

QTMUN



King Lear

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2. Embody their assigned country's/character's position, not their mannerisms (e.g., no accents, no props)
3. Opt for diplomatic, respectful, and tactful speech and phrasing of ideas, including notes (e.g., no foul language, suggestive remarks, or obscene body language)
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Dear Delegates,

I want to begin by thanking you for devoting time and energy to this crisis committee. Having participated in Model United Nations conferences as a high school student, I remember the effort and stress involved in preparing for those conferences on top of regular school work. What was not part of my high school experience was a once-in-a-century pandemic that separated me from my network of friends, restricted my ability to attend school in person, and generally made life suck. Life is hard right now in so many different ways for different people, so whatever 2020 looks like for you, I really respect and appreciate your willingness to take on a fictional crisis in addition to all the real ones. I hope that despite the abnormal circumstances in which this committee is taking place, it can be a source of encouragement, community and genuine fun. To that end, I want to make preparing for and attending this committee as easy as possible. If there is anything I can do to make that happen for you, please do not hesitate to let me know.

King Lear seems particularly relevant now, when we are acutely aware of the injustices that pervade our world. As Lear says, “when we are born, we cry that we are come / To this great stage of fools.”¹ *Lear* doesn’t give us a single answer to the world’s problems. As Jeffrey Kahan says, “the play...generates an endless amount of responses to a circumscribed set of questions: Is there a God and, if there is, [are they] indifferent to our plight? Is death the end of our journey? What loyalty do we owe to our [parents], and what do we owe to ourselves? How should we recognize and value love? How do we cope with the outcasts of the world, with the sufferings of the innocent, the vulnerable, and the criminal? These are Lear’s questions. They remain the questions that plague us still, for they are, like the titles of *King Lear*, both our history and our tragedy.”²

King Lear has human empathy at its core. As Kahan outlines, the play is designed to encourage its audience “see life from a variety of perspectives.”³ “The function of philosophy is to explore the truths and principles of being. In Shakespeare, that exploration takes place in role-playing games in and through which we can safely imagine, rehearse and expand upon the repertoires each of us needs in life. There is no right or wrong answer here but imagining that makes it so.”⁴ I can think of no better description of either Shakespeare or crisis committees. *King Lear* has already captured the imaginations of myself and my team, Leila, Erin, Katherine, and Kasper. We cannot wait to see where your imaginations will take us.

Sincerely,

Claire Latosinsky, *King Lear* Director
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1 William Shakespear, *King Lear*, ed. Eric A. McCann (Don Mills, Canada: Academic Press Canada, 1964), 4.6.198-199.

2 Jeffrey Kahan, “Introduction: Shakespeare’s *King Lear*,” *King Lear: New Critical Essays*, ed. Jeffrey Kahan (London: Routledge, 2008), 88.

3 Kahan, Jeffrey. “If Only: Alternatives and the Self in *King Lear*,” *King Lear: New Critical Essays*, ed. Jeffrey Kahan (London: Routledge, 2008), 358.

4 Ibid, 361-2.

Historical Context

Though Shakespeare sets *King Lear* in the distant past of around the 8th Century B.C.E. (and we will likewise set our crisis during this time period), the key themes of the play cannot be understood outside the context of Jacobean England, when the play was written. Indeed, Stratford Festival's artistic director Antoni Cimolino suggests that *Lear's* ancient setting was chosen precisely because of the play's dangerous relevance to social and political issues: "For Shakespeare to have overtly written *King Lear* about his own time, circa 1606, would have invited disaster. With its criticism of religion, economic justice and the monarchy, it would have been a sure ticket to the Tower of London."⁵

Jacobean England: A Time of "Tumult and Social Upheaval"⁶

The unsettling ending of Shakespeare's *King Lear* can perhaps be better understood as a product of the society in which it was written. On the European continent, the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century had created a "theological crisis" wherein the authority of the Catholic Church was called into question, and faith and religious identity became a "life-and-death matter."⁷ Similar religious conflicts ensued in England, following King Henry VIII's foundation of the Church of England in defiance of the Catholic pope. As the throne changed power from the Protestant Henry and his son, King Edward VI, to the Catholic Queen Mary, back to the Protestant Elizabeth I, Catholics and Protestants were alternately persecuted and killed. As R.V. Young surmises, by the time Shakespeare began writing, "Christians had been martyring one another for three generations: [people] endured terrible suffering and grisly deaths at the hands of those who were convinced that their hope was an illusion and without tangible evidence."⁸ It follows that the senseless deaths of characters both virtuous and vicious in *Lear* would not have been a challenge to contemporary audiences' sense of divine justice, so much as a reflection of the gruesome reality in which they lived: "certainly Shakespeare's original audience would not have found profound suffering and pervasive evil to be proof of a godless world."⁹

The inconsistency of religious authority in Shakespeare's England was inextricably linked to the instability of the monarchy. King Henry VIII's sudden rupture from the Catholic Church was partially influenced by his anxiety over producing a male heir, and the turmoil that followed Edward VI's death seems to confirm these fears. Elizabeth I was able to restore stability, and her long rule marked the beginning of an "English Renaissance;" however, her lack of children led to renewed anxieties over the future of the throne.¹⁰ As Young suggests, "An audience in Shakespeare's England would have no difficulty understanding the apprehension of a King with only daughters about the succession to the throne."¹¹

Concerns over an inconsistent monarchy were coupled with fears of an overreaching monarchy. As Frederick Bengtsson states, "*King Lear* is a play about kingship, written during a period when the monarchy was of central importance, and the role of the monarch was under constant scrutiny and subject to endless theorization."¹²

⁵ Cimolino, Antoni, "A Family to Which We All Belong," Program Notes for *King Lear* (Stratford: Festival Theater, 2014), 12.

⁶ Frederick Bengtsson, "Historical Context for King Lear by William Shakespeare," Columbia College, Columbia University in the City of New York, accessed August 30, 2020.

⁷ Kahan, "Introduction: Shakespeare's King Lear," 47.

⁸ R.V. Young, "Hope and Despair in King Lear: The Gospel and the Crisis of Natural Law," in *King Lear: New Critical Essays*, edited by Jeffrey Kahan (London: Routledge, 2008), 273.

⁹ Ibid, 255.

¹⁰ Bengtsson, "Historical Context for King Lear by William Shakespeare."

¹¹ Young, "Hope and Despair in King Lear," 267.

¹² Bengtsson, "Historical Context for King Lear by William Shakespeare."

