

UNIT 2 KING LEAR

This chapter shall cover the following main points:

STRUCTURE

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Learning objectives
 - Introduction of the play
 - Plot
 - Themes, symbols and motifs
 - Characters
 - Analysis of main characters
 - Summary and analysis of scenes
 - Quotes
 - Summary of the play
 - Key words
 - Review questions
 - Further reading
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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you should be able to:

- Discuss about the summary.
- Explain the plot of the play.
- Discuss and analyze the main characters
- Explain the summary act-wise
- Explain the main quotes.
- Discuss the theme of the play.

INTRODUCTION OF THE PLAY

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King Lear was first printed in 1608. This initial printing is now referred to as the First Quarto. Another Quarto version was printed in 1619, and *King Lear* appeared again in a 1623 Folio edition. The First Quarto contains 300 lines not found in the Folio, and the Folio contains 100 lines not found in the First Quarto. Because many differences exist between the Quarto and Folio editions, some recent anthologies of Shakespeare's works contain play text from both editions, and may also include a conflated edition derived from a combination of both the First Quarto and Folio versions.

Although the text was not printed until 1608, the play was performed in December 1606. The exact date of composition is not known, so scholars often try to base the point in time on references in the play itself. Because of this uncertainty and the textual references, the composition of *King Lear* may have taken place anywhere from 1604 to 1606.

The story of King Lear and his daughters was a familiar tale in Elizabethan England, where it was generally believed to be based on historical fact, having been taken from ancient British history. A legal case of the times also may be due credit for contributing to the drama. In an act that generated extensive publicity, two daughters attempted to have their father declared insane so that they might seize his estate. The younger daughter, Cordell, objected.

This similarity of name and plot might have sparked some interest in resurrecting a familiar plot. However, accounts of King Lear surface in several texts; so, Shakespeare may have turned to other sources as well in exploring this ancient story.

Lear's story appears in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, published about 1135. This text includes insights into the kings of the ancient, pre-Christian Britain. Years later, Lear's story is repeated in Raphael Holinshed's 1577 book, *Chronicles of England*, which includes an ending in which Cordelia and Lear both survive her sisters' treachery. Cordelia succeeds her father to the throne, upon his death; but she is later imprisoned and commits suicide. The John Higgins 1574 edition of *Mirror for Magistrates* introduces the name of Albany and includes a story of Cordelia, in which she commits suicide — something that does not occur in the older play. The Lear story is also retold in Edmund Spenser's 1590 epic poem, *The Faerie Queene*, where Cordelia commits suicide by hanging. The Gloucester plot may have been taken from Sir Philip Sidney's 1590 poem, *Arcadia*, in which an old prince is blinded by his illegitimate son, but is ultimately saved by his legitimate son. Much of the events that occur to Gloucester are derived from this source.

The True Chronicle of King Leir is first entered into the Stationers' register in 1594, although there is no record of its publication until the 1605 edition appears. This source, while containing the basic Lear story, is grounded in Christianity, something not contained in the story of the ancient Leir or in Shakespeare's *Lear*. Many scholars do find ample evidence of Christian ideology in *King Lear*, but no overt emphasis on Christianity, as there is in Shakespeare's principle source. The old play has a happy ending, where evil is punished and good is rewarded, thus reinforcing the Christian belief in divine justice. Instead of proposing such easy answers, Shakespeare leaves his audience to ponder the role of God and divine justice. As he did so often in borrowing from sources, Shakespeare wove threads of historical accounts and original writings to create the fabric of his own *King Lear*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

By the time Shakespeare was writing *King Lear*, the English had survived years of civil war and political and religious upheaval. Considerable turmoil followed the death of Henry VIII, and under his oldest daughter's rule (Mary I), the country experienced both civil and religious chaos, with the conflict between Catholicism and the Church of England resulting in much bloodshed.

After Mary's death, Elizabeth I assumed the throne, leading to a period of extended peace. In spite of their contentment with Elizabeth's rule, the populace worried significantly about England's future because Elizabeth was unmarried, and she refused to select a possible heir. No citizen wanted a repeat of the events that marked the earlier transfer of power. Thus, the lack of an heir created fears about a possible successor to her throne, which were finally resolved in 1603 when Elizabeth appointed James IV of Scotland to be her heir, and eventually, the new king of England.

The English understood that a strong country needed an effective leader to protect it from potential invasion. Elizabeth's powerful leadership had saved England when the Spanish attempted an invasion in 1588, and much of the credit for her success was attributed to her earlier efforts to unite England and to end the dissention that was destroying the country. No ruler would have deliberately chosen to divide a kingdom, not after having witnessed the conflicts that had marked England's recent history. The division of a country would have weakened it, leading to squabbles between petty lords and the absence of an effective central government, and thus, the absence of an effective defense. After this long period of uncertainty, Shakespeare's Elizabethan audience would have been horrified at Lear's choice to divide his kingdom and so, create disunity.

other tragedies might contain comedic elements — such as the Fool — are far removed from comedy. The Fool's purpose is to make Lear laugh, but instead, he functions largely as a Greek Chorus, commenting on the action and pointing out to Lear subtleties of his behavior and dangers that he faces. But his compassion, tinged with sarcasm, is never funny.

Shakespeare also uses soliloquy as an important literary device in his plays. Most Shakespearean tragedies contain soliloquies, because they offer a way for the playwright to divulge a character's inner thoughts. The soliloquy requires that the character must think that he is alone on stage, as he reveals what he is thinking for the benefit of the audience. *King Lear* contains eleven soliloquies, with Edmund using this device most often to explain his plotting to the audience. Edgar also uses this device several times, most notably when he explains the reasons he will henceforth be known as Tom. A soliloquy is different from a monologue, in which a character speaks aloud his thoughts, but with other characters present. Shakespeare also frequently employs the aside, in which the character addresses the audience, but other characters are not supposed to hear. The aside allows the audience to learn details that most of the characters on stage do not know. For example, Goneril uses an aside to reveal that she has poisoned Regan.

The double plot is another important literary device in this play. *King Lear* is the only Shakespearean tragedy to employ two similar plots, each functioning in an almost exact parallel manner. With two plots, perfectly intertwined and yet offering parallel lessons, Shakespeare is able to demonstrate the tragic consequences that result when man's law is given precedence over natural law. Eventually, Gloucester and Lear learn the importance of natural law with both finally turning to nature to find answers for why their children have betrayed them. Their counterparts, Edmund, Goneril, Regan, and Cornwall, represent the evil that functions in violation of natural law.

The double plot serves an important function, emphasizing natural law as an essential facet of both plots. Shakespeare then uses the two plots to point to how essential an acknowledgment of natural law is in a moral society. In both plots, the absence of natural law is destructive, and ultimately even those who are good cannot act to save Cordelia or the other good characters from the ravages of evil and tyranny.

Shakespeare's use of doubling appears throughout *King Lear*. For example, Kent's true loyalty to the king is paralleled by Oswald's corrupt loyalty to Goneril. Lear also has two sons-in-law. Regan's husband is the cruel Cornwall, whose only interest is in furthering his own ambitions. He has no real interest in the well-being of the kingdom, and sacrificing Lear is an acceptable price to pay to gain the power he desires. Cornwall's parallel

is Goneril's husband, Albany, who has no personal ambitions or thoughts of personal glory. Albany's goal is to preserve the kingdom and save Lear's life.

Still another set of doubles is France and Burgundy, whose response to Cordelia's loss of dowry differs in drastic ways. Where Burgundy has no use for a Cordelia who lacks money, land, and rank, France is willing to take Cordelia, even if she has no material possessions. Thus, France who sees Cordelia as representing the greatest riches that her father possesses, is a contrasting double for the self-serving Burgundy.

Shakespeare wrote most of this play in verse, using iambic pentameter, which sometimes intimidates the playwright's audiences. Iambic pentameter is a literary term that defines the play's meter and the stresses placed on each syllable. In iambic pentameter, each complete line contains ten syllables, with each pair of syllables containing both an accented syllable and an unaccented syllable. Many Renaissance poets used iambic pentameter because the alternating stresses create a rhythm that contributes to the beauty of the play's language. Shakespeare also includes prose passages in his plays, with prose lines being spoken by characters of lower social rank. In *King Lear*, Edgar speaks prose when he is disguised as Tom; when he reemerges as Edgar, he resumes speaking in verse.

A Shakespearean glossary can help in understanding the language, but the biggest assist comes with practice. Reading and listening to Shakespeare's words becomes easier with repeated exposure. Reading aloud also helps in becoming familiar with Early Modern English. Over time, the unfamiliar language and the rhetorical devices that Shakespeare employs in writing his texts will cease to be strange, and the language will assume the beauty that was always hidden within it.

PLOT

Lear, the aging king of Britain, decides to step down from the throne and divide his kingdom evenly among his three daughters. First, however, he puts his daughters through a test, asking each to tell him how much she loves him. Goneril and Regan, Lear's older daughters, give their father flattering answers. But Cordelia, Lear's youngest and favorite daughter, remains silent, saying that she has no words to describe how much she loves her father. Lear flies into a rage and disowns Cordelia. The king of France, who has courted Cordelia, says that he still wants to marry her even without her land, and she accompanies him to France without her father's blessing.

Lear quickly learns that he made a bad decision. Goneril and Regan swiftly begin to undermine the little authority that Lear still holds. Unable

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fundamentally indifferent or even hostile to humankind. Various characters offer their opinions: “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; / They kill us for their sport,” Gloucester muses, realizing it foolish for humankind to assume that the natural world works in parallel with socially or morally convenient notions of justice (4.1.37–38). Edgar, on the other hand, insists that “the gods are just,” believing that individuals get what they deserve (5.3.169). But, in the end, we are left with only a terrifying uncertainty—although the wicked die, the good die along with them, culminating in the awful image of Lear cradling Cordelia’s body in his arms. There is goodness in the world of the play, but there is also madness and death, and it is difficult to tell which triumphs in the end.

Authority versus Chaos

King Lear is about political authority as much as it is about family dynamics. Lear is not only a father but also a king, and when he gives away his authority to the unworthy and evil Goneril and Regan, he delivers not only himself and his family but all of Britain into chaos and cruelty. As the two wicked sisters indulge their appetite for power and Edmund begins his own ascension, the kingdom descends into civil strife, and we realize that Lear has destroyed not only his own authority but *all* authority in Britain. The stable, hierarchal order that Lear initially represents falls apart and disorder engulfs the realm.

The failure of authority in the face of chaos recurs in Lear’s wanderings on the heath during the storm. Witnessing the powerful forces of the natural world, Lear comes to understand that he, like the rest of humankind, is insignificant in the world. This realization proves much more important than the realization of his loss of political control, as it compels him to re-prioritize his values and become humble and caring. With this newfound understanding of himself, Lear hopes to be able to confront the chaos in the political realm as well.

Power

Important is the notion of power — who has it, how one obtains it, how one defines it, and how it plays into *King Lear*. With this look at power should also come an investigation of issues such as age and gender. Consider, for example, the treatment of the elderly by their offspring. And think about the power and placement of women in Shakespeare’s time as compared with the position of women in society and the home today.

Nature’s Law

Nature, in varying forms, is another theme prevalent in *King Lear*. Lear’s view of nature is one that holds certain values, such as respect for one’s parents and loyalty to one’s king, to be important regardless of circumstance.

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Edmund, however, believes it's natural to be a repository of sensuality and self-advancement. To Edmund, as well as to several other characters in the play, the natural impulse of humanity is to better oneself at the expense of others.

Doubling

Doubling (to create either oppositions or parallels) adds tremendously to the *King Lear* experience. At various times, fools are contrasted with wise men, reason is set opposite to nature, the upper class is set apart from the beggar, and the family is paralleled with by society.

False service, as in the case of Oswald, is contrasted with true service, represented by Kent. The selfish and false love of Regan and Goneril is a foil for the honest devotion of Cordelia.

Parent-Child Relationship

Throughout the audience is privy to the conflicts between father and child, and to fathers easily fooled by their children. Each father demonstrates poor judgment by rejecting a good child and trusting a dishonest child(ren).

The actions that follow Act I, Scene I illustrate how correct Regan's words will prove to be. It will soon be obvious to the characters and audience alike how little Lear knows and understands his daughters as Goneril and Regan move to restrict both the size of his retinue and power.

Reconciliation

Darkness and unhappiness pervade *King Lear*, and the devastating Act 5 represents one of the most tragic endings in all of literature. Nevertheless, the play presents the central relationship—that between Lear and Cordelia—as a dramatic embodiment of true, self-sacrificing love. Rather than despising Lear for banishing her, Cordelia remains devoted, even from afar, and eventually brings an army from a foreign country to rescue him from his tormentors. Lear, meanwhile, learns a tremendously cruel lesson in humility and eventually reaches the point where he can reunite joyfully with Cordelia and experience the balm of her forgiving love. Lear's recognition of the error of his ways is an ingredient vital to reconciliation with Cordelia, not because Cordelia feels wronged by him but because he has understood the sincerity and depth of her love for him. His maturation enables him to bring Cordelia back into his good graces, a testament to love's ability to flourish, even if only fleetingly, amid the horror and chaos that engulf the rest of the play.

Nihilism

King Lear presents a bleak vision of a world without meaning. Lear begins the play valuing justice, the social order, and the value of kingship,

but his values are undermined by his experiences. Lear ends up believing that justice, order and kingship are just flattering names for raw, brutal power. Cornwall confirms Lear's view when he admits that even though punishing Gloucester without a trial is unjust, his power gives him the freedom to act as he wants: "our power / Shall do a courtesy to our wrath" (III.vii). Gloucester, too, comes to see life as random, violent and cruel, claiming the gods treat people with the same level of care as schoolboys with flies. Nowhere does *King Lear* suggest life offers meaning or the possibility of redemption. The play's tragic ending offers no lesson. Cordelia dies for no reason; the order for her execution has been reversed. The few characters left alive express despair at what they have seen.

