

– BACKGROUND –

King Lear, a stubborn and proud old man, decides to divide his kingdom among his three daughters. He'll give the largest share to the one who loves him most. Unable to tell the difference between flattery and sincere love, he banishes his youngest daughter, the honest Cordelia. He divides the kingdom between Goneril and Regan. These two "gilded serpents" stop pretending affection. They work together to strip him of every possession, no longer pretending any affection. Lear slowly goes mad, but in his lowest state he begins to know himself as a human being.

Like Lear, Gloucester is also blind to the evil he has fathered—in his illegitimate son Edmund. He sees the truth only after he has been literally blinded by his enemies and saved from despair and suicide by his son Edgar. Evil does its worst to both Lear and Gloucester—but the positive result of their physical destruction is spiritual renewal.

– CAST OF CHARACTERS –

LEAR King of Britain

KING OF FRANCE one of Cordelia's suitors

GONERIL Lear's eldest daughter

DUKE OF ALBANY Goneril's husband

REGAN Lear's second daughter

DUKE OF CORNWALL Regan's husband

CORDELIA Lear's youngest daughter

DUKE OF BURGUNDY one of Cordelia's suitors

EARL OF KENT loyal member of Lear's court

EARL OF GLOUCESTER loyal member of Lear's court

EDGAR Gloucester's elder son, later disguised as

Poor Tom, a ragged beggar

EDMUND Gloucester's younger, illegitimate son

OSWALD Goneril's steward

CURAN Gloucester's servant

OLD MAN Gloucester's tenant

DOCTOR

FOOL Lear's jester

KNIGHTS, OFFICERS, MESSENGERS, SOLDIERS, SERVANTS, and

ATTENDANTS

ACT 1

| Scene 1 |

England. A room of state in King Lear's palace. Kent, Gloucester, and Edmund enter.

KENT: I thought the king loved the Duke of Albany more than the Duke of Cornwall.

GLOUCESTER: Now that he has divided his kingdom, it's not clear which of the dukes he values most. Their shares are so equal that neither one would prefer the other's.

KENT (*indicating Edmund*): Isn't this your son, my lord?

GLOUCESTER: I fathered him, sir. I have so often blushed to acknowledge him that now I am hardened to it.

KENT: I cannot conceive why.

GLOUCESTER: Sir, this young fellow's mother could! So she got pregnant and had a son for her cradle before she had a husband for her bed. Do you see a fault?

KENT: I cannot wish the fault undone, the result of it being so handsome!

GLOUCESTER: But I have, sir, a legitimate son, older than this one, though I don't favor

him because of that. Do you know this noble gentleman, Edmund?

EDMUND: No, my lord.

GLOUCESTER (*introducing him formally*): The Lord of Kent, and my honorable friend.

EDMUND: At your service, my lord.

(The sound of trumpets is heard.)

GLOUCESTER: The king is coming.

(A servant enters, carrying a crown, followed by King Lear, the Dukes of Cornwall and Albany, Goneril, Regan, Cordelia, and attendants.)

LEAR: Bring in the lords of France and Burgundy, Gloucester.

GLOUCESTER: I shall, my lord.

(Gloucester and Edmund exit.)

LEAR: Meanwhile we shall reveal our plan.

Give me that map. *(Servants bring a map.)*

We have divided our kingdom into three parts.

We wish to shake off all care in our old age,

And to confer them on younger shoulders,

While we crawl toward death without burdens.

Tell me, my daughters, which of you

Shall we say loves us most?

Then we may be most generous where

Natural affection most deserves it. Goneril,

Our eldest child, speak first.

GONERIL: Sir, I love you more than I can say.
 You are dearer than eyesight, space, and
 liberty.
 No less than life itself.

CORDELIA (*aside*): What shall Cordelia say? Just
 love, and be silent . . .

LEAR (*indicating Goneril's dowry on the map*): From
 Here to here, rich with shady forests,
 Fertile plains, and teeming rivers,
 We give you to rule forever. (*turning to Regan*)
 What does our second daughter say? Speak.

REGAN: I want no other joy than
 The happiness I find in your dear love.

CORDELIA (*aside*): Poor Cordelia, then!
 But not really so, since I am sure my love is
 Richer than my tongue can express.

LEAR: To you and your heirs, take this third
 Of our fair kingdom. No less in space, value,
 And pleasure than that given to Goneril.
 (*turning to Cordelia*) Now, our joy, last-born
 But not least—what can you say to attract
 A third more valuable than your sisters?
 Speak.

CORDELIA: Nothing, my lord.

LEAR: Nothing!

CORDELIA: Nothing.

LEAR: Nothing can come of nothing. Speak again.

CORDELIA: I cannot express what is in my heart.
I love your majesty as a daughter should.
No more, no less.

LEAR: What, what, Cordelia?

CORDELIA: My good lord,
You have fathered me, taught me, loved me.
I return those duties as I should.
I obey you, love you, and honor you most.
Why do my sisters have husbands
If they say all their love is for you?
I hope that when I marry, my husband
Has half my love, care, and duty.

LEAR: Do these words come from your heart?

CORDELIA: Yes, my good lord.

LEAR: So young, and so hardhearted?

CORDELIA: So young, my lord, and truthful.

LEAR: Let your truth then be your dowry!
By the sacred light of the sun, by all the stars
That govern our lives, I hereby disown you!
You are now a stranger to my heart and me.
Stay away forever, my former daughter.

KENT: Your majesty—

LEAR: Silence, Kent! I loved Cordelia most
And thought I would spend my final years
with her. Go, out of my sight!
My grave will be my only peace, since here
I take her father's love from her.