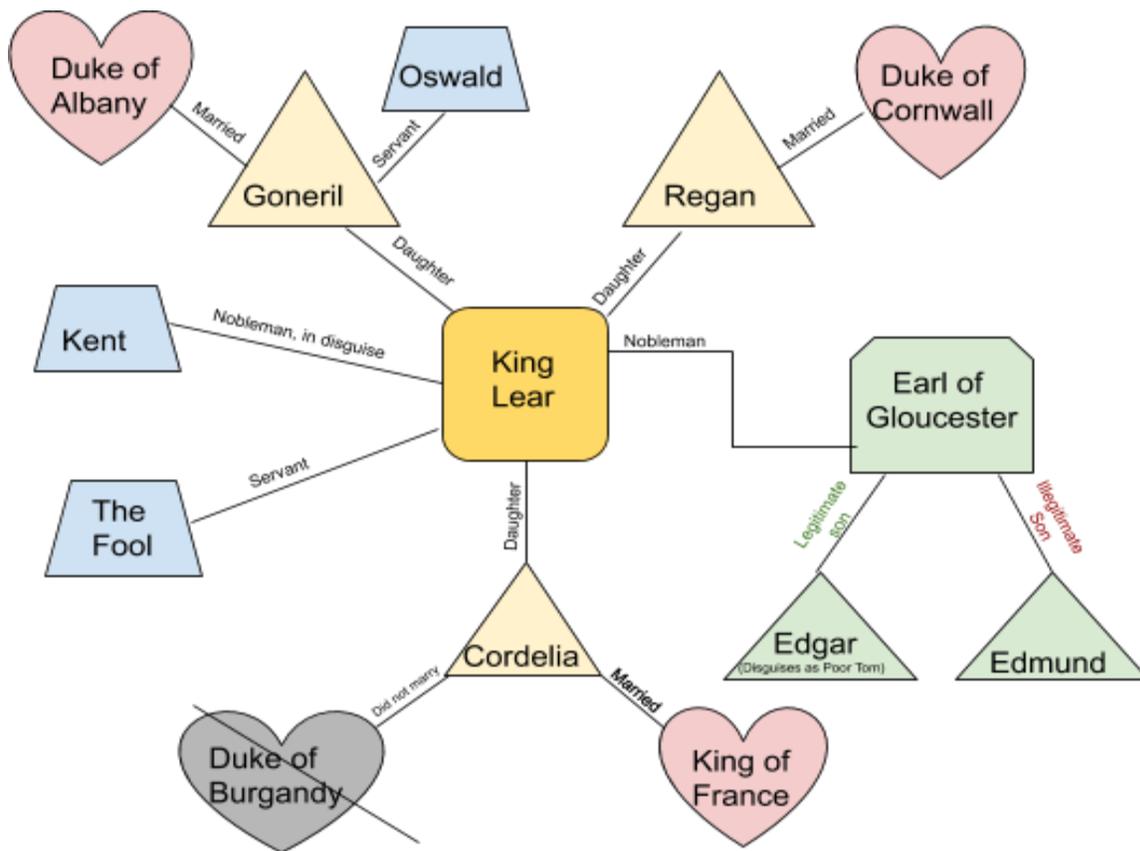


Study Guide:

King Lear by William Shakespeare

Character Relationships



Synopsis

Retiring from ruling, King Lear decides to split his kingdom and power between his three daughters, but only after they declare their love for him to a sufficient degree. Both Goneril and Regan quickly profess their love to flatter Lear and gain their inheritance for themselves and their husbands, the Duke of Albany and the Duke of Cornwall, respectively. Lear's youngest and most beloved daughter, Cordelia, will not take part in this charade. Furious, Lear disinherits her and banishes her. She leaves to go marry the King of France. When his advisor Kent argues that this was too harsh a punishment, Lear banishes Kent too.