Self-knowledge

King Lear shows that a lack of self-knowledge can cause chaos and tragedy, but the play also suggests that self-knowledge is painful, and perhaps not worth the effort it takes to achieve it. Lear's tragic flaw is a lack of self-knowledge. His daughter Regan identifies this flaw in the play's opening scene: "he hath ever but slenderly known himself." (I.i.). Lear achieves self-knowledge, but at the cost of his wealth, power and sanity. What he learns about himself is not a pleasant discovery: "I am a very foolish, fond old man" (IV.vii.). Achieving self-knowledge does not allow Lear to escape his tragic fate. In fact, self-knowledge makes his suffering worse. He realizes that his daughter Cordelia loves him after all, which only makes her death more painful. Edmund's story also suggests that self-knowledge is of limited value. Unlike Lear, Edmund sees himself clearly from the beginning of the play, but his self-knowledge doesn't do him much good: he dies before Lear does.

The Unreliability of Speech

King Lear suggests that people's speeches and words are not always reliable and trustworthy. The tragic events of *King Lear* are set in motion because Lear believes the loving speeches Goneril and Regan make, even though they are obviously deceitful. Goneril claims her love makes "speech unable" (I.i.) which is emptied of meaning because she is in the middle of a long speech. Kent argues that simple speech, like Cordelia's, is trustworthy: "Nor are those empty-hearted, whose low sounds / Reverb no hollowness" (I.i.), but Cornwall argues that simple speech can be just as unreliable as elaborate flattery. Edgar suggests that language can never reliably express suffering. At the end of the play, Lear's behavior suggests that Edgar is correct. When he finds his daughter Cordelia dead, Lear abandons language altogether: "Howl, howl, howl, howl" (V.iii.).

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The Storm

As Lear wanders about a desolate heath in Act 3, a terrible storm, strongly but ambiguously symbolic, rages overhead. In part, the storm echoes Lear's inner turmoil and mounting madness: it is a physical, turbulent natural reflection of Lear's internal confusion. At the same time, the storm embodies the awesome power of nature, which forces the powerless king to recognize his own mortality and human frailty and to cultivate a sense of humility for the first time. The storm may also symbolize some kind of divine justice, as if nature itself is angry about the events in the play. Finally, the meteorological chaos also symbolizes the political disarray that has engulfed Lear's Britain.

Blindness

Gloucester's physical blindness symbolizes the metaphorical blindness that grips both Gloucester and the play's other father figure, Lear. The parallels between the two men are clear: both have loyal children and disloyal children, both are blind to the truth, and both end up banishing the loyal children and making the wicked one(s) their heir(s). Only when Gloucester has lost the use of his eyes and Lear has gone mad does each realize his tremendous error. It is appropriate that the play brings them together near Dover in Act 4 to commiserate about how their blindness to the truth about their children has cost them dearly.

MOTIFS

Madness

Insanity occupies a central place in the play and is associated with both disorder and hidden wisdom. The Fool, who offers Lear insight in the early sections of the play, offers his counsel in a seemingly mad babble. Later, when Lear himself goes mad, the turmoil in his mind mirrors the chaos that has descended upon his kingdom. At the same time, however, it also provides him with important wisdom by reducing him to his bare humanity, stripped of all royal pretensions. Lear thus learns humility. He is joined in his real madness by Edgar's feigned insanity, which also contains nuggets of wisdom for the king to mine. Meanwhile, Edgar's time as a supposedly insane beggar hardens him and prepares him to defeat Edmund at the close of the play.

Betrayal

Betrayals play a critical role in the play and show the workings of wickedness in both the familial and political realms—here, brothers betray brothers and children betray fathers. Goneril and Regan's betrayal of Lear

Lear. He aids Edgar in killing Edmund and tries to right some of the wrongs at the end by reinstating Lear's absolute power. After Lear dies, he names Kent and Edgar as joint rulers.

Earl of Kent

Outraged by Lear's disinheritance of Cordelia, he steps in to support her decision. He too is banished. Ever loyal, he returns in disguise as a servant named Caius and aids Lear in this position. He exchanges communication with Cordelia and accompanies Lear to Dover. He reveals himself finally but the King is too mad to realize who Kent is and thus may never know. Kent is dying at the end and thus does not accept Albany's offer to rule jointly with Edgar.

Earl of Gloucester

The parallel character to Lear in the subplot, Gloucester is tricked by his bastard son Edmund into thinking that Edgar wishes to kill him. He trusts Edmund with his secrets until it is revealed that Edmund has betrayed him. He is blinded for being a traitor and helping Lear escape to Dover. Edgar, as poor Tom, leads him to Dover where he is tricked out of committing suicide. He sees Lear in his madness and wishes it upon himself. The news of Edgar's true identity overwhelms him, cracking his heart.

Edgar, son to Gloucester

Hunted by Gloucester's men due to Edmund's trickery, Edgar disguises himself as poor Tom of Bedlam, a demonic madman, who believes the foul fiend is torturing him. He provides a character for Lear to sympathize with during his encroaching madness and leads his blinded father to Dover where he saves him from suicide. Using many different disguises, he kills Oswald, alerts Albany to Goneril's adultery, and slays Edmund. Once his identity is revealed, he informs the audience of the events they missed and becomes King at the end.

Edmund, bastard son to Gloucester

Resentful of his illegitimacy and having a cruel drive for power, he plots against his brother and father and succeeds. Once Cornwall dies, he gains even more power and Goneril and Regan vie for his hand. He plans to kill Cordelia and Lear after beating them in battle so that he can rule over a united Britain. He is forced to confess his crimes by Albany and killed by Edgar.

Old Man, tenant to Gloucester

A faithful attendant to Gloucester, he leads him through the woods after he is blinded. Gloucester chooses poor Tom to continue leading him but asks the old man to meet them later with clothes for Tom.

Doctor

Cordelia's physician, he gives Lear a sleeping pill in an attempt to restore him to sanity.

Lear's Fool

The hired court Fool, he attends Lear regularly and points out the truths which are missed or ignored. Upset by Cordelia's banishment, he ridicules Lear for being foolish enough to banish the good daughter and trust the evil ones. He further mocks his decision to give up his authority so fully. Once Lear goes mad, the Fool seems incredibly sane, making Lear remain dressed and playing along with his ideas of a trial versus Goneril and Regan.

Oswald, steward to Goneril

Loyal to Goneril, Oswald helps her insult Lear. As a result, Kent's argument with him at Gloucester's castle lands Kent in the stocks. He acts as messenger between Goneril and her sister and Edmund. He alerts Goneril that Albany has changed and he carries her love letter for Edmund. Edgar intercepts it and kills him.

A Captain under Edmund's command

He is given instructions by Edmund to hang Cordelia and then is killed by Lear when he is in the process of doing so.

Gentleman loyal to Lear

Kent sends him to Dover with news of Lear's condition and a ring to identify him to Cordelia. Kent later finds him in Dover and he reports to Kent on Cordelia's reaction to the information which he had brought earlier in the play.

Goneril, daughter to Lear

The eldest daughter, she contrives to strip Lear of his power from the beginning, flattering him and leading her sister in how to act. She drives Lear from her house with coldness and then aids Regan in rejecting him and throwing him out into the storm. Disgusted by her husband's weakness, she tries to persuade Edmund to kill him so they can marry. Her letter allows Albany proof against Edmund and herself. She poisons Regan out of jealousy and then stabs herself when she realizes that Albany knows of her intentions.

Regan, daughter to Lear

The other evil daughter, Regan conspires with Goneril to strip Lear of his power. She assists in sending Lear out in the storm and also helps Cornwall punish Gloucester. She herself grabs the sword and kills the servant who defends Gloucester. She wants Edmund for her husband after

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Cornwall's death and is very jealous that he is intimate with Goneril. She is poisoned by Goneril and dies.

Cordelia, daughter to Lear

The good daughter, Cordelia refuses to insincerely flatter her father with false estimations of love and is disinherited. France marries her and she becomes Queen. We hear of her knowledge of Lear's mistreatment and her movement to Dover with the French army through Kent. She takes Lear to a doctor to treat his madness. She and Lear are captured by Edmund when the French lose the war. Lear hopes to spend quality time with her, but she is hanged by Edmund before Albany can send help. Lear carries her body into the final scene and dies with her in his arms.

ANALYSIS OF MAIN CHARACTERS

King Lear

Lear is the protagonist, whose willingness to believe his older daughters' empty flattery leads to the deaths of many people. In relying on the test of his daughters' love, Lear demonstrates that he lacks common sense or the ability to detect his older daughters' falseness. Lear cannot recognize Cordelia's honesty amid the flattery, which he craves. The depth of Lear's anger toward Kent, his devoted follower, suggests excessive pride — Lear refuses to be wrong. Hubris leads Lear to make a serious mistake in judgment, while Lear's excessive anger toward Kent also suggests the fragility of his emotional state. Hubris is a Greek term referring to excessive and destructive pride. In the ancient Greek world, hubris often resulted in the death of the tragic, heroic figure. This is clearly the case with Lear, who allows his excessive pride to destroy his family.

Throughout the play, the audience is permitted to see how Lear deals with problems. He is shocked when people do not obey as they have in the past, since Lear is king and he expects to be obeyed. However, instead of dealing with issues, Lear looks to the Fool to distract him with entertainment, to help him forget his problems. He has been insulted and demeaned as king, but he is not prepared to face those who are responsible. Instead, Lear often responds to problems with anger and outbursts of cursing, even a physical attack when provoked. When confronted with insults, Lear is helpless, at the mercy of his daughter and her servants, and he often succumbs to despair and self-pity. The once-omnipotent king struggles to find an effective means of dealing with his loss of power.

Eventually, the king reveals that he is frightened and apprehensive for his future, but he refuses to submit to another's decisions. Lear wants to remain in charge of his destiny, even though the choices he makes are poor or filled with danger. Thus, Lear chooses to go out into the storm because

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he must retain some element of control. The only other choice is to acquiesce to his daughters' control, and for Lear, that option is not worth considering. Lear is stubborn, like a willful child, and this is just one additional way in which he tries to deal with the events controlling his life. Lear flees into the storm, as a child flees a reality too harsh to accept.

In spite of his despair and self-pity, Lear is revealed as a complex man, one whose punishment far exceeds his foolish errors, and thus, Lear is deserving of the audience's sympathy. Eventually, Lear displays regret, remorse, empathy, and compassion for the poor, a population that Lear has not noticed before. Lear focuses on the parallels he sees to his own life, and so in a real sense, his pity for the poor is also a reflection of the pity he feels for his own situation.

Lear is the anointed king, God's representative, and thus, he shares the responsibility for dispensing justice on earth. He recognizes that he bears responsibility for both his own problems and for those of others, who suffer equally. His understanding of his complicity in the events that followed is a major step in accepting responsibility and in acknowledging that he is not infallible. Because of his own suffering, Lear has also learned that even he is not above God's justice.

Goneril

Goneril is Lear's eldest daughter. After professing her deep love for her father and receiving half of his kingdom, she betrays him and plots his murder. Goneril's expressions of love are extreme and reveal the inherent dishonesty of her nature. Goneril reveals her true character when she defies the hierarchy of nature, which calls for daughters to respect and honor their fathers, and lays the groundwork for the torment she will set in motion for the remainder of her father's life.

Goneril leads her father to believe that her love for him extends beyond any evidence of poor behavior, and so ultimately, she is responsible for Lear's actions, having earlier endorsed them. Later, both Goneril and Regan are depicted as especially cruel and bloodthirsty, as they call for Gloucester's punishment. Throughout most of the play, having power has been most important to Goneril, but by its conclusion, she is willing to lose the battle, and thus the kingdom, rather than lose a man.

Regan

Regan is Lear's second daughter. Regan is as villainous as Goneril. In the beginning, both Regan and Cornwall appear to be conscientious and reasonable people. Regan appears genuinely upset to learn of Edgar's betrayal. Thus, Regan initially appears as the more sympathetic and gentler sister. She greets her father with politeness, but her deportment is deceptive. Regan has no real reverence for her father and king, as her

subsequent actions reveal, but Regan is more competent than Goneril at deception, more easily assuming the mantle of deference and politeness that a gracious daughter is expected to exhibit.

Like Goneril, Regan also proves herself to be unyielding and cruel. Regan's plucking of Gloucester's beard reinforces the point that she has no respect for age or rank. In contrast to her basic inhumanity, Regan shows some real humanity, though briefly, when Cornwall is wounded. Regan's concerns that Gloucester should be relieved of his misery indicates that she is cognizant of public opinion and concerned that her subjects support her actions.

Cordelia

Cordelia genuinely loves her father, but her refusal to flatter him leads to the tragedy that unfolds. Cordelia's tears at the news of her father's treatment prove her compassion and establish that she is, indeed, the opposite of her sisters. Cordelia has no desire for revenge, nor any need to make her father suffer for having misjudged her. Her virtue and purity make it easy to see why she is often described as Christ-like or representative of God's goodness. Her response to her father's capture, and her own capture, evokes the stoicism of kings, and reveals that Cordelia is as royal as her father is.

Fool

The Fool assumes the role of Lear's protector when Cordelia is banished. The Fool functions much as a Chorus would in a Greek tragedy, commenting upon events and the king's actions and acting, in some ways, as the king's conscience. The Fool is the king's advocate, loyal and honest, but he is also able to point out the king's faults, as no one else can. The Fool's use of irony, sarcasm, and humor help to ease the truth, and allows him to moderate Lear's behavior. The Fool shares his master's fate, and this reinforces the impression that the Fool's purpose is to protect Lear until Cordelia can arrive to help her father. Both Cordelia and the Fool are caretakers for Lear, and when one is present, the other need not be.

Earl of Gloucester

Gloucester is depicted as a foolish old man, whose inability to see through Edmund's lies parallels Lear's own difficulties. By mistaking Edmund's motives, Gloucester is blind to the events occurring around him, even before Cornwall gouges out his eyes. Clearly, he is not intuitive or quick enough to understand the plotting or undercurrents present around him. Gloucester blames events on the stars, and thus, he absolves himself of any responsibility for his actions.

