



Introduction to the Play

Background to *King Lear*

King Lear begins in the same way as many fairy tales do: “Once upon a time, there was a great king who had three daughters. The two older daughters were ugly and mean, but the youngest daughter was beautiful and kind.” Shakespeare takes this story, however, and turns it into one of the most moving, horrifying, and despairing tragedies of the English language.

Shakespeare’s play follows an old Celtic legend about King Leir. He wishes to retire in comfort and so plans to disperse his kingdom among his three daughters, but he expects to keep his title and his knights. Before doing so in a royal ceremony, he asks each daughter to state how much she loves him. The two older daughters use flowery language to express their love and devotion to King Leir. The youngest daughter, Cordelia, makes a simple statement. Infuriated, the King disinherits Cordelia, and she moves to France to marry the French king.

King Leir visits his oldest daughter, Gonorilla, with sixty of his knights, but it is too much work for her, and she demands that he keep only thirty knights. Leir is angry and goes to his middle daughter Regan. She, however, says he can only have five knights if he stays with her. Leir, humbled, goes back to Gonorilla but is now told he can only have one knight. Leir travels to France and is reunited with Cordelia and the French king. They gather an army and return to England, successfully overthrowing the rule of the two older daughters and their

husbands. Leir retakes the throne and rules successfully for three years. At his death, Cordelia rules for five more years. When her nephews come of age, however, they mount a rebellion against Cordelia and are victorious. She is put in prison, where she kills herself.

Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, while reuniting King Lear and Cordelia, ends not with King Lear on his throne, but with betrayal, suffering, madness, and death.

In addition, *King Lear* is enhanced with a subplot. This part of the play involves the Earl of Gloucester and his two sons, Edmund and Edgar. For this part of the play, Shakespeare adapted a story from Sir Philip Sidney’s *Arcadia* in which a king is betrayed by his illegitimate son and mistakenly exiles his true son. The true and forgiving son protects the father, who is blind, from falling off a cliff.

The two plots are linked by the common element of a father who misjudges and disinherits the true child. The father favors the false child, who seeks to destroy the father. Ultimately, the father is “saved” by the true child. When the father understands the mistake and the pride that led to his downfall, the reader sympathizes with the father and is agonized by the price the father has to pay to attain this new awareness. Also, in each story, the child readily forgives the father and is reunited with him. This level of forgiveness and restoration is truly amazing and inspiring.

Act one, Scene 3

Goneril complains to her steward Oswald that caring for King Lear and all his knights is a tremendous burden. Lear is irritable, and the knights are always partying. She tells Oswald to feel free to be rude to Lear so that he might move on to Regan's castle.

Act one, Scene 4

At Goneril's castle, Kent, in a disguise and with a country accent, offers his service to King Lear, who accepts Kent's offer. Goneril's servants insult King Lear and his knight. The Fool enters and teases Kent for offering to be a servant to King Lear. He also hints that King Lear is a fool to give all his power and possessions to his two daughters. He tells Lear that he has cut an egg in the middle and given away the inside to his daughters, leaving only an eggshell—an empty crown for King Lear.

Goneril enters and expresses her displeasure at the behavior of Lear's one hundred knights. She demands that he reduce the number of knights in his charge by half, since he does not need them anymore. Lear is extremely angry, and he denies the charge that his knights are unruly. He curses Goneril's womb so that she will never have a child, or if she does, her child will betray her as Goneril has betrayed Lear. He also realizes that Cordelia was a truer daughter than Goneril. Goneril's husband, Albany, comes in and is amazed at all the disorder around him.

After Lear exits, Goneril instructs Oswald to send a letter to Regan to warn her that Lear is coming and what has happened.

Act one, Scene 5

The Fool talks with Lear, saying that he “should not have been old until he had been wise.” Giving away all his power has put him at the mercy of his two daughters.

