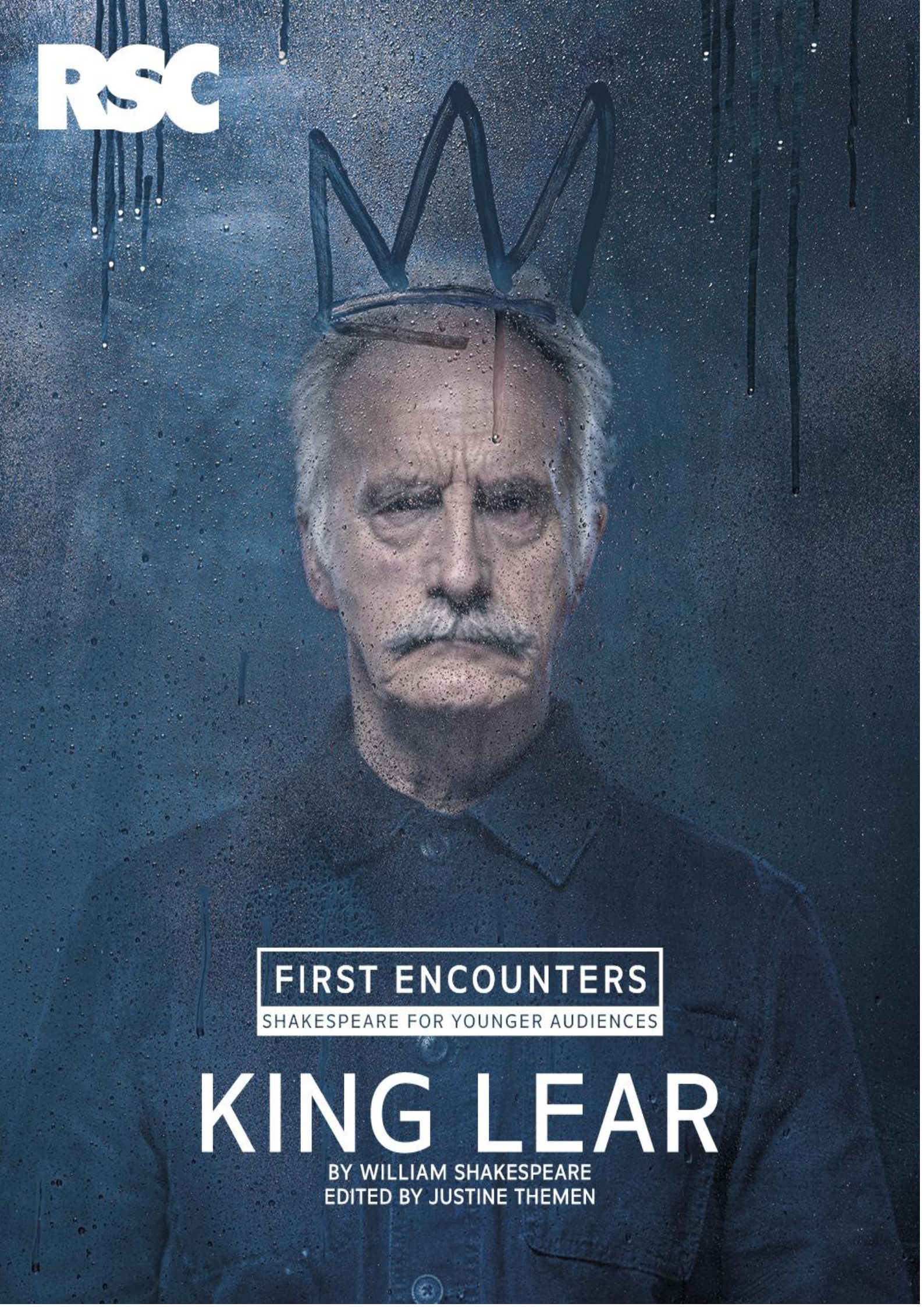




RSC



FIRST ENCOUNTERS
SHAKESPEARE FOR YOUNGER AUDIENCES

KING LEAR

BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
EDITED BY JUSTINE THEMEN

ABOUT THIS PACK

This pack supports the RSC's 2025 First Encounters with Shakespeare production of *King Lear*, directed by Justine Themén.

The activities in the Pack can be used as stand-alone practical approaches to the play or as supporting activities for students seeing the production. They have been designed with KS2 students in mind but can be adapted for other age groups. Some activities are best suited to an open space such as a hall, but a few suggested adaptations have been provided so they can be used in a classroom, or at home if you are preparing your child or young person to watch the production.

