

# King Lear

## Background Info

### Author Bio

**Full Name:** William Shakespeare

**Date of Birth:** 1564

**Place of Birth:** Stratford upon Avon, England

**Date of Death:** 1616

**Brief Life Story:** Shakespeare's father was a glove-maker, and Shakespeare received no more than a grammar school education. He married Anne Hathaway in 1582, but left his family behind around 1590 and moved to London, where he became an actor and playwright. He was an immediate success: Shakespeare soon became the most popular playwright of the day as well as a part-owner of the Globe Theater. His theater troupe was adopted by King James as the King's Men in 1603. Shakespeare retired as a rich and prominent man to Stratford-upon-Avon in 1613, and died three years later.

### Key Facts

**Full Title:** The Tragedy of King Lear

**Genre:** Tragedy

**Setting:** Venice, and the neighboring country estate of Belmont

**Climax:** Lear raging in the thunderstorm

**Protagonists:** King Lear, Cordelia, Edgar, Gloucester

**Antagonist:** Regan, Goneril, Edmund

### Historical and Literary Context

**When Written:** c. 1605

**Where Written:** England

**When Published:** 1608; 1623

**Literary Period:** The Renaissance

**Related Literary Works:** Shakespeare drew the main plot of *King Lear*—that is, the story of a ruler who divides his kingdom among his children and is consequently ruined—from several sources describing the legendary British king of that name. Scholars believe that the most important source was the second edition of Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1587); Holinshed himself had taken the story of Lear from the *History of the British Kingdom* by Geoffrey of Monmouth, written in the twelfth century. (Critics have also pointed out that Lear's rejection of Cordelia resembles numerous classical British fairy tales, where a father rejects a daughter on the grounds that he does not believe she loves him enough.) Shakespeare drew further subplots from Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queen* (1590), which also features a character named Cordelia, who dies by hanging; and from Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* (1580-90), which contains an outline of the Gloucester subplot.

**Related Historical Events:** In the period in which *King Lear* was written—from 1604 to 1607—King James VI, King of Scotland and England, was trying to persuade English Parliament to approve the union of the two countries into one nation. (It was James who first used the term "Great Britain" to describe the unity of the Celtic and Saxon lands: England, Scotland, and Wales.) Such a combination of nations is called "accession." In his speeches to Parliament, he regularly referred to the misfortunes that had been brought about by the disunion of England under King Leir, the historical source of Shakespeare's play. The historical context of Shakespeare's

*King Lear* is thus twofold. Reading it you should keep in mind both the history of King Leir and the discussions on union/disunion of Great Britain in Shakespeare's own time.

### Extra Credit

**Poor Tom.** The character of Poor Tom or the Bedlam Beggar, as which Edgar disguises himself, is based on vagabonds or madmen considered dangerous in England at the time. "Bedlam" was a slang word for "Bethlehem," which was the name of a mental institution in London.

**Two Versions.** There are actually two different versions of *King Lear*—*The History of King Lear* published in quarto form in 1608 and *The Tragedy of King Lear*, which was published in the First Folio (1623) and is very substantially revised from the play published in 1608. Before the 1990s, editors usually "blended" the two texts, taking what they believed were the best versions of each scene. In recent times, some editors have started focusing on the "original" 1608 edition.

**Poor Fool.** In Shakespeare's day, the roles of Cordelia and the Fool were often "doubled"—played by the same actor—since the two characters are never on stage at the same time. Shakespeare alludes to this fact at several points in the play. The first time that Lear summons the Fool, in 1.4, both he and his Knight observe that the Fool has been melancholy ever since Cordelia was sent to France. More famously, in 5.3, upon learning of Cordelia's death, Lear remarks "And my poor fool is hanged" (5.3.369). Sometimes directors staging the play invent a scene in which the Fool himself is hanged, to explain this line, but the tradition of doubling the characters is the better explanation.

## Plot Summary

**King Lear** intends to divide his kingdom among his three daughters, so that he can enjoy old age without the burdens of power. He has planned a ceremony in which each daughter will state how much she loves him, before an audience of nobles including Lear's long-trusted advisor, **Kent**, the **Earl of Gloucester**, and two suitors for his youngest daughter's hand, **Burgundy** and **France**. During the ceremony, his elder daughters, **Goneril** and **Regan** each profess to love Lear more than anything in the world. However, his youngest daughter, **Cordelia**, refuses to play along; when her turn comes, she says that she loves Lear "no more, no less" than she should as a daughter. Enraged, Lear strips her of her dowry, and banishes Kent when the latter attempts to intercede on Cordelia's behalf. France says he will marry Cordelia even without a dowry. Lear then tells the gathered nobles that he will keep one hundred knights and alternate months living with Goneril and her husband, **Albany**, and Regan and her husband, **Cornwall**.

Back at Gloucester's palace, **Edmund**, Gloucester's illegitimate son, plans to displace his legitimate brother, **Edgar**, as Gloucester's heir by turning Gloucester against Edgar. Edmund tricks Gloucester into thinking that Edgar is conspiring to kill him. Meanwhile, Goneril, with whom Lear has gone to live first, becomes angry with her father and his knights for causing chaos in her household. She orders her steward **Oswald** to treat Lear coldly. Meanwhile, the banished Kent returns to Lear in disguise, offers his services, and is accepted as part of Lear's company. Goneril criticizes Lear for his knights' rowdiness and demands that he dismiss half of them. Deeply insulted and angered, Lear curses Goneril and prepares to leave to go and stay with Regan along with his Fool and his other followers.

Back at Gloucester's castle, Edmund's conspiracy moves along. After Edmund tricks Edgar into fleeing, Gloucester, convinced of Edgar's evil intentions, condemns him to death, declaring Edmund his legitimate heir. Cornwall and Regan arrive at Gloucester's castle and welcome Edmund into their service. Outside, Kent and Oswald arrive with letters for Regan

from Lear and Goneril. Kent insults Oswald and challenges him to fight. Roused by the disturbance, Cornwall puts Kent into the stocks—even though such an action is disrespectful to Lear. Elsewhere in the countryside, Edgar disguises himself as a mad beggar "Poor Tom" in order to escape the death sentence declared by his father. Lear himself arrives at Gloucester's castle. Upset to find his man Kent (still in disguise) in the stocks, he grows increasingly angry when Cornwall and Regan refuse to see him. Shortly after Regan finally comes out, Goneril arrives. Lear quarrels bitterly with both, as Regan joins Goneril in claiming that Lear does not need to maintain any attendants of his own. When each says that he may stay with them only if he dismisses all of his knights, Lear rushes, mad with rage, into a brewing storm. Cornwall, Regan, and Goneril lock up Gloucester's castle to keep Lear out.

Searching for Lear, Kent, who has been released from the stocks, meets a **Gentleman** who tells him that Lear and the Fool are alone in the storm. Kent tells the Gentleman that French forces are on their way to England. He gives the Gentleman his purse along with an identifying ring to bring to Cordelia, and asks the Gentleman to tell her about the injustice that Lear has suffered. Meanwhile, Lear has gone mad and is raging against the storm, while the Fool begs him to seek shelter. When Kent finds them, he leads them toward a hovel. Back inside the castle, Gloucester confides in Edmund that he has decided to try to help Lear; he also reports that he has received a letter about the French invasion. After Gloucester leaves to find Lear, Edmund tells the audience that he will betray his father to Cornwall.