Later, Gloucester is willing to sacrifice his own life for the king. This heroic behavior sets Gloucester apart from his youngest son, Edmund, who

is merely an opportunist. Like Lear, Gloucester feels despair and questions a god, and like Lear, Gloucester finds his humanity in the midst of his tragedy. The blinded old man who asks that clothing be brought, so that Bedlam Tom might be covered, is a very different man from the Gloucester of Act I, who in the play's opening scene, bragged of the good sport to be had at Edmund's conception. Instead of a thoughtless braggart, Gloucester is filled with compassion for Poor Tom. This compassion for his fellow man indicates that Gloucester regrets the behavior of his past, as he seeks to make amends by sharing with those he never noticed before the recent events.

Earl of Kent / Caius

Although banished, Kent disguises himself in an effort to stay close to his king. Kent is honest — he will not lie to his king — and he is truly selfless, devoted to Lear. When his attempts to protect Lear from his own impetuous nature fail, Kent assumes the guise of an ordinary man and resolves to protect his king. When queried by Lear as to his identity, Kent replies that he is "a man" (I.4.10). Thus, he is no one special, and yet, he stands apart from many other men. Kent is a man defined by integrity, whose goodness is immeasurable, as is his love for his king. Kent's destiny is irrevocably connected to that of the king's, as the final scene of the play reveals. In rejecting Albany's offer to rule the kingdom with Edgar, Kent reveals that he will soon join his king in death. Clearly, Kent feels that his job on earth is to serve his king, and with that job now ended, he anticipates his own death.

Edmund

Gloucester's younger illegitimate son is an opportunist, whose ambitions lead him to form a union with Goneril and Regan. The injustice of Edmund's situation fails to justify his subsequent actions. Edmund rejects the laws of state and society in favor of the laws he sees as eminently more practical and useful — the laws of superior cunning and strength.

Edmund's desire to use any means possible to secure his own needs makes him appear initially as a villain without a conscience. But Edmund has some solid economic impetus for his actions, and he acts from a complexity of reasons, many of which are similar to those of Goneril and Regan. To rid himself of his father, Edmund feigns regret and laments that his nature, which is to honor his father, must be subordinate to the loyalty he feels for his country. Thus, Edmund excuses the betrayal of his own father, having willingly and easily left his father vulnerable to Cornwall's anger. Later, Edmund shows no hesitation, nor any concern about killing the king or Cordelia. Yet in the end, Edmund repents and tries to rescind

his order to execute Cordelia and Lear, and in this small measure, he does prove himself worthy of Gloucester's blood.

Edgar / Poor Tom

Edgar is Gloucester's only legitimate heir, but he must flee and hide from his father when he comes under suspicion. Edgar's innate honesty and dignity lets him believe that his brother, Edmund, would never lie to him, since Edgar would not lie to his brother. Edgar's stoic belief that he has survived the worst that fortune can throw at him is tested when Edgar discovers his father, now blinded. The manner in which Edgar addresses his father indicates compassion, understanding, and an acceptance of his father's flaws.

Duke of Albany

As Goneril's husband, Albany grows in stature during the play and ultimately finds the strength to resist his wife's efforts to have Lear killed. Early in the play, Albany lacks the strength to stand up to his wife, and thus, he cannot control her. Albany is Goneril's opposite, gentle and kind to his wife's cruel and self-serving demeanor. But later, Albany's attack on Goneril's integrity demonstrates that Albany is a highly moral and humane individual, the antithesis of his wife.

Where Goneril has created chaos, Albany endorses nature's design and a view of nature's work within an organic framework. Albany accepts that nature's pattern is essential for survival. Early on, Albany hesitates to confront Goneril when he thinks she's wrong, but he is not the willing participant in evil that Cornwall is. Albany is genuinely shocked when he learns of Gloucester's blinding, while Cornwall easily succumbs to this depravity.

With a new resistance to his wife, Albany joins the ranks of characters who undergo dramatic change during the course of the play; he grows and evolves into a stronger and more compassionate individual by the end of the drama. Albany leads his army in defense of the kingdom, although with great reluctance. The audience witnesses his personal growth, and the culmination of change is clear when he assumes control of the kingdom following the battle's conclusion.

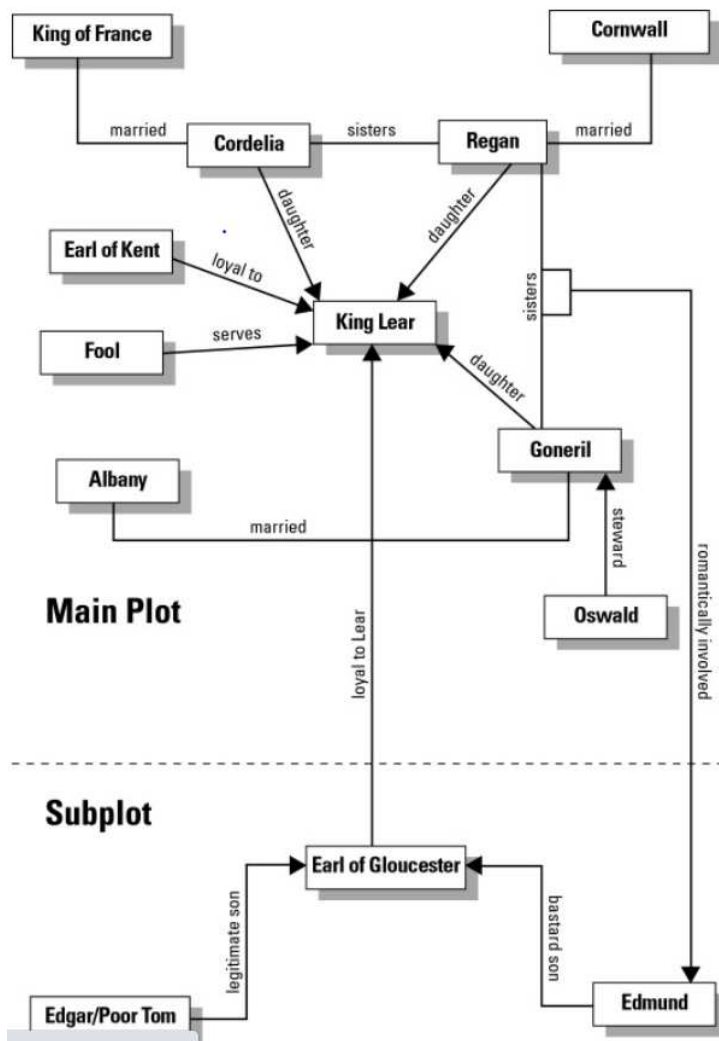
Duke of Cornwall

Cornwall is Regan's brutal husband, vicious and savage when thwarted in his efforts to seize ambition. Cornwall's easy acceptance of Edmund's story and his welcoming of Edmund into his clique foreshadows the evil that will later emerge from Cornwall and provides a hint to the audience that Cornwall is not what he appears. Cornwall responds to Kent's truthful declarations by placing Kent in the stocks. This action indicates that Cornwall, who himself uses artifice as a substitute for honesty in his own

speech, cannot recognize truth when he hears it. Later in the play, Cornwall will make no attempt to control his actions or behave in a civilized manner as he gouges out Gloucester's eyes and grinds them under the heel of his boot.

Oswald

Oswald, Goneril's steward, is a willing accomplice to Goneril's plotting and a henchman without honor. Oswald adds to this negative perception by failing to defend himself against Kent's attack and by lying that he spared Kent's life because Kent is an old man. These events paint Oswald as weak and dishonest. Oswald is, as Kent suggests, a parasite who thrives off Goneril's evil machinations and who makes her deceit easier to maintain. As Goneril's servant, he accepts her orders without question. Although he is warned, he refuses to abandon his orders to murder Gloucester, since obedience and position are everything to this servant. Oswald's sense of obedience is so great that he even asks the man who has killed him to deliver Goneril's letter to Edmund.



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tells them that Cordelia no longer has any title or land. Burgundy withdraws his offer of marriage, but France is impressed by Cordelia's honesty and decides to make her his queen. Lear sends her away without his blessing.

Goneril and Regan scheme together in secrecy. Although they recognize that they now have complete power over the kingdom, they agree that they must act to reduce their father's remaining authority.

Act 1, scene 2

Summary

Edmund enters and delivers a soliloquy expressing his dissatisfaction with society's attitude toward bastards. He bitterly resents his legitimate half-brother, Edgar, who stands to inherit their father's estate. He resolves to do away with Edgar and seize the privileges that society has denied him.

Edmund begins his campaign to discredit Edgar by forging a letter in which Edgar appears to plot the death of their father, Gloucester. Edmund makes a show of hiding this letter from his father and so, naturally, Gloucester demands to read it. Edmund answers his father with careful lies, so that Gloucester ends up thinking that his legitimate son, Edgar, has been scheming to kill him in order to hasten his inheritance of Gloucester's wealth and lands. Later, when Edmund talks to Edgar, he tells him that Gloucester is very angry with him and that Edgar should avoid him as much as possible and carry a sword with him at all times. Thus, Edmund carefully arranges circumstances so that Gloucester will be certain that Edgar is trying to murder him.

Analysis: Act 1, scenes 1–2

The love test at the beginning of Act 1, scene 1, sets the tone for this extremely complicated play, which is full of emotional subtlety, conspiracy, and double-talk, and which swings between confusing extremes of love and anger. Lear's demand that his daughters express how much they love him is puzzling and hints at the insecurity and fear of an old man who needs to be reassured of his own importance. Of course, rather than being a true assessment of his daughters' love for him, the test seems to invite—or even to demand—flattery. Goneril's and Regan's professions of love are obviously nothing but flattery: Goneril cannot even put her alleged love into words: "A love that makes . . . speech unable / Beyond all manner of so much I love you" (1.1.59); Regan follows her sister's lead by saying, "I find she names my very deed of love; Only she comes too short" (1.1.70–71).

In contrast to her sisters, whose professions are banal and insincere, Cordelia does not seem to know how to flatter her father—an immediate reflection of her honesty and true devotion to him. "Love, and be silent," she says to herself (1.1.60). When her father asks her the crucial question—

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what she can say to merit the greatest inheritance—she answers only, “Nothing, my lord,” and thus seals her fate (1.1.86). Cordelia’s authentic love and Lear’s blindness to its existence trigger the tragic events that follow.

The shift of the play’s focus to Gloucester and Edmund in Act 1, scene 2, suggests parallels between this subplot and Lear’s familial difficulties. Both Lear and Gloucester have children who are truly loyal to them (Cordelia and Edgar, respectively) and children who are planning to do them harm (Goneril and Regan, and Edmund, respectively); both fathers mistake the unloving for the loving, banishing the loyal children and designating the wicked ones their heirs. This symbolic blindness to the truth becomes more literal as the play progresses—in Lear’s eventual madness and Gloucester’s physical blinding.

Moreover, Gloucester’s willingness to believe the lies that Edmund tells him about Edgar seems to reflect a preexisting fear: that his children secretly want to destroy him and take his power. Ironically, this is what *Edmund*, of course, wants to do to Gloucester, but Gloucester is blind to Edmund’s treachery. Gloucester’s inability to see the truth echoes the discussion between Goneril and Regan at the end of Act 1, scene 1, about Lear’s unreliability in his old age: the “infirmity of his age” (1.1.291) and his “unconstant starts” (1.1.298) evoke images of senility and suggest that his daughters ought to take control from him, just as Edmund is taking control from Gloucester.

Edmund is significantly more complicated than the other major villains in the play, Regan and Goneril. He schemes against his father’s life, but not just because he wants to inherit his wealth and land; indeed, his principal motive seems to be desire for *recognition* and perhaps even the love denied him because of his bastard status. The first time we see Edmund, at the beginning of Act 1, scene 1, his own father is mocking him because he is illegitimate. Edmund’s treachery can be seen as a rebellion against the social hierarchy that makes him worthless in the eyes of the world. He rejects the “plague of custom” (1.2.3) that makes society disdain him and dedicates himself to “nature” (1.2.1)—that is, raw, unconstrained existence. He will not be the only character to invoke nature in the course of the play—the complicated relationships that obtain among the natural world, the gods above, and fate or justice pervade the entire play.

Summary: Act 1, scene 3

Lear is spending the first portion of his retirement at Goneril’s castle. Goneril complains to her steward, Oswald, that Lear’s knights are becoming “riotous” and that Lear himself is an obnoxious guest (1.3.6).

Seeking to provoke a confrontation, she orders her servants to behave rudely toward Lear and his attendants.

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Summary: Act 1, scene 4

Disguised as a simple peasant, Kent appears in Goneril's castle, calling himself Caius. He puts himself in Lear's way, and after an exchange of words in which Caius emphasizes his plainspokenness and honesty, Lear accepts him into service.

Lear's servants and knights notice that Goneril's servants no longer obey their commands. When Lear asks Oswald where Goneril is, Oswald rudely leaves the room without replying. Oswald soon returns, but his disrespectful replies to Lear's questions induce Lear to strike him. Kent steps in to aid Lear and trips Oswald.

The Fool arrives and, in a series of puns and double entendres, tells Lear that he has made a great mistake in handing over his power to Goneril and Regan. After a long delay, Goneril herself arrives to speak with Lear. She tells him that his servants and knights have been so disorderly that he will have to send some of them away whether he likes it or not.

Lear is shocked at Goneril's treasonous betrayal. Nonetheless, Goneril remains adamant in her demand that Lear send away half of his one hundred knights. An enraged Lear repents ever handing his power over to Goneril. He curses his daughter, calling on Nature to make her childless. Surprised by his own tears, he calls for his horses. He declares that he will stay with Regan, whom he believes will be a true daughter and give him the respect that he deserves. When Lear has gone, Goneril argues with her husband, Albany, who is upset with the harsh way she has treated Lear. She says that she has written a letter to her sister Regan, who is likewise determined not to house Lear's hundred knights.

Summary: Act 1, scene 5

Lear sends Kent to deliver a message to Gloucester. The Fool needles Lear further about his bad decisions, foreseeing that Regan will treat Lear no better than Goneril did. Lear calls on heaven to keep him from going mad. Lear and his attendants leave for Regan's castle.