We hope you enjoy trying out some of the activities in this Pack. **If you only have 30 minutes to prepare your young person to see the production, we suggest you jump straight to The Story in Ten Moments on page 6.**

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These symbols are used throughout the Pack:



READ

Notes from the production, background info or extracts



ACTIVITY

A practical or open space activity

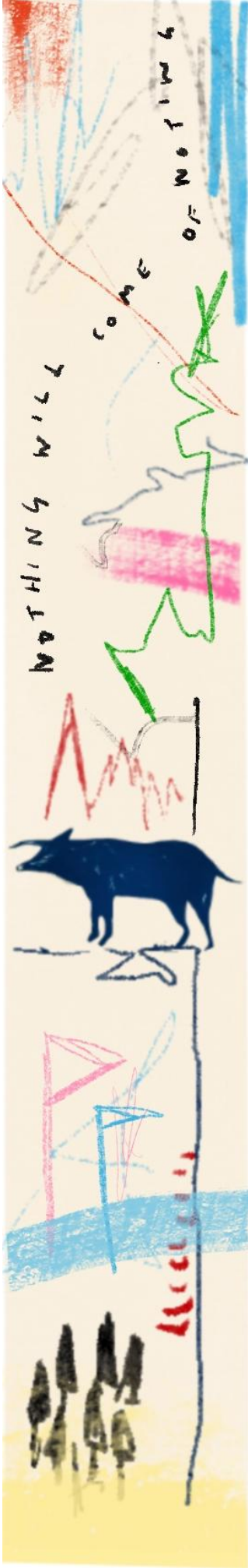


WRITE

A writing or discussion activity



All photos in this Learning Pack are © Lucy Barriball.



ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

A king announces that he will divide his kingdom between his three daughters according to how much they love him.

Lear thinks he will live out his old age with all of the comforts of kingship, and none of the responsibility. But the eldest two daughters, Goneril and Regan, have other ideas in mind – and he has given away all his power to stop them. His vanity has devastating consequences for family, nation and for climate.

Our First Encounters with Shakespeare production makes Shakespeare's play about family, power and betrayal relevant for a new generation of theatregoers.

In this Pack, you will find a selection of activities to help you work with young people to explore the story, characters and themes of *King Lear* through the lens of our First Encounters production.



ACTIVITY 1: What Makes a Good Leader?

Time: approx. 30 minutes

For the following activity, you will need Resource A in the Resources section of this Pack.

- Ask your young people to imagine they are in a country about to elect a new leader. What would they look for in this person? What kind of leader do they think would be good for a country? What qualities might they need?
- Now, show them the photographs from past RSC productions (Resource A). These are all photographs of King Lear and other leaders in



Shakespeare's plays. Ask them to choose one of the photographs and discuss what sort of leader they think they are.

- Ask your young people to consider:
 - What characteristics do they think this character has? What is it about the photograph that makes them think that?
 - How has costume, staging, or lighting been used to give the audience information about the character?
 - Which of these characters would they choose to be leader of their country? Why?

EXPLORING THE CHARACTERS



ACTIVITY 2: Who's Who and What Do They Say?

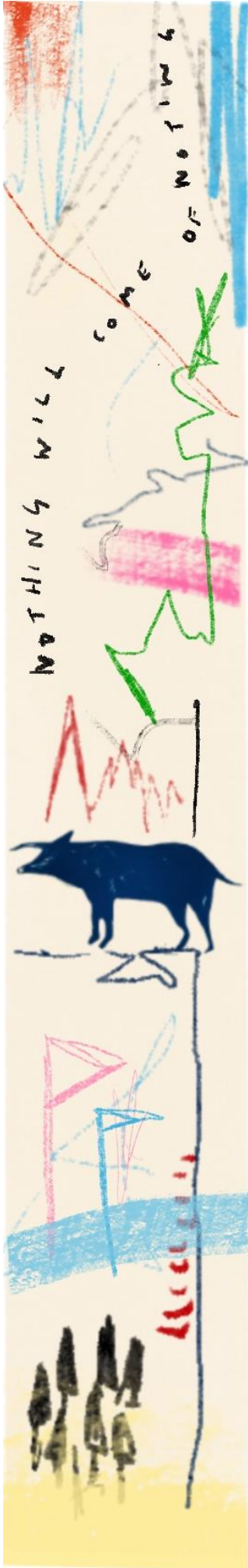
Time: approx. 60 minutes

For the following activities, you will need Resources B to D in the Resources section of this Pack. You will need to cut out each of the photographs and write the name of the character on the back. You will also need to cut out each of the quotes.