Out on the heath, having reached the hovel, Lear, Kent, and the Fool find Edgar, disguised as Poor Tom, inside. Gloucester finds them soon after, and leads them to the shelter of a house. Inside Gloucester's castle, Edmund tells Cornwall about Gloucester's decision to help Lear and hands over the incriminating letter from France. In return, Cornwall makes Edmund Earl of Gloucester. Back in the house, hiding from the storm, Lear

hallucinates that Goneril and Regan are on trial before himself, Edgar, and the Fool. Gloucester returns, tells Kent that Goneril, Regan, and their husbands are plotting Lear's death, and asks Kent to rush Lear to Cordelia, who has landed with France at Dover. Back inside the palace, Cornwall sends men to capture Gloucester and sends Edmund and Goneril to tell Albany that the French have landed. When Cornwall's forces bring in the captured Gloucester, Cornwall and Regan pull out Gloucester's eyes as punishment for his treachery. However, Cornwall's **Servant** attempts to stop him; they end up dueling. Although Regan stabs the servant in the back, Cornwall receives a wound that will eventually kill him. Regan throws the now blinded Gloucester out of his own castle. Two servants take pity on Gloucester, and decide to try to help him find Poor Tom, who they know is Edgar in disguise.

Outside Gloucester's palace, Edgar, still disguised as Poor Tom, meets his blinded father. Deeply moved, he agrees to show him the way to Dover. Meanwhile, Goneril and Edmund have traveled back to her palace to fetch Albany. However, Oswald meets them and reports that Albany has changed. Goneril quickly sends Edmund away. When Albany emerges, he berates her for her brutality to her father. In response, she criticizes him for becoming cowardly. A messenger arrives, interrupting their argument with news of both the death of Cornwall from the wound his servant gave him as well as the blinding of Gloucester.

In the French camp, Kent and a Gentleman discuss Cordelia's love of Lear, which has brought her back to Britain at the head of an invading French army. Kent reports that Lear himself is in Dover and, although he has spells of sanity, he is too ashamed to see Cordelia. In the camp, Cordelia herself sends a search party after her father. Back at Gloucester's palace, Regan questions Oswald about Goneril and Edmund. She states her feeling that, now that she is a widow, she should marry Edmund and asks Oswald to convince Goneril of the logic of this. As Oswald hurries off with a letter for Edmund

from Goneril, Regan adds that she will show favor to anyone who kills the blinded Gloucester. Meanwhile, hoping to cure Gloucester of his despair, Edgar pretends to lead him to the cliffs of Dover (they are actually on flat ground). When Gloucester jumps, to commit suicide (in fact just fainting and falling), Edgar then hurries over to him while pretending to be someone who saw Gloucester jump, and telling Gloucester that the fact that he survived is a miracle. Lear shows up, raving mad; he jabbers at Gloucester about lechery, the abuse of power, and other human faults. When some of Cordelia's search party turn up, Lear runs off. Just then, Oswald happens upon Edgar and Gloucester. He attempts to kill Gloucester but Edgar kills him. In Oswald's purse, Edgar finds letters from Goneril to Edmund plotting Albany's death so that they can marry. In the French

camp, Lear is awakened by the doctor treating him and is reunited with Cordelia.

At her camp, at the start of the battle, Goneril argues with Albany; she tells herself that she would rather lose the war against the French than let Regan marry Edmund. Edgar, still disguised as a peasant, brings Goneril's letter to Edmund, describing her plot against Albany, to Albany then quickly leaves, with instructions that Albany must summon him with three blows of a trumpet after the battle with the French, if the British have won. While Edgar places Gloucester beneath a tree to rest, the battle takes place off stage. In the battle, Britain defeats France and Lear and Cordelia are captured by Edmund. Edmund sends them to jail, then sends a Captain after them with secret instructions to kill them both. Summoned by Al-

bany's Herald, Edgar arrives in disguise and fights and wounds Edmund, who, dying, admits to all his treacheries. Edgar identifies himself and explains that, right before coming, he revealed himself to Gloucester; Gloucester died in that moment of a mix of grief and joy. Goneril has poisoned Regan beforehand, in the hopes of securing Edmund for herself; however, when he dies, she also stabs herself. Before he dies, Edmund admits that he sent his Captain to hang Cordelia and kill Lear. Albany sends soldiers running off to try to save them. However, it is too late: Lear emerges from the prison with Cordelia's body in his arms, mad with grief. He explains that he killed the Captain who hung her but was too late to save her life. Lear dies of his sorrow on the spot. Only Albany and Edgar remain to pick up the pieces, as Kent concludes that he soon must follow his master (i.e., kill himself, too).

## Characters

**King Lear** – The aging king of Britain and tragic hero of the play. Lear, who is used to complete obedience from everyone around him, makes two related major errors: giving up of political responsibility by transferring power to his daughters; and trusting the flattering **Goneril** and **Regan** over the plain-spoken, but true, **Cordelia**. Despite his flaws he is able to maintain the loyalty of certain subjects, particularly **Kent** and **Gloucester**. However, these will not be enough to save him from madness and death.

**Cordelia** – Lear's youngest daughter, whom he disowns when she refuses to flatter him, as her sisters do, during the ceremony in which he hands over power. Cordelia remains loyal to Lear despite his unjust harshness to her at the beginning of the play and even seems prepared to forgive her treacherous sisters at the end. Other characters who do not betray Lear—particularly Kent—admire Cordelia for her virtue and mildness.

**Goneril** – Lear's vicious older daughter, who is the first to flatter him in the power-transfer ceremony and the first to insult him afterwards, throwing him and his knights out of her house. Goneril's ruthless temperament contrasts with that of her husband, the **Duke of Albany**. In the end, she plots against Albany, and even against her former ally, her sister Regan, out of lust for **Edmund**.

**Regan** – Lear's middle daughter, who shares the vicious traits of Goneril, also flattering him in the power-transfer scene and abusing him thereafter. Regan shows her particularly brutal

nature when she aids her husband, the **Duke of Cornwall**, in blinding Gloucester.

**Gloucester** – An earl, or nobleman, who is loyal to Lear and similar to him in many ways. Like Lear, Gloucester misjudges his children, trusting his scheming illegitimate son, Edmund, over his honest and good child from his legal marriage, **Edgar**.

**Edmund** – Gloucester's younger, illegitimate son. Edmund resents the fact that the accident of his birth has deprived him of legal status (and, therefore, an inheritance). He schemes to turn Gloucester against his legitimate son, Edgar, and eventually usurp his title. Eloquent and seductively wicked, Edmund almost succeeds in carrying out his malign plots to fruition.

