

King Leir

By Geoffrey of Monmouth

Questions for Class Discussion

1. Why do you suppose Geoffrey of Monmouth gives two names—*Kaerleir* and *Leircestre*—for the kingdom or city which Leir ruled? What do you suppose the words *Kaer* (Welsh or British; also spelled *caer*) and *cestre* (Anglo-Saxon; also spelled *chester*) mean? Write down any other place names in your own area or abroad that have “cester” or “chester” in it. Here is an example: *West Chester*.
2. How does Leir propose to give away his kingdom? How does the writer explain such a foolish way of handling things?
3. Using your own words, write down the responses of the daughters to Leir’s question of how much they love him.
4. Who marries the sisters? Which of the husbands is the foreign king? Where does this foreign king rule? What reason does the foreign king give for marrying Cordelia despite the fact that she has lost all her inheritance?
5. How is Leir eventually restored to his rightful throne? Is Leir active or passive in getting back his kingdom?

Literary Terms: Literary Sources

A literary source serves as the information and inspiration of a writer. Shakespeare got many of his ideas from the histories of his day—his literary sources. In fact, there are few works that Shakespeare wrote that came strictly from his own imagination. (One of those plays is *Midsummer Night’s Dream*.) Instead, Shakespeare borrowed his plots from other sources. The fact that Shakespeare got his material from other works does not diminish our appreciation of the playwright. Rather, when we read the original sources, we admire all the more what he did with them to create works of art. He reshaped the plot, characters and other detail to suit his purposes. The beauty of Shakespeare, of course, also lies in his artful use of language.

One popular source of history that was used in his play *Julius Caesar* was Plutarch’s *Lives*, translated by Thomas North (1535–1601), which contains biographies of the Greeks and Romans. Shakespeare’s play faithfully follows the details found in Plutarch, but deviates in important parts that show his artistry.

Another source for Shakespeare was Raphael Holinshed’s histories of England and Scotland. Holinshed was the historical inspiration behind Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, which involves a Medieval Scottish king who lived

around the time of the English King Edward the Confessor. Shakespeare makes important changes to the history, of course, again, to suit his purposes. Macbeth is much more villainous in the play; indeed his wife and he appear almost as demons equal to the witches that stir them on to evil. These changes were made to better communicate the theme of fate, character and the conscience.

Holinshed's translation of the Welsh historian Geoffrey Monmouth was the literary source for Shakespeare's *King Lear*. It is interesting to note is that the details of Geoffrey of Monmouth's history of the Kings of Britain seem equally or even more fantastical than any fictional elements that we might find in Shakespeare's works. This fact should serve to show that fanciful details are not what makes a work of literature great; it is rather the *artful use* of those details that create a "suspension of disbelief" (a believable plot, however fanciful) and communicate a theme which an audience can easily relate to. Shakespeare does both in *King Lear*.

King Lear

By Charles and Mary Lamb

About Words and Word Origins

Many words have more than one meaning. Take the word *hermit*, for example. The word indicates a person who lives alone, often to pray to and to worship God. The word also can refer to a cookie made of molasses, raisins and nuts. Although these two definitions are completely unrelated, both words actually can be traced to the ancient Greek word ἐρημία (*eremia*), which means desert.

In contrast to the word *hermit*, there are words that are spelled the same, but do not have the same origin. The words *rash*, meaning doing things without thinking, and *rash*, meaning a skin ailment, fall under this category. The first word is from the Middle English *rasch*, meaning quick, and the second is possibly from French. We call the two words homonyms, as they share the same sound and spelling, but are two totally different words. (Homophones are different from homonyms in that they have the same sound, but not the same spelling, as in the words *maid* and *made*.) Although they may be spelled and pronounced the same, when words are not from the same origin they are given a separate word entry in a dictionary.

Vocabulary

Use context clues to figure out the meaning of the italicized words. The answers are provided at the end of the exercise.