- Place the past production photographs of characters from the play (Resource B) around the room along with the quotes spoken by each of the characters (Resource C). Make sure the photographs and quotes are all mixed up.
- Now, ask your young people to decide which characters they think say which quotes, based on what they look like in the production photographs and what they know of the story. They don't need to worry about trying to get the 'right' pairing – what's more interesting is their justification for why they think that photograph fits that quote.
- Ask the young people to turn all the photographs over. On the back of each of them is the name of the character in the photograph, which they can match to the right quote.

Sensitive content

You may wish to highlight to your young people that there are many deaths in this play, including torture and a death by suicide. King Lear is one of Shakespeare's tragedy plays, which means it has a sad ending. However, in this production we have explored difficult moments in a sensitive way and have looked at how we can bring some lightness and hope to the story. You will know your young people well and be able to gauge how much support they need around these topics. The



following activity (which introduces the story of the play) could be adapted to exclude characters that die if you wish.

- Give the young people the *King Lear* Detective Clues (Resource D) to see if they can work out which characters are related, which are friends, who marries who, and who is left alive at the end of the play.
- Ask your young people to assemble a spider diagram of the relationships in the play.
- Invite young people to choose a prop or piece of costume for each character, or draw a prop or piece of costume on a piece of paper.
- Now ask them to take it in turns to place these in the middle of the room, for use in the Storytelling activities below. As they put their object in the middle of the room, ask them to talk about why they've chosen it. Ask them to think about why it might work for the character practically and symbolically, and what it might make an audience think about the character when they see it.

Production Notes:

Travelling Storytellers

In this production, the story is told by a group of Lear's subjects, who have been neglected by his rule, and displaced by the ensuing war. They are the "*Poor, naked wretches*" Lear talks about in a speech he makes.

They are now travelling the kingdom performing their story, in order to avoid a repeat of their own experience under a neglectful and unjust ruler, and a narcissistic father. They want to encourage others to think about how we all live and lead in a way that is more just, collaborative, and harmonious (both with each other and with the planet).

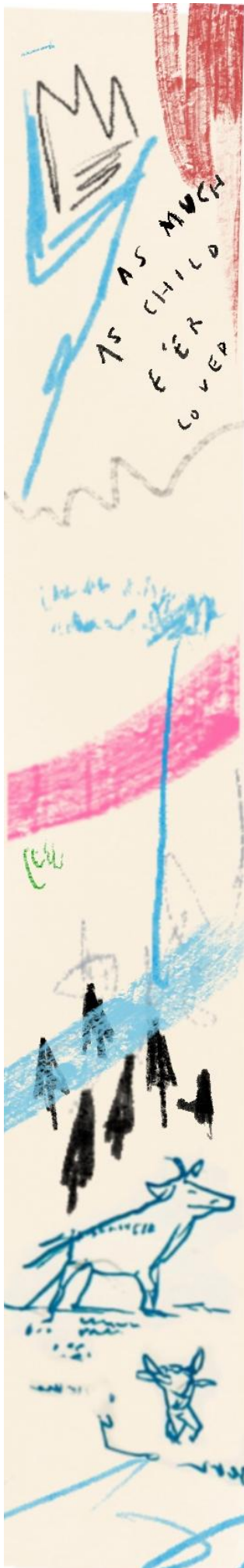
EXPLORING THE STORY



ACTIVITY 3: Understanding the Story

Time: approx. 40 minutes

This activity will help young people understand the key story beats of the play. This will allow them to recognise and explore the key plot points before they watch the performance. It's best suited to a studio or hall but can be done in a classroom or at home. You will need Resource E in the Resources section of this Pack.



Warm up:

- Before you start, ask young people to stand in a circle and invite them to create a routine for getting into role to tell a story. Here is a prompt script to guide them through the activity:
 - First, put on your storyteller shoes (they have to be big and sturdy for walking from town to town). Do your shoes have laces or Velcro?
 - Next, put on your storyteller skirt, trousers or shorts (they have to have lots of pockets for all your props).
 - Then put on your storyteller shirt (it has to have lots of room in it for all your big gestures). What colour is your shirt?
 - Many actors in Shakespeare's day had a ruff around their necks. What might you add to make the outfit yours?
 - Lastly, create your storyteller pose – something ready and alert. Now you're ready to tell stories.

