



presents **KING LEAR**

NY Classical produced Shakespeare's tragic *King Lear* 12 years ago. Associate Artist John Michalski, who played Gloucester, now plays Lear. This summer we perform the play incorporating Nahum Tate's 1681 ending.



*Chandos Portrait
painted between
1600 and 1610*

THE EVOLVING STORY

The tale of King Lear and his daughters had been circulating for hundreds of years before Shakespeare decided to adapt it for the King's Men to perform. He worked from a variety of sources including an earlier, anonymously-written play, *The True Chronicle History of King Leir and His Three Daughters, Gonorill, Ragan, and Cordella* (fresh off the presses in 1605), and Raphael Holinshed's historical opus, *The Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Wales*.

Shakespeare's retelling makes the King Lear story darker than the source material. Jacobean playgoers would have been deeply surprised by what they saw and heard in act 5 at the Globe Theatre. Some might have expected the old king to die—he is, after all, over 80 years old. But the rest of it? Shocking!

Complicating our understanding of Shakespeare's radical revision of the source material is the instability of the text. The play comes to us in two separate versions: the Quarto published in 1608 and the Folio published in 1623 after Shakespeare's death. Vast textual differences distinguish the two, making them essentially separate plays, but neither of them is short enough to have been the play that was *actually* performed. They are also categorized differently: the Quarto *Lear* is a "Historie" while the Folio *Lear* is a "Tragedie." The Quarto gives us a strong, enraged, and reckless king. The Folio offers a slightly weaker, timeworn king, keenly aware of his mortality.

***King Lear* is set
in 800 BCE
during the late
Bronze Age in
pre-Roman,
pre-Christian
Britain.**

The poet Alexander Pope joined the Quarto and the Folio into a single (conflated) text in 1723 that remained the standard for over two centuries. NY Classical's 2021 hybrid-script has been devised by Artistic Director Stephen Burdman who assembled his own conflation of the two Shakespeare texts with deep cuts and added a twist: he builds in the love-story/happy-ending adaptation written by Restoration theatre impresario, Nahum Tate.



Nahum Tate
(above) famously described Shakespeare's *King Lear* as "a heap of jewels unstrung and unpolished."

NAHUM TATE'S LEAR

In 1642, the London theatres were closed because Oliver Cromwell's "Long Parliament" considered plays to be indecent and sinful. Upon the Restoration of the English monarchy in 1660, plays were once again all the rage, but theatrical tastes had changed. Audiences wanted Christian-influenced moralizing that punished the bad and rewarded the good. They demanded poetic justice.

Theatrical practices were likewise radically transformed: women were finally allowed to perform on the English public stage. Actresses, several of them rumored to be mistresses of the king, drew crowds curious to see them and to witness a different erotic energy than when boys had played the female roles in Shakespeare's time.

With these new tastes and practices in mind, the enterprising Nahum Tate revived and adapted Shakespeare's *King Lear* in 1681. Believing "'tis more difficult to Save than 'tis to kill," his version—slightly shorter and without the Fool or the King of France—grants the good characters an ending in which "Truth and Virtue shall at last succeed."

Tate's adaptation, *The History of King Lear, Revived with Alterations*, dominated the Anglophone stage for the next 150 years, which means that Benjamin Franklin and Alexander Hamilton likely never saw Shakespeare's ferociously dark and tragic vision of Lear's story on stage.



Elizabeth Barry
(above) played Cordelia in Tate's *Lear*. She was known for her naturalistic acting and could produce actual tears in performance!

THEMES for our times

INFECTION

As Shakespeare was writing *King Lear*, a resurgence of the deadly bubonic plague beset London. Shakespeare had already survived many plague outbreaks, including a very dangerous one in Stratford-upon-Avon that took the lives of one in six people when he was just a year old. At its peak, the pestilence killed hundreds per week. First came fever, headaches, and breathlessness. Then the “buboes” arrived—the lymph nodes blackened, swelled, and burst. Death could come within three days. The cause was unknown; no therapy was effective; mass gatherings were banned; the rich and powerful left London for their country homes; church bells tolled the deaths day and night. As with the Covid-19 pandemic, theatres were among the first businesses to close, creating financial hardship for acting companies. The plague worsened in the summer months—high season for the outdoor London theatres.