Act two, Scene 1

Edmund tricks Edgar into fighting with him. Gloucester enters to see his two sons with their swords out, and he is convinced that Edgar is indeed planning to murder him. Edmund reports that Edgar is not worried if Edmund tells of his brother's evil plans, because no one would believe him since he is an “unpossessing bastard.” Gloucester, fully under the influence of Edmund's lies, promises Edmund that he will try to improve his status.

The Duke of Cornwall and his wife Regan enter. Gloucester informs them of Edmund's loyalty and protection. Cornwall is impressed with Edmund's “virtue and obedience” and asks him to serve in his court.

Act two, Scene 2

Oswald and Kent meet, and Kent calls Oswald a knave and a rascal. Kent challenges Oswald to fight because Oswald carries letters against King Lear. Kent begins to beat Oswald. During the beating, Edmund, Cornwall, Regan, and Gloucester enter. They discover why Kent is beating Oswald. As punishment, Kent is placed

and say that he has gone to bed so that his negative feelings toward Cornwall will not be evident. He leaves, and Edmund immediately admits that he will tell everything his father said to the Duke, even though it betrays his father.

Act three, Scene 4

Kent leads Lear and the Fool to the hovel. Lear thinks about all he has done for Goneril and Regan, and it almost makes him go mad. As Lear surveys the storm, he begins to realize that he has not paid attention to those less fortunate than he.

Inside the hovel, they meet up with Edgar, who is acting as a deranged beggar, Tom O' Bedlam. Tom speaks in a crazy way about his condition. Lear sees Edgar as "unaccommodated man." Realizing that he, too, is not more than a "poor, bare, forked animal," Lear begins to rip off his clothes.

Gloucester finds everyone at the hovel. Even though it will get him into trouble, he has come to lead Lear back to his castle. Edgar recognizes his father and continues to act as if he has lost his mind. Gloucester, thinking that Edgar is homeless, tells Edgar to stay in the hovel, but King Lear insists that Edgar stay with him, calling him a philosopher.

Act three, Scene 5

Edmund shows the Duke of Cornwall the letter from Gloucester that speaks of treason against Cornwall. Edmund pretends that he is sad that he has to be the one to expose his father. The

Duke of Cornwall states that he will replace Edmund as the Duke of Gloucester.

Act three, Scene 6

In a room on Gloucester's estate, King Lear, Kent, the Fool, and Edgar wait out the storm. King Lear appears to be in a psychotic state. Kent asks him to rest, but Lear insists on a trial. He puts his two oldest daughters on trial, and uses a joint stool to represent Goneril. The Fool, Edgar, and Kent stand as judges. Edgar feels so sorry for King Lear that he says in an aside that it is difficult for him to keep from crying. After a wild and passionate trial, Lear sleeps.

Gloucester enters and asks Kent to take Lear to Dover because there is a plot to kill the King. Edgar remains behind and gives a brief soliloquy admitting that his problems seem small compared to the suffering of King Lear.

Act three, Scene 7

Regan and Cornwall decide to punish Gloucester for aiding King Lear and for siding with France against their rule. They tie Gloucester to a chair in order to put out his eyes. Cornwall's servant tries to save him and wounds Cornwall. Regan grabs a sword and kills the servant. During the horrible, cruel blinding, Gloucester comes to realize that Edmund betrayed him and that Edgar was indeed a true and loyal son. Cornwall and Regan leave, and two remaining servants dress Gloucester's eyes and plan to get Tom O' Bedlam to lead Gloucester to wherever he wants to go, not realizing that Tom is Edgar in disguise.

Act five, Scene 2

Edgar tells his father that Lear and Cordelia have been captured. Gloucester asks to sit and rot, but Edgar tells him that men must endure their lives, even though they are grim.

Act five, Scene 3

Edmund leads in the prisoners King Lear and Cordelia. Cordelia says to Lear that she is not sad for herself but for Lear's situation. Lear says that he is happy about prison since he can be with Cordelia. Edmund gives an officer a note that orders the death of Cordelia.