**Edgar** – Gloucester's elder, legitimate son. Although at first Edgar comes across as a bit naïve, easily duped by Edmund, he later disguises himself successfully as a madman beggar and manages not only to save himself from the death sentence his misled father has pronounced on him, but also to help Gloucester and Lear and to avenge the wrongs committed by his traitorous half-brother.

**Kent** – A nobleman of the same rank as Gloucester, banished by Lear in the first scene when he attempts to intercede with the king on Cordelia's behalf. Kent spends most of the play disguised as Caius, a disguise he takes on so that he can continue to serve Lear even after being thrown out of his kingdom.

**Fool** – Lear's jester, who accompanies him through much of the play. Although his statements come out as riddles, the Fool offers insight into Lear's mistakes and their consequences. Insofar as he stays with Lear, despite all his mockery and criticisms (and at his peril, during the violent storm in Act 3), the Fool, like Kent, Gloucester, and Cordelia, proves himself loyal.

**Albany** – The husband of Lear's older daughter, Goneril, and a Duke. Albany is kind and generous, in contrast to his malicious wife, and criticizes her for her treacherous behavior toward her father. However, he realizes the viciousness of the other characters he is aligned with (namely, Edmund and Regan) too late in the play to prevent the evil that they cause.

**Cornwall** – Cornwall is the husband of Lear's middle daughter, Regan, and just as vicious as she is. He disrespects Lear by putting his man Kent in the stocks and, later, violently blinds Gloucester.

**Oswald** – Goneril's steward, or chief servant. Oswald's blind obedience to the evil Goneril earns him contempt from the "good" characters Kent and Edgar, and eventually costs him his life.

**France** – The husband of Cordelia. France is a benevolent character, who takes Cordelia as his wife without a dowry, when she has been rejected by her father, and even sends her back to England with the French army to rectify the wrongs carried out by Goneril and Regan against Lear. However, France only appears in the first scene.

## Themes

In LitCharts, each theme gets its own corresponding color, which you can use to track where the themes occur in the work. There are two ways to track themes:

- Refer to the color-coded bars next to each plot point throughout the *Summary and Analysis* sections.
- Use the *ThemeTracker* section to get a quick overview of where the themes appear throughout the entire work.

### Fathers, Children, and Siblings

The personal drama of *King Lear* revolves around the destruction of family relationships. Tragedy emerges from bonds broken between parents and children—and, at a secondary level, from the loss of ties among siblings. Lear, misreading Cordelia's understated, but true, devotion to him renounces his "parental care" (1.1.127) of her. This rejection is twofold. Lear withdraws his "father's heart" (1.1.142); he also strips Cordelia of the financial and political support that formerly made her attractive to her suitors. Driven by greed and ambition, Goneril and Regan fail to show any solidarity with their sister in 1.1. And later, despite their strong professions of love for Lear, they both betray him in order to consolidate their political authority. In addition, although the two "tigers, not daughters" (4.2.49) initially ally with each other, their lustful desire for Edmund ultimately drive Goneril to murder Regan,

before committing suicide when Edmund himself is killed, thus ensuring the complete annihilation of the Lear line.

Edmund's conspiracy to mislead Gloucester into disinheriting his legitimate son Edgar provides a foil to the Lear family situation throughout the play. Edmund—who is Gloucester's illegitimate or "natural" son from an affair outside marriage, rather than a legitimate or "legal" one—further highlights the question of where parent-child loyalty stems from: biology or socially acknowledged status. And, indeed, the private or familial sphere is inseparable from the public and political realm in *King Lear*. Fatherhood, in the play, serves as a model and metaphor for kingly leadership, while the narrative regarding the disintegration of families parallels the disintegration of the British state.

### Authority and Order

At the beginning of the play, Lear is an authority figure, embodying order in his own person and commanding it from his family and followers. (This is how he is able to compel his elder two daughters to participate in the dramatic ceremony dividing the kingdom by professing their absolute love on cue, precisely when he demands it; this is why Gloucester, Kent, and others respectfully watch the ceremony unfold, despite thinking that Lear's plan to give up power is a bad idea.) Just as the father-child bonds discussed above encompass both a private and a

public dimension, authority and order in this play exist at both the level of the family and the level of the nation.

Throughout the tragedy, Lear and other characters also repeatedly invoke the ideas of natural and divine order. Lear appeals to the idea of divine justice when his children treat him unjustly (e.g. after his final quarrel with Goneril and Regan: "O heavens, / If you do love old men [...] Send down and take my part" [2.4.218-221]). Gloucester similarly calls out to the gods after he has been betrayed and blinded in 3.7. Meanwhile, nature in the play seems to mirror the political chaos of the play, particularly in the form of the brutal storm that rages even as Lear himself, the former embodiment of order in the kingdom, rages in his own madness.

### Disintegration, Chaos, Nothingness

Although Lear begins as a figure of authority and order, when he gives up his power and Goneril and Regan turn against him, he falls apart, going mad. Moreover, his personal decline parallels a farther-reaching dissolution of order and justice in the British state. Lear's error, based on blindness and misjudgment, doesn't just ruin him personally. It leads to a political situation in which there is no order to guarantee justice, despite his (and Gloucester's) repeated appeals to the gods.

Cordelia's first answer to Lear's command that she pronounce her love for him, the answer that first enrages him

against her, is (in 1.1) is “nothing.” After that first appearance, the word “nothing” recurs constantly throughout the play in the mouths of multiple characters. The repetition of this word highlights the theme of nothingness, and of the complete lack of meaning that results from nothingness – after all, when everything is destroyed, it is not possible to compare anything to anything else, and in such a void, without any ability to compare, nothing can have any meaning. And, ultimately, it is hard to argue that the ending of the play offers any justice at all: while the “bad guys” of Edmund, Goneril, Regan, and Cornwall are all killed, so are the heroes of Lear, Gloucester, and Cordelia. Nearly the entire social order, good and bad, is annihilated and turned to nothing. As Lear himself cries out in the moments before he dies, while holding the dead Cordelia in his arms, with his kingdom destroyed: “Never, never, never, never, never” (5.3.372).

### Old Age

Originally, Lear wishes to free himself of the burdens of ruling his kingdom because he is aware of his old age and wishes to “crawl unburdened toward death” (1.1.42). As his choice of the verb “crawl” suggests, Lear has a sense that old age forces the individual to remember his or her **animal** aspect—that is, the fact that human beings, like animals, are subjected to the forces of physical nature and have physical needs.

Age as Goneril and Regan unkindly observe at various points, brings a kind of weakness with it. Regan mocks Lear: “O, sir, you are old [...] You should be ruled and led/ By some discretion that discerns your state/ Better than you yourself”

[2.4.165-9]. Yet, together with the father-child bond, the play also suggests at various points that age should command respect. The fact that Lear’s daughters abuse him for being old makes their cruelty seem all the worse and also indicates that all they care about is power, without any thought for wisdom. Cornwall and Regan’s brutality to Gloucester is similarly heightened by our awareness of his age—for instance, when Regan plucks Gloucester’s white beard in 3.7.