1. A *suitor* came to the princess with rich gifts.
 - a) step-father

- b) a man wooing a woman to marry
 - c) foreign diplomat
2. The government gets nearly a quarter of its *revenue* from import tax.
 - a) money collected for government
 - b) complaints
 - c) construction work
 3. Don't make a *rash* purchase, as the merchandise cannot be returned.
 - a) excess
 - b) foolish
 - c) hasty
 4. Our father *reproved* the children for making so much noise.
 - a) criticized sharply
 - b) laughed with
 - c) discovered
 5. Does Grandfather still hold a *grudge* against his neighbor after so many years?
 - a) memory
 - b) an unforgiving attitude toward a past misdeed
 - c) fondness
 6. You cannot make subtle suggestions with the girl; the dull girl understands only *bluntness*.
 - a) harsh criticisms
 - b) rude directness
 - c) silly or coarse humor
 7. The president of the company trusted Jeremy to have the *discretion* required to handle the important client's account.
 - a) determination
 - b) good judgment
 - c) cheerful attitude
 8. I have *the utmost* respect for Sarah Smith.
 - a) the most reserved
 - b) the least
 - c) the highest

9. At this time of year especially, the *heath* looks gloomy and desolate.
- a) neighborhood
 - b) landscape
 - c) wasteland
10. Bob has a cranky *disposition* and never has a friendly word for anyone.
- a) character or personality
 - b) embellishment
 - c) way of speaking
- Answers: 1) b 2) a 3) c 4) a 5) b 6) b 7) b 8) c 9) c 10) a

Exercise 2.1

ANALOGIES

Write down the letter next to the relationship that most resembles the one given in small capitals.

EXAMPLE. WRITE : PAPER ::

- a) grow : stature
- b) sing : opera
- c) manage : organization
- d) engrave : metal
- e) fry : heat

Answer: d

1. government : revenue ::
 - a) bookkeeper : accounts
 - b) company : worker
 - c) money : earnings
 - d) thought : idea
 - e) lawyer : fee
2. rash : forethought ::
 - a) boastful : care
 - b) enthusiastic : hot
 - c) stubborn : rebellion
 - d) aloof : isolation
 - e) cowardly : courage
3. bluntness : direct ::
 - a) charm : attractive
 - b) deafness : keen

- c) safety : dangerous
 - d) ship : watertight
 - e) hunger : delicious
4. discretion : wisdom ::
- a) compassion : pity
 - b) manliness : boyhood
 - c) hatred : charity
 - d) justice : judge
 - e) folly : destruction
5. utmost : highest ::
- a) low : top
 - b) radiant : dull
 - c) terrible : horrid
 - d) eventual : timely
 - e) altered : continual
6. heath : uncultivated ::
- a) forest : cheer
 - b) farmland : arable
 - c) shoreline : large
 - d) archipelago : beautiful
 - e) valley : green
7. suitor : courts ::
- a) painter : completes
 - b) milkman : drinks
 - c) bachelor : spends
 - d) choir : sings
 - e) bride : dresses
8. grudge : forgive ::
- a) interest : encounter
 - b) enjoyment : sling
 - c) attraction : repulse
 - d) dread : find
 - e) inclination : understanding
9. CHEERFULNESS : DISPOSITION ::
- a) envy : jealousy

- b) privacy : society
- c) tidiness : maid
- d) sadness : emotion
- e) manners : custom

10. REPROVE : SCOLD ::

- a) cease : begin
- b) praise : uplift
- c) seize : release
- d) agitate : calm
- e) greet : leave

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. Why does King Lear decide to give away his kingdom to his three daughters?
 - a) He thought that young rulers ruled best.
 - b) He feared the King of France's army and wanted to strengthen his kingdom by making friends with the enemy nation through marriage.
 - c) He was only testing to see who loved him best.
 - d) He was getting too old to rule.
 - e) He wanted to demonstrate his love toward his children.
2. Why does Cordelia refuse to say how much she loves her father?
 - a) She did not love him as much as her sisters.
 - b) She was not as expressive and good at speaking as her sisters were.
 - c) She loved her father but could neither lie and say that she loved nobody but her father nor could she bring herself to flatter like her sisters.
 - d) She really thought that her father was not in his right mind.
 - e) She loved the King of France more and did not want to share that love with her father.
3. From his speech against his daughter, we can conclude that a "Scythian" is, in the mind of King Lear, _____.
 - a) more loving and expressive of their love than his daughter Cordelia
 - b) a friendly nation
 - c) a noble people
 - d) a wretched people
 - e) an enemy nation planning with his daughter Cordelia to overtake his kingdom
4. The Duke of Burgundy decides not to marry Cordelia because _____.
 - a) she was not as beautiful as he thought she was

