Repertory Theater, Morrie in Tuesdays With Morrie, and Firs in The Cherry Orchard with the Atlantic Theater Company. He made his New York debut in 1956 when he was named most promising new actor of the season by the New York Drama Critics’ Circle. Subsequently, his Broadway and off-Broadway credits have included performing with Marcel Marceau, playing the Fool to Orson Welles’ King Lear, creating Lucky in the American premiere of Waiting for Godot and Clov in the American premiere of Endgame, the world premiere of Sam Shepard and Joseph Chaikin’s When the World Was Green, Richard Rodgers’ No Strings with Diahann Carroll and Richard Kiley, The Madwoman of Chaillot with Kim Hunter and Anne Jackson, The Threepenny Opera with Sting, The Skin of Our Teeth with Anne Bancroft and Estelle Parsons, and Dynamite Tonight! (for which he won an Obie Award). For twenty years he performed A Kurt Weill Cabaret with Martha Schlamme on and off Broadway and on tour of the United States and South America, and he is again singing that repertoire with Beth Anne Cole in Songs Degenerate and Otherwise, which won the New England Award for Best Cabaret performance. A founding member of the Berkshire Theater Festival, Yale Repertory Theater, and the American Repertory Theatre (ART) and former artistic director of the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, Mr. Epstein has directed over twenty productions (five at ART, including the inaugural A Midsummer Night’s Dream in 1980) and acted in over a hundred (over fifty at ART, including The Miser, Henry IV, Happy End, Woyzeck, Don Juan, Richard II, The Winter’s Tale, Hamlet, The Threepenny Opera, Ivanov and Marat/Sade). He recorded Stravinsky’s L’Histoire du Soldat with Melvyn Douglas and performed it onstage with Dianne Wiest and on television with Jerry Orbach. He also starred in the television premiere of Waiting for Godot opposite Zero Mostel and Burgess Meredith. Among honors awarded to Mr. Epstein have been the Brandeis University Creative Arts Award (1966), the Elliot Norton Award for Sustained Excellence (1996), the IRNE Award for Best Supporting Actor (Shabelsky in Ivanov, 1999) the Torch of Hope Award, the Jason Robards Award for Dedication to the Theater, and the Spencer Chershore Award for Lifetime Dedication to Not-For-Profit Theater.

*Benjamin Evett* (Edmund) Actors’ Shakespeare Project: founder and Artistic Director, director, All’s Well That Ends Well; Cassius, Julius Caesar; director and Richmond, Richard III. 2005 Elliot Norton Award for Best Actor for Permanent Collection (Paul Barrow), Quills (Abbe de Coulmier) and Richard III (Richmond). As a member of the Resident Acting Company at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, he appeared in more than 50 productions from 1983 to 2003. He has also appeared at the Huntington Theatre, Commonwealth Shakespeare Co., Hartford Stage Co., Missouri Repertory Theatre, Virginia Stage Co., Great Lakes Theatre Festival, Cleveland Play House and others. He has performed at the Festivale Biennale in Venice, the Festival d’Automne in Paris, at the Taiwan National Theatre and the Moscow Art Theatre. He teaches at the Boston Conservatory, and is a graduate of Harvard College with a degree in Classics.
*William Gardiner* (Albany). Boston credits include Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Feste in *Twelfth Night* and Pandarus in *Troilus and Cressida* at the Publick Theatre; Friar Lawrence in *Romeo and Juliet* at Boston Theatre Works, Egeus/Peter Quince in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* at North Shore Music Theatre. Other local credits include American Stage Festival, Jewish Theatre of New England, Playwrights Platform, Underground Railway Theatre and Gloucester Stage. Education touring company credits include City Stage Company, Boston Arts Group, Loon and Heron Theatre, Boston’s Museum of Science and Tempest Productions. Industrial film credits include Boston Herald, Dunkin Donuts, Allmerica Insurance, Franco-American and the President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports. Bill has taught acting at the Actor’s Workshop in addition to summer programs at Boston University and the American Stage Festival. Bill is currently working towards a Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Education at Boston University.