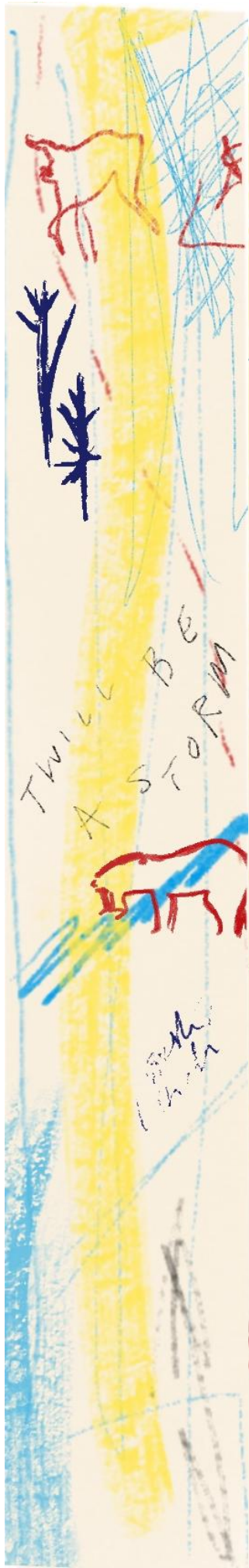
This warm up can be adapted so that young people stand in front of a partner, or in front of the mirror, to explore their routine for getting into role.



The Story in Ten Moments:

- Place any costume or props that you have in the middle of the room and ask young people to sit in a circle around them.
- Use the King Lear in Ten Moments (Resource E) to introduce the young people to the story, by reading aloud each 'moment'. As you read aloud, invite each young person in turn to step into the circle and play each of the characters as they appear. They can use the costume and props in the middle of the circle to help them play the role. At the end of each section, say the word 'whoosh' to signal that the young people must return their costume and props to the middle of the circle and sit back down.

In this activity, each character will be played by different young people, so they can work together to select costume and props to help identify each of the characters. If they want to observe, invite young people to say 'pass'



when it comes to their turn, but let them know that they won't get a chance to have another go until the story comes back round the circle.

Reflection Point:

Ask young people to discuss:

- What stood out for them in the story and what surprised them about the story?
- What things do they have questions about, with regards to the story?
- What are some of the key themes emerging?

This activity can be adapted as follows:

- Ask young people to pair up. One young person will start a story with the line, *"Once upon a time"*. Their partner will then add a sentence to continue the story, and so on. Encourage young people to try and always build on the sentence that has come before.
- Next, ask the young people to repeat the activity with the other person starting and see if they can include in their story the following elements: **a king, his 3 daughters, a storm and a war.**

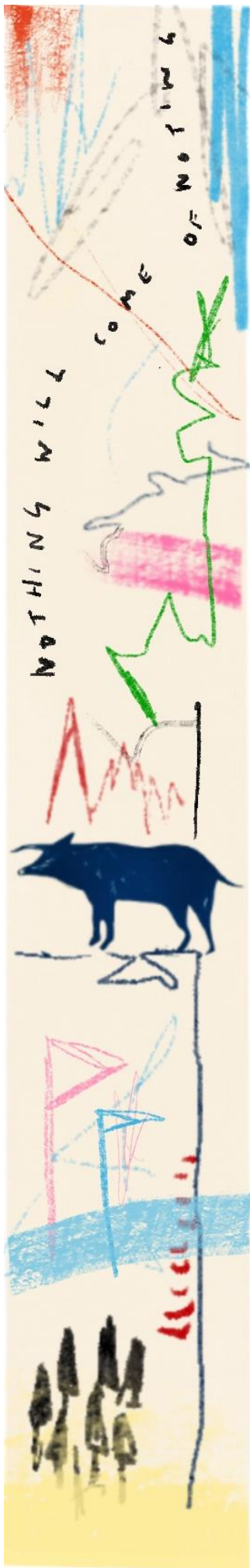
EXPLORING THE THEMES



ACTIVITY 4: Go, Stop, Show Us

Time: approx. 30 minutes

- Ask your young people to move around the room, exploring the whole space, when you shout "go". Next, ask them to stop where they are when you shout "stop". Practice this a few times so young people are stopping and moving together.
- Next, ask the young people to keep moving and, on your command, find a partner to make a still image of the following: **Parent and child; father and daughter; siblings.**
- Ask your young people to look around at the different interpretations that each pair has created and what they notice is similar or different between the images.
- Next, divide your young people into **three** groups. Each group is given one of the key themes from the production: **Power and Leadership; Parent and Child; Climate Justice.**
- Ask each group to make a still image for their given theme.
- Provide each group with the following quotes for their corresponding still images:



- Power and Leadership:
*"Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,"*
- Parent and Child:
*"How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
To have a thankless child!"*
- Climate Justice:
"Crack nature's molds,"

- Ask each group to adjust their still image based on the quote provide and decide how they want the line to be spoken aloud. Encourage your young people to add some movement and actions to bring the image to life.
- Invite your young people to watch each other's and discuss what they notice.

