

KING LEAR CRITICS COMMENTS

GENERAL:

- ✿ **ARNOLD KETTLE** - “in King Lear Shakespeare reveals, from the very start, a society in turmoil”

 - “Lear is a world in which the old order is decadent and the new people unprincipled”
 - he sums up King Lear as a conflict between “those who accept the old order (Lear, Gloucester, Kent, Albany)” and “the new people, the individualists (Goneril, Regan, Edmund, Cornwall)”
 - “The Lear story is deep and complex”

- ✿ **FRANK KERMODE** – King Lear is “the craftiest as well as the most tremendous of Shakespeare's tragedies”

- ✿ **NAHUM TATE** in 1681 felt the ending was too gloomy and so devised a happier ending where Lear does not die and there is romance between Edgar and Cordelia.

- ✿ **JOSEPH WHARTON** objected to the Gloucester subplot as being unlikely and distracting and felt Gloucester’s blinding was too horrid to be exhibited on stage. He also found Goneril and Regan’s savagery too diabolical to be credible.

- ✿ **SAMUEL JOHNSON** – “the extrusion of Gloucester’s eyes... seems an act too horrid to be endured in dramatic exhibition, and such as must always compel the mind to relieve it’s distress by incredulity.”

- ✿ **CHARLES LAMB** thought the play was un-actable.

- ✿ **A. C. BRADLEY** published *Shakespearean Tragedy* in 1905 and commented on the play’s careless inconsistencies, loose episodic structure and unwieldy subplot. He did say it was ‘one of the world’s greatest poems’.

- ✿ **D.J. ENRIGHT** - ‘the principal characters are not those who act, but those who suffer’

- ✿ **LC KNIGHTS** - “exposure is the very essence of King Lear”

- ✿ **HAROLD BLOOM** believed “the descent from Monarch to ‘unaccommodated man’ thus conveys most potently man’s fragility, fallibility and fatality”

The phrase ‘unaccommodated man’ of which this was its first recorded use in the English language, is also evidence of Lear’s madness, for he speaks in prose of “the unaccommodated man like a bare, forked animal that thou art”, and therefore a contrast to his earlier speech in blank verse and iambic pentameter. Lear thus, is no longer “every inch a King”.

- ✿ **CUNNINGHAM** – there is hope Gloucester will find “insight through blindness” and Lear “wisdom through madness in the play’s twinned key moral provocations”.

- ✿ **ELTON** says that Cordelia’s death and Gloucester’s blindness “are the actions of an upside-down providence in an apparently deranged universe”

- ✿ **LC KNIGHTS** – “the play is a microcosm of the human race”

- ✿ **WILLIAM R ELTON** - “the last act shatters the foundations of faith itself”
- ✿ **LEO TOLSTOY** – “the subject of the play is renunciation” (the rejecting of something)
- ✿ **JAN KOLT** – “King Lear is about the disintegration of the world”
- ✿ **J HARRISON** – “Lear replies "Nothing will come of nothing." He is wrong—from this one word "nothing" begins the whole devastating tragedy”

TRAGEDY:

- ✿ **GEORGE BRANDES** thought Cordelia was ‘the living emblem of womanly dignity’ and that the play as a whole was ‘the titanic tragedy of human life’.
- ✿ **SAMUEL JOHNSON** – ‘a play in which the wicked prosper and the virtuous miscarry’ is a ‘just a representation of the common events of human life’.
- ✿ **ARNOLD KETTLE** – “Shakespeare was a realistic writer who presents us with actual situations [...] based on particular observations and insight”

POWER:

- ✿ **JONATHAN DOLLIMORE** says ‘what makes Lear the person he is – or rather was – is not kingly essence, but, among other things, his authority and his family’ – he loses his mind when he loses his social status. He believes the play is about ‘power, property and inheritance’.

FEMINISM:

- ✿ **COPPELIA KAHN** sees a more feminist aspect; she suggests the play is about ‘male anxiety’. She says “Lear goes mad because he is unable to accept his dependence on the feminine, his daughters”
- ✿ **KATHLEEN MCCLUSKIE** feels it is an ‘anti-feminine’ play as it ‘presents women as the source of the primal sin of lust’. The play forces us to sympathise with the patriarchs. She continues to say ‘family relations in this play are seen as fixed and determined, and any movement within them is portrayed as a destructive reversal of the rightful order.’ “The feminine must be made to submit (Cordelia) or destroyed (Goneril and Regan).”