- b) in his mind she showed herself unworthy of his love in her treatment toward her father
 - c) he was more interested in material things than Cordelia's noble character
 - d) the King of France threatened to make war against him if he did
 - e) The story does not say.
5. Who is Caius?
- a) Kent
 - b) a loyal follower of King Lear
 - c) a noble
 - d) a man banished by Lear
 - e) all of the above
6. Once he is banished from his daughter's castle, the storm which King Lear is forced to go out in is most like ____.
- a) Kent's anger toward King Lear
 - b) the trouble and sorrow that is going on in Lear's mind
 - c) in strength, Goneril's and Regan's love for their father
 - d) Cordelia's hatred for what her father has done to her
 - e) Goneril's love for Edmund
7. Which of the following accompanies King Lear in his madness?
- a) Kent
 - b) the fool
 - c) Caius
 - d) all of the above
 - e) none of the above
8. The meeting between Cordelia and the king is most like ____.
- a) a meeting between two enemies
 - b) a person who forgives and a person who shamefully regrets
 - c) a meeting between two people who have neither love nor hate for each other
 - d) a meeting between a person who secretly hates and a person who secretly loves
 - e) two friends who have both deeply misunderstood each other
9. Which of the following does the story say about Goneril's and Regan's deaths?
- a) Their deaths cause King Lear much grief.
 - b) Their deaths are sadder than Cordelia's death.
 - c) Their deaths are just and right, for they have caused their own sorrow and that of others as well.

- d) No one cares about their deaths.
 - e) As in fairy tales, their deaths make everybody happy in the end.
10. Who gives the command for Cordelia to die?
- a) Edmund
 - b) King Lear
 - c) Kent
 - d) the King of France
 - e) Goneril and Regan

Writing: the Comparison Essay

By looking at Shakespeare's sources, we can see the ways in which Shakespeare changed details to suit the purposes of his drama. The tragedy *King Lear*, for instance, which came from Holinshed's rendering of Geoffrey of Monmouth's history of the king, is notably different from its source. The most obvious difference between the history and the drama is the ending. In the end of Shakespeare's play, the king dies with his wicked daughters, while in the history, the king survives to see justice executed on his wicked daughters. Shakespeare seems to have changed the ending of Lear's "real" history to underscore his theme about justice. The villains in the play die by their own machinations, suggesting that wickedness ultimately is punished. But King Lear and Cordelia also die, suggesting that though there is ultimate justice for the wicked, the innocent must suffer for their evil. In order to bring out these themes in his tragedy, the dramatist altered the details of the king's death.

In a five-paragraph comparison composition, write about the changes that Shakespeare made to Geoffrey of Monmouth's history in writing his drama *King Lear*. (You will work from Charles Lamb's rendition of it.) Be sure to discuss the significance of those changes.

1. Begin by writing relevant or important information about Geoffrey of Monmouth, Shakespeare, or both, then lead into your main idea. The main idea of your essay should read something like what follows:

In writing his version of the King Lear story, Shakespeare makes several important changes to his historical source, Geoffrey of Monmouth.

(About four to six sentences)

2. Mention the first difference and explain its significance. Here is an example that you can follow:

One difference between Geoffrey of Monmouth's version and Shakespeare's is the ending. In Monmouth's account, King Lear regains the throne, and as in a fairy tale, everything ends happily

ever after, while in Shakespeare's drama, King Lear dies a very tragic death after experiencing the grief of his dearest daughter's death. Shakespeare's change adds pathos, an emotional element that supports the themes in Shakespeare's play. By his ending, Shakespeare shows that life on earth does not have such happy endings as in fairy tales. Life is harsh and although he was a foolish old man and caused his own problems, the punishment for his foolishness seems unbalanced; only in heaven, Shakespeare seems to be saying, is there real justice.

(About four to eight sentences)

3. Mention a second difference and explain its significance. Make sure that you use a transition, such as *Another difference*, etc.

(About four to eight sentences)

4. Mention a third difference and explain its significance. Again, make sure that you use a transition, such as *One of the most important differences*, or a *last difference*.

(About four to eight sentences)

5. Write a concluding paragraph. Ask yourself such questions as, "What is the significance of what I just wrote?" An answer to this question might involve talking about "artistic license." Often writers "bend" history a little to add interest to their stories, as well as to communicate the theme more effectively.

(About three to six sentences)

For Further Reading

Students might want to read Charles and Mary Lamb, *Tales from Shakespeare*. The book is an adaptation of Shakespeare's plays suitable for children.

Literary Terms: Tragedy

When we say something is tragic, we often mean that it is very sad. When the term is used in literature, however, the meaning of the word is more specific. A tragedy is defined as a play that ends in death and involves a revelation of some kind of truth about life.

