King Lear Annotated Bibliography: Cultural Context


- Bengtsson reviews how the historical time period around when *King Lear* was written affects the contents and understanding of the play. Specifically, an interesting concept that Bengtsson points out is the idea of a divine ruler and how Lear forgoes usual means of replacing a ruler by giving his estate to his daughters. He argues that this allows the play to be read in terms of reflection on how the monarchy is run and concerns about the power of early modern kings.


- This book explores the Renaissance religious, political, and literary culture in *King Lear*, by focusing on the images and metaphors used in the play, particularly in Part 2 of the book. This source provides valuable information on the context of several different religions, such as Christianity, Protestantism, Puritans and more and what the different metaphors and images on nakedness could mean to each of these religions. It explores the same topic in different political contexts, using semantic and linguistic theory to support the ideas.

The article discusses Edward’s attempt at redemption when he tries to cancel the order for Cordelia’s execution but he is too late. This is a good example of cultural context because it shows religion (Christianity) in the play with the portrayal of repentance by Edmund.


Neely uses several different Shakespeare texts, but especially King Lear to outline the way in which Shakespeare culturally creates the dramatization of madness in his plays. The essay focuses on how Shakespeare uses several culture specific frames, such as specific phrases, disorganization of language, the hearing of voices and more. The essay also compares it to the likes of Hamlet in the character Ophelia to observe the differences in gender and madness. It helps explain how many people of the time viewed mental illness, and gives ideas as to how they can be performed and portrayed.


This article uses King Lear as a means to explore and analyze how gender roles are conveyed in literature, and furthermore why specific gender stereotypes are represented culturally throughout literature. The author of this article, Sharma, begins by stating that King Lear is a play that is often patronized by feminists due to the strong misogynistic elements the play exerts such as, the juxtaposition of females characters and the absence of a mother figure, which she claims formulates biased
views towards females and stereotypes them. Sharma states that the absence of a mother figure creates a situation in which the importance of love and power lies solely under King Lear’s control, which is demonstrated when he distorts the morality of love in the play by forcing his daughters to profess their affection towards him, otherwise he will withhold their land and titles, further weakening their agency. Sharma also interestingly notes that the word “mother” is only used twice in the entire play and always with a negative association, psychologically causing the reader and audience to associate mothers (women) as bad. Sharma explains that Regan and Goneril’s treatment of Lear is not so different from how he treated them when he was in power and had the ability to banish them at any time without cause, yet because he is a king and they are merely women, the audience views Goneril and Regan as power hungry harpies and Lear as the victim. From a cultural and historical view, many royal women throughout Europe in the 17th century held little power regarding land ownership, money, class standing, and the choice of whom to marry. This article reinforces the absolute power men typically held over women during this era and highlights the way in which women who did exercise their small-scale power were stereotypically viewed as wicked.


- Daughters and Dowries talks about the opportunities that were available to daughters regarding wealth, land, and inheritance. Also it discusses how the daughter would
receive a dowry when she was to be married and relates it to the Duke of Burgundy and Cordelia. This relates to cultural context in King Lear because it discusses how women were treated if they were not wealthy and shows that values that men and women had towards marriage.


- In this article, Joseph Chih-chiao Yang is arguing the importance of a stable home in the world of King Lear. Specifically, when Lear no longer has the safe physical space surrounding him his mental spaces are also disrupted, thus leaving Lear in a very vulnerable state. I choose this as an example of cultural context because Yang stresses the importance of stability in homes and family. Yang also discusses the types of negative affects losing a type of stability can have.