

Focus on the text: *King Lear*

The plot

King Lear tells the story of an old English king called Lear who, in the absence of a male heir, decides to divide up his kingdom among his three daughters according to how much they declare they love him. The first two daughters – Regan, wife of the Duke of Cornwall, and Goneril, wife of the Duke of Albany – exaggerate their affection for their father to increase their inheritance. The youngest daughter, Cordelia, is disgusted by her sisters' hypocrisy: when Lear asks her how much she loves him she says she loves him as much as is natural for a daughter to love her father.

Lear is furious and disinherits Cordelia, who is exiled and marries the King of France. The inheritance is divided between Goneril and Regan on the condition that they promise to maintain the old king, together with a hundred of his knights. But the two sisters soon reveal their evil intentions. They do not keep their promise and in the end they throw Lear out of the court in the middle of a storm, saying that he has lost his mind.

A parallel plot concerns the Duke of Gloucester, who has problems with his two sons. His illegitimate son Edmund has convinced him that his other son, Edgar, plans to take his lands. But Edmund, like Regan and Goneril, is simply trying to manipulate things to his own advantage. To make matters worse, thanks to Edmund's insinuations, Gloucester is suspected of complicity with the enemy and he is blinded by the Duke of Cornwall.

Edgar, disguised as a mad beggar, leads the blind Gloucester to join Lear in the wilderness, where they begin to realise their terrible mistakes in favouring the wrong children. Returning to England, Cordelia, now the Queen of France, is briefly reunited with her old father. But then they are imprisoned by Edmund, who has gained power in the kingdom after winning the affections of both Regan and Goneril. The ending of the play is one of the most tragic in all of Shakespeare. Cordelia is hanged on Edmund's orders, and Lear, already mad, dies of grief. Goneril, meanwhile, poisons Regan out of jealousy over Edmund and then kills herself. Gloucester dies after being reunited with his good son Edgar. Edmund is killed by Edgar, but although order is restored at the end of the play, the tone is immensely sad.

Features of the play

King Lear was first printed in 1608. Two versions of the play exist, however, and it is probable that the second version, which first appeared in the Folio edition of 1623, was a major revision which Shakespeare made a few years after he first wrote the play in 1605.

The story of *King Lear* derives from a legend about a British king supposed to have lived about 900 BCE, which Shakespeare knew from sources including Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1577). The play's central themes are love, power, madness, old age, death and responsibility.



Scene from the Russian film *King Lear* (1970)
by Grigor Kozintsev.

**A man who
loves too much**

The tragedy of King Lear is initially provoked by Lear's **excess of paternal love** which is also an **excessive demand for love**. It is perhaps difficult for a modern audience to understand how Lear is able to so violently reject his most beloved daughter. Cordelia insists that her love for her father is limited by the natural bond which exists between father and child, and that when she marries, half her love will go to her husband. Indeed, Lear's rejection of her seems almost monstrous, pointing to dark, unexpressed passions.

Goneril and Regan, on the other hand, with their exaggerated declarations of absolute devotion are able to placate their father, though they actually hate him. They tell him what he wants to hear but then betray him by throwing him out into the wilderness.

**Blindness and
insight**

In *King Lear*, love is ultimately not a redemptive force but one which destroys and leads to catastrophe. Excessive love is shown as an obstacle to wisdom and good judgement. The central scenes of the play relate to **Lear's exile in the wilderness** during a storm, in which he is later joined by the blinded Gloucester and his legitimate son Edgar disguised as a mad beggar called Tom o'Bedlam. The wilderness is a place of madness, folly, social exclusion and blindness, but it is also for this reason a place where wisdom and the acceptance of the hard truths of existence are possible.

Lear's **madness** expresses **his rage against the pain and absurdity of human life**; the cycle of generation and corruption; his inability to accept that he must soon die and that his daughters' lives will go on without him. Lear's tragedy at the end of the play is made more powerful by the brief moment of tender reconciliation he enjoys with Cordelia, before she is killed and he goes irretrievably mad.

If Lear has the capacity to feel but lacks reason and Edmund is a genius of reason but with no real feeling, then Edgar emerges as one of the very few positive figures in the play (the others are Cordelia and Kent, a courtier who stays faithful to Lear). In assuming the role of the mad beggar, Tom o'Bedlam, Edgar voluntarily descends into madness. When he comes out of the experience, he is a much stronger man, but also one who is more depressed and sceptical about life. His faith in the idea of power and authority is shattered and he has no desire to become king. As he says at one point in the play 'the worst is not/So long as we can say "This is the worst"'.