LEAR:

- ✿ **BK STUART, 19767** – “Lear would rather have flattery than the truth”
- ✿ **WILLIAM HAZLITT** (Shakespearean scholar) says it is Lear’s “blindness to everything but the dictates of his passions or affections, that produces all his misfortunes”

- ✿ **FRANK KERMODE** - “the love he seeks is not the sort that can be offered in formal or subservient expressions”
- ✿ **CHARLES LAMB** – “Lear is essentially impossible to be represented on a stage”
 - “to see Lear acted [...] has nothing in it but what is painful and disgusting”
- ✿ **HAL HOLBROOK** - “boisterous, demanding, arrogant. He expects absolute obedience”. He is “not a man of conscious intellect”
 - “Lear slips into madness...a direct result of Lear’s refusal to face the awful truth that has exploded in his mind”
 - “the paranoia of age is stalking him”
 - “Lear is not a man of conscious intellect”
 - “He has clung steadfastly to the conviction that he is a loving father, despite all evidence of the contrary”
- ✿ **ARNOLD KETTLE** – “Lear is a hero”
 - “Lear’s madness is not so much a breakdown as a breakthrough. It is necessary”.
 - “It is through his madness [...] that Lear comes to a new outlook on life”
 - “his incapacity to deal with the inhumanity of the new people is what drives him into a solidarity and later, an identification with the poor”
- ✿ **JAN KOTT** – “He does not see or understand anything. . . . Lear is ridiculous, naive and stupid.”
- ✿ **NICOLAS BROOKE** - "pride is not just humbled, it is reduced from supreme autocratic power to utter penury and insanity”

THE FOOL:

- ✿ **LEO TOLSTOY** – hated ‘King Lear’ and especially hated the character of the Fool arguing he has no purpose in the play he said about the Fool; “there upon begins a prolonged conversation between the Fool and the King, utterly unsuited to the position and serving no purpose”
- ✿ **WELSFORD** – the Fools “tactless jokes and snatches of song spring do evidently from genuine grief”
- ✿ **GOLDSMITH** – the Fool is “Lear’s alter ego, his externalized conscience”
- ✿ **J. BENNET** – the Fools “bitter jests counter and balance Lear’s bitter thoughts. Where Lear blames his daughter, the Fool blames Lear”
- ✿ **VIDEBAEK** – the Fools jesting “shows deep compassion and understanding of the human condition”
- ✿ **KITTERIDGE** – “The Fool spouts a piece of nonsense to distract attention from too keen a piece of satire”

KENT

- ✿ **COMPLETE WORKS OF SAMUEL COLERIDGE** – “Kent is, perhaps, the nearest to perfect goodness in all Shakespeare's characters, and yet the most individualized.” – he is loyal and selfless.
- ✿ **ARNOLD KETTLE** – Kent has an “ultimate failure to cope with the situation – he is unable to hold Lear within the bounds of sanity.”

GONERIL AND REGAN:

- ✿ **THORNDIKE** calls them “inhuman sisters”
- ✿ **HUDSON** calls them “personifications of ingratitude”

GLOUCESTER:

- ✿ **ARNOLD KETTLE** – “Gloucester himself is a conventional and blind old man”. He is “hideously punished for his moral laxity”

EDMUND:

- ✿ **ARNOLD KETTLE** – Edmund “is intelligent, active and ruthless. His immediate personal motive is simple” he wants power.

CORDELIA:

- ✿ **DR SAMUAL JOHNSON** - “I was many years ago so shocked by Cordelia's death, that I know not whether I ever endured to read again the last scenes of the play till I undertook to revise them as an editor.”
- ✿ **ARNOLD KETTLE** – “It is Cordelia who, at the beginning of the story, is the heroic one”
- ✿ **MARIYLN FRENCH** – “She does not feed Lear's delusion of control.”
- ✿ **DUTHIE** – “surely her affection for her father might have led her to pardon his error, and to humour him a little

NATURE:

- ✿ **ARNOLD KETTLE** – “To Lear, Nature is essentially a benignant traditional order [...] in which human and divine society are at one”