



## William Shakespeare

### *King Lear*

#### CONTEXT

King Lear was first staged in 1606, but Shakespeare's sources were ancient. The tales of the three sisters, two prosperous but evil and the third and youngest virtuous but rejected, and of the king who poses a riddle that brings disaster on himself and his kingdom can be found in the folklore of many cultures. Geoffrey of Monmouth first established Lear as one of the ancient rulers of Britain in his *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Shakespeare would certainly have known him there; he would also have encountered him in Spenser's *The Faerie Queen* (published in 1590; Book II, Canto 10) in Higgin's *Mirror for Magistrates* (1574), and in Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1587). It is from Holinshed that we have some sense of the time of Leir's reign: "Leir, the sonne of Baldud," Holinshed reports, came to the throne "in the yeare of the world 3105, at what time Joas reigned in Juda." Shakespeare, then, would have had a rounded experience of the Lear story from a great variety of sources—a number of acting companies had also performed it. The likelihood, however, is that the one work from which he drew most immediately was an anonymous work entitled *The True Chronicle History of King Leir, and his Three Daughters, Gonorill, Ragan, and Cordella*, a play published some years before his own production in 1606. The popular folk tales on which the plays were based were usually simple moral tales ending with the happy triumph of virtue. Shakespeare took them and shaped them to his own purposes, giving us a story of such haunting, anguished pain that his seemingly tragic ending was done away with altogether by the eighteenth century and was not restored to its original form again until the beginning of the nineteenth century. The violence in *Macbeth* is brutal; the violence in *Lear* is tortured because it's personal and intimate; it comes from family. Set in pre-Christian Britain and dealing with families and intergenerational relationships, it nonetheless would have been relevant to politically oriented Elizabethan audiences.

#### SUMMARY

The play opens on the Duke of Gloucester introducing his bastard son, Edmund, to the Earl of Kent. The introductions are brief and informal but they are already enough to suggest buried problems. Gloucester seems embarrassed at acknowledging his illegiti-

mate son and veils his awkwardness behind a glib, facetious manner: Edmund "hath been out nine years, and away he shall again." After this brief prelude, King Lear enters for what is clearly a predesigned ceremonial division of his kingdom among his three daughters. Before bestowing their portions, he asks each daughter to declare her love for him. The two eldest, Goneril and Regan, say that nothing in life can measure the love they feel for their father, that their love of him is beyond anything else of value in their lives, even life itself. But when he turns to Cordelia, his youngest and his favorite, she tells him that she is unable to "heave my heart into my mouth," that her love is "according to my bond, no more nor less." Outraged at her response, Lear disowns her on the spot, giving her portion to be divided between her two older sisters. The Duke of Burgundy, who has been wooing Cordelia, withdraws his suit when she loses her dowry, but the King of France, who had also come to woo her, counts her personal worth beyond that of any dowry and claims her as his bride. Kent, Lear's longtime personal advisor, tries to reason with the King, but Lear becomes increasingly outraged at his efforts, and when he orders Kent to stop and Kent continues in his opposition, Lear banishes him for his honesty at pain of death if he refuse. Lear stalks off with Burgundy, whose refusal of Cordelia has vindicated his actions and apparently made him a fast friend. France calls Cordelia away; she quietly chastises her sisters and wishes them to love their father well. They in turn taunt her with her poverty and chide her for scanting her obedience. As Cordelia leaves, Goneril and Regan speak of their father's infirmities and agree to meet difficulties united.

Act I, scene ii opens with Edmund apostrophizing the goddess Nature, saying "to thy law/ My services are bound" and setting in motion a plot to defame his legitimate half-brother, Edgar, and take his place in his father's esteem and as his heir. He shows Gloucester a letter that he has forged in Edgar's hand that urges Edmund to join him in eliminating their father and sharing equally in his estate. Gloucester is horrified at the revelation and now sees his natural son, Edgar, as "unnatural" (I, ii, 75) and a villain. Edmund (in a gesture reminiscent of Iago in *Othello*) assures his father that he can prove Edgar's villainy by having him overhear a discussion between the two. Later, after having successfully planted these seeds of division between father and son, Edmund encounters his brother and, feigning concern, tells him that someone has accused him to his father and that he should arm himself and stay away until the matter is settled. His designs on his father's property seem entirely in his hands at this point, and as Edgar leaves, he says to himself: "Let me, if not by birth, have lands by wit;/ All with me's meet that I can fashion fit" (I, ii, 176-77).

