

# KING LEAR

by William Shakespeare

"King Lear" is a shattering play. Readers, audiences, actors - even scholars - so recoiled from the tragic story that for several generations it was only presented in a heavily doctored version. After several productions in the early 17th Century, the original gave way to a heavily doctored version by Nahum Tate, but with substantial changes, in which a love story is contrived between Cordelia and Edgar, the fool is eliminated, and the play given a happy ending.

This version was first presented in 1681 and held the stage for 150 years. It was not until 1838 that English audiences saw the substance of Shakespeare's drama in a production by William Macready and it was performed but fitfully afterwards.

Charles Lamb thought "The Lear of Shakespeare cannot be acted." Leo Tolstoy opined that a production of this "absurd" play "cannot evoke amongst us anything but aversion and weariness." Samuel Johnson was "shocked by Cordelia's death" and he doubted that he had ever "endured to read again the last scenes of the play till I undertook to revise them as an editor."

But Shakespeare knew what he was doing. Life is not a fairy tale or a television sitcom. In the end, we lose everything: our possessions, our loved ones, our lives. What happens to King Lear happens to all of us; not, we would hope, in such a devastating manner. but most of us will experience at least a touch of the king's folly and its consequences.

Whenever people argue about the importance of dramatic art, dismissing plays as so much foolery and fluff, offer this work in evidence on the opposing side. Whether one approaches the play as an expression of "radical pessimism" or "a purgation, a way to salvation" it is obviously one of the greatest tragedies in theatrical history.

When a person sets out to read the play or prepare it for performance, the first matter to be settled is which edition to use. There are so many variants in the field that the popular Riverside edition of Shakespeare's complete plays offers two versions. However, in both the basis story line remains the same.

It is the retelling of an old story: of a king who divided his dominion among his three daughters with unhappy results. Shakespeare had the gift of literary alchemy and routinely transmuted lead into gold. And that's what he did with King Lear.

One of the most important changes he made was to reinforce the story of Lear and his daughters with that of the Duke of Gloucester and his two sons, interweaving them for maximum dramatic effect.

The first scene discloses the basic action of the play even as it deals with two characters of its subplot. The Duke of Gloucester introduces his bastard son Edmund, just before the court assembles to hear King Lear divide his kingdom among his three daughters. He will introduce the Duke's legitimate son, Edgar, later on,

Before dividing his kingdom, Lear asks to hear how much his daughters love him. In return for their answers, he will grant them lands. His youngest daughter, Cordelia, is revolted by the excessive statements of her sisters Regan and Goneril. She states she loves him according to the dues of parenthood. This less than fulsome statement enrages Lear and he disinherits her. His most faithful follower, the Earl of Kent, speaks up for her and is banished in turn.

The King of France, in competition for Cordelia's hand with the Duke of Burgundy, accepts her as his dowerless bride. When the court is dismissed, Regan and Goneril begin to discuss how to curtail their father from the advantages he has decided to keep: a retinue of knights and monthly accommodation at their respective castles.

The second scene unfolds the dimensions of the subplot. Edmund, Gloucester's bastard son, schemes to have his father disinherit Edgar, his legitimate son, in favor of him. He devises a means of making Edgar seem to be plotting his father's death.

Some time later, Lear is spending a month with Goneril, wife of the Duke of Albany. Unhappy with the behavior of Lear's knights, she encourages her steward, Oswald, to so treat the king that he will complain to her, affording her an opportunity to dismiss most of his followers.

Kent returns to serve Lear in disguise, winning the king's favor by tripping the insolent steward. The fool is introduced and heightens Lear's dawning awareness of his dependent situation. Goneril enters to scold her father. Her husband tries to make peace, but Lear explodes. When he discovers that fifty of his knights have been discharged, he leaves the castle to find Regan. Goneril sends Oswald to warn her sister of Lear's approach.

Lear sends Kent ahead with letters to Regan who is visiting Gloucester. The fool comments on Lear's folly in giving up his kingdom.