Analysis: Act 1, scenes 3–5

In these scenes, the tragedy of the play begins to unfold. It is now becoming clear to everyone that Lear has made a mistake in handing over his power to Goneril and Regan. Lear's major error is that, in stepping down from the throne, he has also given up all of his formal authority to those who do not actually love him. He no longer has the power to command anyone to do anything, even to give him shelter or food—his daughters,

Fool calls Lear “nuncle” and Lear calls the Fool “boy.” He is always speaking in riddles and songs, but in these scenes his meaning can be understood: he advises Lear to be wary of his daughters. In telling Lear, “I / am better than thou art now; I am a fool, thou art nothing,” he hints at the dangerous situation in which Lear has put himself (1.4.168–169). His ostensibly silly singing—“The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long / That it had it head bit off by it young”—clearly warns the king that his daughters, each like a traitorous “cuckoo,” plan to turn against the father who raised them (1.4.190–191).

Summary: Act 2, scene 1

In Gloucester’s castle, Gloucester’s servant Curan tells Edmund that he has informed Gloucester that the duke of Cornwall and his wife, Regan, are coming to the castle that very night. Curan also mentions vague rumors about trouble brewing between the duke of Cornwall and the duke of Albany.

Edmund is delighted to hear of Cornwall’s visit, realizing that he can make use of him in his scheme to get rid of Edgar. Edmund calls Edgar out of his hiding place and tells him that Cornwall is angry with him for being on Albany’s side of their disagreement. Edgar has no idea what Edmund is talking about. Edmund tells Edgar further that Gloucester has discovered his hiding place and that he ought to flee the house immediately under cover of night. When he hears Gloucester coming, Edmund draws his sword and pretends to fight with Edgar, while Edgar runs away. Edmund cuts his arm with his sword and lies to Gloucester, telling him that Edgar wanted him to join in a plot against Gloucester’s life and that Edgar tried to kill him for refusing. The unhappy Gloucester praises Edmund and vows to pursue Edgar, sending men out to search for him.

Cornwall and Regan arrive at Gloucester’s house. They believe Edmund’s lies about Edgar, and Regan asks if Edgar is one of the disorderly knights that attend Lear. Edmund replies that he is, and Regan speculates further that these knights put Edgar up to the idea of killing Gloucester in order to acquire Gloucester’s wealth. Regan then asks Gloucester for his advice in answering letters from Lear and Goneril.

Summary: Act 2, scene 2

Outside Gloucester’s castle, Kent, still in peasant disguise, meets Oswald, the chief steward of Goneril’s household. Oswald doesn’t recognize Kent from their scuffle in Act 1, scene 4. Kent roundly abuses Oswald, describing him as cowardly, vain, boastful, overdressed, servile, and groveling. Oswald still maintains that he doesn’t know Kent; Kent draws his sword and attacks him.

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Oswald's cries for help bring Cornwall, Regan, and Gloucester. Kent replies rudely to their calls for explanation, and Cornwall orders him to be punished in the stocks, a wooden device that shackles a person's ankles and renders him immobile. Gloucester objects that this humiliating punishment of Lear's messenger will be seen as disrespectful of Lear himself and that the former king will take offense. But Cornwall and Regan maintain that Kent deserves this treatment for assaulting Goneril's servant, and they put him in the stocks.

After everyone leaves, Kent reads a letter that he has received from Cordelia in which she promises that she will find some way, from her current position in France, to help improve conditions in Britain. The unhappy and resigned Kent dozes off in the stocks.

Analysis: Act 2, scenes 1–2

Edmund's clever scheming to get rid of Edgar shows his cunning and his immorality. His ability to manipulate people calls to mind arguably the greatest of Shakespeare's villains, Iago, from *Othello*, who demonstrates a similar capacity for twisting others to serve his own ends. There is a great deal of irony in Edmund's description to his father of the ways in which Edgar has allegedly schemed against Gloucester's life. Edmund goes so far as to state that Edgar told him that no one would ever believe Edmund's word against his because of Edmund's illegitimate birth. With this remark, Edmund not only calls attention to his bastard status—which is clearly central to his resentful, ambitious approach to life—but proves crafty enough to use it to his advantage.

Gloucester's rejection of Edgar parallels Lear's rejection of Cordelia in Act 1, scene 1, and reminds us of the similarities between the two unhappy families: Edgar and Cordelia are good children of fathers who reject them in favor of children who do not love them. When Gloucester says, "I never got him"—that is, he never begot, or fathered, him—he seems to be denying that he is actually Edgar's father, just as Lear has disowned Cordelia (2.1.79). On the other hand, when he praises Edmund as a "loyal and natural boy," he seems to be acknowledging him as a true son (2.1.85).

It is somewhat difficult to know what to make of Kent's attack on Oswald. Oswald's eagerness to serve the treacherous Goneril in Act 1, scene 4, has established him as one of the play's minor villains, but Kent's barrage of insults and subsequent physical attack on Oswald are clearly unprovoked. Oswald's failure to fight back may be interpreted as cowardice, but one can also interpret it as Oswald does: he says that he chooses not to attack Kent because of Kent's "gray beard"—at nearly fifty, Kent is an old man and thus no longer suited for fighting (2.2.55). Kent's attack seems to be rooted in his anger at Goneril's treatment of Lear—"anger hath a

privilege” is the excuse that he gives Cornwall and Regan—and his rage at the hypocrisy surrounding Lear’s betrayal by his daughters (2.2.62).

Cornwall’s and Regan’s decision to put Kent in the stocks reinforces what we have already seen of their disrespect for their father. The stocks were a punishment used on common criminals, and their use on Lear’s serving man could easily be interpreted as highly disrespectful to Lear’s royal status. Gloucester announces as much when he protests, “Your purposed low correction / Is such as basest and contemned’st wretches / . . . / Are punished with” (2.2.134–137). Regan, however, ignores his pleas; she almost seems to welcome the idea of inviting Lear’s anger.

Summary: Act 2, scene 3

As Kent sleeps in the stocks, Edgar enters. He has thus far escaped the manhunt for him, but he is afraid that he will soon be caught. Stripping off his fine clothing and covering himself with dirt, he turns himself into “poor Tom” (2.3.20). He states that he will pretend to be one of the beggars who, having been released from insane asylums, wander the countryside constantly seeking food and shelter.

Summary: Act 2, scene 4

Lear, accompanied by the Fool and a knight, arrives at Gloucester’s castle. Lear spies Kent in the stocks and is shocked that anyone would treat one of his servants so badly. When Kent tells him that Regan and Cornwall put him there, Lear cannot believe it and demands to speak with them. Regan and Cornwall refuse to speak with Lear, however, excusing themselves on the grounds that they are sick and weary from traveling. Lear insists. He has difficulty controlling his emotions, but he finally acknowledges to himself that sickness can make people behave strangely. When Regan and Cornwall eventually appear, Lear starts to tell Regan about Goneril’s “sharp-toothed unkindness” toward him (2.4.128). Regan suggests that Goneril may have been justified in her actions, that Lear is growing old and unreasonable, and that he should return to Goneril and beg her forgiveness.

Lear asks Regan to shelter him, but she refuses. He complains more strenuously about Goneril and falls to cursing her. Much to Lear’s dismay, Goneril herself arrives at Gloucester’s castle. Regan, who had known from Goneril’s letters that she was coming, takes her sister’s hand and allies herself with Goneril against their father. They both tell Lear that he is getting old and weak and that he must give up half of his men if he wants to stay with either of his daughters.

Lear, confused, says that he and his hundred men will stay with Regan. Regan, however, responds that she will allow him only twenty-five men. Lear turns back to Goneril, saying that he will be willing to come down to

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fifty men if he can stay with her. But Goneril is no longer willing to allow him even that many. A moment later, things get even worse for Lear: both Goneril and Regan refuse to allow him any servants.

Outraged, Lear curses his daughters and heads outside, where a wild storm is brewing. Gloucester begs Goneril and Regan to bring Lear back inside, but the daughters prove unyielding and state that it is best to let him do as he will. They order that the doors be shut and locked, leaving their father outside in the threatening storm.

Analysis: Act 2, scenes 3–4

In these scenes, Shakespeare further develops the psychological focus of the play, which centers on cruelty, betrayal, and madness. Lear watches his daughters betray him, and his inability to believe what he is seeing begins to push him toward the edge of insanity. This movement begins with Lear's disbelief when he sees how Regan has treated his servant Kent. By putting Kent in the stocks, Regan indicates her lack of respect for Lear as king and father. When Lear realizes how badly Regan is treating him, he reacts with what seems to be a dramatically physical upwelling of grief: he cries out, "O, how this mother swells up toward my heart! / *Hystericapassio*, down, thou climbing sorrow" (2.4.54–55). "The mother" was a Renaissance term for an illness that felt like suffocation; characterized by light-headedness and strong pain in the stomach, its symptoms resemble those of emotional trauma, grief, and hysteria.

Regan clearly tries to undercut Lear's rapidly waning authority. As her subversion becomes clearer, Lear denies it in ways that become more and more painful to watch. Regan and Cornwall refuse his demands to speak with them, and Lear forgets that, since he has given up his power, he can no longer give them orders. Goneril and Regan eventually insult Lear by telling him that he is senile: "I pray you, father, being weak, seem so" (2.4.196). These barbed words from Regan skirt the issue of Lear's loss of authority and point to something that he can neither deny nor control—that he is growing old.

The sisters' refusal to allow Lear to keep his hundred knights and Regan's polite but steadfast refusal to allow him to stay with her instead of Goneril finally begin to make Lear understand that he can no longer command like a king. But he stands in fierce denial of this loss of authority; being forced to this realization causes him to alternate between grief and an anger so powerful that it seems to be driving him mad. We see flashes of this anger and madness when he curses Goneril, and then, later, when he declares that instead of returning to Goneril's house without servants, he will flee houses entirely and live in the open air.

The servants that Lear wants to keep with him are symbols of more than just his authority. When Regan asks why he needs even one attendant, Lear bursts out, “O, reason not the need!” (2.4.259). Human nature, he says, would be no different from that of animals if humans never needed more than the fundamental necessities of life. Clearly, Lear needs his servants not because of the service that they provide him but because of what they represent: his authority and his importance—in essence, the identity that he has built for himself. Regan and Goneril, in denying Lear his servants, deny their father that which he needs the most: not what he needs to be a king, but what he needs to be a human being.

Lear’s cry of “O fool, I shall go mad!” foreshadows the fate that soon befalls him (2.4.281). His words also recall the earlier scene in which Edgar dons a disguise and assumes the identity of a “Bedlam beggar” (2.3.14). “Bedlam” was a nickname for the Bethlehem hospital in Elizabethan London where the mentally ill were housed. When Edgar rips his clothes to shreds and smears himself with dirt, he is taking on the disguise of a “poor Tom” (2.3.20), one of the insane Bedlam beggars who roam the countryside sticking themselves with pins and begging “with roaring voices” (2.3.14). Thus, in these scenes, both Lear and Edgar flee from civilization, leaving the safety of walls and roofs behind in favor of the chaos and confusion of the natural world.

Summary: Act 3, scene 1

A storm rages on the heath. Kent, seeking Lear in vain, runs into one of Lear’s knights and learns that Lear is somewhere in the area, accompanied only by his Fool. Kent gives the knight secret information: he has heard that there is unrest between Albany and Cornwall and that there are spies for the French in the English courts. Kent tells the knight to go to Dover, the city in England nearest to France, where he may find friends who will help Lear’s cause. He gives the knight a ring and orders him to give it to Cordelia, who will know who has sent the knight when she sees the ring. Kent leaves to search for Lear.

Summary: Act 3, scene 2

Meanwhile, Lear wanders around in the storm, cursing the weather and challenging it to do its worst against him. He seems slightly irrational, his thoughts wandering from idea to idea but always returning to fixate on his two cruel daughters. The Fool, who accompanies him, urges him to humble himself before his daughters and seek shelter indoors, but Lear ignores him. Kent finds the two of them and urges them to take shelter inside a nearby hovel. Lear finally agrees and follows Kent toward the hovel. The Fool makes a strange and confusing prophecy.

Summary: Act 3, scene 3

Inside his castle, a worried Gloucester speaks with Edmund. The loyal Gloucester recounts how he became uncomfortable when Regan, Goneril, and Cornwall shut Lear out in the storm. But when he urged them to give him permission to go out and help Lear, they became angry, took possession of his castle, and ordered him never to speak to Lear or plead on his behalf.

Gloucester tells Edmund that he has received news of a conflict between Albany and Cornwall. He also informs him that a French army is invading and that part of it has already landed in England. Gloucester feels that he must take Lear's side and now plans to go seek him out in the storm. He tells Edmund that there is a letter with news of the French army locked in his room, and he asks his son to go and distract the duke of Cornwall while he, Gloucester, goes onto the heath to search for Lear. He adds that it is imperative that Cornwall not notice his absence; otherwise, Gloucester might die for his treachery.

When Gloucester leaves, Edmund privately rejoices at the opportunity that has presented itself. He plans to betray his father immediately, going to Cornwall to tell him about both Gloucester's plans to help Lear and the location of the traitorous letter from the French. Edmund expects to inherit his father's title, land, and fortune as soon as Gloucester is put to death.

Analysis: Act 3, scenes 1–3

The information that Kent gives the knight brings the audience out of the personal realm of Lear's anguish and into the political world of Lear's Britain. Throughout the play, we hear rumors of conflict between Albany and Cornwall and of possible war with France, but what exactly transpires at any specific moment is rarely clear. The question of the French is not definitively resolved until Act 4. Kent's mention of Dover, however, provides a clue: Dover is a port city in the south of England where ships from France often landed; it is famous for its high white cliffs. As various characters begin moving southward toward Dover in the scenes that follow, the tension of an inevitable conflict heightens. Whatever the particulars of the political struggle, however, it is clear that Lear, by giving away his power in Britain to Goneril and Regan—and eventually Edmund—has destroyed not only his own authority but *all* authority. Instead of a stable, hierarchical kingdom with Lear in control, chaos has overtaken the realm, and the country is at the mercy of the play's villains, who care for nothing but their own power.