Albany, Goneril, Regan, and some soldiers enter. Goneril and Regan argue over Regan's wish to marry Edmund. Albany stops the fight by saying that Edmund is arrested for treason. Albany says that if no one comes to challenge Edmund, he will duel with Edmund himself. Regan becomes increasingly sick, and Albany orders his men to bring her to his tent. Goneril, in an aside, implies that she has poisoned her sister.

At the sound of the herald, Edgar arrives to fight Edmund, calling him a traitor to his brother, to his father, and to everyone. Edgar stabs Edmund, but Albany cries out to Edgar not to kill Edmund so that he may stand trial for treason. Albany confronts Goneril with her letter to Edmund, and she leaves.

Edgar reveals himself to Edmund and Albany. He tells them how he disguised himself as Tom O' Bedlam. He explains that he just revealed himself to Gloucester, who died from being overwhelmed by Edgar's loyalty and love.

A gentleman comes in to announce that Goneril has killed herself and that Regan is also dead from Goneril's poison. Their bodies are brought in, and Edmund expresses sadness that he has lost their love. He then tries to reverse his letter ordering the death of Cordelia, to do one good thing before he dies from his wound.

Edmund, however, is too late. Lear enters carrying the body of Cordelia. He attempts to find out if she is still alive, but he realizes she is dead. In his rage, Lear killed the slave who was hanging Cordelia. He speaks with Kent, who tells Lear that Goneril and Regan are also dead. A messenger enters and announces that Edmund is dead.

Lear, thinking that Cordelia's lips are moving and that she is alive, becomes overwhelmed and dies. Kent tells everyone to let Lear go because he has suffered enough. Albany asks Kent and Edgar to help him rule the kingdom, but Kent implies that he will kill himself. Edgar speaks the final words of sadness and suffering: "We that are young/Shall never see so much nor live so long."

Annotated Character List for *King Lear*

King Lear: A ruler of the pre-Christian British kingdom. He wishes to give up the cares and responsibilities of ruling while enjoying a comfortable retirement in the care of his daughters. His abdication of the throne and his division of the kingdom is his undoing.

Goneril: The eldest daughter of King Lear. She is married to the Scottish Duke of Albany. She is quick to use flowery language of love to her father when she thinks it will gain her

Messengers: They bring news of the progress of the battle.

Doctor: Employed by Cordelia to help in the restoration and healing of King Lear

Two Captains: They lead the battles of France and England.

Herald: He sounds a trumpet so that Edgar will come forward and challenge Edmund.

Other Minor Characters: knights, attendants, servants, officers, soldiers, and trumpeters

Shakespeare and Stage Directions

The plays of Shakespeare are so well written that they seem to leap off the page and come to life. However, the plays themselves have very few stage directions. Perhaps this is because Shakespeare's plays were performed in large amphitheaters that were very simple.

This was a time before electric lights, so the plays needed to take place during the day to utilize the natural light. The average time for a performance was between noon and two in the afternoon. Theater historians report that there were typically no intermissions; plays ran from beginning to end without a break and took about two hours.

The set might be painted canvas to illustrate whether the play was occurring in a forest or a town, for example. Sometimes the background was accompanied by a sign that indicated the place as well. Props were few and large: a table, a chariot, gallows, a bed, or a throne.

However, the audience in Shakespeare's plays expected a spectacle for the price of admission. Therefore, there were many devices to produce

a gasp from the audience. For example, a device in the loft of the theater could raise and lower actors so that they could play gods, ghosts, or other unusual characters. Additionally, a trapdoor in the stage offered a chance for a quick appearance or disappearance. The actors could suggest a beheading or hanging with various illusions on the stage. Sound effects suggesting thunder, horses, or war were common. Music was important, and drums and horns were often played.

Most important to the sense of spectacle were the costumes worn by the actors. These were elaborate, colorful, and very expensive. Therefore, they often purchased these outfits from servants who had inherited the clothes from their masters, or from hangmen, who received the clothes of their victims as payment for their services.