King Henry VIII's conversion of the entire country from Catholicism to the new Church of England demonstrated "the degree to which the monarch's personal desires and actions could affect the destiny and structure of an entire country, seemingly on a whim."¹³ King James I, who succeeded Elizabeth, renewed questions about the extent of the Crown's authority. His belief in the divine right of kings to absolute power put him at odds with parliament. These tensions would not be resolved in James' lifetime, and would lead to a Civil War in 1642-1651, which would take the life of James' son, King Charles I.¹⁴

It is important to remember that all of this tumult among political and religious powers did not occur in isolation, but in the midst of English society and the broader world. In addition to major religious and political transitions, England was undergoing immense socio-economic transformations. In spite of its internal conflict, the nation was developing as a colonial power. As Bengtsson says, "the social structure and geography of the country as a whole was being reorganized, and the possibilities for social advancement opened up."¹⁵ Within the country, reorganization of land ownership through land enclosure threatened traditional ways of life of the rural poor. "Common land," once open to all for hunting, fishing, gathering, and grazing animals, was gradually appropriated for private use of the nobility and gentry.¹⁶ Frank Upham identifies legal disputes over land enclosures as a site of conflict between those with power and those without:

- » That the powerful used law to oppress the weak is hardly news. That the weak during the same process were able to use law to resist their dispossession, on the one hand, has been rightly hailed as an initial step not only to modern rule of law but to the development of democracy itself.¹⁷

Thus, in the midst of a society dominated by monarchy and religion, the seeds of profound social and economic transformation were already sown at the time of *King Lear's* premiere.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Christina Bosco Langert, "Hedgerows and petticoats: sartorial subversion and anti-enclosure protest in seventeenth-century England," *Early Theatre* 12, no. 1 (2009): 120.

17 Frank K. Upham, "The Paradoxical Roles of Property Rights in Growth and Development," *Law and Development Review*, 8, 2 (2015): 255. Doi <https://doi.org/10.1515/ldr-2015-0024>.

Key Themes

As Jan Kott puts it, "*King Lear* gives one the impression of a high mountain that everyone admires, yet no one particularly wishes to climb."¹⁸ The play is notoriously difficult to analyze, particularly in terms of its ending, with the seemingly unjust deaths of both Lear and his innocent daughter, Cordelia. Indeed, this ending was so disturbing that for almost 150 years, from 1681 until 1838, the most popular rendition of *King Lear* was a revised version by poet laureate Nahum Tate, in which King Lear survives to vanquish his foes and Cordelia marries Edgar.¹⁹ 18th century scholars regarded Shakespeare's ending to be "ethically inferior" to Tate's;²⁰ Poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge said of Shakespeare's ending, "if we want to witness mere pain, we can visit the hospitals."²¹

While nowadays most performances of *King Lear* retain the original ending, its significance continues to elude scholars. On the one hand, Barbara Everett argues that *King Lear* portrays a redemptive arch in which Lear is a Christ-figure; his identity as an egotistical monarch is destroyed and he is resurrected "as a fully human being."²² On the other hand, George Orwell believed that the message of *King Lear* was incompatible with a belief in God.²³ Still other scholars have contested whether Lear and Cordelia are truly innocent, and whether Regan and Goneril are not justified in their actions.²⁴ While the centuries-long debate over *King Lear* has yielded no definitive conclusions about the play's significance, several key themes have been identified, which we will explore through our crisis committee:

What is "Natural?"

The very words "natural" and "unnatural" are used more in *King Lear* than in any other play by Shakespeare.²⁵ The question is, what does it mean for a person to be "natural" or "unnatural?" John Danby argues that the play presents two different answers to this question. The first is that all humans are subject to a common moral law, which arises naturally and rationally from a world with an "intelligible created order;"²⁶ in a just world, morality is part of everyone's human nature. The other answer is that natural behaviour is "individual rather than communal;" a person's nature distinguishes them from society, and is "opposed to what is social, traditional, conventional, or artificial."²⁷

We can see these conflicting views of nature embodied in several different characters, perhaps most notably Lear and Edmund. Both characters appeal to nature as their "goddess," but each perceives this goddess differently. When Lear calls on nature to act as an agent of justice against Goneril, who has rejected his authority, he demonstrates the view that morality is tied to nature:

Hear, Nature, hear! Dear goddess, hear!
Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful.²⁸

18 Kahan, "Introduction: Shakespeare's King Lear," 1.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid, 18.

21 Ibid, 18-19.

22 Ibid, 46.

23 Ibid, 46.

24 Ibid, 44.

25 Young, "Hope and Despair in King Lear," 259

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 1.4.277-279.

In this passage, Lear suggests several things about nature and morality: first, that disobedience of a parent is immoral; second, that this immoral behaviour is unnatural; third, that nature will punish those who act immorally. Edmund's goddess of nature takes on very different properties:

Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law
My services are bound. Wherefore should I
Stand in the plague of custom and permit
The curiosity of nations to deprive me,
For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines
Lag of a brother? Why bastard? Wherefore base?
When my dimensions are as compact,
My mind as generous, and my shape as true,
As honest madam's issue?²⁹

Unlike Lear, Edmund suggests that the law of nature is in opposition to the "plague of custom." While Lear believes that nature scorns those who defy social and moral conventions, Edmund describes how his natural abilities defy the "baseness" ascribed to him by society. Edmund's death at the end of the play seems to refute his theory that one can disobey moral and social customs without consequence, but Lear's trajectory in the play is not exactly redemptive of his views either. So who is right? Paul Cantor summarizes this paradoxical relationship between nature and convention in the play: "We see that conventions can get in the way of human nature and obscure it, but we also see that human beings cannot do without conventions completely."³⁰

Justice, Injustice, and Suffering

As may have been noticeable in reading the previous paragraph, questions of nature are linked to concepts of justice in *King Lear*. As Cantor states, "the play investigates the nature of justice and the justice of nature."³¹ Does justice occur naturally in the world? In this play, the view that justice is "natural" is tied to faith; characters who believe in a just world frequently invoke the gods, and as they encounter injustices, their faith is called into question. According to Cantor, when Lear asks, "what is the cause of thunder?" he is not asking for a literal answer; "he is really asking whether the gods exist and whether justice can be said to exist by nature."³² The play does not seem to give an answer to this question. As Kahan surmises, "if the point of tragedy is to reward virtue and to punish vice, then *King Lear* is a failure, so far as both the just and the unjust are punished alike."³³ While the deaths of Cornwall, Regan, Goneril and Edmund seem to imply there is a divine or natural justice that punishes wrongdoing, the death of Cordelia seems entirely unjust. Lear's and Gloucester's deaths could be seen as a punishment for their cruelty to their children, but the punishment seems to outweigh the crime. As Lear puts it, "I am a man / more sinn'd against than sinning."³⁴

Injustices extend beyond the main characters of *King Lear*, to the society around them. As Cantor suggests, "the play does seem to offer the most corrosive critique possible of the conventional order of society and to leave us

²⁹ Ibid, 1.2.1-9.