This political chaos is mirrored in the natural world. We find Lear and his courtiers plodding across a deserted heath with winds howling around them and rain drenching them. Lear, like the other characters, is unused to such harsh conditions, and he soon finds himself symbolically stripped bare. He has already discovered that his cruel daughters can victimize him; now

he learns that a king caught in a storm is as much subject to the power of nature as any man.

The importance of the storm, and its symbolic connection to the state of mind of the people caught in it, is first suggested by the knight's words to Kent. Kent asks the knight, "Who's there, besides foul weather?"; the knight answers, "One minded like the weather, most unquietly" (3.1.1–2). Here the knight's state of mind is shown to be as turbulent as the winds and clouds surrounding him. This is true of Lear as well: when Kent asks the knight where the king is, the knight replies, "Contending with the fretful elements; / . . . / Strives in his little world of man to out-scorn / The to-and-fro-conflicting wind and rain" (3.1.4–11). Shakespeare's use of pathetic fallacy—a literary device in which inanimate objects such as nature assume human reactions—amplifies the tension of the characters' struggles by elevating human forces to the level of natural forces.

Lear is trying to face down the powers of nature, an attempt that seems to indicate both his despair and his increasingly confused sense of reality. Both of these strains appear in Lear's famous speech to the storm, in which he commands, "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow! / You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout / Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks!" (3.2.1–3). Lear's attempt to speak to the storm suggests that he has lost touch with the natural world and his relation to it—or, at least, that he has lost touch with the ordinary human understanding of nature. In a sense, though, his diatribe against the weather embodies one of the central questions posed by *King Lear*: namely, whether the universe is fundamentally friendly or hostile to man. Lear asks whether nature and the gods are actually good, and, if so, how life can have treated him so badly.

The storm marks one of the first appearances of the apocalyptic imagery that is so important in *King Lear* and that will become increasingly dominant as the play progresses. The chaos reflects the disorder in Lear's increasingly crazed mind, and the apocalyptic language represents the projection of Lear's rage and despair onto the outside world: if his world has come to a symbolic end because his daughters have stripped away his power and betrayed him, then, he seems to think, the real world ought to end, too. As we have seen, the chaos in nature also reflects the very real political chaos that has engulfed Britain in the absence of Lear's authority.

Along with Lear's increasing despair and projection, we also see his understandable fixation on his daughters: "Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters: / I tax you not, you elements, with unkindness" (3.2.14–15). Lear tells the thunder that he does not blame it for attacking him because it does not owe him anything. But he does blame his "two pernicious daughters" for their betrayal (3.2.21). Despite the apparent onset

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of insanity, Lear exhibits some degree of rational thought—he is still able to locate the source of his misfortune.

Finally, we see strange shifts beginning to occur inside Lear's mind. He starts to realize that he is going mad, a terrifying realization for anyone. Nevertheless, Lear suddenly notices his Fool and asks him, "How dost my boy? Art cold?" (3.2.66). He adds, "I have one part in my heart / That's sorry yet for thee" (3.2.70–71). Here, Lear takes real and compassionate notice of another human being for the first time in the play. This concern for others reflects the growth of Lear's humility, which eventually redeems him and enables him to win Cordelia's forgiveness.

Summary: Act 3, scene 4

Kent leads Lear through the storm to the hovel. He tries to get him to go inside, but Lear resists, saying that his own mental anguish makes him hardly feel the storm. He sends his Fool inside to take shelter and then kneels and prays. He reflects that, as king, he took too little care of the wretched and homeless, who have scant protection from storms such as this one.

The Fool runs out of the hovel, claiming that there is a spirit inside. The spirit turns out to be Edgar in his disguise as Tom O'Bedlam. Edgar plays the part of the madman by complaining that he is being chased by a devil. He adds that fiends possess and inhabit his body. Lear, whose grip on reality is loosening, sees nothing strange about these statements. He sympathizes with Edgar, asking him whether bad daughters have been the ruin of him as well.

Lear asks the disguised Edgar what he used to be before he went mad and became a beggar. Edgar replies that he was once a wealthy courtier who spent his days having sex with many women and drinking wine. Observing Edgar's nakedness, Lear tears off his own clothes in sympathy.

Gloucester, carrying a torch, comes looking for the king. He is unimpressed by Lear's companions and tries to bring Lear back inside the castle with him, despite the possibility of evoking Regan and Goneril's anger. Kent and Gloucester finally convince Lear to go with Gloucester, but Lear insists on bringing the disguised Edgar, whom he has begun to like, with him.

Summary: Act 3, scene 5

Inside Gloucester's castle, Cornwall vows revenge against Gloucester, whom Edmund has betrayed by showing Cornwall a letter that proves Gloucester's secret support of a French invasion. Edmund pretends to be horrified at the discovery of his father's "treason," but he is actually delighted, since the powerful Cornwall, now his ally, confers upon him the title of earl of Gloucester (3.5.10). Cornwall sends Edmund to find

Gloucester, and Edmund reasons to himself that if he can catch his father in the act of helping Lear, Cornwall's suspicions will be confirmed.

Analysis: Act 3, scenes 4–5

When Kent asks Lear to enter the hovel at the beginning of Act 3, scene 4, Lear's reply demonstrates that part of his mind is still lucid and that the symbolic connection between the storm outside and Lear's own mental disturbance is significant. Lear explains to Kent that although the storm may be very uncomfortable for Kent, Lear himself hardly notices it: "The tempest in my mind / Doth from my senses take all feeling else" (3.4.13–14). Lear's sensitivity to the storm is blocked out by his mental and emotional anguish and by his obsession with his treacherous daughters. The only thing that he can think of is their "filial ingratitude" (3.4.15).

Lear also continues to show a deepening sensitivity to other people, a trait missing from his character at the beginning of the play and an interesting side effect of his increasing madness and exposure to human cruelty. After he sends his Fool into the hovel to take shelter, he kneels in prayer—the first time we have seen him do so in the play. He does not pray for himself; instead, he asks the gods to help "poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are, / That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm" (3.4.29–30). Reproaching himself for his heartlessness, Lear urges himself to "expose thyself to feel what wretches feel" (3.4.35). This self-criticism and newfound sympathy for the plight of others mark the continuing humanization of Lear.

Lear's obsessive contemplation of his own humanity and of his place in relation to nature and to the gods is heightened still further after he meets Edgar, who is clad only in rags. Lear's wandering mind turns to his own fine clothing, and he asks, addressing Edgar's largely uncovered body, "Is man no more than this? Consider him well" (3.4.95–96). As a king in fact as well as in name, with servants and subjects and seemingly loyal daughters, Lear could be confident of his place in the universe; indeed, the universe seemed to revolve around him. Now, as his humility grows, he becomes conscious of his real relationship to nature. He is frightened to see himself as little more than a "bare, forked animal," stripped of everything that made him secure and powerful (3.4.99–100).

The destruction of Lear's pride leads him to question the social order that clothes kings in rich garments and beggars in rags. He realizes that each person, underneath his or her clothing, is naked and therefore weak. He sees too that clothing offers no protection against the forces of the elements or of the gods. When he tries to remove his own clothing, his companions restrain him. But Lear's attempt to bare himself is a sign that he has seen the similarities between himself and Edgar: only the flimsy

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surface of garments marks the difference between a king and a beggar. Each must face the cruelty of an uncaring world.

The many names that Edgar uses for the demons that pester him seem to have been taken by Shakespeare from a single source—Samuel Harsnett’s *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostors*, which describes demons in wild and outlandish language to ridicule the exorcisms performed by Catholic priests. Edgar uses similarly strange and haunting language to describe his demons. The audience assumes that he is only feigning madness; after all, we have seen him deliberately decide to pose as a crazed beggar in order to escape capture by his brother and father. But Edgar’s ravings are so convincing, and the storm-wracked heath such a bizarre environment, that the line between pretending to be mad and actually *being* mad seems to blur.

Summary: Act 3, scene 6

Gloucester, Kent, Lear, and the Fool take shelter in a small building (perhaps a shed or farmhouse) on Gloucester’s property. Gloucester leaves to find provisions for the king. Lear, whose mind is wandering ever more widely, holds a mock trial of his wicked daughters, with Edgar, Kent, and the Fool presiding. Both Edgar and the Fool speak like madmen, and the trial is an exercise in hallucination and eccentricity.

Gloucester hurries back in to tell Kent that he has overheard a plot to kill Lear. Gloucester begs Kent to quickly transport Lear toward Dover, in the south of England, where allies will be waiting for him. Gloucester, Kent, and the Fool leave. Edgar remains behind for a moment and speaks in his own, undisguised voice about how much less important his own suffering feels now that he has seen Lear’s far worse suffering.

Summary: Act 3, scene 7

Back in Gloucester’s castle, Cornwall gives Goneril the treasonous letter concerning the French army at Dover and tells her to take it and show it to her husband, Albany. He then sends his servants to apprehend Gloucester so that Gloucester can be punished. He orders Edmund to go with Goneril to Albany’s palace so that Edmund will not have to witness the violent punishment of his father.

Oswald brings word that Gloucester has helped Lear escape to Dover. Gloucester is found and brought before Regan and Cornwall. They treat him cruelly, tying him up like a thief, insulting him, and pulling his white beard. Cornwall remarks to himself that he cannot put Gloucester to death without holding a formal trial but that he can still punish him brutally and get away with it.

Admitting that he helped Lear escape, Gloucester swears that he will see Lear’s wrongs avenged. Cornwall replies, “See ’t shalt thou never,” and

proceeds to dig out one of Gloucester's eyes, throw it on the floor, and step on it (3.7.68). Gloucester screams, and Regan demands that Cornwall put out the other eye too.

One of Gloucester's servants suddenly steps in, saying that he cannot stand by and let this outrage happen. Cornwall draws his sword and the two fight. The servant wounds Cornwall, but Regan grabs a sword from another servant and kills the first servant before he can injure Cornwall further. Irate, the wounded Cornwall gouges out Gloucester's remaining eye.

Gloucester calls out for his son Edmund to help him, but Regan triumphantly tells him that it was Edmund who betrayed him to Cornwall in the first place. Gloucester, realizing immediately that Edgar was the son who really loved him, laments his folly and prays to the gods to help Edgar. Regan and Cornwall order that Gloucester be thrown out of the house to "smell / His way to Dover" (3.7.96–97). Cornwall, realizing that his wound is bleeding heavily, exits with Regan's aid.

Left alone with Gloucester, Cornwall's and Regan's servants express their shock and horror at what has just happened. They decide to treat Gloucester's bleeding face and hand him over to the mad beggar to lead Gloucester where he will.

Analysis: Act 3, scenes 6–7

In these scenes, Shakespeare continues to develop Lear's madness. Lear rages on against his daughters and is encouraged by comments that Edgar and the Fool make. We may interpret the Fool's remark "He's mad that trusts in the tameness of a wolf" as referring to Lear's folly in trusting his two wolflike daughters (3.6.16). Edgar, for his part, speaks like a madman who sees demons everywhere; since Lear has started to hallucinate that he sees his daughters, the two madmen get along well. For instance, when Lear accosts his absent daughters ("Now, you she foxes!"), Edgar scolds them likewise (3.6.20). Animal imagery will be applied to Goneril and Regan again later in Lear's mock trial of his daughters: "The little dogs and all, / Tray, Blanch, and Sweet-heart, see, they bark at me" (3.6.57–58). Having reduced his sense of himself to a "bare, forked animal," he now makes his vicious daughters animals as well—but they, of course, seem like predatory, disloyal creatures to him (3.4.99–100).

Act 3, scene 6, is the Fool's last scene, and Edgar continues to take over the Fool's function by answering Lear's mad words and jingles. When Lear declares, "We'll go to supper i' the morning" (3.6.77), thus echoing the confusion of the natural order in the play, the Fool answers, "And I'll go to bed at noon" (3.6.78). This line is the last we hear from him in the play. One can argue that since Lear is sliding into madness, he can no longer

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understand the nonsense of the Fool, who actually is sane, but rather can relate only to Edgar, who pretends to be mad. One can also argue that Lear has internalized the Fool's criticisms of his own errors, and thus he no longer needs to hear them from an outside source. In any case, the Fool, having served Shakespeare's purpose, has become expendable.

Edgar's speech at the end of Act 3, scene 6, in which he leaves off babbling and addresses the audience, gives us a needed reminder that, despite appearances, he is *not* actually insane. We are also reminded, yet again, of the similarities between his situation and Lear's. "He childed as I fathered," says Edgar, suggesting that just as Lear's ungrateful daughters put Lear where he is now, so Gloucester, too willing to believe the evil words of Edmund, did the same to Edgar (3.6.103).

The shocking violence of Act 3, scene 7, is one of the bloodiest onstage actions in all of Shakespeare. Typically, especially in Shakespeare's later plays, murders and mutilations take place offstage. Here, however, the violence happens right before our eyes, with Cornwall's snarl "Out, vile jelly!" as a ghastly complement to the action (3.7.86). (How graphic our view of the violence is depends on how it is staged.) The horror of Gloucester's blinding marks a turning point in the play: cruelty, betrayal, and even madness may be reversible, but blinding is not. It becomes evident at this point that the chaos and cruelty permeating the play have reached a point of no return.

Indeed, it is hard to overestimate the sheer cruelty that Regan and Cornwall perpetrate, in ways both obvious and subtle, against Gloucester. From Cornwall's order to "pinion him like a thief" (3.7.23) and Regan's exhortation to tie his arms "hard, hard" (3.7.32)—a disgraceful way to handle a nobleman—to Regan's astonishing rudeness in yanking on Gloucester's white beard after he is tied down, the two seem intent on hurting and humiliating Gloucester. Once again, the social order is inverted: the young are cruel to the old; loyalty to the old king is punished as treachery to the new rulers; Regan and Cornwall, guests within Gloucester's house, thoroughly violate the age-old conventions of respect and politeness. Cornwall does not have the authority to kill or punish Gloucester without a trial, but he decides to ignore that rule because he can: "Our power / Shall do a courtesy to our wrath, which men / May blame, but not control" (3.7.25–27).