### Fooling and Madness

From early on in the play, the Fool is probably the character with the greatest insight into what the consequences of Lear’s misjudgments of his daughters will be. (The Fool’s only competition in this respect comes from Kent in 1.1; in 1.2 Gloucester seems only to have a vague intuition that Lear’s decision was a mistake.) Calling Lear himself a Fool and admonishing him that he has reduced himself to “nothing” by dividing and handing off his kingdom, the Fool recognizes that by giving up his authority Lear is essentially ensuring his own destruction and the destruction of his kingdom.

Just as the Fool’s apparently nonsensical comments contain some of the most sensible advice that Lear receives on his behavior, Lear himself gains increasing insight into his situation as he moves from sanity to madness. His raving—for instance, in the storm or on Dover Beach—often resembles the riddling, but incisive, barbs of the Fool. It is possible to argue that in a world that itself does not seem to make sense—a world of death, of raging storms, of children who turn against their parents—it makes sense that madness might be the most sane reaction.

Deliberately adopting the mad manner of a bedlam beggar, Edgar provides a counterpoint to Lear’s uncontrollable madness, particularly in the storm scene (3.2).

### Blindness and Insight

The tragic errors that King Lear and Gloucester make in misjudging their children constitute a form of figurative blindness—a lack of insight into the true characters of those around them. Reminding the audience of this fact, the language of the play resounds with references to eyes and seeing from the very beginning. Cornwall and Regan make these images and metaphors of (failed) vision brutally literal when they blind Gloucester in 3.7. For the remainder of the play, Gloucester serves as a kind of walking reminder of the tragic errors of blindness that he and Lear have committed. Yet, Gloucester’s greater insight into the character of his two sons after he is blinded reflects an irony: literal blindness ironically produces insight. Only when Gloucester is blind can he see things for what they are.

Throughout the play, characters allude to, and call upon, the **gods and the heavens** watching over them. As noted above, the gods and heavens suggest order and eventual justice. However, as watchers of the action of the play, the gods also become a kind of audience, and like the audience they both see the story of what is happening more completely than the individual characters on stage and can’t seem to do anything to stop it.

## Symbols

Symbols are shown in **red** text whenever they appear in the *Plot Summary* and *Summary and Analysis* sections of this LitChart.

### The Stars, Heavens, and the Gods

In Shakespeare’s time there was a particularly strong belief that order on earth depended on order in the heavens—or, as Kent puts it, that “the stars above us govern our conditions” (4.3.39). Celestial bodies are thus both a metaphor of order and a potential source of disorder, when they go awry. Multiple characters in King Lear make references to eclipses that have taken place; in Act 1 Scene 2 in particular, Gloucester attributes the chaos in Lear’s court—the banishment of Kent and abrupt departure of Cordelia and France—to “these late eclipses of the sun and moon” (1.2.109). Edmund then mockingly takes up the theme of “what should follow these eclipses” (1.2.148). Later in the play, Lear and Gloucester both appeal to

the stars and gods together as benevolent spectators of their sad plights, and as forces for justice. (E.g., Lear cries out in 2.4: “You heavens, give me that patience [...] You see me here, you gods, a poor old man” (313-4).

### Animals


From start to finish, King Lear is full of references to animals, usually incorporated into insults and curses or used to describe states of maximum human degradation. (The **Fool** also frequently tells jokes or sings songs involving non-human creatures.) Lear himself observes, in his rage at **Goneril** and **Regan**: “Allow not nature more than nature needs, / Man’s life is cheap as beast’s” (2.4.307-8). Throughout the play, animals present a vision of brutal nature to which men can descend, and yet the animals are also held up as less corrupt than men. After all the beasts are just beasts, and are naturally brutal, while the finely dressed Goneril and Regan, along with the

other disloyal members of Lear’s court, can spout beautiful language about love and honor, and then stab their father in the back.

### Clothing and Costumes

Complementing the many references to animals throughout the play are mentions of clothing and instances of disguise. Kent, banished by Lear, disguises himself as the commoner Caius. Edgar, fleeing Gloucester’s mistaken wrath, transforms himself the mad beggar, Poor Tom. As the honorable characters of the play must take off their fine clothes and put on disguises to remain loyal, and Lear associates Goneril and Regan’s fine clothing with their duplicity, clothing becomes a symbol of the desire for power and status that corrupts characters like Goneril, Regan, Edmund, and Cornwall. On Dover beach Lear remarks to Gloucester: “Through tattered clothes small vices do appear. / Robes and furred gowns hide all” [4.6.181-2].

## Summary and Analysis

The color-coded bars in *Summary and Analysis* make it easy to track the themes through the work. Each color corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section. For instance, a bar of  indicates that all five themes apply to that part of the summary.

### Act 1 Scene 1

**Kent** and **Gloucester** are in King Lear’s court, discussing Lear’s plan to give up his power and divide it among his daughters. Gloucester introduces Kent to his illegitimate son, **Edmund**, who is standing nearby. Gloucester says that, although Edmund is a “knave” (1.1.21) born out of wedlock, Gloucester loves him no less than the other “son” he has “by order of law” (1.1.19) (i.e., **Edgar**).

**Lear** enters with **Albany**, **Cornwall**, **Goneril**, **Regan**, **Cordelia**, and their attendants. Having sent Gloucester to fetch Cordelia’s suitors, the lords of **France** and **Burgundy**, Lear announces that he has divided his kingdom into three parts. He intends to “shake all cares and business from his age, / Conferring them on younger strengths” so that he can “unburdened crawl toward death” (1.1.41-2).

*Gloucester’s words to Kent show that he values his bond with his illegitimate son, despite the fact that a “natural” (i.e. biological) rather than a social or legal order connects them. This conversation looks ahead to the dismembering of the British kingdom by Lear.*



*Ironically, Lear’s authority as king, as the head of a political order, enables him to make the decision that will produce grave disorder. By using the word “crawl” to describe his progress toward death, Lear describes the aging human without his former authority as an animal.*



Next, Lear calls upon each of his daughters to state how much she loves him. First, **Goneril** insists that she loves her father “dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty” (1.1.61); Lear awards her one third of his kingdom, accordingly. Then, Regan claims that she loves her father even more than Goneril does; she is an “enemy to all other joys” but his “dear Highness’ love” (1.1.80-4). Lear grants her a third, in turn.

While her sisters speak, Cordelia grows nervous, knowing that she would prefer to “love, and be silent” (1.1.68) than to make such a public declaration of her love for her father. And, indeed, when her turn comes to speak, Cordelia can answer only “Nothing, my lord” (1.1.96). Lear presses her to give another answer, but she insists that she loves him “according to [her] bond, no more, no less” (1.1.102).

*The ceremony Lear has devised to make himself feel good also reinforces the plays theme of the connections between the “public” authority of Lear as a king and his “private” authority over his daughters as a father.*



*Refusing to go along with Lear’s political theater, Cordelia stresses the importance of her inward bond. Her answer, “nothing,” will echo throughout the play. Here it anticipates the way in which the dismembering of the kingdom will lead to ruin, chaos, and annihilation.*



Enraged by this refusal to play along, and vowing by “all the operation of the orbs” (1.1.124), Lear renounces his “paternal care” of Cordelia forever (1.1.127). When Kent attempts to intercede on Cordelia’s behalf, Lear reiterates: “here I give/ her father’s heart from her” (1.1.141-2). He states that he will from now on alternate months living with his two other daughters, keeping only 100 knights on reserve to be his followers. When Kent continues to counsel him against such a rash decision, Lear banishes him on pain of death: “out of my sight!” (1.1.179). Having consoled Cordelia, and exhorted Goneril and Regan to live up to their declarations of love, Kent departs.