³⁰ Paul A. Cantor, "The Cause of Thunder: Nature and Justice in *King Lear*," in *King Lear: New Critical Essays*, edited by Jeffrey Kahan (London: Routledge, 2008), 245.

³¹ Ibid, 231.

³² Ibid, 31.

³³ Kahan, "If Only: Alternatives and the Self in *King Lear*," 351.

³⁴ Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 3.2.60-61.

with a sense of the arbitrary character of social hierarchy and conventional conceptions of justice.³⁵ Through their fall from power, Lear and Gloucester come face to face with societal injustices; by the end of the play, “Lear and Gloucester in their different ways have seen the gross inequality of the world, the gulf that separates rich and poor, and have called for a redistribution of wealth.”³⁶ Such a perspective can be seen in Lear’s prayer to the poor, in Act 3, Scene 4:

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe’er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop’d and window’d raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta’en
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superfluous to them,
And show the heavens more just.³⁷

Lear not only recognizes the unjust situation of the poor, but acknowledges his own role in perpetuating these injustices by failing to care for them. It is through Lear’s own suffering that he has been able to identify the suffering of others: “expose thyself to feel what wretches feel.” By Act IV, Lear has further recognized the complex relationship between wealth and “justice:”

Through tatter’d clothes small vices do appear;
Robes and furr’d gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold,
And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks:
Arm it in rags, a pigmy’s straw does pierce it.³⁸

Lear identifies economic inequality as not only a result of injustice, but a cause of injustice; the wealthy are less susceptible to punishment for their sins than the poor. Thus, Lear has outlined a cycle of injustice, in which the marginalized become further marginalized, and those in power become more powerful.

Through the injustices wrought upon individual characters, as well as broader societal injustices, *King Lear* identifies justice and injustice as something that can be enacted and perpetuated by human beings, not just by gods. By making its audience suffer through a tragedy in which suffering is arbitrarily dealt to the “deserving” and “undeserving” alike, *King Lear* forces us to identify others’ suffering through our own. We are asked to confront our own role in perpetuating injustice, and our responsibility to enact justice, rather than waiting for it to occur.

Injustice as a Mechanic: The Wheel of Fortune

In keeping with *King Lear*’s enactments of systemic and random injustices, our committee will be incorporating injustice into its structure, in a way that is both systematic and random. Several characters in *King Lear* refer to fortune as a “wheel” — an allusion to the myth that all human beings are placed upon the goddess Fortune’s spinning

35 Cantor, “The Cause of Thunder: Nature and Justice in King Lear,” 233.

36 Alexander Leggatt, “Measuring Love,” Program notes for *King Lear* (Stratford: Festival Theater, 2014), 8.

37 Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 3.4. 34-42.

38 Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 4.6.180-183.

wheel, and that their fortunes change as the wheel spins.³⁹ When someone is near the top of the wheel, they have good fortune, whereas someone at the bottom of the wheel will have bad fortune. This myth will serve as the basis for our main crisis mechanic — the Wheel of Fortune (no affiliation with the game show). All characters' names will be placed on a wheel, which will rotate every half hour. A character's relative position on the wheel will factor into the success of the delegate's directives. If the delegate's character's name is near the top of the wheel, their directive is more likely to be more successful; if their name is near the bottom of the wheel, their directive is likely to be less successful. Please note that the quality of directives will still be taken into account when determining directive outcomes; a high-quality directive from a delegate whose character is at the bottom of the wheel will not completely fail. Please also note that when considering delegates' performance for awards, outcomes of a delegate's efforts are not the main consideration; it is the quality and consistency of the delegate's efforts that matter.

The Problem of “Madness”

Madness features prominently in *King Lear*, with several characters going mad or feigning madness. We, however, will **not** be portraying madness in our committee. This is because madness plays a symbolic role in the play that would be both problematic and unproductive to replicate in our committee. As Kahan highlights, Lear's madness is a consequence of the events of the play, more than it is a cause of them:

- » Lear's is an erratic world where 'men are / As the times' (5.3.30-31), a hurly-burly where a good daughter says bad things and bad daughters say good things, where fools utter wisdom and wise kings act like babies...The only sane thing Lear can do is go insane, for what drives him mad is his inability to deal with a world that leaves him utterly bewildered.⁴⁰

Kahan thus outlines the symbolic role of madness as a means of dramatizing the personal damage inflicted by an unjust and senseless world.

Unlike plays, in which meaning is conveyed to an audience through figurative rhetoric, crisis committees use “procedural rhetoric,” which Ian Bogost defines as “the practice of using processes persuasively.”⁴¹ In other words, crisis committees put delegates through the process of making decisions that their character would have to make, in order to highlight the problems, themes and ideas of the committee. It would be difficult to portray the symbolic significance of Lear's madness in a procedural manner.

It must also be acknowledged that “madness” is a problematic concept, both within the play and in the real world. “Madness” can be a derogatory term for illnesses, conditions and disabilities that affect real people, and that are socially stigmatized. While disability studies scholars such as Anita Wohlmann and Marion Rana embrace the potential for art and literature to “give voice to disability culture” as part of reclaiming agency and deconstructing stereotypes, they also caution against the metaphorical representation of disability:

- » The disabled body is frequently represented symbolically or metaphorically and is thus used to stand for or is compared to a divine punishment, moral corruption or malice, a lack, a resistance to a culture's normative ideals, or an exotic Other...As a sign of Otherness, disability is an ideologically marked counterpoint of normalcy that meanders between opposite poles, such as the glorification of dis-abled heroes as 'supercrips'

208. 39 McCann, Footnotes, *King Lear* by William Shakespeare (Don Mills, Canada: Academic Press Canada, 1964),

40 Kahan, “If Only: Alternatives and the Self in King Lear,” 353.

41 Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007): 3.

and their objectification and deformation as “monstrous bodies.”⁴²

Crisis committees tread a fine line between reality and fiction, representing fictional events and characters through the decisions, speech, and actions of real people. Thus, the stakes are even higher in representing or misrepresenting disability or illness. Out of respect for the diverse experiences of delegates and staff in this committee, we will refrain from risking this misrepresentation in our committee. We ask that delegates join us in this commitment, by not attempting to portray madness through their directives and speeches. Thank you for your understanding and cooperation.