In his work *Poetics*, the ancient Greek critic Aristotle says that a tragedy must make an audience *pity* and *fear*. By *pity*, the Greek critic meant that the audience had to identify with and feel sympathy for the hero; by *fear* he meant that the audience had to fear that the same horrible fate may fall on it as it does the hero.

This definition of tragedy has consequences for the main character, or hero of the play. If he is to arouse both fear and pity, a tragic hero must be neither totally innocent nor arrantly wicked. Why? If the tragic hero were totally innocent of any wrong-doing, the audience would experience *shock*, not pity or fear. If the tragic hero were a completely villainous, the audience would not pity, but feel that he has gotten justice, and will not fear because he cannot identify with such a person. In order to get members of an audience to pity and fear, then, a tragic hero has to be somewhere between the innocent victim and the outright villain. How does the protagonist King Lear fit the definition of the tragic hero? In what way is he not totally innocent? In what way is he not all to blame for the trouble he experiences?

King Lear

By William Shakespeare

About Words and Word Origins

The “Prologue” of Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* gives a fascinating description of a wide variety of characters that represent a cross section of Medieval society. One of the pilgrims depicted is the prioress, whom Chaucer satirizes as a religious hypocrite. She is part of a religious order, but from the description of her, the reader quickly sees that everything about her smacks of this world and not of the other. Though she has rosary beads with which she prays, they are fancy and decorated with green gems. Though she has compassion, it is a compassion not for the poor among her, but for her dogs with which she feeds roasted meats, milk and white bread. And though her position in the church assumes that she would make God her only love, she wears a brooch of shiny gold with the inscription *Amor vincit omnia*, or “Love conquers all”—a very unsuitable amulet motto for a governing nun!

Many English words are derived from these three Latin words *amor* (love), *vincere* (conquer), and *omnis* (all). Let’s begin with words derived from *amor*, such as *amorous*. In the King Lear story, the Prince of Burgundy and the King of France visit England with *amorous* intentions, seeking to win the hand of Cordelia (King Lear’s daughter) in marriage. The word *amorous*, then, is an adjective that means “having to do with love.”

There are other commonly used words in English that use the Latin root *amor*, such as *amour* and *paramour*. A love relationship can be called an *amour*, and a person involved in one is called a *paramour*. These two words, however, must be used carefully. Both deal with people and relationships outside the bonds of marriage. Thus, you would not say, “Mr. Wilson and his paramour Janet are going out for dinner tonight to celebrate their wedding anniversary”—unless, of course, you wanted to be humorous.

The words *amour* and *paramour*, however, could be used appropriately when talking about the characters Queen Guinevere and Sir Lancelot of the King Arthur legend. The two are involved in an adulterous relationship, or an *amour*. Both could aptly be called *paramours*. In his version of the legend, titled *Idylls of the King*, the Victorian poet Tennyson uses Guinevere and Lancelot's ugly affair to talk about the English church and society. In a sort of Biblical allegory, Tennyson very clearly depicts their relationship as a sort of spiritual unfaithfulness and alludes to England's departure from spiritual faith. Both in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, man's unfaithfulness to God is pictured in terms of adultery. The Old Testament prophet Hosea talks about Israel's adultery when it goes away from the Lord (Hosea 1:1–3). In the New Testament letter of James, the author says, "You adulterers and adulteresses, do you not know that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God" (James 4:4).

The next word in the Latin phrase is a form of the word *vincere* which means "to conquer," from which the English word *invincible* (unconquerable) comes. In 1588, a fleet of 130 Spanish ships entered the English Channel from Spain to conquer England. The fleet was called, ironically, the "Invincible Armada," and just like the *Titanic* was called the unsinkable ship but sank, the Armada was called an unconquerable fleet but was conquered.

The last word in the phrase is *omnia*, which is the Latin word for "all." The English words omnivorous (eating *all*—both meat and vegetables), omnifarious (involving *all* things), omnibus (a work comprised of *many things*) are derived from this Latin word. Theologians use the words *omniscient*, *omnipresent*, and *omnipotent* to describe the attributes of God. Respectively, they mean all-knowing, present everywhere, and all-powerful.

Vocabulary

confer (1: verb) to give (2: verb) to discuss issues in a formal way

(1) *The queen conferred the title of knight on the celebrity.*

(2) *The parent and teacher set up a meeting in order to confer about the current troubles the student was having in his work.*

dower (noun) dowry; property that a father gives when his daughter married

While from his pocket the notary drew his papers and inkhorn,

Wrote with a steady hand the date and the age of the parties,

Naming the dower of the bride in flocks of sheep and in cattle.