Gloucester returns with **France** and Burgundy. Lear addresses Burgundy first, telling him that Cordelia has been disowned. Cordelia interrupts, begging her father to explain that she has not done anything wrong: her only sin is to lack a “still-soliciting eye and such a tongue” (1.1.266) as her sisters. Burgundy asks, won’t Lear give the dowry he proposed? Lear replies that he will give “nothing” (1.1.283). Then, Burgundy apologizes, he cannot marry Cordelia. France, however, says that the neglect of the gods has only increased his love: he pronounces Cordelia his wife and queen. Lear accepts and exits with his attendants.

Cordelia then takes leave of Goneril and Regan, saying she knows their faults, but hopes that they will live up to the love they have declared. Cordelia and France leave. Left alone, Goneril observes that Lear’s old age is “full of changes” (334) and that he showed “poor judgment” (337) casting off Cordelia. Regan agrees the “infirmity of his age” (339) is to blame for his error. Goneril says that in these “infirm and choleric years” (345) they cannot permit their father to exercise any real authority.

## Act 1 Scene 2

**Edmund** stands alone on stage, criticizing the injustice of the laws and customs that deprive him of all legal rights just because he was born out of wedlock. Therefore, Edmund says, rather than law he worships “Nature” (1.2.1). Then, holding up a letter he has forged, Edmund explains to the audience that he is plotting to steal the land of his half-brother, “legitimate **Edgar**” (1.2.17), by winning all his father, Gloucester’s, affection.

As **Gloucester** returns from Lear’s court, baffled by the events there, Edmund conspicuously hides the letter in his pocket. When Gloucester asks what it is, Edmund replies “no news [...] nothing” (1.2.31-3). Gloucester cheerfully demands to see it: “the quality of nothing hath not such need to hide itself [...] if it be nothing, I shall not need spectacles” (1.2.35-7).

Feigning hesitation, Edmund hands over the letter, explaining that Edgar sent it to him. Gloucester reads it aloud. The letter argues against the “aged tyranny” (1.2.53) that keeps sons enslaved to fathers past their prime. It goes on to hint that if Edmund will help Edgar dispose of Gloucester, Edgar will grant the bastard half of his legitimate wealth. Edmund adds that Edgar has often said that, with “sons at perfect age and fathers declined” (76-7), sons should take care of fathers as their wards.

*Lear invokes the heavens as a symbol of order and justice for the first of many times throughout the play. Kent, meanwhile, shows a personal devotion to Lear that is so strong that he is willing to step outside of the usual political order (i.e., the rules of the court) in order to try to protect his king. More insightful than Lear, Kent knows that dividing the kingdom is a bad idea; he also sees Goneril and Regan for the opportunists they are.*

*Burgundy’s reaction to Lear’s declaration reflects that authority and order, political and economic calculations, also govern marriage.*

*France, however, like Cordelia herself, seems to have private, purer motivations.*

*Cruelly criticizing their father’s senility, the sisters show their true colors for the first time, foreshadowing all the abuses that they will soon wreak on him due to his age. Like Kent, they also describe what Lear has done as an error. But they, unlike Kent, plan to take advantage of it, and show more interest in power than in the love they owe their father simply because he is their father.*

*Edmund, criticizing official legal order as unjust, decides to follow a more brutal “win or lose” natural order instead. At this point, a modern reader might be sympathetic to Edmund: it’s not his fault he was born out of wedlock. The Edmund/Edgar sibling rivalry for paternal favor mirrors that between Lear’s daughters.*

*The word, “nothing,” repeated by Cordelia and Lear throughout 1.1., continues its echo here. Quickly falling for Edmund’s tricks to turn him against his legitimate son, Gloucester displays a shortsightedness that matches Lear’s own misjudgment of his daughter’s.*

*In his forged letter, Edmund uses the kinds of criticisms of age that Goneril and Regan cited at the end of 1.1.—and which, indeed, motivated Lear to give up his own power—to play on Gloucester’s own anxieties and turn him against his other son.*

As Gloucester grows enraged, Edmund pretends that he would like to urge moderation: he offers to approach Edgar about the matter, while Gloucester, in hiding, can watch. Gloucester agrees, saying that he would give up everything he has to know whether or not Edgar is actually so untrue to the “father that so tenderly and entirely loves him” (101-2). He adds that he has recently observed disorder in the skies that predicts all the chaos that has happened with Lear, **Cordelia, Kent**, and now him: “these late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us [...] we have seen the best of our time” (109-19).

After Gloucester has exited, Edmund mocks his father’s belief in astrology: it is “excellent foppery,” he says that when people suffer ill fortune, usually because of their own dumb behavior, they then blame “the sun, the moon, and stars” (125-8). Seeing Edgar, who has just then wandered in, Edmund briefly takes up the subject with him. Edgar is surprised at his brother’s sudden interest in astronomy.

Then Edmund cuts to the chase, asking Edgar if he knows how he has offended Gloucester, who, Edmund reports, is enraged at his legitimate son. Edgar reacts with disbelief: “some villain hath done me wrong” (1.2.172). Replying that that’s precisely what he fears, Edmund tells Edgar to go hide in Edmund’s rooms, and advises Edgar that if he leaves his hiding place to make sure to carry a weapon to protect himself. Edmund promises to bring Edgar more news soon. Edgar rushes off.

Once Edmund is left alone, he observes to himself that his father is trusting and Edgar is such a good person that he would never suspect someone else of being anything other than good. Dealing with such “foolish honesty” (1.2.189), Edmund says, will make it easy for him to take, through cunning, the lands that he did not inherit by birth.

## Act 1 Scene 3

At **Goneril**’s palace, where **Lear** has been spending his first month after giving up power, **Goneril** complains to her steward, **Oswald**, about how badly her father, his Fool, and his knights have been behaving in her house. She instructs **Oswald** to tell Lear that she is sick and will not see him. She also instructs Oswald and the servants to serve him only with “weary negligence” (1.3.13), so that she has an opportunity to broach the subject with Lear.

Goneril adds that if Lear does not like what she says, he can go to **Regan**. She knows that she and her sister are of the same mind on this subject and will not be overruled by an “idle old man” (1.3.17). “Old fools are babes again and must be used/ With checks as flatteries” (20-1), she concludes, resolving to write to her sister.

## Act 1 Scene 4

**Kent** returns in the disguise of Caius, a commoner, to offer his services to **Lear**. Lear accepts. He sends **Kent** to fetch his **Fool**.