The Earl of Gloucester's illegitimate son, Edmund, aims to force out his brother Edgar. Edmund tricks Gloucester into believing Edgar is trying to usurp the estate, and convinces Edgar to flee for his life. Edgar disguises himself as a mad-man, Tom o'Bedlam, and goes into hiding.

Planning to spend his retirement between the homes of his two daughters, Lear first goes to Goneril's home, then Regan's. Lear is shocked to find they no longer respect him as King and refuse to host his retinue of 100 soldiers. Lear angrily rushes out into the heath during a storm to rant and rave.

[NOTE: The remainder of this synopsis reveals how the play continues in its second half. Read on only if you want to know how the plot unwinds]

Edmund now plans to remove Gloucester from power and betrays Gloucester to Cornwall, Regan, and Goneril. Gloucester, who was aware of a French invasion to reinstate Lear, is arrested as a traitor and Regan and Cornwall gouge out Gloucester's eyes. Cornwall is killed by a servant who is outraged by the treatment of Gloucester. Regan turns out the now blind Gloucester to wander in the wild too. Lear, now beyond sanity, is found and taken in by the French army.

Albany begins to exhibit a conscience and is upset at what Goneril and Regan are doing. Goneril begins to tire of this and becomes romantically attracted to the rapidly rising Edmund. Goneril, fearing the recently-widowed Regan may also be attracted to Edmund, sends her servant, Oswald, with a letter to Edmund suggesting he kill Albany and take her as a wife. Oswald encounters Gloucester while delivering the letter and attempts to kill Gloucester, but is foiled by Edgar. Edgar finds the letter and gives it to Albany.

The French and British armies meet in battle. The French lose and Cordelia and Lear are captured. Edmund secretly orders for them both to be executed. After the battle, Regan declares she will marry Edmund, but dies shortly after having been poisoned by Goneril. Albany exposes Goneril's and Edmund's plans and challenges Edmund to a trial by combat. Edgar, disguised, steps in to fight Edmund and defeats him. Goneril then takes her own life, her plans having been thwarted. As he is dying, Edmund reveals his command to have Cordelia and Lear executed. Edgar attempts to stop the orders from being carried out.

Director's Note



Shakespeare wrote *King Lear* sometime between 1603 and 1606. Its first recorded performance was for King James I at Whitehall Palace in 1606. He began work on the play immediately after the death of Queen Elizabeth I, who never married and did not leave behind a clear heir to the English throne.

Prior to Elizabeth's death, many feared that her passing would throw England into devastating violence due to the question of succession, and few anticipated the crown would transfer as smoothly as it did to Elizabeth's cousin, James VI of Scotland, who became James I upon his ascension to the English throne.

At the beginning of his reign, one of James's central political priorities was to unite England, Scotland, and Wales into a unified Britain. Given this history, it is not surprising that Shakespeare wrote a play steeped in the anxiety of royal succession, focused on the end of one regime and the beginning of another, resulting in horrors from the country's seemingly arbitrary division into three parts.

When searching for a story to interest a king seeking unity, Shakespeare looked back to the history of ancient Britain and the tales of the King Leir who was thought to have lived in the 8th century BCE, and whose reign was recorded by the 12th century historian Geoffrey of Monmouth. The history of Leir was also told in Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England* published first in 1577 and again in 1587, as well as in an anonymous 16th century play called *The True Chronicle History of King Leir and his three daughters Gonerill, Ragan and Cordella*.

The subplot of Gloucester and Gloucester's feuding sons, Shakespeare drew from Philip Sidney's 1580 prose romance *Arcadia*, in which the fallen king of Paphlagonia is blinded by his illegitimate son Edmund.

The biggest difference between Shakespeare's telling of the story and those preceding his is that Shakespeare's is the only version of the story that doesn't end happily. In this source material about an aging king and that king's feuding daughters, Shakespeare saw the opportunity to examine some of the most frightening aspects of human existence — our deterioration with age, a young generation's violence towards its predecessors, and a nation's political disintegration in the wake of tyranny.