⁴² Anita Wohlmann and Marion Rana, “Narrating Disability in Literature and Visual Media: Introduction,” *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 67, 1 (2019): 4.

The “Historical” Setting of our Crisis

The Legend of *King Lear*

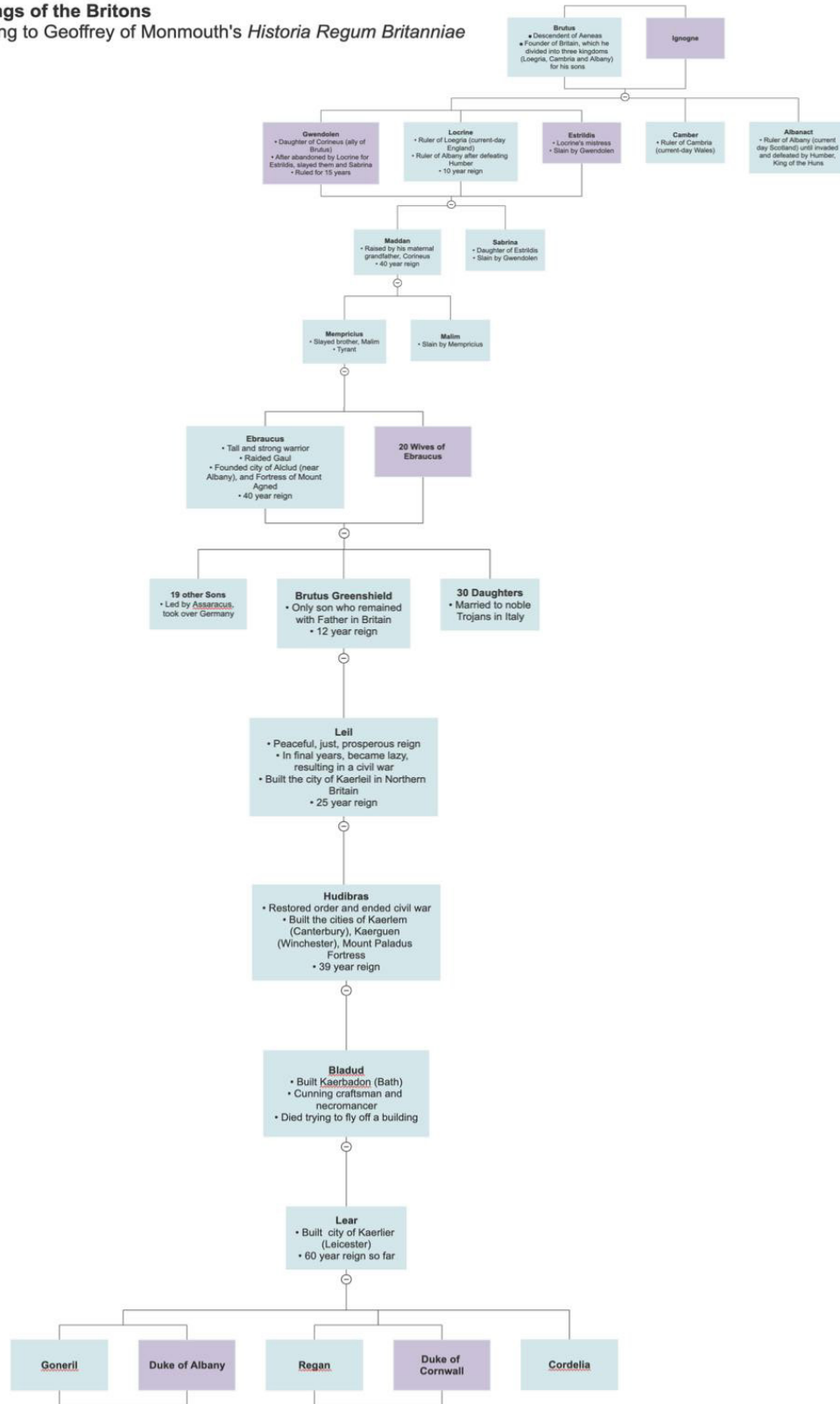
The story of *King Lear* is not Shakespeare’s invention; it is adapted from a legend that had already been recorded in other literary works. The story of “King Leir of Britain” and his daughters is recorded in Geoffrey Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* (“History of the Kings of Britain”), written in the 12th Century. It is important to note that this “history” is purely mythological, and does not match up with our current understanding of the history of Britain. There are other variations of this legend which may have influenced Shakespeare, including in John Weyland’s *The Mirror for Magistrates* (1555), Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles* (1577), and Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1590).⁴³ All of these stories differ from each other in terms of details and even outcomes. Indeed Shakespeare’s version of the legend differs from most others in its ending; most renditions of the story end with Lear or Cordelia surviving to vanquish their foes. Reading summaries of these different versions of the Lear myth could help delegates get ideas for crisis plans. For the purposes of establishing a “historical” and geographical setting for our committee, we will focus on Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*.

Lear: Descendant of Brutus, Ruler of Albion

Monmouth’s “history” positions the British monarchy as descendants of Brutus, the grandson of Aeneas of Troy. Brutus travelled from Troy to what is now called the United Kingdom, where he supposedly founded the kingdom of “Albion” (hence why you may notice characters in *King Lear* refer to the kingdom by that name). Brutus ruled Albion from the city Trinovantum (“New Troy;” present-day London), which he founded as well. Upon his death, Brutus divided the kingdom in three, to be ruled by his three sons: Lochrine inherited Loegria (roughly equivalent to present-day England), Camber became ruler of Cambria (present-day Wales), and Albanact ruled Albany (present-day Scotland). Over several generations of backstabbing drama, the three kingdoms were eventually reunited as the Kingdom of Albion, under a single king. According to Monmouth’s History, Lear is the seventh-great grandson of Brutus. His sixty-year reign occurs in the 8th century BCE, roughly coinciding with the founding of Rome. During this reign, Lear has founded the city of Kaerlier (present-day Leicester), however he rules from Trinovantum. A map of Lear’s kingdom and its surroundings, as it stands at the start of the committee, is included in this background guide.

⁴³ Eric A. McCann, “Sources of *King Lear*,” in *King Lear* ed. Eric A. McCann (Don Mills, Canada: Academic Press Canada, 1964), ix-xiii.