This violence is mitigated slightly by the unexpected display of humanity on the part of Cornwall's servants. Just as Cornwall and Regan violate a range of social norms, so too do the servants, by challenging their masters. One servant gives his life trying to save Gloucester; others help the injured Gloucester and bring him to the disguised Edgar. Even amid the increasing chaos, some human compassion remains.

Summary: Act 4, scene 1

Edgar talks to himself on the heath, reflecting that his situation is not as bad as it could be. He is immediately presented with the horrifying sight of his blinded father. Gloucester is led by an old man who has been a tenant of both Gloucester and Gloucester's father for eighty years. Edgar hears Gloucester tell the old man that if he could only touch his son Edgar again, it would be worth more to him than his lost eyesight. But Edgar chooses to remain disguised as Poor Tom rather than reveal himself to his father. Gloucester asks the old man to bring some clothing to cover Tom, and he asks Tom to lead him to Dover. Edgar agrees. Specifically, Gloucester asks to be led to the top of the highest cliff.

Summary: Act 4, scene 2

Goneril and Edmund arrive outside of her palace, and Goneril expresses surprise that Albany did not meet them on the way. Oswald tells her that Albany is displeased with Goneril's and Regan's actions, glad to hear that the French army had landed, and sorry to hear that Goneril is returning home.

Goneril realizes that Albany is no longer her ally and criticizes his cowardice, resolving to assert greater control over her husband's military forces. She directs Edmund to return to Cornwall's house and raise Cornwall's troops for the fight against the French. She informs him that she will likewise take over power from her husband. She promises to send Oswald with messages. She bids Edmund goodbye with a kiss, strongly hinting that she wants to become his mistress.

As Edmund leaves, Albany enters. He harshly criticizes Goneril. He has not yet learned about Gloucester's blinding, but he is outraged at the news that Lear has been driven mad by Goneril and Regan's abuse. Goneril angrily insults Albany, accusing him of being a coward. She tells him that he ought to be preparing to fight against the French invaders. Albany retorts by calling her monstrous and condemns the evil that she has done to Lear.

A messenger arrives and delivers the news that Cornwall has died from the wound that he received while putting out Gloucester's eyes. Albany reacts with horror to the report of Gloucester's blinding and interprets Cornwall's death as divine retribution. Meanwhile, Goneril displays mixed feelings about Cornwall's death: on the one hand, it makes her sister Regan less powerful; on the other hand, it leaves Regan free to pursue Edmund herself. Goneril leaves to answer her sister's letters.

Albany demands to know where Edmund was when his father was being blinded. When he hears that it was Edmund who betrayed Gloucester and that Edmund left the house specifically so that Cornwall could punish

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Gloucester, Albany resolves to take revenge upon Edmund and help Gloucester.

Analysis: Act 4, scenes 1–2

In these scenes, the play moves further and further toward hopelessness. We watch characters who think that matters are improving realize that they are only getting worse. Edgar, wandering the plains half naked, friendless, and hunted, thinks the worst has passed, until the world sinks to another level of darkness, when he glimpses his beloved father blinded, crippled, and bleeding from the eye sockets. Gloucester, who seems to have resigned himself to his sightless future, expresses a similar feeling of despair in one of the play's most famous and disturbing lines: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; / They kill us for their sport" (4.1.37–38). Here we have nihilism in its starkest form: the idea that there is no order, no goodness in the universe, only caprice and cruelty. This theme of despair in the face of an uncaring universe makes *King Lear* one of Shakespeare's darkest plays. For Gloucester, as for Lear on the heath, there is no possibility of redemption or happiness in the world—there is only the "sport" of vicious, inscrutable gods.

It is unclear why Edgar keeps up his disguise as Poor Tom. Whatever Edgar's (or Shakespeare's) reasoning, his secrecy certainly creates dramatic tension and allows Edgar to continue to babble about the "foul fiend[s]" that possess and follow him (4.1.59). It also makes him unlikely to ask Gloucester his reasons for wanting to go to Dover. Gloucester phrases his request strangely, asking Tom to lead him only to the brim of the cliff, where "from that place / I shall no leading need" (4.1.77–78). These lines clearly foreshadow Gloucester's later attempt to commit suicide.

Meanwhile, the characters in power, having blinded Gloucester and driven off Lear, are swiftly becoming divided. The motif of betrayal recurs, but this time it is the wicked betraying the wicked. Cornwall has died, and Albany has turned against his wife, Goneril, and her remaining allies, Regan and Edmund. Albany's unexpected discovery of a conscience after witnessing his wife's cruelty raises the theme of redemption for the first time, offering the possibility that even an apparently wicked character can recover his goodness and try to make amends. Significantly, Albany's attacks on his wife echo Lear's own words: "O Goneril! / You are not worth the dust which the rude wind / Blows in your face," Albany tells her after hearing what she has done to her father (4.2.30–32). Like Lear, Albany uses animal imagery to describe the faithless daughters. "Tigers, not daughters, what have you performed?" he asks (4.2.41). Goneril, for her part, is hardly intimidated by him; she calls him a "moral fool" for criticizing her while France invades (4.1.59). Goneril equates Albany's moralizing with foolishness, a sign of her evil nature.

When Albany hears that Cornwall is dead, he thanks divine justice in words that run counter to Gloucester's earlier despair. "This shows you are above, / You justicers," he cries, offering a slightly more optimistic—if grim—take on the possibility of divine justice than Gloucester's earlier comment about flies, boys, and death (4.2.79–80). His words imply that perhaps it will be possible to restore order after all, perhaps the wicked characters will yet suffer for their sins—or so the audience and characters alike can hope.

Summary: Act 4, scene 3

Kent, still disguised as an ordinary serving man, speaks with a gentleman in the French camp near Dover. The gentleman tells Kent that the king of France landed with his troops but quickly departed to deal with a problem at home. Kent's letters have been brought to Cordelia, who is now the queen of France and who has been left in charge of the army. Kent questions the gentleman about Cordelia's reaction to the letters, and the gentleman gives a moving account of Cordelia's sorrow upon reading about her father's mistreatment.

Kent tells the gentleman that Lear, who now wavers unpredictably between sanity and madness, has also arrived safely in Dover. Lear, however, refuses to see Cordelia because he is ashamed of the way he treated her. The gentleman informs Kent that the armies of both Albany and the late Cornwall are on the march, presumably to fight against the French troops.

Summary: Act 4, scene 4

Cordelia enters, leading her soldiers. Lear has hidden from her in the cornfields, draping himself in weeds and flowers and singing madly to himself. Cordelia sends one hundred of her soldiers to find Lear and bring him back. She consults with a doctor about Lear's chances for recovering his sanity. The doctor tells her that what Lear most needs is sleep and that there are medicines that can make him sleep. A messenger brings Cordelia the news that the British armies of Cornwall and Albany are marching toward them. Cordelia expected this news, and her army stands ready to fight.

Summary: Act 4, scene 5

Back at Gloucester's castle, Oswald tells Regan that Albany's army has set out, although Albany has been dragging his feet about the expedition. It seems that Goneril is a "better soldier" than Albany (4.5.4). Regan is extremely curious about the letter that Oswald carries from Goneril to Edmund, but Oswald refuses to show it to her. Regan guesses that the letter concerns Goneril's love affair with Edmund, and she tells Oswald plainly that she wants Edmund for herself. Regan reveals that she has

already spoken with Edmund about this possibility; it would be more appropriate for Edmund to get involved with her, now a widow, than with Goneril, with whom such involvement would constitute adultery. She gives Oswald a token or a letter (the text doesn't specify which) to deliver to Edmund, whenever he may find him. Finally, she promises Oswald a reward if he can find and kill Gloucester.

Analysis: Act 4, scenes 3–5

In these scenes, we see Cordelia for the first time since Lear banished her in Act 1, scene 1. The words the gentleman uses to describe Cordelia to Kent seem to present her as a combination idealized female beauty and quasi-religious savior figure. The gentleman uses the language of love poetry to describe her beauty—her lips are “ripe,” the tears in her eyes are “as pearls from diamonds dropped,” and her “smiles and tears” are like the paradoxically coexisting “sunshine and rain” (4.3.17–21). But the gentleman also describes Cordelia in language that might be used to speak of a holy angel or the Virgin Mary herself: he says that, as she wiped away her tears, “she shook / The holy water from her heavenly eyes” (4.3.28–29). Cordelia's great love for her father, which contrasts sharply with Goneril and Regan's cruelty, elevates her to the level of reverence.

The strength of Cordelia's daughterly love is reinforced in Act 4, scene 4, when Cordelia orders her people to seek out and help her father. We learn that the main reason for the French invasion of England is Cordelia's desire to help Lear: “great France / My mourning and importuned tears hath pitied,” she says (4.4.26–27). The king of France, her husband, took pity on her grief and allowed the invasion in an effort to help restore Lear to the throne. When Cordelia proclaims that she is motivated not by ambition but by “love, dear love, and our aged father's right,” we are reminded of how badly Lear treated her at the beginning of the play (4.4.29). Her virtue and devotion is manifest in her willingness to forgive her father for his awful behavior. At one point, she declares, “O dear father, / It is thy business that I go about” (4.4.24–25), echoing a biblical passage in which Christ says, “I must go about my father's business” (Luke 2:49). This allusion reinforces Cordelia's piety and purity and consciously links her to Jesus Christ, who, of course, was a martyr to love, just as Cordelia becomes at the play's close.

The other characters in the play discuss Lear's madness in interesting language, and some of the most memorable turns of phrase in the play come from these descriptions. When Cordelia assesses Lear's condition in Act 4, scene 4, she says he is

As mad as the vexed sea; singing aloud;
Crowned with rank fumiter and furrow-weeds,

With hordocks, hemlock, nettles, cuckoo-flowers,
Darnel, and all the idle weeds that grow. (4.4.2–5)

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Lear's madness, which is indicated here by both his singing and his self-adornment with flowers, is marked by an embrace of the natural world; rather than perceiving himself as a heroic figure who transcends nature, he understands that he is a small, meaningless component of it. Additionally, this description brings to mind other famous scenes of madness in Shakespeare—most notably, the scenes of Ophelia's flower-bedecked madness in *Hamlet*.

These scenes set up the resolution of the play's tension, which takes place in Act 5. While Lear hides from Cordelia out of shame, she seeks him out of love, crystallizing the contrast between her forgiveness and his repentance. Regan and Goneril have begun to become rivals for the affection of Edmund, as their twin ambitions inevitably bring them into conflict. On the political and military level, we learn that Albany's and Cornwall's armies are on the march toward the French camp at Dover. The play is rushing toward a conclusion, for all the characters' trajectories have begun to converge.

Summary: Act 4, scene 6

Still disguised, Edgar leads Gloucester toward Dover. Edgar pretends to take Gloucester to the cliff, telling him that they are going up steep ground and that they can hear the sea. Finally, he tells Gloucester that they are at the top of the cliff and that looking down from the great height gives him vertigo. He waits quietly nearby as Gloucester prays to the gods to forgive him. Gloucester can no longer bear his suffering and intends to commit suicide. He falls to the ground, fainting.

Edgar wakes Gloucester up. He no longer pretends to be Poor Tom but now acts like an ordinary gentleman, although he still doesn't tell Gloucester that he is his son. Edgar says that he saw him fall all the way from the cliffs of Dover and that it is a miracle that he is still alive. Clearly, Edgar states, the gods do not want Gloucester to die just yet. Edgar also informs Gloucester that he saw the creature who had been with him at the top of the cliff and that this creature was not a human being but a devil. Gloucester accepts Edgar's explanation that the gods have preserved him and resolves to endure his sufferings patiently.

Lear, wandering across the plain, stumbles upon Edgar and Gloucester. Crowned with wild flowers, he is clearly mad. He babbles to Edgar and Gloucester, speaking both irrationally and with a strange perceptiveness. He recognizes Gloucester, alluding to Gloucester's sin and source of shame—his adultery. Lear pardons Gloucester for this crime, but his thoughts then follow a chain of associations from adultery to copulation to

womankind, culminating in a tirade against women and sexuality in general. Lear's disgust carries him to the point of incoherence, as he deserts iambic pentameter (the verse form in which his speeches are written) and spits out the words "Fie, fie, fie! pah! pah!" (4.6.126).

Cordelia's people enter seeking King Lear. Relieved to find him at last, they try to take him into custody to bring him to Cordelia. When Lear runs away, Cordelia's men follow him.

Oswald comes across Edgar and Gloucester on the plain. He does not recognize Edgar, but he plans to kill Gloucester and collect the reward from Regan. Edgar adopts yet another persona, imitating the dialect of a peasant from the west of England. He defends Gloucester and kills Oswald with a cudgel. As he dies, Oswald entrusts Edgar with his letters.

Gloucester is disappointed not to have been killed. Edgar reads with interest the letter that Oswald carries to Edmund. In the letter, Goneril urges Edmund to kill Albany if he gets the opportunity, so that Edmund and Goneril can be together. Edgar is outraged; he decides to keep the letter and show it to Albany when the time is right. Meanwhile, he buries Oswald nearby and leads Gloucester off to temporary safety.

Summary: Act 4, scene 7

In the French camp, Cordelia speaks with Kent. She knows his real identity, but he wishes it to remain a secret to everyone else. Lear, who has been sleeping, is brought in to Cordelia. He only partially recognizes her. He says that he knows now that he is senile and not in his right mind, and he assumes that Cordelia hates him and wants to kill him, just as her sisters do. Cordelia tells him that she forgives him for banishing her.

Meanwhile, the news of Cornwall's death is repeated in the camp, and we learn that Edmund is now leading Cornwall's troops. The battle between France and England rapidly approaches.

Analysis: Act 4, scenes 6–7

Besides moving the physical action of the play along, these scenes forward the play's psychological action. The strange, marvelous scene of Gloucester's supposed fall over the nonexistent cliffs of Dover, Lear's mad speeches to Gloucester and Edgar in the wilderness, and the redemptive reconciliation between Cordelia and her not-quite-sane father all set the stage for the resolution of the play's emotional movement in Act 5.

