

KING LEAR

Three daughters.

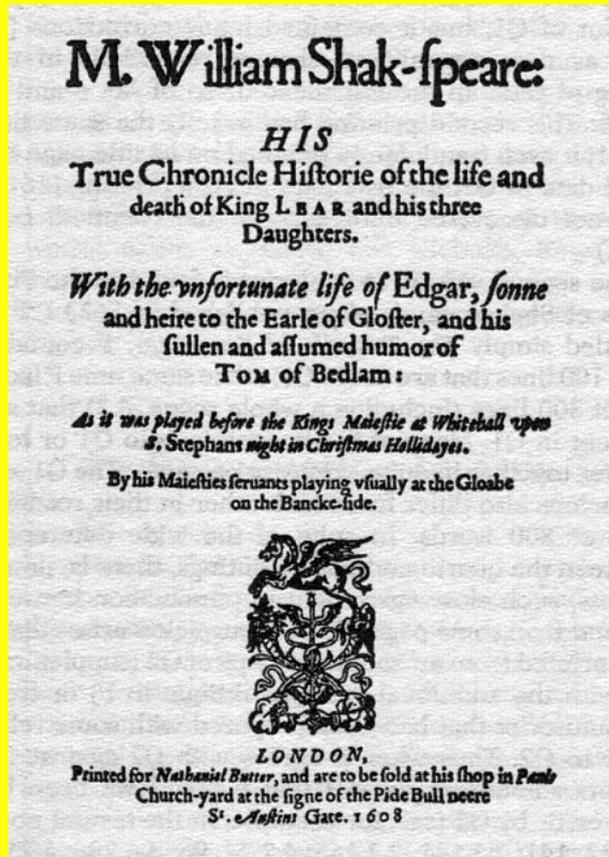
Two Liars.

And a King grown old but not wise.

*Power is the prize, but power shall be
damned by lies.*

"King Lear": Fate loves a fool

King Lear



Author: Shakespeare

Culture: English

Time: around 1605 CE (early
17th century)

Genre: drama (tragedy)

Names to know: Lear,
Goneril, Regan, Cordelia,
Edmund, Kent,
Gloucester, Cornwall

- Shakespeare authored *King Lear* around 1605, between *Othello* and *Macbeth*, and it is usually ranked with *Hamlet* as one of Shakespeare's greatest plays.

Type of Play

- *King Lear* is a tragedy centering on the decline and fall of a dysfunctional royal family.

Elements of Tragedy

- True to Shakespearean tradition, *King Lear* borrows its tragic elements from several types of tragedies that were popular during the Elizabethan Renaissance. Even though *King Lear* is classified as a chronicle play (a type of drama which draws its English historical materials from the sixteenth-century chronicles) Shakespeare uses elements of Senecan tragedy sometimes called Classical tragedy, and the morality play.

Hamartia

- As a tragedy, *King Lear* portrays a protagonist whose fortunes are conditioned by his *hamartia*. As defined by Aristotle, the protagonist of a tragedy should be a person “who is not eminently good or just, yet whose fortune is brought about by some error or frailty.” This error is not necessarily a flaw in character; hamartia can be an unwitting misstep in definite action or the failure to perform a definite action.
- Lear’s hamartia is the capricious division of his powers and kingdom before his death—more particularly, the disavowal of Cordelia because she will speak “nothing.”

- To enhance this chronicle with a tragedy of character, Shakespeare incorporates a few Senecan elements:
 - (1) the use of stock characters—a faithful male servant (Kent);
 - (2) the employment of sensational themes drawn from Greek mythology, involving much use of “blood and lust;”
 - (3) stichomythia—dialogue that is conducted by two characters speaking in alternate lines (though strict regularity is not maintained).

Good vs. Evil

- To balance the stock characters, Shakespeare also used characters that were consistently good or evil in their intent, echoing the pattern of a morality play.
- Edmund, Regan, and Goneril embody avarice, envy, anger, lust, and pride; while Edgar and Cordelia embody faithfulness and unconditional love.