At the beginning of Act II, Shakespeare begins to weave the two plots together. Edmund tricks Edgar into believing his father is furious with him and urges him to flee. He then wounds himself to make Gloucester think he was attacked by Edgar for refusing to join in a plot against their father. Regan and her husband, the Duke of Cornwall arrive for a visit. They sympathize with Gloucester over

his son's apparent wickedness and Edmund assures them that Edgar was a companion of Lear's riotous knights.

Kent arrives outside Gloucester's castle and encounters Oswald to whom he administers a beating. The castle is aroused and Cornwall puts Kent in stocks, a studied slight to the old king.

Edgar, hearing he is wanted for attempted murder, decides to save himself with a disguise as Tom o'Bedlam, a wandering madman.

When Lear arrives he finds Kent in the stocks and is enraged at this treatment of his messenger. When Regan and Cornwall enter, Kent is released and Lear tells his daughter of Goneril's harsh treatment. Goneril then arrives and the two sisters tell Lear that they will strip him of all his followers. Lear, in a towering rage, on the verge of madness, rushes out into the stormy night. Gloucester wants to bring the king back, but is forbidden to do so by the sisters.

Kent meets one of Lear's men who tells him the king is wandering on the heath in a raging storm. Kent tells the man of a rift brewing between Albany and Cornwall and sends the man with messages to Cordelia who is coming from France to rescue her father.

Lear, accompanied only by the fool, rages at the storm. Kent finds him and leads him to a hovel.

Gloucester tells Edmund of a letter he has received, informing him that an army is coming to rescue Lear. Edmund resolves to tell Cornwall.

Lear, the fool, and Kent arrive at the hovel to find it occupied by Edgar, still disguised as a madman. Lear is tipping over into madness. Gloucester arrives and leads them toward his castle.

Edmund tells Cornwall of the approaching army and of his father's complicity. Cornwall promises to make Edmund the new Duke.

Gloucester brings Lear and company to a farmhouse on his property and leaves. Lear, completely mad, convenes a jury, of the fool, Kent and Tom (Edgar) to try his daughters. Gloucester returns to warn them that the king's life is in danger and orders Kent to place him in a litter and head toward Dover where the King of France and Cordelia are supposed to land.

After sending Goneril, Edmund and Oswald away, Cornwall and Regan confront Gloucester. They bind him and Cornwall plucks out one of his eyes. A servant, revolted by what he sees, attacks Cornwall and wounds him. Regan stabs the servant from behind, killing him. Cornwall then plucks out Gloucester's other

eye. When Gloucester calls out for Edmund to avenge him, he learns that it was Edmund who betrayed him. He is then turned out to "smell his way to Dover." Cornwall exits, succumbing to his wound.

Blind Gloucester, led by an old man, encounters Edgar, still disguised as mad Tom, who agrees to lead him to Dover.

Edmund accompanies Goneril to her castle. A servant reports that Albany is greatly changed and upset by the news of Gloucester's "treachery." Goneril declares her love for Edmund as she sends him back to Regan. Albany upbraids Goneril for her cruelty and receives the news of Gloucester's blinding and the death of Cornwall. Goneril fears that Regan, now a widow, will take her lover, Edmund.

Kent reaches the French camp and discovers that the King of France has been called back to his country by an emergency but that the army remains, under Cordelia's command. Lear is also in the camp but is unwilling to meet Cordelia.

Cordelia learns of Lear's condition and that he has slipped out of the camp. She sends men to find him, urges her doctor to find a cure for his madness, and prepares to meet an approaching army.

Oswald arrives at Regan's castle with a letter for Edmund. Regan tries to forestall its delivery and tells Oswald to take a note to Edmund from her. And to kill old Gloucester if he should find him.

Edgar, still disguised, pretends to bring Gloucester to the edge of a precipice near Dover where Gloucester tries to jump to his death. Changing his voice, Edgar convinces Gloucester that he had jumped indeed but that his life was miraculously spared. This apparent miracle reconciles Gloucester to his fate.

Lear then appears, garlanded with flowers, and talks to Gloucester, railing against humankind in the play's most significant scene. One of Cordelia's gentlemen enters and tries to capture Lear, who runs away. Oswald then enters and tries to kill Gloucester, but is himself killed by Edgar. Edgar finds Goneril's letter to Edmund, urging him to kill Albany and claim her for himself.