*Like Lear, Gloucester sees the heavens as both symbolizing and causing order or disorder in human affairs. He is incredulous that Edgar could violate the bonds of family. He thinks of these bonds not in Edmund’s legal or economic terms of inheritance (because such issues don’t affect him; he was a legitimate son of his father). Instead, he sees the bonds almost as a kind of rule of nature, embodying “tender” and complete emotional love.*

*Edmund and Edgar both dismiss their father’s faith in the heavens as being foolish and outdated (obliquely reflecting their age difference with their father, once again).*

*Edmund, however, does continue to create just the kind of familial discord that Gloucester was troubled to observe in Lear’s court and which, Gloucester predicted, were the result of the recent eclipses.*

*Edmund explains that he will exploit the blind faith that a parent has in his child and the assumed trust between siblings in order to outwit the typical legal order (whereby the legitimate child inherits everything).*

*Goneril shows her lack of personal regard for her father: she will use her new political power to flaunt the usual order of authority in a parent-child relationship. Strikingly, Lear has already become an agent of disorder, rather than the careful, controlling stage-manager who planned the divestment ceremony in 1.1.*

*Goneril speaks about the old, and how they should be subservient to the young, in the same terms that Edmund cited in his forged letter. For the time being, she show solidarity with her sister.*

*As in 1.1., Kent demonstrates his deep loyalty to Lear’s authority, which empowers him to go outside of the usual order of political business. Lear’s failure to recognize Kent in his disguise provides a dramatic metaphor for his failure to see his daughters’ true colors.*



Seeing **Oswald**, Lear attempts to summon him, but **Oswald** ignores him. Irritated, Lear sends a Knight to call Oswald back. The Knight returns with the message that Goneril is not well and that Oswald refuses to obey Lear—the Knight thinks that Lear has been “wronged” (66). Lear sends the Knight to fetch his Fool. Both Knight and Lear observe that since **Cordelia**’s departure for France the Fool has been melancholy and sad. Oswald enters again. Lear summons him and demands to know who he is. When Oswald replies, “my lady’s father” (1.4.79), Lear grows enraged, calling him a “dog,” “slave” and “cur” (81), and hitting him. Kent joins in tripping Oswald.

The Fool enters. He tells Lear to wear his (the Fool’s) coxcomb (or fool’s hat). He continues to tease Lear, who finally asks whether the Fool is calling him a Fool. The Fool replies that indeed he is: “all thy other titles thou has given away. That thou wast born with” (152-4). The Fool continues to mock Lear, saying that Lear is worth even less than he is: “I had rather be any kind of thing than a Fool. And yet I would not be thee [...] I am a Fool. Thou art nothing” (189-99).

At this point, **Goneril** storms on stage, irritated. She blows up at Lear, criticizing the Fool and all of Lear’s knights for disturbing the peace in her house. Goneril scolds Lear, telling him he must return to his usual self. Lear, incredulous, jokingly demands whether anyone present recognizes him (i.e., as their former king). “Who is it that can tell me who I am” (1.4.236) But Goneril cuts him off, demanding that he reduce the number of knights with him from 100 to 50. Lear flies into a rage cursing her as a detested kite” (or bird of prey; 1.4.274) and pleading the gods either make her infertile or to send her a “child of spleen” (296) so that she herself can know “how sharper than the serpent’s tooth it is/ to have a thankless child” (302-3). Lear and his knights exit, preparing to depart for **Regan**’s house. As they go, Lear tries, in vain, to stop crying at the loss of his daughter: “Old fond eyes,/ Beweep this cause again, I’ll pluck you out” (317-8). Lear shouts that when Regan hears of Goneril’s unkindness she’ll “flay” Goneril’s “wolvish visage” (325). He rushes out.

As Lear departs, **Albany** enters, tentatively criticizing the lack of hospitality that Goneril has shown to her father. Goneril cuts him off. She summons Oswald, double-checks that he has written a letter to Regan, as she instructed, and orders him to bring it to Regan quickly. Then she turns back to her husband, telling him that he is foolish to be so gentle. **Albany** remains dubious: “How far your eyes may pierce I cannot tell./ Striving to better, oft we mar what’s well” (368-9)

## Act 1 Scene 5

**Lear** explains what happened with **Goneril** to **Kent** (who is still disguised as Caus), and then sends Kent to deliver a letter to **Regan**. Assuring Lear that he will not sleep until he has delivered the message, Kent speeds off.

As he prepares to head for **Regan**’s castle himself, Lear is teased by his **Fool**, who predicts that Regan will be as like **Goneril** as “a crab [...] to a crab” (1.5.18). Meanwhile, Lear begins to rave, fearing that he will go mad at the “monster ingratitude” (1.5.39) that Goneril has shown him. As the Fool persists telling Lear “thou wouldst make a good Fool” (1.5.38), Lear begs: “Sweet heaven! Keep me in temper. I would not be mad!” (1.5.46).

*Lear’s demand to have Oswald acknowledge who he is—that is, the king (or former king)—draws attention to the fact that sight and recognition are part of authority and order, insofar as the leader and the subject must see and acknowledge each other for what they are if the system is to function. Lear’s treatment in Goneril’s house violates both the private respect she as a child owes her parent and the traditional order of official hospitality.*

*Traditionally, the Fool had the unique privilege of stepping outside of, and even inverting, the order of the court by criticizing the King. Speaking in mad, riddling language, the Fool makes insightful comments about Lear’s diminished condition. The Fool’s use of the word “nothing,” echoing Lear, Cordelia, and Gloucester, stresses that Lear has destroyed himself in the process of dividing his kingdom.*

*Lear seems to think that he was king by virtue of being himself, rather than by virtue of his power, and that therefore he could give up power but still demand respect. Now he is discovering that in giving up power he has given up his former identity. Lear curses Goneril using animal terms (“kite,” “serpent’s tooth,” “wolvish visage”). The implication in Lear’s use of these insults is that Goneril is an animal because, like an animal, she lacks the tender familial bonds of love that make humans unique. The fact that his curse focuses specifically on the idea that Goneril be without children—or, like him, have only thankless children—stresses how hurt and angered he is by his daughters’ ingratitude.*

*Although Albany is bound to Goneril through the laws and customs of marriage, and his political power depends on her, Albany’s clear vision of her cruelty to her father starts to drive him away from her. Their opposing viewpoints on the treatment of Lear, among other things, will break their marriage by play’s end.*

*Kent continues to show exemplary loyalty to Lear (though he has to maintain the disguise of Caus in order to do so).*

*The Fool also continues with the kinds of animal metaphors that Lear introduced in his curse of Goneril. Lear, meanwhile, having realizing that in giving up power he has lost his identity as king, calls out to the even higher power of heaven to help him, as he fears that in losing his identity he may fall into the chaos of madness.*

## Act 2 Scene 1

At Gloucester’s court, **Curran** mentions to **Edmund** that there are rumors of imminent war between **Cornwall** and **Albany**. Curran also mentions that Cornwall and **Regan** will be arriving to stay at Gloucester’s castle that very night. After Curran has exited, Edmund reflects that this development – both the coming war and the arrival of Cornwall – will help him in his schemes if he acts boldly and is just a bit lucky. He calls to **Edgar** to come out of his hiding spot.