Motifs & Themes

- Love, betrayal, revenge, loyalty, foolishness
- As in *Macbeth* and *Othello*, all things are not as they appear
- Greed and lust for power corrupt human beings and bring about their downfall
- Fate (the gods) turns humans into playthings
- Candor has a sharp edge
- Advanced age and wisdom do not go hand-in-hand

Theme of Suffering



Suffering can transform
a contemptible human
being into a good
person

Problem of human
suffering -

Remember what Zeus
said in the *Odyssey*?

Human Suffering

In *Odyssey* 1.36 ff, Zeus says:

‘Ah how shameless - the way these mortals blame the gods. From us alone, they say, come all their miseries, yes, but they themselves, with their own reckless ways, compound their pains beyond their proper share.’

The Greek Take on Suffering

According to the Greeks, the role of suffering in human life is clear: *mathos pathei*

(learning [new self-awareness & knowledge] through suffering)

In *King Lear*, most of the characters suffer. They react to suffering in different ways:

- Some harden their hearts
- Some indulge in violence
- Some try to alleviate others' suffering

King Lear & Suffering (the sadness of old age)



Lear makes a big mistake - he gives up his basis for power, but still expects to be treated as powerful.

He rages against his own pain until his sanity cracks.

He dies without being able to profit from his learning through suffering.

Cast of Characters

Lear, King of Britain

His daughters:

Goneril - married to Duke of Albany

her steward is Oswald.

Regan - married to the Duke of Cornwall

Cordelia - marries the king of France

Earl of Kent - loyal retainer to Lear

Fool

Cast of Characters

Earl of Gloucester

His sons:

Edgar

Edmund

Curan, gentleman of the household

Old man, a tenant

Intra-Family Conflict

These are the interwoven stories of two families, each caught up in a struggle between greed/cruelty and support/consolation.

Only death seems to provide an escape from 'the rack of this tough world.'

Parallel Plots

Each family centers on an aging father
(patriarch)

Lear: imperious tyrant

Gloucester: gullible

Each sees his children through a distorted
lens, turning against the child who truly
loves him, unleashing in the other children
greed, lust, ambition.

History

- The setting of *King Lear* is as far removed from Shakespeare's time as the setting of any of his other plays, dramatizing events from the eighth century B.C. But the parallel stories of Lear's and Gloucester's sufferings at the hands of their own children reflect anxieties that would have been close to home for Shakespeare's audience.

Historical Context

- Geoffrey of Monmouth, in his *Historia Regum Britanniae*, written around 1137, was the first known writer to recount an integrated story of Lear and his daughters, though the figure of Lyr or Ler dates from ancient British mythology.
- In the sixteenth century the chronicler Raphael Holinshed adopted the story from Geoffrey and inserted it into his *The Chronicles of England, Scotlande and Irelande*, as did Edmund Spenser in *The Faerie Queene* and John Higgins in *A Mirror for Magistrates*, all of which have been suggested as probable sources for *King Lear*.

Historical Context of King Lear

- However, the principal direct source for Shakespeare's play appears to be *The True Chronicle History of King Leir*.
- Notable differences:
 - Shakespeare's drama ends on a tragic note; the old chronicle presents a happy ending.
 - Lear's madness was also not a part of the chronicle story, nor was the tragic subplot of Gloucester and his sons.

Cultural Allusion 1

- One possible event that may have influenced this play is a lawsuit that occurred not long before *King Lear* was written, in which the eldest of three sisters tried to have her elderly father, Sir Brian Annesley, declared insane so that she could take control of his property. Annesley's youngest daughter, Cordell, successfully defended her father against her sister.

Cultural Allusion 2

- Another event that Shakespeare and his audience would have been familiar with is the case of William Allen, a mayor of London who was treated very poorly by his three daughters after dividing his wealth among them.