Cordelia has finally rescued Lear who is sleeping under a doctor's care. When he awakes, he is purged of his madness and begs Cordelia for forgiveness. News comes of an approaching army and the need to prepare for a bloody battle.

Edmund and Regan prepare for fight. When Goneril and Albany enter, Goneril is beside herself with jealousy, declaring that she would rather lose the battle than lose Edmund to Regan. Edgar, in another disguise, enters and gives a letter to Albany which will reveal Edmund's treachery. The scene ends with Edmund wondering which sister to take.

Edgar reports back to Gloucester that Cordelia's army has been defeated and the old man, who has been waiting between the two camps, must fly for his life.

The final scene opens with Lear and Cordelia prisoners. Edmund sends them away with a captain who has secret orders to kill them. Albany enters and takes command from Edmund. Regan and Goneril quarrel over Edmund. Regan dies from poison administered by Goneril. Albany proclaims Edmund a traitor and the bastard demands trial by combat. Edgar enters in yet a third disguise and fights with Edmund, mortally wounding him. Goneril leaves after Albany confronts her with her letter. Edgar reveals himself and Edmund begs his pardon.

A messenger enters to tell of Goneril's suicide. Kent inquires after Lear and Edmund confesses that he gave order that she and Cordelia be slain. They send an officer with a countermand, but it is too late. Lear enters, bearing Cordelia's body in his arms. Edmund dies. Lear's heart finally gives out and he falls lifeless on the body of his child.

You can sense, just from this quick skim of the plot, how overpowering some of these scenes can be. For example, Lear meeting the blind Gloucester, the mad Lear reasoning more clearly than he did as king; the blind Gloucester, seeing better than he did when he had sight; Lear's touching reconciliation with Cordelia; and the final, devastating scene of Lear's death.

It is hard to take, but the best medicine often is.

#### Sources

Lyr or Ler was a shadowy figure in English history before Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote a coherent story of the king and his daughters in his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (1137). The tale was drawn from Celtic tradition, early British history, and his own invention.

Raphael Holinshed inserted the story in his *Chronicles* (1577), as did Edmund Spenser in *The Fairie Queen* (1590-96), and John Higgins in *A Mirror For Magistrates* (1574).

The direct source is *The True Chronicle History of King Lier and his three daughters, Gonerill, Regan, and Cordella* (published in 1605 but performed earlier). This version has a happy ending and Lear remains a model of patience and mildness throughout the story, despite the harassment of his daughters. Lear's madness was Shakespeare's invention.

The Gloucester subplot was taken and adapted (with all its important features) from "The Tale of the Blind King of Paphlaglonia" in Sir Philip Sydney's *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*.

Three other important sources are cited:

\* John Florio's translation of Montaigne's *Essays* (published in 1603 but registered three years earlier and probably available to Shakespeare in manuscript). There are over one hundred words never before used by Shakespeare to be found in Florio's translation.

\* A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures by Samuel Harsnett (1603) containing an "Apology for Raymond Sebonde" which has references to major themes in the play, most crucially the names of the fiends cited by Edgar as Tom o'Bedlam, as well as many other features of the storm scene.

\* The contemporary story of Sir Brian Annesley who made a will unfavorable to his two married daughters. Shortly before his death, the two daughters attempted to have their father declared insane and his will invalidated. Their effort was thwarted by a third daughter, Cordell, who later erected a monument to her father. Cordell subsequently married Sir William Harvey, husband of the late Countess of Southampton and stepfather to Shakespeare's patron, the Earl of Southampton. This may have been the inspiration for Lear's madness in the play.

The play was entered in the Stationer's Register on November 26, 1607. It was probably written in 1605 and was performed at court on December 26, 1606.

The First Quarto appeared in 1608 and is sometimes called the "Pied Bull Quarto," memorializing the shop where it was to be sold. Some consider it a bad quarto, as is Quarto 2, which is a reprint of Q1. Q2 is dated 1608, but was actually printed in 1619.

The Folio text has 100 lines not in Q1 and Q2, but is missing 300 lines contained in the earlier sources. Neither constitutes an authoritative text. In at least one compendium of Shakespeare's plays, both complete versions are printed.