Though Shakespeare's stage directions are sparse, definition of a few key terms will be helpful for the reader. The following is a brief glossary of stage directions commonly found in Shakespeare's plays.

Selected Glossary of Stage Directions in Shakespeare's Plays

Above: an indication that the actor speaking from above is on a higher balcony or other scaffold that is higher than the other actors

Alarum: a stage signal, which calls the soldiers to battle; usually trumpets, drums, and shouts

Aside: words spoken by the actor so the audience overhears but the other actors on the stage do not. An aside may also be spoken to one



Introduction to Shakespeare

A Brief Biography of William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare was born in April 1564 to John and Mary Shakespeare in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. His birthday is celebrated on April 23. This is memorable because April 23 is also the day Shakespeare died in 1616.

Shakespeare was the eldest of nine children in his family, six of whom survived to adulthood.

William Shakespeare's father worked with leather and became a successful merchant early in his career. He held some relatively important government offices. However, when William was in his early teens, his father's financial position began to slide due to growing debt. After many years, John Shakespeare's fortunes and respect were restored, but records indicate that the years of debt and lawsuits were very stressful.

Historians assume that young Will went to school and took a rigorous course of study including Latin, history, and biblical study. In 1582, at the age of eighteen, he married Anne Hathaway, who was three months pregnant. Studies of Elizabethan family life indicate that Anne's situation was not unusual since it was accepted that the engagement period was as legally binding as the marriage. The couple had a daughter, Susanna, followed by twins, Hamnet and Judith. Not much is known about Shakespeare during the next seven years, but his name is listed as an actor in London by 1592. This was a difficult time for the theater

because measures to prevent the spread of the plague regularly closed the theaters.

Between 1594 and 1595, Shakespeare joined the Chamberlain's Men as a playwright and actor. The acting company featured actor Richard Burbage, and they were a favorite of Queen Elizabeth I. During this time, Shakespeare was writing such plays as *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Even though Shakespeare was enjoying great success by the time he was 32, it was dampened by the death of his son, Hamnet, in 1596. Soon after, Shakespeare refocused on his home in Stratford where he bought an estate called New Place, with gardens, orchards, and barns in addition to the main home. He still maintained a home in London near the theater.

In 1599, Shakespeare wrote *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, and *As You Like It*. The Globe Playhouse was up and running, with Shakespeare a 10 percent owner. This means that he was able to earn 10 percent of any show's profits. This business position helped him solidify his wealth.

In 1603, Shakespeare's reputation earned his acting troop the sponsorship of James I, who requested one play performance per month. Their name changed to the King's Men. By this time, Shakespeare had written and performed in almost all of his comedies and histories. He was proclaimed the finest playwright in London.

lived in London and its suburbs. People were attracted to London because it gave many opportunities for work and financial improvement. It was also a vibrant social scene for the upper class. In fact, one honor of being a noble was the opportunity to house Queen Elizabeth and her entire party if she was in your neighborhood. If she was a guest, it was expected that her noble hosts would cover all the expenses of housing her group. She made many “progresses” through England and London, establishing her relationships with the nobility. However, several nobles asked to be released from this honor because the expense of supporting her visit had often caused them bankruptcy.

Perhaps it was better to be a flourishing member of the English merchant middle class. Their numbers and influence were rising in England at the time of Shakespeare. This was a new and an exciting development in Western European history. One major factor in the rise of the middle class was the need for wool for clothing. The expansion of the wool trade led to the formation of entire cities throughout England, and sparked progress in many other areas of commerce and trade.

With the rise of the middle class came a concern for more comfortable housing. Rather than serving simply as shelter or defense against attack, housing developed architecturally and functionally. One major improvement was the use of windows to let in light. Also, houses were built with lofts and special places for eating and sleeping, rather than having one multifunctional room. However, doors between rooms

were still very rare, so that privacy in Shakespeare’s time did not really exist.