This activity can be adapted as follows:

- Ask young people to write each of the three themes of the production on large sheets of paper: **Power and Leadership; Parent and Child; Climate Justice.**
- Invite them to write everything the theme means to them on the piece of paper in one particular colour.
- Next, ask them to write or read out the corresponding quote for the theme:
 - Power and Leadership:
*"Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,"*
 - Parent and Child:
*"How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
To have a thankless child!"*
 - Climate Justice:
"Crack nature's molds,"
- Ask the young people to reflect on which words they've written still fit the theme when taking the quote into account and circle these words in a different colour.
- Next, ask them to think about which new words spring to mind and write these words in the new colour.
- Invite young people to look at the words in the two different colours and consider how the quote provided has changed their understanding of that particular theme.

Reflection Point:

Ask young people to discuss:

- How did the quote change their thoughts about the theme they were given?



- Do these quotes and the images that were created or words that were written suggest a particular tone or mood for the play?

PRODUCTION NOTES:

Key Themes

Over a year ago, the Director Justine Themen, visited 16 different groups of young people across RSC partner schools to find out what is currently preoccupying young people and what they feel needs changing or addressing in their world and in their lives. What became clear from these conversations and explorations was that there were three main key themes emerging: leadership (and specifically poor leadership), family dynamics and the relationships between children and their parents, and the climate crisis. These themes guided us to be able to choose the right title for this First Encounters production, and to frame the approach to making the production with young people's preoccupations front and centre.



ACTIVITY 5: Diving Deeper into Themes

Time: approx. 60 minutes

Parent and Child:

For this activity, you will need a small toy in the space, ideally something that doesn't require a power source, and Resources F and G from the Resources section of the Pack.

- Divide your young people into small groups. Ask them to look at the quotes related to 'Parent' from *King Lear* (Resource F) and quotes related to 'Child' (Resource G).
- Next, based on the quotes they have been given, ask your young people to discuss what they think the relationships between parents and children are like in the play?
- Invite young people in pairs to make a still image showing this relationship.
- Next, ask all of your young people to sit in a circle on the floor and look at the toy. Ask them to imagine that this toy has come from the world of *King Lear* and to think about what the story of this toy might be.
- Pass the toy around the circle, inviting each young person to give their own 'backstory' for the toy and which character(s) it might belong to. Ask young people to receive the toy from the previous young person by saying "Yes, or..." and add their own ideas. They can play with how the toy is used and what sounds it makes if they would like to.

This activity can be adapted for pairs of young people by asking them to imagine their job title is Professor of Toy History: an expert in toys and where they come from. Invite them to explore the toy and consider what the



story of this toy is. Ask them, in their 'expert opinion' where the toy has come from and to share the story of the toy with each other.

Leadership:

- Ask young people to stand in a circle and for one young person to volunteer to 'lead' the group. The group must follow all of the actions of their 'leader'. Repeat this activity with different young people as 'leaders'.
- Invite young people to reflect on what they noticed about how their 'leaders' were leading them in the action and how they felt whilst following each of them.
- Next, in small groups, ask young people to divide a large piece of paper into two columns: 'Good Leader' at the top of one column and 'Bad Leader' at the top of the other.
- Give the groups five minutes to write any words they would attribute to a 'Good Leader' and then a 'Bad Leader'. Invite them to discuss any attributes that could sit under both of the two columns and why that might be the case.
- Next, in their groups, ask them to create a statue for a 'Good Leader' and then a statue for a 'Bad Leader'. Over a count of five, ask them to move from one statue to the other.
- Invite the young people to reflect on what the differences are physically between a 'Good Leader' and a 'Bad Leader', and the different attributes shown in the two statues. Were there any similarities between either of these statues and the still images they made for 'Parent' and 'Child' in the previous activity?

This activity can be adapted by asking young people to draw a picture of a 'Good Leader' and one of a 'Bad Leader', or to source images that best represent these for them.



Reflection Point:

Ask young people to consider:

- Where do we see leadership in our world?
- Whose responsibility is good leadership?
- What are the responsibilities of people towards a leader?

- What makes someone want to follow a leader?
- Why might someone show attributes of a 'Bad Leader'?
- Are there any similarities between 'Parent', 'Child' and 'Leader'?

Climate Justice:

- Place a very large piece of paper (e.g. a metre or two of a roll of wrapping paper) on the floor. This is going to be the map of Lear's kingdom.
- Invite young people to go around the piece of paper drawing various things that they think might be in Lear's kingdom. Encourage them to think about including locations in the play, such as Lear's castle, Goneril and Regan's castles, the heath where the storm takes place, the hovel Lear hides in.