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

strife (noun) conflict; harsh disagreement

The mother complained that there was too much strife in the family.

amorous (adjective) having to do with love; romantic; tending to cause a romantic mood

The lady of his heart was his partner in the dance, and smiling graciously in reply to all his amorous oglings, while Brom Bones, sorely smitten with love and jealousy, sat brooding by himself in one corner.

—Washington Irving, “Rip Van Winkle”

sojourn (noun) a stay in a place away from one’s regular home

Jonathan prospered in the place of his sojourn.

felicitate (adjective) archaic happy (2: verb) to congratulate

(2) Fellow Citizens, I greet you well; I give you joy, on the return of this anniversary; and I felicitate you, also, on the more particular purpose of which this ever-memorable day has been chosen to witness the fulfillment. Hail! all hail! I see before and around me a mass of faces, glowing with cheerfulness and patriotic pride.

—Daniel Webster, “Address at the Laying of the Cornerstone of the Addition to the Capitol”

ample (1: adjective) large in amount or number (2: adjective) more than enough

(1) There was an ample crowd waiting to see the performer.

(2) “Don’t worry about me,” George said, “I have ample room to sit here comfortably.”

opulent (adjective) very rich, lavish or fancy

We admired the opulent palace built in the Middle Ages.

mar (verb) to ruin the appearance or value of something

Do not mar your chances of winning the race by not practicing.

propinquity (noun) nearness, sometimes said of relation

As she walked, however, some footsteps approached behind her, the footsteps of a man; and owing to the briskness of his advance he was close at her heels and had said “Good morning” before she had been long aware of his propinquity. —

Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*

Scythian (noun) an ancient people located in eastern Europe known for their cruel barbarism

The dominions of Alexander and of Trajan were small when compared with the immense area of the Scythian desert.

—Thomas Babbington Macaulay, *The History of England*

hence (interjection) Get away!

Hence, and avoid my sight!

—William Shakespeare, *King Lear*

abode (noun) home; dwelling place

Was he happy with his current abode, or was he looking for another place nearer his work?

cunning (noun) cleverness or know-how (in a good sense) or slyness (in a bad sense)

(1) The architects who built the ancient buildings had an admirable cunning.

(2) The fox is an animal known for its cunning.

choleric (adjective) easily angered

We avoided our choleric classmate when we were able.

Exercise 2.2

FILL IN THE BLANK

Use one of the following words from the word bank to complete the sentences below. You may have to change the form of the word to fit the sentence.

WORD BANK

conferring, strife, amorous, sojourn, amplex, opulence, marring, cunning, abode, propinquity, choleric

EXAMPLE

His ___ in Iran lasted about five months, and then he returned home.

Answer: sojourn

1. The ___ of the rink to our house allowed us to skate every other day.
2. Although the gardens and grounds of the extensive estate were very ___, Jeremiah and Levi preferred their own humble backyards.
3. Although he was never in the best of moods, Fred was not considered ___ by those who knew him well.
4. It was hard to live so far away from home for so long, and Annie was happy to return to her ___ in Pennsylvania.
5. “___ the paint on the hood of the car definitely has reduced its value,” James said to his friend Jonathan.
6. Although they had been best of friends for years, there has been recently a bitter ___ between the two boys.
7. The house was just perfect for their large family, especially the ___ of the dining room where they had to fit a table that seats fifteen.
8. The thief's ___ was immediately acknowledged by the detectives who had scoured the area for hours without finding any clues.

9. After the ____ of the honorary doctorate on the old teacher, he surprised everyone when he said that he could not accept the honor and that his biggest honor could never be any title, but having gotten to know so many great students.
10. We never suspected the relationship between his sister and friend were ____, until they announced that they wanted to get married months later.