Meanwhile, the love that Goneril and Regan professed to their father is being shown for what it is: shallow and self-centered. The King has taken up residence with Goneril first, and she is quickly out of patience with maintaining the hundred knights he has kept as his retinue and with his imperious treatment of her servants. The conflict comes to a head when Lear strikes her steward, and Kent, who has disguised himself and returned to serve his King, trips up the servant as he prepares to resist the King. Lear asks where his Fool is, and shortly afterwards, the Fool appears and begins to playfully engage the King with innuendoes and jibes, all pointing to the foolishness of his decision to pass on the authority of his office while trying to maintain its prerogatives:

*Lear: Dost thou call me fool, boy?*

*Fool: All thy other titles thou hast given away; [except] that thou wast born with.*

Goneril tells her father she can maintain no more than fifty of his knights, and in a fit of anger and shock, Lear goes off to Regan's.

At Gloucester's castle, Edmund continues to work on his father. He pretends he was wounded by Edgar in attempting to foil his plot against their father. Gloucester all but disowns Edgar, swearing to do all he can to apprehend him, and now claims Edmund as his natural heir: "of my lands,/ Loyal and natural boy, I'll work the means/ To make thee capable." Regan and Cornwall arrive and being informed of Edgar's supposed designs against his father promise to give Gloucester their complete support. Regan and her husband seek Gloucester's counsel about the rift between Lear and Goneril. Kent and Goneril's steward Oswald arrive and immediately come to blows. Cornwall intervenes and when Kent is plain with him, he slaps him in the stocks, despite Gloucester's objections that Lear would disapprove. Lear arrives and does disapprove. He has Kent freed, and unaware that his daughters have made league to support each other, he kneels to Regan and asks that she shelter him against the unnatural viciousness of her sister. Goneril arrives and when Lear discovers that Regan is in agreement with her, entreating him to reduce his retinue to twenty-five and then doing nothing when Goneril asks what need he has of any, Lear finds himself utterly betrayed and reduced to near helpless rage. He is stunned by his daughters' actions, and with nowhere to turn, he flies out into the storm that is brewing on the moor, followed only by his Fool and Kent.

Act III opens with Kent meeting a Gentleman and telling him of a growing division between Albany and Cornwall, "although as yet the face of it is covered." He also tells him of powers from France secretly landing; he asks the man to go to Dover where he will meet Cordelia, and then, providing him with money and assurance of his station, he gives him a ring for Cordelia and sets off to find the King.

Act III, scene ii finds Lear on the heath in the midst of a storm. The once wealthy, powerful King is utterly helpless and exposed and defies Nature to do her worst. Feeling as if all order and justice has been withdrawn from the world, he sees himself as a man "more sinned against than sinning" (III, ii, 60). As the storm blows, Kent arrives and finds a shepherd's hut in which they can take refuge. Already there is Edgar, who has fled out to the moor to avoid his father's wrath and is now disguised as Tom o' Bedlam, a beggar who has lost his wits. Lear is rapidly losing his and recognizes a kindred soul. In his madness, he sets Tom o' Bedlam and the Fool up as judges and conducts a mock judicial proceeding in which he presents his accusations against his two daughters. He is worn out, and having convicted reinforced in himself a sense of his own innocence, he finally agrees to Kent's pleas that them and so he sleep a little.

Gloucester meanwhile has met with Edmund and confides to him that the French are preparing to land at Dover to rescue the King and that he will seek out the King and offer what aid he can. He knows that he risks his life by going against Cornwall's order that no

one is to help the King and swears Edmund to secrecy. As soon as he is gone, Edmund takes the news to Cornwall, who vows to take vengeance on Gloucester before leaving to face the French forces. Gloucester finds the hut and warns Kent of the plot against Lear, urging him to take the King and go immediately to Dover. On his return to his castle, Cornwall and Regan seize and bind him. He appeals to them as their host not to harm him. They ignore his entreaties, and just as they begin to pluck out his eyes, his servant comes to his aid. Cornwall and the servant fight; Regan comes at the servant from behind and kills him, but Cornwall is wounded in the exchange. The two remaining servants lead Gloucester off, his eye sockets empty and his face bleeding.