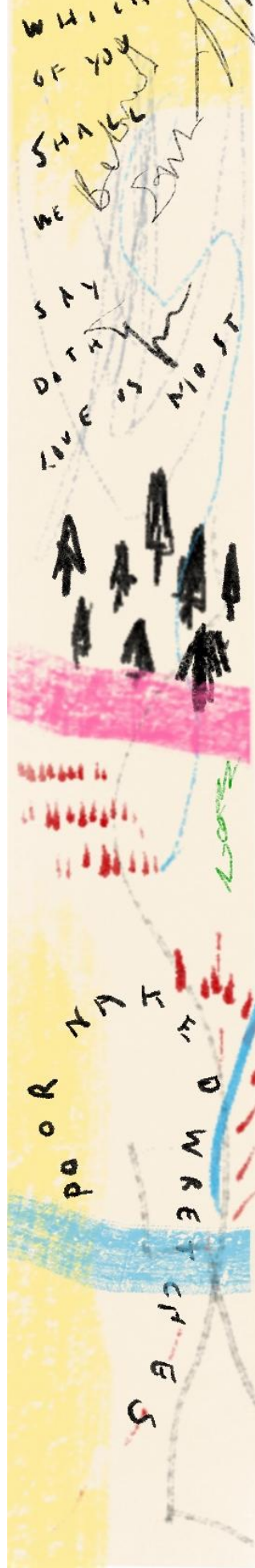
PRODUCTION NOTES:

Designing the Kingdom

The design for the floor cloth in the production has been created in order to visually show different locations in the play or quotes that tell us something about the world of the play. This is to help you as an audience understand all of the different locations Lear's kingdom. Below is a sneak preview of the floor cloth in the production.



- Share with the young people that Lear says:
"Oh, I have ta'en
Too little care of this!" when seeing the "Poor, naked wretches" referenced earlier. He is realising that he hasn't taken care of his kingdom, both in terms of the people living in it and of the land itself.
- Discuss what **Climate Justice** is with your young people. Climate Justice focuses on the impacts of climate change on marginalized or otherwise vulnerable populations. Different communities feel the effects of the climate crisis differently, and the responsibility for the crisis rests with some countries and companies more than others. Approximately 60% of greenhouse gas emissions are produced by ten countries, whereas less



than 3% comes from the 100 least-emitting countries¹. However, amongst those least-emitting countries are those that are impacted the most by the climate crisis.

- Ask them where they see examples of the impact of the climate crisis or evidence of climate injustice in their world and/or in their communities.
- Alongside anything that has been drawn on the large piece of paper, ask young people to draw or write possible consequences of climate injustice. For example, you could write about how the people living next to a major road would be affected by the air pollution, or about how rising water levels mean people living next to a river may have to leave their homes.
- Invite young people to consider what helps or could help us to live well with nature. Ask them to draw or write on the map anything they would add to the kingdom to help combat the climate crisis, or to help the people of the kingdom live well with nature.

PRODUCTION NOTES:

Bouffon

The performance style of the Travelling Storytellers is inspired by Bouffon performance. Bouffon is a grotesque, satirical style of clowning rooted in European theatrical traditions, drawing on medieval carnival, commedia dell'arte, and the role of jesters. Performed by outsiders or social outcasts, Bouffons hold up a funhouse mirror to society, mocking institutions, hypocrisy and morality. Bouffon relies on parody, improvisation, and ensemble play - often chanting or moving in unison - to overturn societal values, praising the ugly and mocking the beautiful. Through direct audience interaction, humour, and taboo themes, Bouffons often push boundaries, exposing hidden power dynamics and absurdities, and forcing both performer and spectator to confront uncomfortable truths.

WATCHING THE PRODUCTION

"See better Lear"

Gloucester, Act 1, Scene 1

For the following activity, you will need Resource H in the Resources section of this Pack. You will need to cut out the template and the small hole within the template. Young people will write on the reverse of the template.

¹ Environmental Justice Foundation. Inequality is worsening as climate crisis deepens: new report. <https://ejfoundation.org/news-media/inequality-is-worsening-as-climate-crisis-deepens-new-report>, 2022.



ACTIVITY 6: Watch the Play and Have Your Say

Time: approx. 20 minutes

In our production, Gloucester says to King Lear “See better Lear”, urging him to look past the flattery around him. Then in the final scene, Edgar says how people should “speak what we feel, not what we ought to say”, imploring those around him to be honest, even if this goes against societal expectations.