Shakespeare's play defies easy conclusions. Those wanting to see *King Lear* as the story of Lear's vicious daughters mistreating their father must also recognize the equally present evidence of Lear's lifetime of abuse towards his family and tyranny over his country. It is this darkness and complexity that led the 20th century critic Jan Kott to note that "the theme of *King Lear* is the decay and fall of the world."

Today, *King Lear* enjoys frequent production. The cataclysmic atrocities of the 20th century have perhaps made us better able than ever to appreciate the play's themes of tyranny bringing about political and personal strife, civil war, and the end of humanity. With its depiction of a kingdom collapsing under the weight of its own government, and of the impossibility of uprooting lifetimes of political and personal abuse, the play today seems chillingly relevant.

Yet amidst the play's bleak picture of political chaos, the figures of Albany, Edgar, and Kent, struggling to preserve moral order amidst the demise of all human decency beg us to consider how we might preserve morality amidst the chaos of our own time. As critic Stephen Greenblatt pointedly explains, "The devastation at the close of *Lear* poses in its most extreme form questions that hover over all of Shakespeare's representations of tyranny: How can alert and courageous people not merely escape from the tyrant's grasp, in order to fight against him and try to topple him, but prevent him from coming to power in the first place? How is it possible to stop the devastation from happening?"

King Lear at Northern Stage

In his Director's note for this production, Director Stephen Brown-Fried uses words and phrases such as "cataclysm," "tyranny," "devastation," and "collapse of human decency" to describe the story of *King Lear*. The artistic team has taken those words as inspiration to create a world on stage that reflects that mood. Design aspects construct a strong sense of order that steadily devolves into decay as the story progresses.

When you enter the theater you will be met with a totalitarian scene created through prominent images of the leader and a stark, strict, and controlled color palette. In his design presentation to the cast, Brown-Fried explained, "The audience should sense that they are entering the most developed land as possible, at the height of its empire and power." As the show progresses, the physical and emotional space descend towards a "scorched earth." Disorder seeps into the theater, not only through the plot but also through the visual and sound aspects of the show. A question for the audience to consider is whether this dysfunction is new, or whether the disorder has always existed but was just suppressed by an authoritarian ruler.

As the play continues, and we follow Lear's descent into madness, observe the changes in costume. Take note of the unraveling of order through small touches such as hairstyle and color. Note how the set changes, and how the lighting and sound intensify those changes.

Brown-Fried's staging physically surrounds the audience with both the words of the Bard as well as these design elements. He wants the audience to feel "as much a part of the show as the actors are." For him, this play is "deeply political while at the same time deeply personal," and he hopes that audiences will be moved to consider how this story connects to them. How are the themes relevant today? What would it feel like for a parent to say these things to a child, or for a child to say these things to a parent? How does aging impact families? Is it better to tell the truth, or to tell the people in our lives what they want to hear? How do we take action in the face of morally challenging choices?

Although chaos, devastation, and death reign strongly in this tragedy, Brown-Fried believes *King Lear* ultimately offers us a sense of hope -- the idea that out of tragedy, or from a scorched earth, new opportunities and growth can occur.

Further Reading

There are many fabulous online resources for exploring the world of Shakespeare, but here are a few to jumpstart your journey:

- The Folger Shakespeare Library: <https://www.folger.edu>
- Shakespeares's Globe: <https://www.shakespearesglobe.com>
- Good Tickle Brain: <https://goodticklebrain.com>
- No Sweat Shakespeare: <https://www.nosweatshakespeare.com>
- Classic Stage Company Comic Study Guides:
<http://www.classicstage.org/education/for-schools/>

There are hundreds of books written about Shakespeare, but a fun one to check out from a “formerly local” author is:

Bryson, Bill. *Shakespeare: The World as Stage*. New York: Harper Collins, 2007.