King Lear's sweeping desolation carries with it references to a plague that appear in both the Quarto and the Folio: Lear regards his eldest child Goneril as “a disease that’s in my flesh,” and a “plague-sore.” Kent hopes that contagion will befall the toadying Oswald: “A plague upon your epileptic visage,” he cries. Towards the end of the tragedy, a heartbroken Lear wishes illness upon everyone, including the audience: “a plague upon you, murderers, traitors, all.”



The word “plague” occurs in Shakespeare’s *King Lear* about six times.



Above: Restoration Actress Nell Gwynne

THEMES for our times *continued*
INSURRECTION

Indeed, murderers and traitors were also on Shakespeare’s mind when he wrote *King Lear*. London playgoers had only recently been spared the carnage intended by the 1605 Gunpowder Plot, a planned act of terrorism that would have blown up the Houses of Parliament. The king, the entire royal family, and most of the political and religious leaders of the country would have perished in the blast along with thousands of city dwellers caught in the resulting fires.

Acting on a tip from a mysteriously delivered letter, authorities searched a vault beneath the House of Lords and discovered Guy Fawkes with thirty-six barrels of gunpowder amid piles of wood, rocks, and iron. Co-conspirators were rounded up—many of them captured near Shakespeare’s family home in Warwickshire. In January 1606, they were interrogated, tortured, and publicly executed in an extremely gruesome fashion (far worse than the blinding of Gloucester in the play). The king’s fears of another conspiracy or insurrection ran rampant.

King Lear alludes ominously to forged and waylaid letters offering evidence of a treasonous plot: Edmund, hungry for power, bears false witness against his own father when he announces in Shakespeare’s text, “This is the letter he spoke of, which approves him an intelligent path to the advantages of France. O heavens! That this treason were not, or not I the detector.”



Guy Fawkes



Guy Fawkes’s face inspired the mask worn by the vigilante in the *V for Vendetta* comic book series (at left).

THEMES for our times *continued***SUCCESSION**

Fears of conspiracy were amplified by the coronation of King James I who had succeeded his mother's cousin, Queen Elizabeth I, to the throne in 1603. The principle of primogeniture dictated that the monarch's first-born or next-surviving male offspring ("the heir or a spare") would inherit all the wealth and power. Questions arose, however, when the only surviving heirs were female—especially if the daughters had married. How could a wife rule England when, in the eyes of the law and the Church of England (created by Elizabeth's father, Henry VIII), she had to "obey" her husband? Elizabeth avoided sharing power with a husband by never marrying, craftily gendering her power as masculine and calling herself a "Prince." Childless, she left no direct heirs. When Elizabeth died, James acceded; he was the closest male relative to her in blood, religion, and ideology. But there were others, some of them female, who still had compelling claims to the English throne.

King Lear presents a vexing hypothetical to the principle of primogeniture: what if the heirs to the throne are all female, and the king wants to divide his kingdom among them? As 1606 playgoers witnessed the deterioration of King Lear's power, his family, and his mind, they were surely reminded of England's past and present dynastic instabilities.



King James I whose succession to the throne amplified conspiracy fears



A widely-known court case of 1603 (the Annesley Case) involved two elder daughters attempting to certify their aged father as insane so they could inherit his wealth. The youngest daughter, named Cordell, protested on behalf of her father. Was this case an inspiration for Shakespeare’s *King Lear*?

Seventy-five years later, when Nahum Tate revised and adapted Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, England once again faced a succession crisis. The monarchy had only recently been restored after the failure of Oliver Cromwell’s Protectorate, but King Charles II had no legitimate offspring. He had, however, fathered up to a dozen children by women other than his queen. The boys, among them the Duke of Monmouth, became powerful, some of them with designs on seizing the throne. In *King Lear*, the dangerous Edmund is the illegitimate son of Gloucester. Tate wisely cut Edmund’s plea, “Now gods, stand up for bastards.” Listen for it—we left it in.

Whether framed as a tale, a history, or a tragedy, whether bleak or joyful, whether Shakespeare’s ending or Tate’s, *King Lear* blends the familial with the political, and the cosmological with the mundane as it dissects the origins of authority, the rights of succession and inheritance, the vagaries of old age, the trauma of human suffering, filial ingratitude, imbalances of power, and family dysfunction. Above all, the play emphasizes humankind’s reliance—in 1606, in 1681, and in 2021—on the belief, to paraphrase Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., that the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice.

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