**Edgar** enters. Edmund pretends to be frightened for Edgar’s safety. He tells Edgar that **Gloucester** has discovered his hiding spot, and that the Duke of Cornwall is also rushing to the castle out of anger with Edgar. He asks if Edgar has said anything publicly against Cornwall? Edgar denies doing any such thing, but just then they hear Gloucester approaching. Edmund apologizes, but says that to keep up good relations with Gloucester he must pretend to be fighting Edgar off. He tells Edgar to pretend to fight him as well. While shouting as if he and Edgar are fighting, he whispers to Edgar that he should flee. Edgar does, and exits. Once Edgar is gone, Edmund wounds himself in the arm in order to make the fight seem more real and himself seem more heroic.

Gloucester enters. Seeing that Edgar has ‘escaped,’ he sends servants after him, then questions Edmund, who confirms that Edgar attempted to persuade him to murder their father and, then, when Edmund opposed “his unnatural purpose” (2.1.59), attacked Edmund. Enraged, Gloucester declares that, by the authority of Cornwall, who is supposed to arrive that night, he will put a price on Edgar’s head. Gloucester further declares that Edgar is no longer his son (“I never got him” [2.1.90]), and that he will make the “loyal and natural” (2.1.98) Edmund heir to all his property.

Just after Gloucester makes this declaration, Cornwall and Regan arrive. They have already heard rumors of Edgar’s attempted murder of his father. Gloucester confirms to them that his “old heart is cracked” (1.2.106). Cornwall praises Edmund for having “shown [his] father/ a childlike office” (122-3) and takes him into his service; Edmund gratefully accepts.

Regan then explains to Gloucester why she and Cornwall have come. They have been informed, via letters from both her father and sister, of differences between them. They hoped to seek Gloucester’s counsel as their “good old friend” [1.2.146] and thought, in any case, that it was best to handle the matter while not at home. Gloucester welcomes them and says he will be happy to advise.

## Act 2 Scene 2

Outside Gloucester’s castle, **Kent** and **Oswald** run into each other, waiting for responses to the letters that they brought **Regan** (from Lear and **Goneril**, respectively). Kent picks a fight with **Oswald**, calling him a “son and heir of a mongrel bitch” (2.2.22) and reminding him who he is: two days ago, Kent says, he tripped Oswald at Goneril’s castle.

Hearing the ruckus, **Edmund**, **Cornwall**, **Regan**, **Gloucester**, and his servants, enter, and demand to know what is going on. Oswald explains that Kent, an “ancient ruffian” (2.2.63), started the quarrel and that he has spared him only because of “his gray beard” (64). Continuing to abuse Oswald, Kent further insults Regan, Cornwall, and Gloucester by adding that he has “seen better faces in [his] time than [those] before [him] at this instant” (97-9).

*Paralleling the exchange between Gloucester and Kent at the beginning of 1.1, Curran’s rumors of war indicate the coming dissolution of the kingdom and the breakdown of order. But for Edmund, who was born outside the law and now seeks to create disorder everywhere, these developments are good news.*

*Edmund dupes Edgar as easily as he has mislead Gloucester. Through his trickery he makes Edgar look guilty and himself look like a hero, and turns on its head the usual emotional bond between father and son as well as the usual legal bond between father and legitimate son.*

*Staging the entire encounter for the purpose of misleading Gloucester, Edmund has provided yet another instance of manipulating vision in order to produce blindness. Entirely misreading his two sons, Gloucester falls for it and uses his authority to reverse the usual legal order, preferring the illegitimate to the legitimate.*

*Yet, despite his definitive declaration, Gloucester, like Lear in 1.1 and 1.4, is clearly deeply emotionally affected by losing his emotional bond to his legal son—particularly given his old age. Cornwall, meanwhile, praises just the sort of parental respect that neither he nor Regan are going to show to Lear.*

*Despite how badly shaken and heartbroken he is by the loss of Edgar, Gloucester smoothly fulfills his duty, performing his role as host. Although Goneril and Regan have criticized Lear for his senility (1.1), here Regan at least suggests that she respects Gloucester’s potential wisdom.*

*Continuing to demonstrate his loyalty to Lear, insulting Oswald as an animal, Kent further shows how the discord brewing at the highest level of government carries down to the level of bickering servants.*

*Echoing the abuse that Goneril and Regan used against Lear, and which Edmund cited to upset Gloucester, Oswald shows that old age can be a liability for commoners or servants as well as royals and aristocrats. Kent stresses that he is able to see through Cornwall and Regan to the corruption in their hearts.*

Cornwall orders that Kent be put in the stocks until noon, in order to learn some manners. Kent replies that he is “too old to learn” (2.2.138). Regan lengthens his sentence from noon until the following morning. Kent is shocked: he says, if he were Lear’s dog, Regan would be wrong to abuse him in this way. However, Cornwall and Regan are firm. Gloucester, too, is perturbed and seeks to console Kent; but both know that Cornwall will not reverse his command.

*As Gloucester knows, Cornwall and Regan are breaking the rules of hospitality as well as the respect they should show to Lear as a father and former kin by punishing his messenger in this way.*



Left alone on stage, Kent takes out a letter, which, he explains to the audience, is from **Cordelia**. “Nothing almost sees miracles but misery” (180-1). The letter says that Cordelia has been informed of the steps Kent has taken, disguising himself, and will in time return to remedy the trouble in Lear’s England.

*Cordelia’s letter to Kent provides the first sign that there are forces working to restore justice and order in England—and particularly that not all family-feeling between children and parents is lost.*



## Act 2 Scene 3

In a soliloquy, **Edgar** explains that he escaped the “hunt” (2.3.3) sent after him by hiding in the hollow of a tree. Now that nowhere is safe for him he intends to disguise himself in the “basest and most poorest shape/ that ever penury in contempt of man/ brought near to beast” (7-9)—that is, as a “Bedlam beggar,” or madman escaped from an asylum—and give up his own identity: “‘Edgar I nothing am” (21).

*Transforming his outward appearance into that of a nearly animal, naked madman, Edgar seeks to escape the unjust (or blind and misled) workings of the law. Like Lear (whom the Fool calls “nothing” in 1.4), Edgar annihilates his own identity. However, Edgar does so knowingly and purposefully, and in doing so is able to pretend madness without actually going mad, while Lear did so in error, and is therefore slipping into actual madness.*



## Act 2 Scene 4

**Lear**, his **Fool**, a Gentleman, and his other followers arrive at **Gloucester**’s castle. Confused not to have found **Regan** at home, and not to have been informed of her departure, Lear grows infuriated when he sees **Kent** in the stocks, demanding to know who put him there. **Kent** explains that **Regan** and **Cornwall** themselves are responsible. Lear storms off into the palace to find them. While he is away, Kent asks why Lear has so few attendants with him. The Fool mocks Kent for asking such a stupid question.