- Whilst young people are watching the production, ask them to think about what mistakes or bad choices were made in the play. Are there moments in the play where different choices could have been made to enable a better outcome?
- Invite them to imagine Lear has asked them to advise him on how to divide up his kingdom. What would they suggest that he does? Who in the play displays qualities of good leadership or good decision-making?
- Now, ask them to consider the following about their world:
 - What could good leadership and good decision-making look like?
 - How do we work better together?
 - How do we live well with nature?
- Next, find and cut out the Leaf Template (Resource H) in this Pack. Ask the young people to consider their answers to the above questions, as they write (or draw) their responses on the back of the leaf template. What words of hope or change for the future would they like to share? How do they want their world to be different and how might they contribute to this?



Speaking aloud our words:

- We invite all young people, whether in a classroom setting or at home to participate in the above activity and bring their leaf with them to the



performance. Please can their accompanying adult keep hold of the leaf throughout and then support their young people to read aloud their words of hope or change for the future at the end, if they wish to.

- Towards the end of the performance, the company will share a specially written epilogue. There will be a moment when young people are invited to stand up and voice their contribution to what difference they want to make.
- Please ask any young people who would like to speak aloud their words to hold up and wave their leaf when they are invited to do so. The character of Fool will then say:

“So speak what we feel...” and a young person can respond with their words.

“Speak what we feel...” and another young person can respond with their words.

- This will repeat another couple of times.
- The Fool then continues with **“We will be blinding in our brilliance...”** which indicates that the moment for sharing has finished. If a young person misses their cue or no longer wishes to share their words, it is not a problem at all; the company are prepared that this may happen.
- Young people will then be invited to attach their leaf to a barren tree outside the performance space when they leave, giving hope and ‘new life’ to the world that has been left at the end of the play.

Visual Story & Content Advisory:

Before attending the performance, you may wish to have a look at our [Content Advisory](#) page on our website and the Visual Story, to further prepare your young people for watching.

Reflection Point:

After the performance, ask young people to discuss the following:

- What have you learnt?
- What would you do differently from Lear if you were a leader, or a parent?
- Where do you lead in your life or community? What might you do differently in your leadership role now?
- What would you like other audience members to learn from this play?
- Do you have a message for a character in the play, and if so, what is it?
- What are your hopes for the future of the land and the characters of the play?

Resources

Appendix A: RSC Production Images of Leaders



King Lear, 2010: Greg Hicks as Lear, Photo by Manuel Harlan (c) RSC



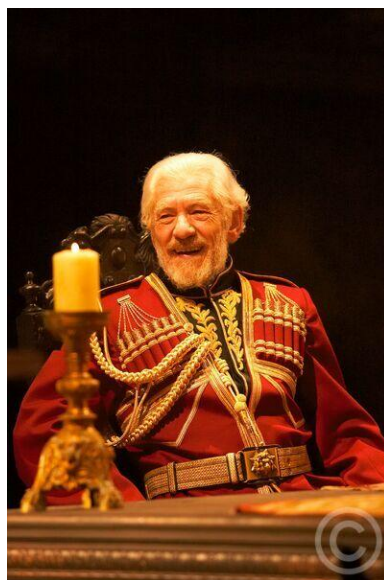
Julius Caesar, 2012: Jeffrey Kissoon as Julius Caesar, Photo by Kwame Lestrade (c) RSC



Antony and Cleopatra, 2017: Josette Simon as Cleopatra, Photo by Helen Maybanks (c) RSC



Henry VI Rebellion, 2022: Henry VI, Photo by Ellie Kurtzz (c) RSC



King Lear, 2007: Ian McKellen as Lear, Photo by Manuel Harlan (c) RSC



Henry V, 2015: Alex Hassell as Henry, Photo by Keith Pattison (c) RSC

Resource B: RSC Production Images of Characters from *King Lear*



**Name on Reverse:
Poor Tom**

King Lear production photos, 2016: Poor Tom, Photo by Ellie Kurtz (c) RSC



**Name on Reverse:
Goneril**

King Lear, 2007: Goneril, Photo by Manuel Harlan (c) RSC



**Name on Reverse:
One of Lear's
Advisors**

King Lear, 2010: the Earl of Kent, Photo by Manuel Harlan (c) RSC



**Name on Reverse:
Regan**

King Lear, 2010: Regan Photo by Manuel Harlan (c) RSC



**Name on Reverse:
Cordelia**

Young People's Shakespeare: King Lear, 2012: Cordelia, Photo by Hugo Glendinning (c) RSC



