

# KING LEAR

By William Shakespeare



*Shakespeare*

# Act 1 sc i

- Mood of **uncertainty** – typical of **Elizabethan and Jacobean** drama – sets scene and introduces **key themes and ideas**.
- **Inheritance and property** issues.
- Ideas about **favouritism**.
- Edmund – bastard son – **no position** in society – **silence** is significant.
- His **polite exterior** conceals his **evil nature** – appearance vs reality.

## Act 1 sc i cont.

- Gloucester takes his **rule of Edmund** for granted
- **Not embarrassed** about his illegitimate child – jokes – lax morals
- Questions about **family relationships** are raised.

# What do we learn about Lear?

- His **entrance** is impressive – suggesting **power**.
- We **question** the use of power.
- ‘Love test’ is **foolish** and egotistical.
- So is his desire to be **treated as royalty** even though he has given away his kingdom.
- His intention to **break up his state** is alarming.
- Actions – **not** those of a **responsible** ruler.
- Most concerned **with appearances** – does not see clearly.
- Fails to **recognise Kent** and **Cordelia’s honesty**.

# Lear...

- Behaves like a **tyrant** in 1.1.
- Has **lost control** when tries to strike Kent.
- Continues to **issue orders**, and speaks **cruelly** to Cordelia, but his authority has been denied.
- It is possible to feel **some sympathy** for Lear –
  - **loves Cordelia** greatly (wants to give her the most opulent part of the kingdom)
  - **Pained and humiliated** by her refusal to take the test
- However, there is **truth** in Goneril and Regan's remarks of Lear as **explosive and violent**.

# But – can they be trusted?

- Perhaps **Gonerill and Regan** simply try **to justify** their already **wicked** intentions when they decide to ‘hit together’.
- **Family and national harmony** have been destroyed.
  - **One daughter has challenged** her father
  - Two more prepare to **subvert** his authority

# Cordelia and Kent in this scene...

- Cordelia stands up for **genuine feeling** and the correct order in **family life** - some love must go to her husband.
- **Strength and integrity** shown –
  - Scorns Burgundy
  - Parts from her sisters – says she knows they are cunning and false
- Some commentators see her as **cunning and false** (like her father)
- Ironic that Cordelia **rebels** against her father first
- **Kent** is also **subversive** – insulting language used towards Lear – ‘thou’ and ‘old man’
- However, they have **Lear and the country’s best interests at heart** – hope to alert Lear to his false, materialistic values.

## By the end of this scene...

- Family and national harmony have been destroyed.
- Cordelia has challenged her father.
- Gonerill and Regan prepare to subvert his authority.
- Lear's tragic fall proceeds from his misuse of power in 1.1

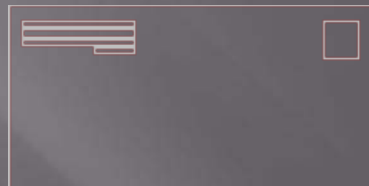


# Act 1 Scene 2

- Edmund makes his father Gloucester believe that **Edgar seeks his life**.
  - Alone on stage – Edmund offers **his view of life**.
  - Refuses to submit to the **patriarchal hierarchy** of 1.1.
  - Declares **nature** his goddess.
  - Argues that he possesses **personal qualities** that make him his legitimate brother's equal.
  - Questions the notion that he should be **denied property and power** because he is **illegitimate**.
  - Determined to **'grow'** and **'prosper'**.

# Act One, scene three

- How serious are **Gonerill's complaints** about Lear and his knights?
- This depends on how the **director** chooses to **portray the knights** in the next scene.
- They could be **rabble**, and Gonerill is therefore **justified** in her irritation,
- These **complaints** look suspiciously **empty** – because letters have been sent back and forth – scheming



# Act 1, scene 3 cont...

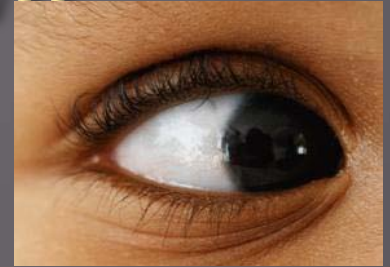
- Gonerill's duty as host:
  - Has a **duty** to be **gracious towards** her father and to **protect** him.
  - However, she **prepares to subvert his authority**.
  - Her **tone** is **authoritative and uncompromising**.
  - Insists that she is **wronged**.
  - **Balance of power** is shifting from Lear to his daughters.



# Act One, scene four

- Lear finds his **expectations and beliefs** thwarted at every turn.
- **Challenged** directly by Gonerill.
- **Dependant state** revealed when Oswald tells him that he is now simply his **mistress's father**, not a **royal monarch** who must be obeyed.
- Scathing **jests** of Fool, suggest Lear's **powerlessness**.
- **Continues to insult even after Lear threatens to have him whipped – suggests loss of power.**

# Lear questions his own identity...



- 'Who is there that can tell me who I am?'
- His use of 'I' is at odds with the royal 'we' he invokes in his earlier question, 'Are you our daughter?'
- Lear thinks he's joking – audience will realise that Lear is no longer omnipotent.
- Even servants disobey him.
- These questions also reveal Lear's blindness.
- Although there is some indication that he realises he has behaved unwisely:
  - 'Woe that too late repents' and 'O Lear, Lear, Lear! / Beat at this gate that let thy folly in/ And thy dear out!'

# Dismissal of knights is important:

- Symbol of **might and importance**.
- **Fighting** power
- Unable to **reassert** himself/ regain control of kingdom.
- Threats and curses increasingly **empty**
- Speeches increasingly **disjointed**.
- Hints at **madness** to come.

# Gonerill and Albany's responses

- Differ
- Suggest a **clash** later
- Albany's **feeble protestations** seem inadequate
- **Evil** will go unchecked for some time
- **Main plot:** Gonerill has assumed control
- **Subplot:** Edmund ruthless too

# Act One, Scene 5

- Lear – growing isolation and increasingly fragile mental state.
- Distracted .
- Recognises that mistreated Cordelia.
- Increases sense of isolation.
- We suspect Regan will treat him coldly.
- Increased isolation.



# Act One, Scene 5 cont

- **Blind** to the truth.
  - Does not recognise his **faults as a father**.
  - Sees troubles as caused by his **ungrateful offspring**.
  - Little chance of **reclaiming the throne** now.
- Fool's **vulgar closing rhyming couplet** – comic relief.
- Lear's **suffering** has truly begun.

# BYE BYE!

Adapted from York Notes Advanced