*Jennie Israel* (Goneril) Actors’ Shakespeare Project, Associate Artistic Director; Helena in *All’s Well That Ends Well*, Calpurnia/Trebonius/Pindarus in *Julius Caesar*, Elizabeth in *Richard III*. Other credits include Lady Macbeth for Commonwealth Shakespeare Company; *Living in Exile* at the Vineyard Playhouse; Molly Maguire at the Sugan Theatre; Tartuffe at New Repertory Theater; *Undine’s Valediction* and *Undine’s Bells* for Shakespeare & Company, Yale Repertory Theatre, Actors’ Theatre of Louisville, The Greenwich Street Theatre, Lincoln Center Theatre, Theatre Building Chicago, Ohio Theatre, Sun Valley Shakespeare Festival, and Chautauqua Theatre Festival. Film and television credits include *Rudy* for TriStar Pictures, *Guiding Light*, and *Coming to Litchfield*, an independent film. Jennie has taught voice, Shakespearean text and acting at Bowdoin College, Harvard, Boston College, SUNY/Purchase, Emerson, and The Boston Conservatory. MFA Yale School of Drama.


*Paula Langton* (Regan) Actors’ Shakespeare Project: First Lord, Marianna and Madeline in *All’s Well That Ends Well*, Isabella in *Measure For Measure*, Rivers/2nd Murderer/ Mayor in *Richard III*. Recently played Galactia in *Scenes from an Execution* with BU at the Wimbley Theatre in the Calderwood Pavilion. She played the Goddess Juno in *Tales from Ovid* at Teatro Eos in Stromboli, Italy, last summer and will play the role again this summer at The Great Theatre of the World Festival at Teatro Nacional in Lisbon, Portugal. She has played Beatrice in *Much Ado about Nothing*, Miranda in *The Tempest* with Shakespeare &

**Thoughts and Questions About King Lear – from the Director**

We begin with a well-made folk tale. There is an Appalachian tale (collected by Richard Chase from an eight-year-old) that tells the story of the old king and his three daughters and how he insists on them telling everybody how much they love him. The elder sisters love him “more than life”, and “more than I can tell ye” *The Cordelia character says she loves him like meat loves salt. Which makes him mad.*

The Appalachian illiterate who distilled the Shakespeare play was canny. Cordelia is a chip off the old block. Blindness was not for her. Lear must have liked her very much.

The setting for *King Lear* is pre-Christian, a harsh landscape dotted with occasional havens—fortified castles, elegant within, grim without. The action is frequently brutal yet the language of the play is often in glorious Renaissance verse.

At the beginning, Britain is held together by Lear, by effort, cunning, charm and sheer will. The geometry of the throne room is prescribed. Everyone knows their place. The stress of holding it all together is causing small fractures. Rust shows on the surfaces. Connecting wires quiver.

After the fairy tale everything is different. Lear begins his journey into what it is like to be human. He has been blind and now he will see. Gloucester is making the same journey. It will take them into the storm and eventually along with everybody else to the end of the earth, to the vertiginous cliffs of Dover. In this bleak landscape of meaninglessness Cordelia’s death seems to bear out Gloucester’s theory that the gods do “…kill us for their sport”. It is a strangely timeless world. A Samuel Beckett world.

Goneril and Regan are not unreasonable about the unruly knight problem. If they were to hire a lawyer and take Lear to court they would have a pretty good case. The Fool pines like a dog for his mistress Cordelia. His wit is in speaking the truth. Is he a “natural fool”, a bit “touched” as they say in the north of England? He guides Lear into the wilderness like a shaman.

What is attractive about Lear? What does Kent see in him? Cordelia? He is a wit and an eccentric. The Fool goes with him into the heart of darkness.

The storm is in the verse. Lear’s brain is its epicenter. Sparks fly.

The hovel. The whole scene bleeds into an abandoned and timeless theatrical space. This is shelter at the lowest level. One would not be surprised to find Nag and Nell here in their ashcans. Here the paths of the first man of the kingdom and the very last (a mad beggar) meet. Who brought them to this? Lear has been blind and now he will see. Gloucester is making the same journey. It will take them into the storm and eventually along with everybody else to the end of the earth, to the vertiginous cliffs of Dover.

After the fairy tale everything is different. Lear begins his journey into what it is like to be human. He has been blind and now he will see. Gloucester is making the same journey. It will take them into the storm and eventually along with everybody else to the end of the earth, to the vertiginous cliffs of Dover. In this bleak landscape of meaninglessness Cordelia’s death seems to bear out Gloucester’s theory that the gods do “…kill us for their sport”. It is a strangely timeless world. A Samuel Beckett world.