Gloucester is turned out onto the moor in the storm. Act IV begins with an old man, loyal to the Earl, guiding Gloucester to the hut where they are received by Edgar, who is still disguised as Tom o' Bedlam and who will now take his father on to Dover. As father and son move off, Gloucester laments his treatment of Edgar, saying that if he could only see him in his touch once more, he'd say he had his eyes again. Edgar finds it almost impossible to keep up his disguise, he is so overcome by his father's condition, and says to himself, "And yet I must—Bless thy sweet eyes, they bleed."

Edmund accompanies Goneril when she returns home to her husband. Albany has remained loyal to the King and is now prepared to stand against them. Goneril finds herself sexually drawn to Edmund, and as she sends him off to Regan and Cornwall, she insinuates her interest in him. Albany arrives and he and Goneril quarrel over allegiances and her treatment of Lear. Albany sees Goneril as she is—"see thyself, devil:/ Proper deformity seems not in the fiend/ So horrid as in woman"—and when the two are informed of Gloucester's maiming and Cornwall's death, Albany finds himself strengthened—he feels indebted to Gloucester for the example of his service to the King—and Goneril is fearful—now that Regan is widowed, she may have a rival for Edmund.

At Dover (Act IV, iv), Cordelia and the Doctor receive news that Lear was just discovered crowned with weeds "and as mad as the vexed sea." Distraught at her father's condition, Cordelia sends a man out in search of her father, urging that every effort be made to relieve him of the distress that threatens his life. She receives news that the British forces are approaching, but as she leaves, she makes clear one thing motivates all she does: "No blown ambition doth our arms incite, but love, dear love, and our aged father's right."

Edgar meanwhile has led his father to the cliffs of Dover where he intends to take his own life. Edgar has brought Gloucester to a slight rise and tells him that he stands at the very edge of the precipice. Gloucester throws himself off and swoons, and when he comes to, Edgar, who is now pretending to be someone other than Tom o' Bedlam, tells him that he fell from the height of the cliff and survived and that when he looked up, as Gloucester was jumping, he saw beside him a strange evil creature, with "a thousand noses,/ Horns whelked and waved like the enridged sea."

He convinces his father that his survival is the result of a miracle performed by the gods and that knowing that must make him patient with their will: "Bear free and patient

thoughts." Immediately upon that utterance, Lear arrives, "bedecked with weeds" and speaking in broken, vatic phrases, and both old men confront each other for the first time since their madness, on the surface absolutely at cross-purposes and yet joined spiritually by their shared persecutions and their exhausted, near ruined conditions. Edgar is once again at the verge of being over-whelmed, this time at the spectacle of Lear: "O thou side-piercing sight!" (IV, iv, 85). The two old men exchange thoughts that in some ways seem both incoherent and painfully honest and that prompt Edgar to say, "O, matter and impertinency mixed;/ Reason in madness." A Gentleman arrives from Cordelia to rescue her father. Oswald also arrives and when he attempts to kill Gloucester as a traitor, Kent intervenes and kills him. Kent discovers a letter on the body, a commission from Goneril expressing her grief if Albany returns victorious and offering her bed if Edmund can kill him.