The Kings of the Britons
According to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*



A Note on Religion in Albion

There are several conflicting religious references within *King Lear* that may lead to confusion about the religious beliefs of the play's characters. There are some references to Christianity in *King Lear*. For example, when Kent claims that he "eats no fish," he is alluding to the Catholic tradition of eating fish on Fridays.⁴⁴ Such references are anachronistic to the pre-Christian time period in which *King Lear* is set. Instead, they are jokes that would have been relevant to the original audiences of *Lear*. The play also contains anachronistic references to demons. When Edgar feigns demonic possession, he names several demons, including Obidicut, Hobbididence, Mahu, Modo, and Flibbertigibbet.⁴⁵ These demons are all listed in *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*, published by Samuel Harsnett, in 1603.⁴⁶ Most scholars agree that Shakespeare's inclusion of these demons is a coded critique of Harsnett's work.⁴⁷ For the purposes of our committee, we will not be including any references to Christianity or to demons.

The prevailing belief systems within *King Lear* are Roman classical mythology and astrology. Characters frequently refer to the "gods" in plural form, and there are direct references to Apollo, Jupiter, and Hecate. This belief system would fit within the chronology of the play. Several characters also profess their belief in the stars as the determinants of fate—although it is important to note that not all characters share this belief. Astrology can be traced back to 1000 BCE in Babylon, and it did spread throughout the continent, albeit not until around 300 BCE.⁴⁸ While it seems unlikely that people in Albion would have heard of astrology at the time of *King Lear*, it is not impossible, and it is certainly not the most egregious historical inaccuracy within the play. For the purpose of our committee, we will assume classical mythology and astrology to be the belief systems of those characters who do believe in fate and the gods. However, there will not be divine interventions or magic within the crisis.

The Anachronistic Geography of France and Burgundy

The King of France and Duke of Burgundy present difficulties within our committee, since in the 8th Century BCE there was no France, nor was there a Burgundy. For the purposes of this committee, we will ignore this anachronism and assume that France and Burgundy do exist, as politically independent and separate states. Our Duchy of Burgundy will be modeled after the Kingdom of the Burgundians from the 5th Century AD. France is perhaps a more difficult matter, since the unity of several kingdoms vaguely resembling France only occurred after the Fall of Rome, and at the expense of the Burgundian Empire.⁴⁹ For our purposes, we will consider France to constitute the territory of the Franks (including the Salian, Ripuarian, Mosan, and Hessian Franks) at roughly the 5th Century AD.

44 Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 1.4.16-17.

45 Ibid, 4.2.70-77.

46 "A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures by Samuel Harsnett, 1603," *Collection Items*, The British Library, accessed November 10, 2020, <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/a-declaration-of-egregious-popish-impostures-by-samuel-harsnett-1603>.

47 Ibid.

48 Ian Bacon. "The Other 'A' Word: Astrology in the Classical World," guest contribution, Swinburne University of Technology, 19 November 2007, <https://astronomy.swin.edu.au/sao/guest/bacon/>.

49 "Burgundians (Burgundiones) (Germans)." *The History Files*, accessed November 13, 2020, <https://www.historyfiles.co.uk/KingListsEurope/FranceBurgundy.htm>.



A map of Burgundy and France, adapted from "European Kingdoms: Germanic Tribes," *The History Files*, figure 1.

Where We Are at the Beginning of this Committee

After a reign of sixty years, King Lear is ready to retire from his duties as monarch. In the absence of a male heir, Lear has decided to divide the kingdom among his three daughters. While this may seem to be an innocuous decision, as Cantor highlights, it is both highly abnormal and very strategic:

- » ...despite the conventional role he adopts, Lear is actually attempting to do something quite unconventional in this scene. He has summoned his court to deal with the problem of the succession and is clearly not content to follow the customary path. Given the fact that Lear has no sons, the matter of the succession is murky, but custom would normally dictate that in the event of his death, the crown would pass to the eldest of his children, Goneril. If Lear were the doddering old fool many take him to be, he would simply let this result come to pass. But he evidently is smart enough to foresee problems if Goneril becomes his sole successor. To ensure "that future strife/may be prevented now" (1.1.44-45) Lear has come up with an unconventional scheme for dividing up his kingdom and managing the succession while he is still alive to supervise it.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Cantor, "The Cause of Thunder: Nature and Justice in King Lear," 235-6.

Lear has decided that he will determine this division based on his daughters' love for him. It will be up to Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia to determine how to demonstrate this love, or if they are willing to partake in the competition at all. Allies of each daughter can assist in their persuasive efforts, while allies of Lear can advise him on the best course of action. It will be up to Lear to decide whose advice to heed, and whose love to reward.



Albion



Characters

Lear, King of Albion

"Proud, serious arbitrary, impatient, peremptory, humorous, capricious" — King Lear's enemies would describe him as a "selfish, high-tempered, autocratic old man."⁵¹ Lear is a self-assured monarch; "he has always assumed that the political order is rooted in the natural, that nature supports human justice and in particular his own decrees as king."⁵² He is used to getting his way. Lear not only commands respect, he inspires it. He has earned the trust of his people — particularly his knights — not only because of his title, but through his age and experience.⁵³ But Lear's age is catching up with him; he is over eighty years old, and although he has always been rather impulsive, he is growing increasingly unreliable as he gets older.⁵⁴ To Lear, a loss of respect is "worse than murder,"⁵⁵ so he wants to relieve himself of the burden of being king, in order to prevent "future strife."⁵⁶

Regan, Duchess of Cornwall

The second-eldest daughter of King Lear, Regan seeks her father's wealth and power. She will use any means to achieve this goal; she is willing to be both hypocritical and deceitful,⁵⁷ and she has great swordsmanship — a skill that she is unafraid to use.⁵⁸ Regan is an "expert in matters of vengeance and cruelty."⁵⁹ But she is not impulsive; she puts thought behind her actions. Regan does not think much of her sisters. She resents Cordelia for her apparent coldness and she is jealous of Goneril, the Duchess of Albany.⁶⁰ Though she is married to the Duke of Cornwall, Regan lusts after Edmund.