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Bring King Lear to New York

Our thanks to everyone involved in the Bring King Lear to New York effort. Your generosity and enthusiasm have brought this historic performance to New York, and we are proud to have you as partners.

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Thank you to all those who have supported our efforts towards making this production a reality. Your contributions have made it possible to bring this historic performance to New York.


*Gabe Levey (France/Ensemble) is a recent graduate of Boston University’s School of Theatre. Recent roles include Valentine in Arcadia, Urgentino in Scenes from an Execution, Darren in The Drowned World, Kleitsch in The Lower Depths (BU) Sir Peter Teazle in The School for Scandal, and the title role in Macbeth (LAMDA). In August Gabe will be appearing in Happy Sauce, a new play by Ben Lewis, at the New York International Fringe Festival.

*Doug Lockwood (Edgar) Actors’ Shakespeare Project: Richmond in Richard III; Claudio and Elbow in Measure for Measure; over 40 living room performances of Wallace Shawn’s The Fever (dir. Ken Rus Schmoll); NYC: The Hussy Chronicles at Show World (by Kenny Finkle); A Tale of Two Cities at The Culture Project (dir. Will Pomerantz); Boston: Twelfth Night, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead and The Waverly Gallery at New Repertory Theatre; Pericles at American Repertory Theatre; Regional: Colorado Shakespeare Festival, Fairbanks Shakespeare Theatre, Edinburgh Festival. Doug teaches Acting at The Boston Conservatory. He received his MFA in Acting from the University of Washington, under the direction of Steve Pearson.

*Sarah Newhouse (Cordelia) Actors’ Shakespeare Project: Viola in Twelfth Night, Lady Anne in Richard III. Recently appeared in the New England premiere of Rebecca Gilman’s The Sweet Spot at Boston Theatre Works. Other Boston area credits include Six Characters in Search of an Author, The King Stag, Macbeth, Picasso at the Lapin Agile at the American Repertory Theatre, Much Ado About Nothing and As You Like It at the Publick Theatre, Desdemona – A Play About a Handkerchief at Boston Center for the Arts, La Vita Claire at Centastage, Shear Madness at the Charles Playhouse, Red Herring, Lost in Yonkers, and The Miracle Worker at the Lyric Stage Company of Boston, Imperialists at the Club Cave Canem and The Square Root of Minus One at The Market Theatre, The Sweepers at Stoneham Theatre and Twelfth Night at Worcester Foothills Theatre. Regional / New York City credits include American Stage Festival, Berkshire Theatre Festival, Gloucester Stage Company, Jane Street Theater, Manhattan Punchline Theatre, Samuel Beckett Theater, Synchronicity Space, and The Kraine. Film &TV: As The World Turns, Another World, MTV, Saturday Night Live, The Legend of Lucy Keyes, Dischord, Chain of Desire, Expired, and The Stupid Years. Sarah is a graduate of Hampshire College and the ART Institute for Advanced Theatre Training at Harvard University.
The Story

Lear, the aging king of Britain, has decided to divide his kingdom among his three daughters, giving up his regal power and its burdens. First, however, he asks which one loves him most, so that he can give most to her. Goneril, the eldest, and Regan, next in line, each answer with elaborate protestations of overwhelming love. But Cordelia, the youngest, refuses to flatter her father, saying only that she loves him “according to my bond, no more nor less.” In a rage (since she is his favorite), Lear disowns and banishes her. When the loyal Earl of Kent defies her, he is banished, too. Cordelia’s suitor, the King of France, offers her his hand even though she now has no dowry, and they leave together. Lear divides the kingdom between Goneril and Regan, reminding them that although they now have the power to rule, he will retain the title of king and a retinue of 100 knights; he intends to live a month with each of them in turn.