The psychological motivations behind Gloucester's attempted suicide and Edgar's manipulation of it are complicated and ambiguous. Gloucester's death wish, which reflects his own despair at the cruel, uncaring universe—and perhaps the play's despair as well—would surely have been troubling to the self-consciously Christian society of Renaissance

England. Shakespeare gets around much of the problem by setting *King Lear* in a pagan past; despite the fact that the play is full of Christian symbols and allusions, its characters pray only to the gods and never to the Christian God.

Clearly, Edgar wants his father to live. He refuses to share in Gloucester's despair and still seeks a just and happy resolution to the events of the play. In letting Gloucester think that he has attempted suicide, Edgar manipulates Gloucester's understanding of divine will: he says to Gloucester after the latter's supposed fall and rebirth, "Thy life's a miracle. . . . / . . . / The clearest gods . . . / . . . have preserved thee" (4.6.55, 73–74). Edgar not only stops Gloucester's suicidal thoughts but also shocks him into a rebirth. He tells his father that he should "bear free and patient thoughts": his life has been given back to him and he should take better care of it from now on (4.6.80).

In these scenes, King Lear's madness brings forth some of his strangest and most interesting speeches. As Edgar notes, Lear's apparent ramblings are "matter and impertinency mixed! / Reason in madness!" (4.6.168–169). This description is similar to Polonius's muttering behind Hamlet's back in *Hamlet*: "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't" (*Hamlet*, 2.2.203–204). Some of Lear's rambling does indeed seem to be meaningless babble, as when he talks about mice, cheese, and giants. But Lear swiftly moves on to talk of more relevant things. He finally understands that his older daughters, in Act 1, scene 1, and before, were sweet-talking him: "They flattered me like a dog. . . . To say 'aye' and 'no' to everything that I said!" (4.6.95–98).

Lear has realized, despite what flatterers have told him and he has believed, that he is as vulnerable to the forces of nature as any human being. He cannot command the rain and thunder and is not immune to colds and fever (the "ague" of 4.6.103). Just as, during the storm, he recognizes that beneath each man's clothing is "a poor, bare, forked animal" (3.4.99–100), Lear now understands that no amount of flattery and praise can make a king different from anyone else: "Through tattered clothes small vices do appear; / Robes and furred gowns hide all" (4.6.158–159).

Armed with this knowledge, Lear can finally reunite with Cordelia and express his newfound humility and beg repentance. "I am a very foolish fond old man" (4.7.61), he tells her sadly, and he admits that she has "some cause" to hate him (4.7.76). Cordelia's moving response ("No cause, no, cause") seals their reconciliation (4.7.77). Love and forgiveness, embodied in Lear's best daughter, join with humility and repentance, and, for a brief time, happiness prevails. But the forces that Lear's initial error unleashed—Goneril, Regan, and Edmund, with all their ambition and appetite for destruction—remain at large. We thus turn from happy

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reconciliation to conflict, as Cordelia leads her troops against the evil that her father's folly has set loose in Britain.

Summary: Act 5, scene 1

In the British camp near Dover, Regan asks Edmund if he loves Goneril and if he has found his way into her bed. Edmund responds in the negative to both questions. Regan expresses jealousy of her sister and beseeches Edmund not to be familiar with her.

Abruptly, Goneril and Albany enter with their troops. Albany states that he has heard that the invading French army has been joined by Lear and unnamed others who may have legitimate grievances against the present government. Despite his sympathy toward Lear and these other dissidents, Albany declares that he intends to fight alongside Edmund, Regan, and Goneril to repel the foreign invasion. Goneril and Regan jealously spar over Edmund, neither willing to leave the other alone with him. The three exit together.

Just as Albany begins to leave, Edgar, now disguised as an ordinary peasant, catches up to him. He gives Albany the letter that he took from Oswald's body—the letter in which Goneril's involvement with Edmund is revealed and in which Goneril asks Edmund to kill Albany. Edgar tells Albany to read the letter and says that if Albany wins the upcoming battle, he can sound a trumpet and Edgar will provide a champion to defend the claims made in the letter. Edgar vanishes and Edmund returns. Edmund tells Albany that the battle is almost upon them, and Albany leaves. Alone, Edmund addresses the audience, stating that he has sworn his love to both Regan and Goneril. He debates what he should do, reflecting that choosing either one would anger the other. He decides to put off the decision until after the battle, observing that if Albany survives it, Goneril can take care of killing him herself. He asserts menacingly that if the British win the battle and he captures Lear and Cordelia, he will show them no mercy.

Summary: Act 5, scene 2

The battle begins. Edgar, in peasant's clothing, leads Gloucester to the shelter of a tree and goes into battle to fight on Lear's side. He soon returns, shouting that Lear's side has lost and that Lear and Cordelia have been captured. Gloucester states that he will stay where he is and wait to be captured or killed, but Edgar says that one's death occurs at a predestined time. Persuaded, Gloucester goes with Edgar.

Analysis: Act 5, scenes 1–2

In these scenes, the battle is quickly commenced and just as quickly concluded. The actual fighting happens offstage, during the short Act 5, scene 2. Meanwhile, the tangled web of affection, romance, manipulation, power, and betrayal among Goneril, Regan, Albany, and Edmund has

finally taken on a clear shape. We learn from Edmund that he has promised himself to both sisters; we do not know whether he is lying to Regan when he states that he has not slept with Goneril. Nor can we deduce from Edmund's speech which of the sisters he prefers—or, in fact, whether he really loves either of them—but it is clear that he has created a problem for himself by professing love for both.

It is clear now which characters support Lear and Cordelia and which characters are against them. Albany plans to show Lear and Cordelia mercy; Edmund, like Goneril and Regan, does not. Since all of these characters are, theoretically, fighting on the same side—the British—it is unclear what the fate of the captured Lear and Cordelia will be.

Ultimately, the sense that one has in these scenes is of evil turning inward and devouring itself. As long as Lear and Gloucester served as victims, Goneril and Regan were united. Now, though, with power concentrated in their hands, they fall to squabbling over Edmund's affections. Edmund himself has come into his own, taking command of an army and playing the two queens off against each other. It is suddenly clear that he, more than anyone else, will benefit from Lear's division of the kingdom. Gloucester's bastard may, indeed, shortly make himself king.
Summary: Act 5, scene 3

Edmund leads in Lear and Cordelia as his prisoners. Cordelia expects to confront Regan and Goneril, but Lear vehemently refuses to do so. He describes a vividly imagined fantasy, in which he and Cordelia live alone together like birds in a cage, hearing about the outside world but observed by no one. Edmund sends them away, giving the captain who guards them a note with instructions as to what to do with them. He doesn't make the note's contents clear to the audience, but he speaks ominously. The captain agrees to follow Edmund's orders.

Albany enters accompanied by Goneril and Regan. He praises Edmund for his brave fighting on the British side and orders that he produce Lear and Cordelia. Edmund lies to Albany, claiming that he sent Lear and Cordelia far away because he feared that they would excite the sympathy of the British forces and create a mutiny. Albany rebukes him for putting himself above his place, but Regan breaks in to declare that she plans to make Edmund her husband. Goneril tells Regan that Edmund will not marry her, but Regan, who is unexpectedly beginning to feel sick, claims Edmund as her husband and lord.

Albany intervenes, arresting Edmund on a charge of treason. Albany challenges Edmund to defend himself against the charge in a trial by combat, and he sounds the trumpet to summon his champion. While Regan, who is growing ill, is helped to Albany's tent, Edgar appears in full armor to

accuse Edmund of treason and face him in single combat. Edgar defeats Edmund, and Albany cries out to Edgar to leave Edmund alive for questioning. Goneril tries to help the wounded Edmund, but Albany brings out the treacherous letter to show that he knows of her conspiracy against him. Goneril rushes off in desperation.

Edgar takes off his helmet and reveals his identity. He reconciles with Albany and tells the company how he disguised himself as a mad beggar and led Gloucester through the countryside. He adds that he revealed himself to his father only as he was preparing to fight Edmund and that Gloucester, torn between joy and grief, died.

A gentleman rushes in carrying a bloody knife. He announces that Goneril has committed suicide. Moreover, she fatally poisoned Regan before she died. The two bodies are carried in and laid out.

Kent enters and asks where Lear is. Albany recalls with horror that Lear and Cordelia are still imprisoned and demands from Edmund their whereabouts. Edmund repents his crimes and determines to do good before his death. He tells the others that he had ordered that Cordelia be hanged and sends a messenger to try to intervene.

Lear enters, carrying the dead Cordelia in his arms: the messenger arrived too late. Slipping in and out of sanity, Lear grieves over Cordelia's body. Kent speaks to Lear, but Lear barely recognizes him. A messenger enters and reveals that Edmund has also died. Lear asks Edgar to loosen Cordelia's button; then, just as Lear thinks that he sees her beginning to breathe again, he dies.

Albany gives Edgar and Kent their power and titles back, inviting them to rule with him. Kent, feeling himself near death, refuses, but Edgar seems to accept. The few remaining survivors exit sadly as a funeral march plays.

Analysis

This long scene brings the play to its resolution, ending it on a note of relentless depression and gloom. Almost all of the main characters wind up dead; only Albany, Edgar, and Kent walk off the stage at the end, and the aging, unhappy Kent predicts his imminent demise. Goneril, Regan, Cordelia, and Lear lie dead onstage, and Edmund and Gloucester have passed away offstage. Albany philosophizes about his merciless end when he says, "All friends shall taste / The wages of their virtue, and all foes / The cup of their deserving" (5.3.301–303). One can argue that these words suggest that, in some sense, order and justice have triumphed over villainy and cruelty, and that the world is a just place after all.

But one can also argue that Albany's words ring hollow: most of the virtuous characters die along with the villains, making it difficult to

interpret the scene as poetic justice. Indeed, death seems to be a defining motif for the play, embracing characters indiscriminately. We may feel that the disloyal Goneril and Regan, the treacherous Edmund, the odious Oswald, and the brutal Cornwall richly deserve their deaths. But, in the last scene, when the audience expects some kind of justice to be doled out, the good characters—Gloucester, Cordelia, Lear—die as well, and their bodies litter the stage alongside the corpses of the wicked.

This final, harrowing wave of death raises, yet again, a question that has burned throughout the play: is there any justice in the world? Albany's suggestion that the good and the evil both ultimately get what they deserve does not seem to hold true. Lear, howling over Cordelia's body, asks, "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life, / And thou no breath at all?" (5.3.305–306). This question can be answered only with the stark truth that death comes to all, regardless of each individual's virtue or youth. The world of *King Lear* is not a Christian cosmos: there is no messiah to give meaning to suffering and no promise of an afterlife. All that *King Lear* offers is despair.

The play's emotional extremes of hope and despair, joy and grief, love and hate, are brought to the fore as well in this final scene. Lear's address to Cordelia at the beginning of the scene is strangely joyful. He creates an intimate world that knows only love: "We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage. / When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down, / And ask of thee forgiveness" (5.3.9–11). This blissful vision, however, is countered by the terrible despair that Lear evokes at Cordelia's death: "Thou'lt come no more, / Never, never, never, never, never." (5.3.306–307). Yet, despite his grief, Lear expires in a flash of utterly misguided hope, thinking that Cordelia is coming back to life. In a sense, this final, false hope is the most depressing moment of all.

Similarly, Gloucester, as Edgar announces, dies partly of joy: "his flawed heart— / . . . / 'Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief, / Burst smilingly" (5.3.195–198). Even Edmund, learning of Goneril's and Regan's deaths, says, "Yet Edmund was beloved. / The one the other poisoned for my sake, / And after slew herself" (5.3.238–240). Even the cruel Edmund thinks of love in his last moments, a reminder of the warmth of which his bastard birth deprived him. But for him and the two sister queens, as for everyone else in *King Lear*, love seems to lead only to death. In perhaps the play's final cruelty, the audience is left with only a terrifying uncertainty: the good and the evil alike die, and joy and pain both lead to madness or death.

The corpses on the stage at the end of the play, of the young as well as the old, symbolize despair and death—just as the storm at the play's center symbolizes chaos and madness. For Lear, at least, death is a mercy. As Kent says, "The wonder is, he hath endured so long" in his grief and

madness (5.3.315). For the others, however, we are left wondering whether there is any justice, any system of punishment and reward in the “tough world” of this powerful but painful play (5.3.313).

QUOTES

1. nhappy that I am, I cannot heave

My heart into my mouth. I love your majesty

According to my bond; no more nor less.

Cordelia speaks these words when she address her father, King Lear, who has demanded that his daughters tell him how much they love him before he divides his kingdom among them (1.1.90–92). In contrast to the empty flattery of Goneril and Regan, Cordelia offers her father a truthful evaluation of her love for him: she loves him “according to my bond”; that is, she understands and accepts without question her duty to love him as a father and king. Although Cordelia loves Lear better than her sisters do, she is unable to “heave” her heart into her mouth, as her integrity prevents her from making a false declaration in order to gain his wealth. Lear’s rage at what he perceives to be her lack of affection sets the tragedy in motion. Cordelia’s refusal to flatter Lear, then, establishes her virtue and the authenticity of her love, while bringing about Lear’s dreadful error of judgment.

- 2 Thou, nature, art my goddess; to thy law

My services are bound. Wherefore should I

Stand in the plague of custom, and permit

The curiosity of nations to deprive me,

For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines

Lag of a brother? Why bastard? wherefore base?

...

Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land.

Our father’s love is to the bastard Edmund

As to the legitimate. Fine word—“legitimate”!

Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed,

And my invention thrive, Edmund the base

Shall top the legitimate. I grow; I prosper.

Now, gods, stand up for bastards!

Edmund delivers this soliloquy just before he tricks his father, Gloucester, into believing that Gloucester’s legitimate son, Edgar, is plotting against him (1.2.1–22). “I grow; I prosper,” he says, and these

words define his character throughout the play. Deprived by his bastard birth of the respect and rank that he believes to be rightfully his, Edmund sets about raising himself by his own efforts, forging personal prosperity through treachery and betrayals. The repeated use of the epithet “legitimate” in reference to Edgar reveals Edmund’s obsession with his brother’s enviable status as their father’s rightful heir. With its attack on the “plague of custom,” this quotation embodies Edmund’s resentment of the social order of the world and his accompanying craving for respect and power. He invokes “nature” because only in the unregulated, anarchic scheme of the natural world can one of such low birth achieve his goals. He wants recognition more than anything else—perhaps, it is suggested later, because of the familial love that has been denied him—and he sets about getting that recognition by any means necessary.

