King Lear context

King James I, who attended one of the first performances of Lear, was trying to unite England and Scotland under his rule when he was crowned King of England in 1603, so the very idea of the division of Britain would have been troubling to Shakespeare’s contemporaries – the division of the kingdom reflect contemporary fears due to the Elizabethan crises of succession that lead to the Jacobean era.

Inheritance issues was also a matter of national concern for the audience as Elizabeth the first was unmarried and childless.

During the same period that Shakespeare wrote ‘King Lear’ he also wrote ‘Measure for Measure’ which questions ideas about authority and justice.

Some believe Kent and Cordelia’s action in act 1 could have served as a warning to James the first not to be taken in by flattering courtiers and advisers. Like his predecessor, Elizabeth the first, James gained a reputation for indulging his Favourites.

The first recorded performance was a court on the 26th of December 1606. Boxing day was an apt choice as the play consisted of a sovereign who was reduces to a beggar and so the day was significant as Boxing Day was traditionally associated with hospitality to the poor and homeless.

The recent transfer of power from Elizabeth I to James I occurred in 1603. Elizabeth had produced no male heir, and the anxiety about who her successor would be

SOURCES:

- Shakespeare would have been familiar with two “real life” Lear stories.
- During his life in London, a former mayor – Sir William Allen – divided his property between his 3 daughters and this was disastrous as he was treated badly by all of them.
- Another was in 1603, Sir Brian Annesley’s eldest daughter and her husband tried to have him certified as a senile lunatic so that they could take over his property. His youngest daughter, Cordell, saved the day by challenging her sister in court.