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. The phrase “constant will” (printed in bold) as it is used in line 8 of Lear’s opening speech most nearly means ____.
 - a) steadfast intent
 - b) eternal desire
 - c) eternal love
 - d) hated decision
 - e) strange opinion
2. Which of the following BEST describes Goneril’s reply to Lear’s request for his daughters to tell him how much they love him?
 - a) hateful
 - b) fulsome or overstated
 - c) proud
 - d) sincere
 - e) jealous
3. What does Regan compare herself to in her reply and why?
 - a) steel because she is firm
 - b) a duplicate coin because she has the same mind as her sister
 - c) metal because she is as hard-hearted as her sister
 - d) metal because she will be worth more than her sister
 - e) gold because she is a princess
4. What does Lear mean when he says to Cornwall and Albany “With my two daughters’ dower digest the third” (printed in bold)?
 - a) Go and eat your dinners; there is no use of talking anymore.
 - b) This woman’s (Cordelia’s) words are hard to stomach.
 - c) Take the inheritance that was meant for Cordelia.
 - d) My two daughter’s dowries are now worth more than Cordelia’s.
 - e) Cordelia won’t eat without her dowry, but you, Cornwall and Albany, will be full.
5. What does Lear mean when he says to Kent, “The bow is bent, etc.” (printed in bold)?
 - a) Lear has an arrow in his bow that he intends to shoot Kent with.

- b) Lear will tell his archers to shoot Kent if he does not leave in a certain number of days.
 - c) Because Kent is not showing him respect, Lear is asking him to bow, as he is king.
 - d) Lear wants Kent to go off in a boat and leave the kingdom.
 - e) Lear's anger has been provoked, so Kent better beware before he comes to harm.
6. Which of the following BEST summarizes the first six lines of Kent's reply to Lear after he says, "The bow is bent and drawn; make from the shaft"?
- a) I am showing my love and duty to you by being blunt in saying that you have fallen prey to your daughters' flattery.
 - b) You are mad and old and I must now make the decisions for the kingdom.
 - c) Goneril and Regan have spoken the truth, not flattery.
 - d) Although Goneril and Regan have flattered you, their words are untrue.
 - e) I once loved you and served you with all my heart, but now I turn from my folly, as I see that you are an old, mad king.
7. How long does Lear give Kent to escape the punishment of death by fleeing the kingdom?
- a) five days
 - b) six days
 - c) eight days
 - d) ten days
 - e) twenty-one days
8. When Burgundy rejects Cordelia because Lear has taken away her dowry, what is France's response?
- a) He praises Lear for finally seeing the truth of his monstrous daughter.
 - b) He speaks against his other daughters' monstrous behavior.
 - c) He is confused by Lear's inconsistent or erratic behavior.
 - d) He urges Lear to reconcile with his daughter Cordelia.
 - e) Although he says he does not want to argue with Lear about his praise of his daughters Goneril and Regan, he must tell him the truth.
9. What is the BEST word to describe Goneril's and Regan's response to what Cordelia says to them before she bids them farewell?
- a) scornful
 - b) pitying
 - c) comforting
 - d) doubtful
 - e) joyful

10. What are Goneril and Regan discussing at the end of this scene?
- Although they are angry at their father, they pity their sister and wonder that even though he loved her most, he has treated her (and Kent) so poorly.
 - They see that their father's behavior toward Cordelia and toward Kent as evidence of his old age and say that they must do something quickly before his erratic behavior affects them.
 - They pity both their sister and father: Cordelia for being treated so poorly and Lear because he is getting too old to wield his authority.
 - They express their hatred toward their sister and their father, saying that they deserve each other.
 - They wonder at their father's behavior toward Cordelia and Kent, as he has always shown himself to be a wise and thoughtful man.

Literary Terms: Tragedies, Comedies, Histories, and Romances

Shakespeare is perhaps most famous for his tragedies—*King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Hamlet*, and *Julius Caesar*. But the English dramatist wrote other kinds of plays, including romances, comedies, and histories. Comedies and romances end in marriage, while the tragedies and histories end in death. Unlike the comedies, romances (such as the *Tempest*) have fantastical elements and often have a theme of fall and redemption. The comedies often involve the theme of appearance and reality. Twins, for example, play a role in *A Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night* where mistaken identity leads to trouble and near disaster. But when the veil of mistaken appearances is taken away, the reality surfaces. Comedies end in the institution of marriage, signifying harmony, stability and hope. With marriage, there is no more chaos and the potential tragedy that has threatened the lives or welfare is averted.

The histories of Shakespeare more often than not involve English kings, while the tragedies do not. Thus, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar* and *King Lear*, although they are monarchs, are not English: *Macbeth* was a Scottish king; *Julius Caesar*, a Roman; and *King Lear*, a Celtic Briton. The kings of the histories include the kings of the Norman and Anglo-Saxon line: King John, Henry IV, Henry V, Richard II, and Henry VIII. You might also say that the tragedies are more broad in their treatment of character, than histories. Details of the history are not as important as the universal themes expressed.