In Act IV, vii, in the French camp near Dover, Lear and Cordelia are reconciled in a scene that is a strange blend of the grotesque and sacramental. All that happens is played out against a backdrop of music on the one hand and war on the other, and the combination of the two makes for a moment utterly unlike any other in drama: quiet and violence hold their balance together. The old King is overcome with remorse and says to his daughter that she does him wrong to take him out of the grave, that he is "bound upon a wheel of fire," and that his "tears/ Do scald like molten led." He thinks he should know her and yet doesn't and doesn't even know himself. He has some distant recollection that her sisters did him wrong but knows she had cause. She replies, "No cause, no cause." The two armies meanwhile meet in combat. Edmund leads Regan's troops; Albany leads his to defeat the French but with the intention of saving Lear and Cordelia. The English forces prevail and Lear and Cordelia are taken prisoner. Goneril poisons Regan to prevent her from claiming Edmund. Albany makes known his awareness of her plot on his life; she confesses to the murder of her sister and then takes her own life. Albany calls Edgar forward to confront Edmund, and the two brothers fight. Edgar defeats his half-brother, who wants to do some good before he dies and warns them to send word quickly because he had ordered Cordelia to be hung in prison. The reprieve is too late. Lear enters carrying Cordelia's body, doing all he can to deny their separation or her death. He struggles in vain to find life in her, making one last outcry, "Do you see this? Look on her! Look her lips,/ Look there, look there—" and then dies of grief. Albany asks Edmund and Kent to rule England with him and the play ends with a funeral march.



## Things to Think About

1. As in a fugue or symphony, two themes are announced at the beginning of the play: the *first*, the theme of preferences (Gloucester prefers his legitimate son to his illegitimate; Lear prefers Cordelia to Goneril and Regan); and the second, the theme of love in its relation to law. Gloucester failed to keep his desires within the law—giving a woman “a son for her cradle ere she had a husband for her bed”—and Lear attempts to use political power and the law behind it to enforce or buy a love from his daughters. Beneath both of these themes is the unifying action of unconditional love, apparently at work from a number of different quarters and always confronting sins and transforming them at anguishing cost. Be attentive to its spirit, veiled or explicit, and ultimately to what the action of the whole play says about this love.
2. In one sense *Lear* is a play about growing old and all that it implies, man’s mortality and the fact of transitions, one age passing and another taking its place. Consider two lines of thought: first, the elderly: how does a man “let go” of life? When he does, if he can, how does he handle problems of inheritance? How does he handle preferences? Should there be any? How does one face such questions as these in the light of Christian injunctions to love all, even enemies?
3. Be aware of the relationship between law and nature on the one hand and the relation between both of these and social conventions on the other. The word law covers a whole range of meanings. There are written political laws made by men; there are unwritten codes or rites of hospitality; but both point to norms or the existence of an underlying natural law governing all aspects of man’s existence in nature. Be attentive to the word “*nature*” and the various meanings it is given at different times and by different characters over the course of the play.
4. Be mindful of the place of servants and the love that inspires them in the play. Another way of saying this is: ‘be aware of the contrast between those whose love shows itself by their willingness to serve others and those who seek only to serve or advance themselves.
5. Be alert to motifs having to do with sight or seeing and the question of who sees clearly and who does not. Keep in mind that all great tragedies turn on moments of *insight*, of recognition. Be able to identify all those who have “tragic moments of recognition” in the play.
6. Think about the madness that runs through the play. We see it in different ways and in different degrees in Lear, the Fool, Tom o’ Bedlam, and Gloucester—a case could

be made for its existence in Albany, in Cornwall's servant, even in Edmund when he repents at the end. Think about the wisdom that is buried in the speeches of "madmen." What does this wisdom allow those who possess it to see? And what light does it throw on those who lack it? What is the difference between the reason associated with this "madness" and the more "educated" or socially cultivated kind of "reason" that seems to cause nothing but blindness and misery?

7. Notice Shakespeare's predictable practice of using multiple settings: the Court-palace world of Lear, Albany, and the French lords; the Heath world with its violent storms; and the world of Dover where the wars are concluded. Set off and opened up by the experiences on the Heath is another, implied world, one that we almost miss, what Kent describes as the culture of "Bedlam beggars," those paupers who are neglected but used by the aristocracy and who work the "low farms,/ Poor pelting villages, sheepcotes, and mills,/ Sometimes with lunatic bans, some-time with prayers...." (II, iii, 14-19). How do these various worlds "speak" to each other?
8. The setting or time of *Lear* is pre-Christian. But everything that takes place in the play is measured, either implicitly or explicitly, by a Christian spirit of charity or a self-giving, self-dying love. *Lear* was performed for an audience that was composed mainly of Christians or humanists. What does it have to teach both? What does a humanist who may or may not believe in a Christian God stand to gain from experiencing *Lear*? What does a Christian audience stand to gain? Are there some ways it can speak more directly, more powerfully, to a Christian audience precisely because it seems to be about a non-Christian world?