The Duke of Cornwall

The Duke of Cornwall is a successful and pragmatic ruler. He is not hampered by the consideration of ethics; rather, he believes that his power gives him the freedom to take unethical actions.⁶¹ Though he is restrained and judicial, he accepts violence as a "natural instrument by which an objective may be gained."⁶² Like his wife, Regan, Cornwall's objective is power. He will not be dissuaded from pursuing this goal: "unremovable and fixed he is in his own course."⁶³ Cornwall sees King Lear as an obstacle in his path to power — an "irritant that must be destroyed."⁶⁴ He is also at odds with the Duke of Albany, whom he views as a rival in his quest for dominance.⁶⁵

Goneril, Duchess of Albany

The eldest daughter of King Lear, The Duchess of Albany is much like her sister, Regan; she too is motivated by wealth and power, and she will stop at nothing to obtain it. Like Regan, Goneril believes Lear must be removed

51 Eric McCann, "Some Notes on the Characters," *King Lear*, ed. Eric McCann (Don Mills, Canada: Academic Press Canada, 1964), xl.

52 Cantor, "The Cause of Thunder: Nature and Justice in King Lear," 231.

53 Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 5.3.54-55.

54Ibid, 1.1. 318-323.

55Ibid, 2. 4. 29-30.

56Ibid, 1.1.:40-45.

57 McCann, "Some Notes on the Characters," xlvii.

58 3.7.94.

59 McCann, "Some Notes on the Characters," xlvii.

60 Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 1.1.307-308; 5.1.67.

61Ibid, 3.7.25-28.

62 McCann, "Some Notes on the Characters," xli

63Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 2.2.156-157.

64 McCann, "Some Notes on the Characters," xli.

65 Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 2.1.10-11.

from power; she sees Lear as a senile old man, entering a “second childhood.”⁶⁶ Perhaps more so than Regan, Goneril is impulsive; she likes to act immediately.⁶⁷ Goneril shares Regan’s military skill — indeed, she is a better soldier than her husband, Albany. She dislikes her husband, regarding him as foolish and cowardly.⁶⁸ Instead, she is romantically interested in Edmund.⁶⁹ Goneril is beautiful, but vain.⁷⁰ She is jealous of Regan, and resents her sister Cordelia’s overbearing morality.⁷¹

The Duke of Albany

The Duke of Albany can be described as a “misplaced idealist.”⁷² He is not violent or cruel and he is blind to evil. He married his wife, Goneril, out of love, and although their relationship is uneasy,⁷³ he is submissive to her and ignorant of her schemes.⁷⁴ Goneril blames Albany for his “milky gentleness;”⁷⁵ indeed, while Albany believes in doing what is right, he is somewhat cowardly and hesitates to take action against those who are doing wrong.⁷⁶ He lacks initiative and cunning. Among Lear’s sons-in-law, Albany is Lear’s favourite.⁷⁷ He does not get along with his brother-in-law, Cornwall.⁷⁸ Albany disdains Edmund, whom he views as a subordinate.⁷⁹

Cordelia

Noble and forgiving Cordelia is the youngest and favourite daughter of King Lear. She is soft-spoken, believing that actions speak louder than words.⁸⁰ Cordelia loves and honours her father, but her desire to be honest prevents flattery.⁸¹ To others, her rigid morality can come across as prideful and arrogant.⁸² Cordelia resents her sisters for their greed and she perceives them to be morally inferior.⁸³ She “objects to the hypocrisy of her sisters, the way they simply say what is conventionally demanded by the situation” and she “refuses to be put in the same class with them.”⁸⁴ Though Cordelia lacks her sisters’ ambition, she is similarly resolute;⁸⁵ she will stand her ground even if it puts her at odds with Lear’s entire court.

The King of France

The King of France rivals the Duke of Burgundy for Cordelia’s love. Unlike the Duke, the King loves and respects Cordelia and is not very interested in her land and wealth. He is a man of reason as well as compassion,

66 Ibid, 1.3.20.

67 Ibid, 1.1.336.

68 Ibid, 4.2.32, 65, 57.

69 Ibid, 4.5.28-31.

70 Ibid, 3.2.35.

71 Ibid, 5.1.67; 1.1.304.

72 McCann, “Some Notes on the Characters,” xlii.

73 Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 4.2.6-7.

74 Ibid, 1.4.275-275.

75 Ibid, 1.4.350.

76 Ibid, 4.2.14-16.

77 Ibid, 1.1.1.

78 Ibid, 2.1.10-11.

79 Ibid, 5.3.67-68.

80 Ibid, 1.1.83.

81 Ibid, 1.1.113-114.

82 Ibid, 1.1.137.

83 Ibid, 1.1.296-299.

84 Cantor, “The Cause of Thunder: Nature and Justice in King Lear,” 237.

85 Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 4.4.30.

and is unafraid to stand up to anyone—even King Lear—in the name of justice.⁸⁶ Such blatant opposition would hurt Lear's pride, and could strain the relationship between the two Kings, by extension causing tension and even conflict between the countries of France and Albion. While France is not looking for a war as of yet, he is prepared for one; he has informants among the servants of the nobility of Albion.⁸⁷

The Duke of Burgundy

A rival against the King of France for Cordelia's hand in marriage, the Duke is not as interested in Cordelia's love as he is in her land and title, which King Lear has offered as a dowry.⁸⁸ Indeed, the Duke can use all the political allies he can get. Although allied with Rome, this relationship is tenuous, and threatened by the Duke's desire to expand his own territory.⁸⁹ An allegiance with Albion could replace the Duke's reliance on Rome for protection, and could enable an attack on France, which lies between Albion and Burgundy. By contrast, to fall out of favour with Lear would risk Albion and France aligning against Burgundy. Thus, while Burgundy courts Cordelia, it is really Lear's approval he seeks.

The Earl of Kent

With a "hot temper" and a "rough tongue," the Earl of Kent believes that actions speak more loudly than words.⁹⁰ Kent is Lear's most devoted follower; he loves the King like his father, and would die for him.⁹¹ Unlike others, who see the King as old, unreasonable and piteous, Kent sees Lear as the great king he once was.⁹² However, Kent believes that part of his duty in honouring the king is to be honest, even when his honesty is unmannerly.⁹³ Kent is also an honourable friend of the Earl of Gloucester.⁹⁴ He is a man of faith, believing that human lives are governed by the stars.⁹⁵ He is also a "cheerful realist," who makes the best of every situation.⁹⁶

The Earl of Gloucester

A white-haired old man, the Earl of Gloucester is a defender of traditional laws and hierarchies.⁹⁷ He respects the authority of King Lear, and the superior rank of the Duke of Cornwall and the Duke of Albany.⁹⁸ He is deeply faithful to astrology and he believes that his life is in the hands of the gods.⁹⁹ Gloucester is a complex character. He is capable of decency, courage and wisdom, but can also be officious and overbearing.¹⁰⁰ "He has insight and prudence, but they are darkened when his own pleasure, comfort, and vanity are at stake."¹⁰¹ Gloucester claims to love both his sons equally, but he does not know either of their characters well.¹⁰² He does, however, have

86 Ibid, 1.12.77-289.

87 Ibid, 3.1.25-27.

88 Ibid, 1.1.46.

89 "Burgundians (Burgundiones) (Germans)."