Of course, it also alludes to
royalty...

- Not least among relevant developments was the then recent transfer of power from Elizabeth I to James I, which occurred in 1603. Elizabeth had produced no male heir, and the anxiety about who her successor would be was fueled by fears that a dynastic struggle along the lines of the fifteenth-century Wars of the Roses might ensue.

Setting

- The action takes place in Ancient Britain. The places include the castles of King Lear and the Earl of Gloucester, the palace of the Duke of Albany, a forest, a heath, a farmhouse near Gloucester's castle, a French camp near Dover, a British camp near Dover, and fields near Dover.

Climax

- The climax of a play or another narrative work, such as a short story or a novel, can be defined as (1) the turning point at which the conflict begins to resolve itself for better or worse, or as (2) the final and most exciting event in a series of events.
- The climax in *King Lear* occurs, according to the first definition, when Lear leaves Gloucester's castle during a violent storm after being rejected by his evil daughters, Goneril and Regan.
- According to the second definition, the climax occurs in the final act, when Goneril, Regan, and Edmund die and Lear comes to his senses, then falls and dies on the body of innocent Cordelia, who has been executed.

King's Fool

- King Lear's fool (court jester) is the wisest character in the play in that he is the only character who understands the motivations of Lear, his daughters, and other characters. He constantly ridicules Lear, the better to make the old man understand himself and the folly of his selfish, headstrong ways.
- In the courts of England, a fool was a comic figure with a quick tongue who entertained the king, the queen, and their guests. He was allowed to—and even expected to—criticize anyone at court. Many fools were dwarfs or cripples, their odd appearance enhancing their appeal and, according to prevailing beliefs, bringing good luck to the court.

Is Cordelia the Jester?

- Yes!
 - Cordelia and the jester never appear onstage at the same time, and the jester disappears without explanation after act III;
 - Other Shakespearean heroines disguise themselves as men, though only in the non-tragedies;
 - King Lear seems to identify the jester and Cordelia in the last scene ("My poor fool is hanged!");
 - Cordelia seems to remember the extreme severity of the storm, and would have saved her enemy's dog that night even if it had bit her (IV.vii)
 - It's quite playable. Having Cordelia reveal herself at the end of III.vi. is an audience-pleaser.

Is Cordelia the Jester?

- No!
 - It is hard to explain "Cordelia"'s choice of jokes, which run from the bitter to the off-color to very harsh criticism of the King, and it is hard to explain why Cordelia would want to rub her beloved father's face in his own stupidity;
 - "Since my young lady's going into France, sir, the fool has much pined away." "No more of that, I have noted it." -- I.iv.
 - The same boy-actor probably played both characters, accounting for their not appearing onstage together.
- You decide!

Morals vs. Religion

- **Whether or not you agree with his vision of a godless universe in which our only hope is to be kind to one another, you will recognize the real beliefs of many (if not most) of your neighbors.**
- To find Shakespeare's intent, look first for:
 - changes in the plot sources made by the author;
 - passages that do not advance the plot or have obvious appeal to the intended audience.

- Shakespeare took a story that had a happy ending, and gave it a sad ending. He transformed a fairy-tale about virtuous and wicked people into something morally ambiguous. He took a story of wrongs being righted, and turned it into the story of painful discovery. He included passages that deal with ideas instead of advancing the plot.

Act 1, Scene 1

Shakespeare sets out the premise for the play (the crazy idea out of which all follows):

King Lear, intending to divide his power and kingdom among his three daughters, demands they publicly profess their love for him.

Cordelia refuses to put on that show.

In revenge, Lear strips her of her dowry, divides the kingdom between the other two, then banishes the Earl of Kent, who dares to protest Lear's rash and unfair actions toward Cordelia.

Complications

The king of France marries Cordelia despite her lack of dowry.

Lear tells Goneril and Regan that they and their husbands should divide his powers and revenues; he will keep 100 knights and will live with them each by turns.