Meals in Shakespeare’s England were an important part of the day. Breakfast was served before dawn and was usually bread and a beverage. Therefore, everyone was really hungry for the midday meal, which could last up to three hours. If meat was available in the home, it was usually served at this time. A smaller supper was eaten at 6:00 or 7:00 P.M., with the more wealthy people able to eat earlier and the working class eating later. Cooking was dangerous and difficult since all meals were cooked over an open fire. Even bread was not baked in an oven but was cooked in special pans placed over the fire. A pot was almost always cooking on the fire, and the cook would put in whatever was available for supper. This is most likely where the term “potluck” came from.

Furniture was usually made of carved wood, as woodcarving was a developing craft in Shakespeare’s day. One important part of an Elizabethan home was the table, or “board.” One side was finished to a nice sheen, while the other side was rough. Meals were served on the rough side of the board, and then it was flipped for a more elegant look in the room. The table is where we get the terms “room and board” and having “the tables turned.” Another important part of a middle or an upper-class home was the bed. Rather than being made of prickly straw, mattresses were now stuffed with softer feathers. Surrounded by artistically carved four posts, these beds were considered so valuable that they were often a specifically named item in a will.



ACTIVITY 3

Goneril and Regan Deal with Dad

Act one, Scenes 3–5

Background After lavishing him with compliments to get a better inheritance, Goneril and Regan are now forced to live with their father and his one hundred knights. There is much friction between Goneril and her father, and this will carry over to Regan. Goneril claims that the knights are badly behaved, but Lear disputes this. Who is to blame here? Is Goneril wrong to feel frustrated with her father's large entourage? You decide.

Directions Reread Scenes 3–5 and examine Lear's attitude toward Goneril and her servants and Goneril's attitude toward Lear and his knights. Then

1. Decide who is to blame for the conflict, and try to cite at least three quotations per character.
2. Write one of the following letters from your chosen character's perspective:
 - a. a letter from Goneril to Regan telling Regan what has happened with Lear and what she has done about it
 - b. a letter from Lear to Regan complaining about his treatment at Goneril's castle
 - c. a letter from Regan to Lear expressing her frustration

Use another sheet of paper for your letter.

Part 1: Who is to blame/Character Quotations:

Part 2: Letter from _____ to _____



ACTIVITY 8

The King Breaks Down

Act two, Scene 4

Background When both Regan and Goneril turn against their father and demand that he keep only twenty-five men because he doesn't really need even one, Lear's response is very telling.

Directions Answer the following questions based on King Lear's speech to his daughters when they have told him that he really does not need even one follower.

1. "O, reason not the need; our basest beggars/Are in the poorest thing superfluous:/Allow not nature more than nature needs,/Man's life's as cheap as beast's."

Question: What is Lear saying about what makes a man happy and separates him from animals?

2. "Thou art a lady;/If only to go warm were gorgeous,/Why, nature needs not what thou gorgeous wear'st,/Which scarcely keeps thee warm."

Question: How does Lear compare his daughters' material needs to his in order to make his point about "needing" followers?

3. Do you think Regan and Goneril are acting selfishly, or is this whole conflict King Lear's fault? Why?
4. Why is King Lear so hurt by his daughters' not allowing him his entourage?
5. Do you think that Regan and Goneril are right in not stopping their father from going out in the storm? Why or why not?



ACTIVITY 9

Courtly Reporter

Acts one and two

Background Much of what happens in Acts one and two sets up the themes of the entire play. Some events take place in public, while others are private occurrences.

Directions Imagine that you write a gazette that focuses on the daily occurrences in Britain's royal court. Decide which events from each of the acts are important enough to warrant a write-up in your paper. Then write an article incorporating those events, making sure to mention the people involved. Suggested length: $\frac{1}{2}$ of a page to 1 page. Use another sheet of paper, if necessary.