90 McCann, "Some Notes on the Characters," xliii

91 Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 1.1.150; 1.1.166-7.

92 McCann, "Some Notes on the Characters," xliii.

93 Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 1.1:154-158

94 Ibid, 1.1:25.

95 Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 4.3.37-38.

96 McCann, "Some Notes on the Characters," xliii.

97 Young, "Hope and Despair in King Lear," 266.

98 Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 2.1.64-65.

99 Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 1.2.102-103; 4.1.44-45.

100 Young, "Hope and Despair in King Lear," 265-266.

101 Ibid, 266.

102 Ibid, 265.

insight into the characters of others: he knows Lear's personality, believes in Kent's loyalty, and is healthily suspicious of Goneril and Regan.¹⁰³

Edgar

Edgar is the eldest son of the Earl of Gloucester, and the godson of King Lear.¹⁰⁴ He is one year older than his half-brother, Edmund.¹⁰⁵ Unlike Edmund, Edgar is unselfishly devoted to his father. He shares Gloucester's religious fervour, believing that the gods are just. As such, Edgar is obedient to the gods and accepts their dictates. Edgar believes that consequences of actions are also just, as they are determined by the gods.¹⁰⁶ Edgar is cheerful and hopeful, noble and honest; he would not harm anyone, nor would he expect anyone to harm him.¹⁰⁷

Edmund

Edmund's position as the illegitimate son of the Earl of Gloucester is the deepest grievance of his life.¹⁰⁸ Gloucester himself is ashamed of Edmund, and Edmund is painfully aware of this.¹⁰⁹ Abandoned and scorned by society, Edmund has learned to reject social and moral conventions. He believes it is in human nature to act for oneself, and he is willing to renounce law, morality and religion to secure his own future.¹¹⁰ Edmund believes that success comes at the expense of others: "the younger rises when the old doth fall."¹¹¹ He sees mercy as a sign of weakness,¹¹² and believes courage to be his "single virtue."¹¹³ He has spent nine years abroad as a soldier.¹¹⁴ Edmund is a self-made man¹¹⁵ and a man of action rather than discussion.¹¹⁶ He is able to adapt to any situation; he can be "bold, admirable and resolute," or "furtive, worthless and perfidious" as it suits him.¹¹⁷

Lear's Commander

In charge of Lear's one hundred knights, the commander is unconditionally obedient to King Lear.¹¹⁸ Some suspect that this obedience might not be motivated by pure intentions, but rather might be sycophantic.¹¹⁹ Regardless of the motivation for their loyalty, the knights are crucial to King Lear. They represent a part of his identity and give him a sense of self-respect: "to deny him his own men is to deprive him of his sense of self."¹²⁰ As a symbol of Lear's continuing authority, the knights are a source of tension between the King and his two daughters.¹²¹ They do not get along with Regan and Goneril's servants.

103 Ibid, 267.

104 Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 2.1.98-99.

105 Ibid, 1.1.18.

106 Ibid, 5.3.205-206.

107 Ibid, 1.2.174-175.

108 McCann, footnotes, 22.

109 Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 1.1.9.

110 McCann, footnotes, 22.

111 Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 3.4.23.

112 Ibid, 5.3.36-37.

113 Ibid, 5.3.124.

114 Ibid, 1.1.30.

115 Kahan, "Introduction: Shakespeare's King Lear," 52.

116 Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 5.2.79-80.

117 Kahan, "If Only: Alternatives and the Self in King Lear," 355.

118 Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 1.4.47.

119 Kahan, "Introduction: Shakespeare's King Lear," 57.

120 Young, "Hope and Despair in King Lear," 270.

121 Leggatt, "Measuring Love," 7.

Curan

A courtier of Albion, Curan is privy to the rumours of the kingdom.¹²² Officially, he advises the Earl of Gloucester and relays communications between Gloucester and the other nobility. However, his frequent travelling has enabled him to establish a network of contacts among the courtiers, servants and soldiers of other courts, particularly Albany's and Cornwall's. Thus, Curan is among the first to hear of "whispered" news and "ear-kissing" arguments.¹²³ He will often let some of these rumours slip, although he rarely divulges all the information he knows, preferring that people discover them "in [their own] time."¹²⁴ Among the Gloucester family, Curan is rather close with Edmund.

Oswald

Oswald is the faithful servant of Goneril, the Duchess of Albany. Cowardly and facetious, he borrows his pride from his mistress's power.¹²⁵ He is a "serviceable villain," happy to follow Goneril's orders even if they are evil.¹²⁶ Oswald takes malicious pleasure in exerting power over others in the name of self-advancement.¹²⁷ He particularly enjoys taunting King Lear.¹²⁸ Oswald is cowardly, and wants nothing to do with danger.¹²⁹ Oswald fears the Earl of Kent and resents the Earl of Gloucester.¹³⁰

The Fool

The Fool is no fool; Robert Armin, who first played the Fool described him as a "foolosopher:" "[The] fool's questions reach to mirth, leading wisdom by the hand as age leads children by one finger."¹³¹ The Fool has one of the closest and most complex relationships with King Lear. He is Lear's conscience—the only one "willing to tell Lear the unflattering truth."¹³² Although he can be bitter, cynical, nervous and even frightened, the Fool is as loyal to Lear as Kent is. Besides Lear, the Fool is very close with Cordelia—many would say they are one and the same.¹³³ He dreads the notion of being separated from her if she marries and leaves for Burgundy or France.¹³⁴ Perhaps because of his special relationship with Lear and Cordelia, the Fool is detested by Goneril and Regan, and often treated poorly by them and by their servants.¹³⁵

Monsieur LaFar, Marshal of France

One of the King of France's top generals, Monsieur LaFar has been awarded the title "Marshal" for his extraordinary bravery and strength in battle. With that title, LaFar's military authority in France is second only to the King. Besides this official honour, the King of France trusts the Marshal on a personal level, counting him as a close friend and confidant. In this time of peace, LaFar is accompanying the King on his journey to Albion.

¹²² Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 2.1.6-9.

¹²³ Ibid, 2.1.930.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 2.1.939.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 2.4.206-207.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 4.6.277-278.

¹²⁷ McCann, "Some Notes on the Characters," xlvii.