**Name on Reverse:
The Fool**

King Lear, 2007: the Fool, Photo by Manuel Harlan (c) RSC



**Name on Reverse:
Edmund**

Lear, 2007: Edmund prepares to fight, Photo by Manuel Harlan (c) RSC



**Name on Reverse:
Edgar**

King Lear production photos, 2016: Edgar, Photo by Ellie Kurttz (c) RSC



**Name on Reverse:
King Lear**

King Lear Production photos, 2016: Antony Sher as Lear, Photo by Ellie Kurttz (c) RSC



**Name on Reverse:
Gloucester**

Young People's Shakespeare: King Lear, 2012: blinded Gloucester, Photo by Hugo Glendinning (c) RSC



**Name on Reverse:
Cornwall**

Young People's Shakespeare: King Lear, 2012: Cornwall and Regan, Photo by Hugo Glendinning (c) RSC



**Name on Reverse:
Albany**

Details of the image item King Lear, 2007: Regan, Albany and Goneril, Photo by Manuel Harlan (c) RSC

Poor Tom's a cold

Now, gods, stand up for bastards!

Being weak, seem so

Blow wind and crack your cheeks

Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave
My heart into my mouth

A very honest-hearted fellow, and
as poor as the king

Some villain hath done me wrong

How sharper than a serpent's tooth
it is
To have a thankless child

Daughter, do not make me mad

That's a wise man and a fool

Resource D: *King Lear* Detective Clues

1. The King has three daughters.
2. He has two friends, one named after an English city, and one named after an English county.
3. The man named after the city has two sons.
4. He calls one of them 'illegitimate'.
5. This 'illegitimate' son has the same name as one of William Shakespeare's siblings.
6. The other son is tricked into fleeing the city and becomes Poor Tom.
7. Of the king's three daughters, the youngest's name is first alphabetically. The eldest's is last alphabetically.
7. The eldest daughter marries a man who shares a name with a city on the coast of Australia.
8. The middle daughter marries a man who shares a name with a county on the coast of England.
9. The King is also befriended by a character who has a statue dedicated to him in Stratford-Upon-Avon, opposite Shakespeare's birthplace.
10. By the end of the play, only three of these characters are left. An anagram of their names combined is 'badly enrage tank'.

Resource E: *King Lear* in Ten Moments

1	King Lear wishes to retire, and 'to shake all cares and business from our age,/ Conferring them on younger strengths'. He divides his kingdom into three parts and asks his daughters who loves him the most. His eldest daughters, Goneril and Regan, give him answers that please him greatly, so he gives them large parts of his kingdom. But his youngest daughter Cordelia disappoints him with her answer. He is furious, takes away her dowry, and gives her share to the other two daughters.
2	The King of France agrees to marry Cordelia despite what has happened and she goes with him to France.
3	The Earl of Gloucester's youngest son Edmund fools his father into believing that his older son, Edmund's half-brother Edgar, wants to kill Gloucester.
4	Edmund tells Edgar to run away because his life is in danger and Edgar disguises himself as a 'mad' beggar called 'Poor Tom'.
5	King Lear goes to stay with his oldest daughter Goneril. She asks him to reduce the number of his followers because of their noise and behaviour. He is deeply offended and goes to stay with his daughter Regan instead.
6	But Regan unites with Goneril against their father, questioning why he should have any followers at all. He refuses to give up his followers and instead walks off into a storm, followed by Kent and the Fool. He rages against the ingratitude of his daughters, and the others fear for his sanity.
7	Lear meets 'Poor Tom' in the storm. Gloucester then finds Lear, gives him food and shelter and sends him to Dover to meet up with Cordelia.
8	Regan and her husband Cornwall torture Gloucester for helping Lear and gouge out his eyes. 'Poor Tom' then finds his blind father, treats him with compassion, and helps him travel to Dover to meet the king.

9

Goneril and Regan's British armies, supported by Edmund, defeat Cordelia's invading French forces. Lear and Cordelia are captured and she is later killed.

10

Edgar kills Edmund in a duel. Goneril poisons Regan and dies by suicide. Lear dies mourning Cordelia.

But I have, sir, a son by order of
law.

As much as child e'er loved, or
father found.

Here I disclaim all my paternal care

thou my sometime daughter

obey thy parents

there's son against father...there's
father against child.

I prithee, daughter, do not make
me mad

The untented woundings of a
father's curse

I pray you, father, being weak,
seem so.

How sharper than a serpent's tooth
it is
To have a thankless child

Tell me, my daughters...Which of
you shall we say doth love us
most?

As much as child e'er loved

Beloved sons

Ingratitude...More hideous when
thou show'st thee in a child

How manifold and strong a bond
The child was bound to the father

Thou art my flesh, my blood, my
daughter
Or rather a disease that's in my
flesh

Thy youngest daughter does not
love thee least

Thy other daughter will use thee
kindly

