



“Who is it that can tell me who I am?”: Looking at Lear’s Speeches

by **Melissa Borgmann**

North Community High School, Minneapolis

The themes of love, transformation, redemption, and forgiveness are central to *King Lear* and to Lear’s relationships with his daughters. Asking students to read, analyze, and perform two of Lear’s speeches—one from the beginning of the play, and one from the end—is a provocative way to introduce these themes and to inspire questions about the characters and the play. This activity can be used either as an introduction to reading *King Lear*, or as an introduction to Shakespeare’s language.

The two speeches are from Act 1 and Act 5:

From 1.4.289-303 (New Folger edition)

Hear, Nature, hear, dear goddess, hear!
Suspend thy purpose if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful.
Into her womb convey sterility.
Dry up in her the organs of increase,

And from her derogate body never spring
A babe to honor her. If she must teem,
Create her child of spleen, that it may live
And be a thwart disnatured torment to
her.

Let it stamp wrinkles in her brow of youth,
With cadent tears fret channels in her
cheeks,

Turn all her mother's pains and benefits
To laughter and contempt, that she may
feel

How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
To have a thankless child. Away, away!

.....

From 5.3.9-20

No, no, no. no. Come, let's away to
prison.

We two alone will sing like birds i' th'
cage.

When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll
kneel down

And ask of thee forgiveness. So we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and
laugh

At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news, and we'll talk with
them too –

Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's
out –

And take upon's the mystery of things,
As if we were God's spies. And we'll wear

out,
In a walled prison, packs and sects of
great ones
That ebb and flow by th' moon.

Give half of the class copies of the Act 1 speech, and half the class copies of the Act 5 speech. Tell them only that in each speech, Lear is talking to one of his daughters. Have the two groups of students read through their speeches at least twice. The first time, all of the students should read it aloud chorally. The second time through the students should take turns reading line by line. Ask students to identify words they don't know and find their definitions. Continue reading through the speeches until students are familiar with it and are making sense out of it.

Now, subdivide the two groups. One of the subdivided groups should begin preparing a performance of their speech using any significant props or symbols they can find or create. The symbols should help convey the meaning of the most visual or significant words, and the words with difficult meanings. Performers should also consider music or sound effects to create the mood for the speech. The other subdivided group should rewrite and perform the speech in contemporary vernacular, also using props, music or sound effects for the performance. All groups should also create a scenario for events leading up to and following the speech. What might have happened immediately before the speech? What

might happen after?

After preparation and rehearsal time, let the performances begin! Have the two groups with the Act 1 speech perform first, followed by the two groups with the Act 5 speech.

Now the whole class can compare the speeches and discuss their impressions and ideas. What was the predominate feeling of each speech? Did the original speech match the contemporary translation? How did the symbols help clarify meaning? What changes seem to have taken place in the Lear as a father? As a king? What might have caused those changes? How were the different scenarios of before and after events imagined by the performance groups alike and different?

For further follow up, students can do some writing. If they are going to be reading the play, they can predict what happens between Acts 1 and 5. If they are going on to a different play, they can write a scenario for a contemporary story of a father and a daughter which would start with the anger of the Act 1 speech and end with the companionship of the Act 5 speech.

NOTE: This lesson (in a slightly different form) was first published on the [Folger Shakespeare Library Web site](#). ▶

[Home](#) | [Welcome](#) | [Current Issue](#) | [Order Back Issues](#) |

[News on the Rialto](#) | [Featured Articles](#) | [Teaching Resources](#) |
[Archives](#) | [The Infinite Book](#) | [Feedback](#)