Meantime, Kent, disguised as a serving man, joins Lear and his knights. Lear is already discovering that power has changed his daughters. Goneril demands he cut his train to 50 knights, saying they are rowdy and destructive; overcome with anger, Lear curses her and leaves for Regan’s household, sending Kent ahead as messenger of his coming. But Regan and her husband, Cornwall, have left home and come to Gloucester’s to prevent Lear from visiting them. When Lear arrives there, too, he finds Kent being punished in the stocks for insulting Goneril’s messenger, Oswald. The two daughters have united against him, and Lear’s burgeoning but impotent anger begins to drive him mad. Abandoned by his knights, shut out by his daughters, he goes out into a terrible storm, accompanied only by his Fool and Kent. On the heath they find an Edgard, disguised as Poor Tom, and find a makeshift shelter. Gloucester surreptitiously comes to help them, advising them to head to Dover, where Cordelia and a French army have come to her father’s aid. Edmund betrays his father to Regan and Cornwall, who puts out Gloucester’s eyes as punishment – but an outraged servant kills Cornwall, leaving Regan a widow and free to woo Edmund. Goneril, still wed to Albany, becomes jealous – she finds Edmund attractive, too.

Everyone moves toward Dover: Edgar, in a new disguise, leads his blind father there; Lear, completely mad, wanders alone, while Cordelia and her army look for him. Regan and Goneril give Edmund control of their armies. As battle is joined, all come together for good or ill.
A Note on the Text

King Lear comes to us in two distinctly different texts: the Quarto version, published as a single volume in 1608, and the Folio version, published together with almost all the other Shakespeare plays in 1623. Q is longer than F by about 300 lines, but F contains significant material not in Q, and there are literally hundreds of differences in individual words and punctuation. F is tonally harder and more austere than Q; it cuts some speeches and acts that tend to ameliorate the effect, though not the fact, of the violence and cruelty that characterize the second half. Scholars are still debating the relationship between the two versions, but there is some consensus that F is close to the text that Shakespeare’s company had recently been performing. For a long time, productions of the play tended to use a text that combined elements of both Q and F; more recently, directors have tended to favor one or the other, and this production is based on F.

Mark O’Maley (Lighting Designer) Actors’ Shakespeare Project: set & lights for Measure for Measure. Mark is a native of Cape Ann, Massachusetts currently living in Philadelphia where he has designed for Headlong Dance Theater, Pig Iron Theatrical Company, New Paradise Laboratories, Prince Music Theater, Rennie Harris Puremovement, Brian Sanders’ Junk, Walnut Street Theater, Delaware Theatre Company, Contemporary Stage Company, and The Philadelphia Live Arts Festival. His New York credits include Pearl Theater Company, Dance Theater Workshop, The Joyce, The Flea, P.S. 122, HERE, Brooklyn Academy of Music, and the Ohio Theater/Ice Factory Festival. Mark’s credits nationally and internationally include Sadler’s Wells (West End), River North Chicago Dance Company, Boston Playwrights’ Theater, Dance Chicago, Northlight Theater, Boston Center for the Arts, Edinburgh Festival Fringe, Harris Theater for Music & Dance (Chicago), Orpheum/Phoenix Stages, Naples Philharmonic Center, The Brighton Festival (U.K.), Ravenna Teatro (Italy) & Colombia’s Festival Iberoamericano de Teatro de Bogota. Mark is the co-director of Reactionaries – a Philadelphia based performance collective. He is a recent graduate of the University Without Walls program at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Elizabet Locke (Props) Actors’ Shakespeare Project: All’s Well That Ends Well, Twelfth Night, King Lear, Julius Caesar, Measure for Measure, Richard III. Local credits include stage management for Christmas Revels, Summer Revels, RiverSing, and Noye’s Fludde; production assistance for Dressed Up!/Wigged Out!


Adele Nadine Traub (Stage Manager) Actors’ Shakespeare Project: All’s Well That Ends Well, Twelfth Night, Julius Caesar, Measure for Measure, and Richard III. Other local credits include Seven Rabbits on a Pole with Stoneham Theatre, Living Room in Africa and Dinner With Friends with Gloucester Stage Company, Life x3 with The Vineyard Playhouse, Private Lives, Sherlock’s Last Case, and The Cemetery Club with Pioneer Valley Summer Theater, The Order of Things with CentaStage, Point of Departure with The Huntington Theater Company, and assistant Stage Managing Kindertransport with New Repertory Theatre. Adele spent four years as the Production Stage Manager at The Boston Conservatory, working on over 40 productions with the Musical Theater, Dance, Opera and Music Departments. She graduated from Brandeis University in 1999.
*Elizabeth Ross (Assistant Stage Manager) Actors’ Shakespeare Project: King Lear. Recent credits include How I Got That Story and The Sea Horse with The Nora Theatre Company; The Tempest, Conspiracy of Memory, Antony and Cleopatra, Our Town, and BTW Unbound: A Festival of New Plays with Boston Theatre Works; A Doll’s House, Reno, and An Evening of 75 Laughs with Jonathan Katz, at Jimmy Tingle’s Off Broadway. Elizabeth has just completed her Master’s in Theatre Education at Emerson College.