¹²⁸ McCann, footnotes, 68.

¹²⁹ Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 2.2.13-20.

¹³⁰ McCann, "Some Notes on the Characters," xlvii.

¹³¹ Kahan, "Introduction: Shakespeare's King Lear," 12.

¹³² Ibid, 56.

¹³³ Kahan, "Introduction: Shakespeare's King Lear," 56.

¹³⁴ Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 1.4.72-73.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 1.4.197-198.

While there, LaFar is helping the King to woo the Princess Cordelia, and is taking care of the King's horses.

Questions to Consider

1. What are my character's moral convictions? Do they believe that morality is part of human nature, or that human nature is at odds with morality? Do they believe that immoral acts will be punished?
2. What are my character's convictions regarding justice and "natural order?" Does my character believe that the world is just? Do they have faith in the gods? Do they believe that social positions are divinely ordained, or that they can be earned?
3. Is my character satisfied with the current distribution of power? If not, what do they seek to change, and how will they attempt to change it? Do the ends justify the means (i.e. to what extent they will go to secure the outcome they desire)?
4. What comes first: the duty to oneself, the duty to one's family, the duty to one's sovereign and/or country, or the duty to one's moral principles?

Advice for Research and Preparation

As you probably already know, Shakespeare can be difficult for modern readers to access. Needless to say, it is important to have a general understanding of the story of *King Lear* for this committee. However, our crisis committee will **not** be following the plot of the play, since your decisions will determine the course of the narrative. So **don't get hung up on reading Shakespeare's original play, if that's not working for you!** Although I will include a link to a free online copy of *King Lear* in the "recommended resources," **you are welcome to seek out alternative versions or summaries (yes, that includes SparkNotes!), either as supplements to or substitutes for the play itself.** I will provide two of my favourite "alternative media" forms of the play in the "Recommended Resources." **As long as you have a good grasp of the relationships between characters, and of your character's strengths, weaknesses, values, and objectives, you will be well equipped for this committee.**

In this background guide, I have tried to outline themes that are central to *King Lear*, and social and political issues that were important at the time it was written. This is because **even though the narrative of our committee will doubtless differ from the play, I aim to incorporate the play's thematic material into our crises.** To prepare for the crises your character will face, **you should have an idea of your character's positions regarding the issues I have highlighted in the "Questions to Consider."** As you are working your way through the story of *King Lear*, try to focus on your character's behaviour, and consider what it might reveal about their beliefs. Some characters have few or no appearances in the play. In this case, you can feel free to use your imagination and research to fill in the blanks. **As long as you can explain how your position is reasonable for your character and for the context of the play, you are encouraged to think creatively!** You can use your position paper to explain your character's beliefs about some of these questions, and why you think they have these beliefs.

In terms of readings beyond *King Lear*, I encourage you to **explore the topics that most interest you!** If you are interested in the mythology behind Shakespeare's *King Lear*, check out some of the other versions of the *King Lear* story that I have included in the "Recommended Resources for 'Historic' Context." If you are interested in learning more about Jacobean England, try some of the resources I have recommended for "Socio-Political Context." If you want to explore a topic I haven't covered with the "Recommended Resources," go for it! I honestly can't predict exactly what resources will be most useful for the committee, since I'm not the only one determining how it will go. **The committee will be shaped by you — whatever knowledge and ideas you bring to the table will be valuable! Please also don't feel constrained to articles and books in your research.** You can use play programmes, podcasts, YouTube videos, a conversation with your friendly neighbourhood English teacher — whatever works best for you!

I hope this background guide and research advice is helpful to you, and has not overwhelmed you. If you are having any challenges, questions, or concerns — whether it's understanding the background guide, understanding the play, finding information about your character, finding or accessing research resources, writing your position paper, or anything else — **please feel free to reach out to me at claire.latosinsky@mail.utoronto.ca.** I know that crisis committees can seem daunting, especially if this is your first one, but my goal is to make this a fun and rewarding experience for everyone!

Recommended Resources for *King Lear*

- **A free, online version of Shakespeare's *King Lear*:**

Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. The Tech, 1993. <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/index.html>.

- **A free (and legal) film of a production of *King Lear* from the Stratford Festival:**

Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. Directed by Antoni Cimolino. Stratford: Stratford Festival, 2015. CBC Gem, <https://gem.cbc.ca/media/stratford-presents/season-1/episode-2/38e815a-010bc2bab37?cmp=sch-king%20lear>.

- A webcomic of *King Lear*. I have linked the artist's entire archive. The *King Lear* scene-by-scene breakdown begins in April 2014, but I encourage you to peruse their website for other *King Lear*- and Shakespeare-related content!

Gosling, Mya Lixian. *Good Tickle Brain*. 2013-present. <https://goodticklebrain.com/archives-home>.

Recommended Resources for Socio-Political and Critical Context

- **A brief overview of the historical context for *King Lear*:**

Bengtsson, Frederick. "Historical Context for *King Lear* by William Shakespeare." Columbia College, Columbia University in the City of New York, accessed August 30, 2020, <https://www.college.columbia.edu/core/node/1763#:~:text=King%20Lear%20in%20historical%20context,and%20subject%20to%20endless%20theorization>.

- **A podcast of a lecture about the history of critical responses to *King Lear*:**

Smith, Emma. *King Lear*. *University of Oxford Podcasts*. Podcast audio. February 22, 2012. <https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/king-lear>.

- **A Youtube video lecture about the themes of *King Lear* in relation to its historical context:**

Morrissey, Mary. "Lear and Context." YouTube video, 22:47. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iMwMaMwQz8g>.

Recommended Resources for "Historical" Context

- **A Copy of Geoffrey Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*King Lear* is Chapters 11-16):**

Monmouth, Geoffrey. *History of the Kings of Britain*. Translated by Aaron Thompson. Revised by J.A. Giles. Cambridge, Ontario: In Parentheses Publications, 1999. https://www.yorku.ca/inpar/geoffrey_thompson.pdf.

- **A webpage about *The Holinshed Chronicles* in relation to Shakespeare and *King Lear*, including images of the original text:**

"*Holinshed's Chronicles*, 1577." *Collection Items*. British Library. <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/holinsheds-chronicles-1577>.

- **A list of links to sources for the *Lear* story, different Folios of Shakespeare's *Lear*, Nahum Tate's revision, and many other fantabulous materials:**

Best, Michael. "King Lear." *Internet Shakespeare Editions*. University of Victoria, 2019. <https://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/Texts/Lr/index.html>.

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