## Study Questions

1. Identify the leaders who are present at the King's opening ceremony as well as the countries or geographical areas that they represent.
2. Identify Gloucester's two sons by name and by legitimacy of birth, and identify the husbands of Lear's three daughters.
3. In Act II, Edgar has to flee his home and decides to take on a disguise. Why does he have to flee and what is his disguise?
4. Out on the Heath, at the mercy of the storm and the raw forces of nature, dispossessed and abandoned, Lear says, "I am a man more sinned against than sinning" (III, ii, 60). In what ways is this true? In what ways is it not true and ironic? What is it that Lear is not seeing about himself at this point?

5. The scene in which Regan and Cornwall attempt to punish Gloucester is a bloody one. Why are Regan and Cornwall so vindictive? Do you think it's important that Regan and Cornwall are guests in Gloucester's house? Who gets injured or killed and how? What light does it throw on the major themes of the play?
6. The Fool appears shortly after Cordelia leaves, and he departs just before she appears again. Is that an accident or is there some thematic link between the two? The first time the Fool appears coincides with the moment when Kent offers his services to Lear. Do you think there's any thematic meaning to that fact? And in the last appearance of the Fool, when Gloucester has come to warn of plots to kill Lear, Kent tells the Fool he must help bear his master away and not stay behind (III, vi, 96-99). What are the implications of that order? Are we to suppose the Fool contemplates not going on with Lear? We know that Lear goes nearly mad after this point and that during this period the Fool is not with him. Has the special wisdom of the Fool left him? What does the Fool's absence during this period say about Lear's peculiar kind of wisdom?
7. Describe the deaths of Cornwall, Regan, Goneril, and Edmund.
8. Identify the following quotes by speaker and context or significance:

*"Think'st thou that duty shall have dread to speak  
When power to flattery bows? To plainness honor's Bound  
When majesty falls to folly."*

*"Dost thou call me fool, boy?"  
"All thy other titles thou hast given away; that thou wast born with."*

*"Thou wert better in a grave than to answer with thy uncovered body this extremity of the skies. Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou ow'st the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha! Here's three on's are sophisticated. Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! Come unbutton here."*

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

*"See thyself, devil'  
Proper deformity seems not in the fiend  
So horrid as in woman."*

*"Thou hast seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar?  
And the creature run from the cur. There thou mightest behold the great image of authority—a dog's obeyed in office.  
Thou rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand!"*

*Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thy own back.  
Thou hotly lusts to use her in that kind  
For which thou whip'st her. The usurer hangs the cozener.  
Through tattered clothes small vices do appear;  
Robes and furred gowns hide all."*

*"What, in ill thoughts again? Men must endure  
Their going hence, even as their coming hither;  
Ripeness is all: come on."*

*"No, no, no, no! Come, let's away to prison:  
We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage:  
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,  
And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,  
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh  
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues  
Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too,  
Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out;  
And take upon's the mystery of things,  
As if we were God's spies: and we'll wear out,  
In a wall'd prison, packs and sects of great ones,  
That ebb and flow by the moon.*

9. *King Lear* is set in pre-Christian Britain and the references to deities and the supernatural are to gods and the influences of the stars; but there are elements in the play that reflect Christian values. Where do you see those values?
10. Think about the role of the Fool, who he is, how he serves Lear. Fools typically bring to light things people don't want to see; they make public sometimes a very personal knowledge that most would rather keep private. Is there any connection to the Fool and the popular medieval believer, who was often called a "fool for Christ"? How is the Fool like Christ? How is he unlike Him?