Sara Stackhouse (Executive Producer) was the Supervising Producer of A&E’s INSIDE This Old House, Executive Producer of the MIT Media Lab’s Toy Symphony, Director of Education for Public Radio International’s From the Top, and Producer for A Taste of Chanukah for PBS. In the 1990’s, she served as Project Manager for cellist Yo-Yo Ma for nearly six years, managing international collaborations, education projects, tours, live events, television, and films. With Ma, she served as Associate Producer on nine films, including Yo-Yo Ma: Inspired by Bach, which was the recipient of over 12 international awards including several Emmys. She serves as an advisor to the Berkshire Institute for Theology and the Arts. She holds a degree in Theater from Oberlin College.

* Member of Actor’s Equity Association (AEA). Founded in 1913, AEA represents 45,000 actors, singers, dancers and stage managers across the United States. Equity seeks to advance, promote and foster the art of live theater as an essential component of our society. Equity negotiates wages and working conditions and provides a wide range of benefits including health and pension plans. AEA is a member of the AFL-CIO and is affiliated with FIA, an international organization of performing arts unions. For more information, visit www.actorsequity.org

The early seventeenth century was an uncommonly turbulent moment in English thought. Conflicts in religious doctrine, the move from an agricultural toward a mercantile economy, the conceptual leaps of Galilean astronomy and other new science, the vast extension of geographical horizons as explorers opened the Far East and the Americas to Europeans—all surged and sloshed together in a country politically unsettled by the death of Elizabeth and the coming of her Scottish cousin as King James I. Daring thinkers were challenging ideas, doctrines, customs, and institutions; as John Donne put it, “the new philosophy calls all in doubt.”

None of Shakespeare’s plays reflects this hectic activity as fully as King Lear. But at no point does it engage the issues in merely intellectual ways: here, philosophical matters are profoundly enmeshed in the lives of the people of the play. Cordelia and Kent are devoted to traditional order and the subordination of individual desire to the needs of the community; their devotion gets them banished. Edmund embraces the more modern concept of the liberated, autonomous self; it apparently authorizes him to betray, commit adultery, and murder. Thrown off balance by a world that no longer extends to them the deference and obedience they are used to, the play’s elders, Lear and Gloucester, respond impulsively in ways that end up destroying themselves and others.

As he so often does, Shakespeare treats the conflicts in relation to the family, seen as a microcosm of the larger society. Inside and outside the family the lack of common ideals corrupts communication. In particular, King Lear elaborates the tormented relations between fathers and their children—Lear and his three daughters, Gloucester and his two sons. Conspicuously, there are no mothers. The absence of maternal ideas and characters exposes more fully the play’s cruelty, violence, and focus on self. Is this what happens when society loses the maternal presence?

The play’s probable primary source, Holinshed’s Chronicle, and an earlier play of uncertain authorship on the same story called The True Chronical History of King Leir, give what is in effect a kind of fairy story a happy outcome, in which Cordelia helps restore Lear to kingship. Neoclassical England embraced a revision of Shakespeare’s play by Nahum Tate (1681) that restored the happy ending. Shakespeare, however, offers a darker vision. Set in the pre-Christian era of English history, and wary of government directives that forbade treatment of doctrine on the stage, the play dodges matters of institutional religion. But it is deeply occupied with metaphysical questions. Is there, as Hamlet had earlier put it, “a divinity that shapes our ends” in accordance with some providential plan? Are we instead victims of irresponsible gods who “kill us for their sport”? Or is the anarchy that afflicts human life just nature at work, just the way things are? In Kent, Cordelia, the Fool, and Edgar, the play enacts a life of mutual service that would sustain rather than destroy. From the beginning of his career, however, Shakespeare was exquisitely sensitive to the tendency for those who gain power to abuse it. Here, the achievement of truly humane government seems difficult almost to the point of impossibility, and the dire consequences of the failure to achieve it only too immediate.

David Evett