*Joseph Andrews-Henry
Fielding*

3 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 . . .
...
You heavens, give me that patience, patience I need!
...
If it be you that stir these daughters’ hearts
Against their father, fool me not so much
To bear it tamely; touch me with noble anger,
And let not women’s weapons, water-drops,
Stain my man’s cheeks! No, you unnatural hags,
...
No, I’ll not weep.
I have full cause of weeping, but this heart
Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws,
Or ere I’ll weep. O fool, I shall go mad!

Lear delivers these lines after he has been driven to the end of his rope by the cruelties of Goneril and Regan (2.4.259–281). He rages against them, explaining that their attempts to take away his knights and servants strike at his heart. “O, reason not the need!” he cries, explaining that humans would be no different from the animals if they did not need more than the fundamental necessities of life to be happy. Clearly, Lear needs knights and attendants not only because of the service that they provide him but because of what their presence represents: namely, his identity, both as a

king and as a human being. Goneril and Regan, in stripping Lear of the trappings of power, are reducing him to the level of an animal. They are also driving him mad, as the close of this quotation indicates, since he is unable to bear the realization of his daughters' terrible betrayal. Despite his attempt to assert his authority, Lear finds himself powerless; all he can do is vent his rage.

4 As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods;
They kill us for their sport.

Gloucester speaks these words as he wanders on the heath after being blinded by Cornwall and Regan (4.1.37–38). They reflect the profound despair that grips him and drives him to desire his own death. More important, they emphasize one of the play's chief themes—namely, the question of whether there is justice in the universe. Gloucester's philosophical musing here offers an outlook of stark despair: he suggests that there is no order—or at least no *good* order—in the universe, and that man is incapable of imposing his own moral ideas upon the harsh and inflexible laws of the world. Instead of divine justice, there is only the “sport” of vicious, inscrutable gods, who reward cruelty and delight in suffering. In many ways, the events of the play bear out Gloucester's understanding of the world, as the good die along with the wicked, and no reason is offered for the unbearable suffering that permeates the play.

5 Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones:
Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so
That heaven's vault should crack. She's gone forever!
I know when one is dead, and when one lives;
She's dead as earth.

Lear utters these words as he emerges from prison carrying Cordelia's body in his arms (5.3.256–260). His howl of despair returns us again to the theme of justice, as he suggests that “heaven's vault should crack” at his daughter's death—but it does not, and no answers are offered to explain Cordelia's unnecessary end. It is this final twist of the knife that makes *King Lear* such a powerful, unbearable play. We have seen Cordelia and Lear reunited in Act 4, and, at this point, all of the play's villains have been killed off, leaving the audience to anticipate a happy ending. Instead, we have a corpse and a howling, ready-for-death old man. Indeed, the tension between Lear as powerful figure and Lear as animalistic madman explodes to the surface in Lear's “Howl, howl, howl, howl,” a spoken rather than sounded vocalization of his primal instinct.

SUMMARY

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King Lear opens with a conversation between the earls of Kent and Gloucester, in which the audience learns that Gloucester has two sons: Edgar, who is his legitimate heir, and Edmund, his younger illegitimate son. This information will provide the secondary or subplot. Next, King Lear enters to state that he intends to remove himself from life's duties and concerns. Pointing at a map, Lear tells those in attendance that he has divided his kingdom into three shares, to be parceled out to his three daughters, as determined by their protestations of love. The two elder daughters, Goneril and Regan, exaggerate their love by telling their father that their affection for him exceeds all reasonable expectations. The youngest daughter, Cordelia, tells Lear that she loves him, but only as a daughter should love a father. Lear, angry and disappointed at what he deems a lack of devotion on Cordelia's part, divides his kingdom equally between Goneril and Regan, and banishes Cordelia. Later, France agrees to marry the now dowerless and banished Cordelia. When Kent attempts to defend Cordelia, Lear banishes him as well. Meanwhile, Goneril and Regan decide that if Lear becomes too much of a nuisance, they will have to decide what disciplinary actions to take.

In the developing subplot, Edmund complains of his unhappiness at being an illegitimate — and thus, disinherited — son. As part of his plot to claim what is not his, Edmund gives a false letter to his father, Gloucester, declaring that Edgar is proposing that they kill their father and split the wealth between them. The cunning Edmund easily convinces his father that Edgar cannot be trusted.

Within a short time, Lear moves to Goneril's palace. Goneril tells Lear that he needs a smaller troop, more decorous in behavior and better suited to the king's rank and age. The king is very angry and says he will pack up his people and move to Regan's palace. Lear's anger continues to build, and he calls upon nature to curse Goneril's womb. In response, Goneril turns out 50 of Lear's retinue.

As the subplot develops, Edmund wounds himself slightly, pretending that Edgar has attacked him. Certain that Edgar will also try to kill him, Gloucester promises to find the means to make Edmund his heir. After his escape into the woods, Edgar decides that he will disguise himself as a Bedlam beggar, who will be known as Poor Tom. Meanwhile, Cornwall orders an impassioned Kent placed in the stocks. Lear arrives and quickly realizes that Regan has joined Goneril in seeking to reduce Lear's authority. Lear reminds his daughters that he gave them all that they now

enjoy, but they are unmoved. An angry Lear calls for his horse, and rides into the storm with his Fool for protection. Exposed to the storm, the Fool attempts to reason with his king, but Lear will have no part of submission, especially before his daughters. Soon the king and Fool are joined by Edgar disguised as Poor Tom.

Gloucester tells Edmund of the plot to save the king, unaware that he is divulging the plans to a traitor. Edmund immediately resolves to tell Cornwall of the plan. Edmund soon receives his reward: Gloucester's title and lands. The captured Gloucester is tortured by Regan, who fiendishly plucks at his beard, and Cornwall, who gouges out Gloucester's eyes, but not before one of Cornwall's servants draws a sword and stabs Cornwall, who soon dies of his wounds.

Later, Edgar is both shocked and dismayed when a blinded Gloucester is led in by one of his tenants. The disguised Edgar agrees to take Gloucester to the cliff he seeks, where he dupes Gloucester into thinking that he is at the edge of a precipice. After Gloucester jumps and loses consciousness, Edgar easily convinces his father that he has somehow survived a fall from the cliffs. Oswald arrives and attempts to kill Gloucester but is, instead, slain by Edgar. As he lays dying, Oswald gives Edgar a letter from Goneril instructing Edmund to murder Albany so that she will be free to wed Edmund.

Goneril and Edmund soon learn that Albany is a changed man, one who is pleased to learn of the proposed invasion by France and displeased when he learns that Gloucester has been replaced by his younger son, Edmund. Meanwhile, Cordelia learns of her father's deteriorated mental condition and returns to England with an army to defend her father. Within a short time, Cordelia and her father reunite.

In spite of Albany's intent to save Lear and Cordelia's lives, Edmund resolves that they will die. Edmund orders that Lear and Cordelia be imprisoned. Albany, Goneril, and Regan join Edmund, and a confrontation erupts between all four characters. Edmund's treachery is revealed, and he is wounded in a fight with Edgar, whom Edmund does not recognize as his brother. Soon, Regan dies, poisoned by Goneril, who then kills herself. Since he is now dying, Edmund admits that the charges against him are truthful, and he seeks to know the identity of his killer. Edgar confesses his lineage as brother and shares the news that their father, Gloucester, has died.

Edmund, who says he wants some good to come from so much death, reveals his and Goneril's plan to have both Lear and Cordelia murdered and to have Cordelia's death appear a suicide. Efforts to rescind these orders are too late, and soon Lear enters with a dead Cordelia in his arms. Unable to accept Cordelia's death, the king also dies, his body covering that

of his youngest daughter. Albany informs Kent and Edgar that they must now rule the kingdom together, but Kent replies that he will soon leave the world to join his master. Edgar is left to speak of the sad weight of these events, which everyone must now endure.

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KEY WORDS

- alteration change (of mind).
- answer any act in response or retaliation.
- apprehension capture or arrest.
- arbitrement an absolute and final decision.
- attain to prove guilty.
- avouched asserted; affirmed.
- ballock a short, thick stick or club.
- bandy to give and take; specifically, to exchange (words) in an angry or argumentative manner.
- bans curses.
- belike quite likely; probably.
- bemadding maddening.
- bend 1 to turn or direct. 2 to cause to have a fixed purpose; determine; aim.
- bending overhanging; prominent.
- bending to turn or direct.
- benison a blessing; benediction.
- besort to be suitable to.
- blood parental heritage; family line; lineage.
- bourn a limit; boundary; a domain.
- braz'd 1 made of, or coated with, brass or a brasslike substance. 2 made hard like brass.
- briefness sudden action; a short duration or length.
- cadent falling.
- carbonado to cut gashes in; slash; hack.
- cataracts floodgate (of heaven).
- century a military unit, originally made up of 100 men.
- character style of printing or handwriting.
- clipp'd inaccurate through omission.

- cock a small boat propelled by oars, esp. one used as a ship's tender.
- conceit a flight of imagination; fancy.
- convenient appropriate; suitable.
- cope to meet, encounter, or have to do (*with*).
- cowish timid; cowardly.
- coxcomb a cap topped with a notched strip of red cloth like a cock's comb, formerly worn by jesters.
- cullionly low, contemptible.
- curious highly detailed, as in workmanship; elaborate.
- daub it further disguise it further.
- dearn gloomy; bleak.
- defuse 1 complicate. 2 to render harmless.
- descent the lowest point; here, the sole of a shoe.
- dog-hearted ferocious; cruel; pitiless.
- faith'd approved; endorsed.
- felicitate made happy.
- festinate hurried.
- fetches tricks; dodges.
- finical finicky.
- fire extreme suffering or distress that tries one's endurance; tribulation or ordeal.
- first cock midnight.
- fitchew lewd woman; prostitute.
- flesh to begin; activate.
- footed secured.
- fordome destroyed, killed, ruined, etc.
- forfended prohibited; forbidden.
- gauntlet 1 a medieval glove, usually of leather covered with metal plates, worn by knights in armor to protect the hand in combat. 2 throw down the gauntlet to challenge, as to combat.
- goatish lustful; lecherous.
- good host shelterer, entertainer.
- green mantle a surface covered with scum or froth.
- greet the time hurry; meet the emergency.
- horse-way horse path.

- idle frivolous; silly.
- idle having no value, use, or significance; worthless.
- ill affected unfaithful.
- imports to mean; signify.
- jakes an outdoor toilet; privy.
- joint-stool a stool made with jointed parts.
- justicers legal officials; judges.
- kibes a chapped or ulcerated chilblain especially on the heel.
- lendings things that one has let another have use of temporarily and on condition that they, or equivalents, be returned.
- list a wish; a craving, desire, or inclination.
- long-engrafted firmly established.
- make from to stay away from; avoid.
- maugre in spite of.
- meiny attendants, collectively; retinue or household.
- minikin very small and delicate; diminutive.
- moiety 1 a half; either of two equal, or more or less equal, parts. 2 an indefinite share or part.
- more composition the act of composing, or putting together a whole by combining parts.
- nether-stocks tights or stockings.
- nighted made dark; black.
- of her bosom have her trust or confidence.
- offices the function or characteristic action of a particular thing.
- opposeless irresistible.
- out wall outside; exterior.
- out-paramour'd having more lovers or mistresses.
- pawn anything given as security, as for a debt, performance of an action, and so on; pledge; guaranty.
- plackets pockets, especially in a woman's skirt or a petticoat.
- plain to complain.
- portable bearable; endurable.
- pricks any of various pointed objects, as a thorn, goad, and so on.
- proper fine; good; handsome.
- propinquity nearness of relationship; kinship.

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- punder confusion; excitement.
- quarrels a cause for dispute.
- question communication; an asking; inquiry.
- questrists seekers; pursuers.
- rank growing vigorously and coarsely; overly luxuriant.
- recreant failing to keep faith; disloyal; traitorous; apostate.
- remotion 1 the act of removing. 2 inaccessibility.
- rings the outer edge or border of something circular; rim, as of a wheel.
- roundest outspoken; plain and blunt; straightforward.
- ruffle to disturb, irritate, or annoy; to take away the smoothness of; wrinkle; ripple.
- silly-ducking submissive.
- simples a medicinal herb; a medicine made from a plant.
- sliver to cut or break into slivers.
- smilets small smiles; half-smiles.
- snuffs disputes; squabbles.
- sovereign above or superior to all others; chief; greatest; supreme.
- speed to have good fortune; prosper; succeed.
- squiny to squint.
- straight immediately.
- strain ancestry; lineage; descent.
- superfluous extravagant; prodigal.
- take upon be interested in.
- taking contagious; infectious.
- tranc'd a stunned condition; daze; stupor.
- trick a personal habit or mannerism.
- trundle-tail a dog with a curled tail.
- unpriz'd precious to be unimportant to one person, but appreciated or valued highly by another.
- vaunt-couriers a forerunner; precursor.
- welk'd r idged or twisted.
- white flakes white hair.
- wide-skirted vast; extensive.
- yokefellow a companion, partner, or associate.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Examine the specific ways that Lear contributes to his fall.

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2. A tragic hero moves the reader to pity, since his misfortune is greater than he deserves, and he also creates fear, since his tragedy might easily befall one of us. To what extent does Lear fit the definition of a tragic hero?
3. Discuss either Lear or Gloucester's movement toward a greater knowledge of himself and his world.
4. The play raises important questions about divine justice. All those who are evil are dead, but so are several of the characters who represent good. Does God see to it that good people are rewarded and evildoers are punished? Write an essay that responds to the question of whether or not divine justice is served in this play.
5. Focus on the repetition of several words, such as nothing, bond, nature, and natural. Choose two of these words and discuss the ideas that their use suggests.

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