## Questions on Language and Form

1. Identify the structure of the play: 1) the *opening conflict*; 2) the *complication*; 3) the *climax*; 4) the *denouement*; and 4) the *resolution*.
2. Here as in all of Shakespeare's plays, the plot isn't simply a "story"; it is a way of opening up themes. Notice the way in which plots mutually inform each other, how they become means of deepening and even of evaluating action. What light does the

main plot of Lear and his daughters throw on the Gloucester plot, and conversely, what light does the Gloucester-and-his-sons plot throw on the Lear action? Notice, too, how the two plots begin to intertwine and so complicate the chain of cause and effects coming from each. Regan and Goneril's turning on Lear draws Gloucester more deeply into Lear's world, just as it does Albany. Follow out the interconnecting lines of causality between the two plots. Notice how the intrigues between Edmund, Goneril, and Regan intertwine the two plots, and also how both of these family plots expand outward to inform and be included in the plot of the England/ France war.

3. The appearance vs. reality theme is complex and multifaceted. Once again, it's important to see that what we conventionally call a theme is not simply or merely that. It is also a method, a way of penetrating reality. What appearance/reality means to Lear is not the same as it means to Edmund. Notice that in the beginning, what *appears* to be reality *is* real to Lear. In his mind, what he takes as reality contains no discrepancies. He thinks that he's been real all of his life; he hasn't yet discovered that there are things about himself he doesn't understand. The same is true for Gloucester. The cavalier glibness with which he speaks about his illegitimate child conceals a deeper world, but he clearly is only vaguely aware of faults. They are things to be covered up; he is mindless of them (a quality we suppose he finds support for from his culture and rank), and, hence, his "blindness." With Edmund, the case is much different. He consciously, actively, creates a fiction, an "appearance," in order to gain illicit ends. In all of these instances, "reality" will assert itself; appearances will be shattered, unmasked, and whatever is false will be exposed. But it's important to keep in mind the difference, even if subtle, between those "appearances" in which characters like Lear and Gloucester are implicated and those which characters like Edmund, Goneril, and Regan use to secretly advance their own interests. Notice how the differences become a means of helping readers or an audience evaluate character. Take any of the characters and set them against this appearance/reality theme or method: how does it become a means of unmasking or of penetrating reality? How does it work differently in the case of Lear and Gloucester, or of Edmund?
4. At their core, tragedies are about recognitions and the changed ways of seeing and loving that come from unmaskings and conversions. As a genre, they tend to take us into the interior where we learn to confront the secret or buried aspects of our lives. Lear contains a number of "plays-within-the-play." Do they help facilitate the work of unmasking and conversion or do they resist it? Consider, for example, the mock-trial that Lear stages against his daughters in the hovel; or the death-rite that Edgar puts Gloucester through at the cliffs of Dover. Edgar plays a role as "Poor Tom," Kent as a servant dressed in "weeds" (IV, vii, 1-8). Edmund "plays a part" in the letters he forges and the deceptions he practices to gain his ends. We can even see aspects of a "play" in the role of the Fool. He has almost no life, no function, apart from his work of confronting others. And how important is "indirection" as a tool for characters taking on a role or playing a part? How important is indirection for the Fool? for other characters? Notice that Kent's "method" changes after his banishment. All he does afterwards is by "indirection," by disguise and art. Edgar and Kent have extremely demanding "role-playing" parts. How are the "plays"

which they put on different from those of the other characters? How do these performances or “plays-within-plays” function? What do they have in common? What distinguishes them?

5. Is the wild, tempestuous storm on the Heath an appropriate objective correlative for the turmoil within Lear? In the hands of an inferior artist, some might call this an example of the “pathetic fallacy,” an artist attributing to the nature outside a character what is taking place within. Is this bad art in Shakespeare, a bit of bad overwriting on his part or is it good art? To answer this would require seeing some appropriate, intrinsic link between the storm and Lear’s inner state of being.



## Reflection Questions

1. One of the primary questions that the play asks is, what is natural? Write a reflection in which you consider several different ways in which this question is addressed in the play. You might consider the “natural” relationship between father and child, the “nature” of man, and also the relationship between man and nature. Concerning this last one, for example, does nature, the fury of the storm, mirror the interior state of man, of Lear’s mind, or are the two completely unrelated? You might also want to consider the relationship between nature (in this case, determined by the stars) vs. nurture, and the relationship between nature and supernature.