*Lear comes closer to the brink of madness upon seeing his messenger abused by his own other daughter—particularly as, in the order of the court, such an act is a direct insult to Lear himself.*



Lear returns with Gloucester, in disbelief, as Gloucester has explained to him that Cornwall and Regan have been informed of Lear’s arrival but decline to see him. Lear exclaims: “My breath and blood!” (116-7). As he attempts to calm himself, Gloucester returns inside. Finally, Gloucester persuades Cornwall and Regan to come out with him.

*Regan’s initial refusal to see Lear parallels Goneril’s coldness to him in 1.4. Lear is shocked that his child, bound to him not only by her legal inheritance but in her (animal) body of “breath and blood” would insult him in this way.*



Having freed Kent from the stocks, Cornwall and Regan receive Lear. Lear explains his grievances against **Goneril**. However, Regan takes her sister’s side: “O sir, you are old.” (165). Insisting that he should be ruled by someone who “discerns [his] state” (168) better than he can, Regan encourages Lear to return to Goneril’s house and ask for her forgiveness. Lear is incredulous: what should he do, apologize for his age? As Cornwall joins in reproaching Lear, Lear curses Goneril—insisting, however, that he will never curse Regan in this manner because she knows better what the “offices of nature, bond of childhood” (202) are.

*When Regan reveals herself as having just as little regard for both her father’s age and the responsibilities following from the “bond of childhood” as Goneril exhibited in 1.4, the extent of Lear’s misjudgment (and blindness) in 1.1 becomes increasingly clear.*



**Oswald** appears, announcing Goneril’s arrival. Continuing to rave with displeasure at Kent’s having been put in the stocks, Lear asks the gods to take his side and to help preserve his sanity. When Goneril herself shows up, she defends her behavior; Regan tells Lear to accept Goneril’s terms, dismissing half of his hundred men and return to Goneril. Lear says that he would rather “abjure all roofs, and choose [...] to be a comrade with the wolf and owl” (241-3). Goneril says coldly that the decision is up to him.

*Lear’s invoking of the heavens to preserve his sanity explicitly opposes the order of the stars and the gods to the disorder taking place on earth. When Lear further states that he would rather revert to the state of an animal without shelter (“comrade with the wolf and owl”) he suggests that perhaps nature has more intrinsic justice than family bonds of law or affection.*



Lear begs Goneril not to drive him mad. She can wait; he will be patient and stay with Regan, with his hundred knights. Regan, however, interjects that he should not make this assumption. Indeed, she thinks it is unsafe for him to keep as many as fifty followers in her household; she will allow him twenty-five. Responding that “wicked creatures yet do look well-favored/ when others are more wicked” (294-5), Lear throws himself back on Goneril: now, however, she says she does not understand why he needs twenty-five, ten, or five in a household where she has so many servants that she will tell to serve him. In fact, Regan questions why he even needs one.

*As they bring down the numbers of knights that Lear is allowed to keep, without concern for their own ingratitude or injustice to their father, Regan and Goneril systematically reduce him to “nothing” (as the Fool called him in 1.4), stripping him of his remaining power and authority with shocking speed.*



Lear responds with outrage, saying that what he needs is not the point: “Allow not nature more than nature needs,/ Man’s life is cheap as beasts” (307-8). Begging for divine justice and for the gods to bear witness to how he has been wronged, he says he will have revenge on these “unnatural hags” (320): “I will do such things—/ What they are yet I know not, but they shall be/ The terrors of the earth!” (323-5). Once again, he insists that he will not weep, and fears that he will go mad. He exits with Kent and his Fool. Gloucester follows them.

*While his speech descends into self-interruption and incoherence (“I will do such things”) Lear makes the strong point that a life defined only by needs is no more than animal life. Calling his daughters “unnatural hags” he finally sees them as neither human nor animal; they have violated the laws of love, duty, and of nature itself.*



A storm is beginning. **Cornwall** encourages the group to come inside, but Regan points out that there is no space for all of Lear’s followers in Gloucester’s house. Regan and Goneril agree that they will receive Lear himself, but not one follower. Gloucester, returns, reporting that Lear is in a high rage, raving around outdoors. Goneril says that they will not beg him to stay, but Gloucester is worried about the storm—there is no shelter for miles. Pitiless, Regan says that Lear has earned whatever suffering he comes by and Cornwall urges Gloucester to shut the doors of his castle.

*By effectively throwing Lear out of the house into extreme, dangerous natural conditions, Goneril and Regan reduce him to the animal state that he describes above (i.e., the state of need). Doing this in Gloucester’s palace, they effectively use their authority to violate the usual order of hospitality. In response, Lear begins to go fully mad.*



## Act 3 Scene 1

**Kent**, out looking for **Lear**, runs into a Gentleman. The Gentleman describes seeing Lear out in the storm, from which even fierce animals (“the cub drawn bear” [14] and “belly-pinched wolf” [15]) are hiding, with only the Fool to keep him company.

*The Gentleman’s language reminds us that the mad Lear’s daughters have driven him to the animal state of being subject to nature’s forces.*



Seeing that the Gentleman is on his side, Kent confides in him that there is division between **Albany** and **Cornwall**, which is still a secret. And he asks the Gentleman to go to Dover and report of the “unnatural and bemaddening sorrow” (3.1.42) to which the King has been subjected. Although he does not reveal his real identity, he gives the Gentleman his purse, containing a ring, which he should show **Cordelia** who will be at Dover. Kent says she will recognize it.

*Kent is wise to the division and disorder already mounting among the British. He hopes that the invading French force can take advantage of this division in order to restore a more legitimate authority in the British kingdom. He also alludes to the superior insight and recognition that exists between Cordelia and himself with the ring in his purse.*



## Act 3 Scene 2

**Lear** rages out in the storm, calling upon it to “crack nature’s molds” and destroy everything “that makes ingrateful man” (3.1.10-11), while the Fool urges him, in vain, to find shelter. “Here I stand your slave/ A poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man” (21-2), Lear raves. When **Kent** arrives on the scene, directing Lear to a hovel that he has found, Lear finally relents, remarking that “the art of our necessities is strange/ and can make vile things precious” (76-7). As they enter, the Fool predicts that they are at the beginning of an era in which the “realm of Albion” (i.e. England) will “come to great confusion” (98-9).

*No longer appealing to the divine or natural powers of the heavens to guarantee order, Lear calls upon the storm to produce maximum disorder, stripping the world of unjust human authority and pretenses and laying things bare as they are. He reveals himself in something like the animal terms of “unburdened crawl toward death” (1.1): “a poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man.”*



## Act 3 Scene 3

Back inside, **Gloucester** confides in **Edmund** that he does not like the “unnatural dealing” (3.3.2) that **Goneril** and **Regan** have shown to their father. Edmund agrees. Gloucester then tells Edmund that there is division between **Albany** and **Cornwall** and that he has received a letter with further information, too dangerous to be spoken, which will eventually bring **Lear** revenge. Gloucester asks Edmund to distract Cornwall while he sneaks off to aid Lear.

Once Gloucester has exited, Edmund informs the audience that he will immediately report everything that his father has told him to Cornwall, in the hopes that he himself will gain what his father loses: “the younger rises when the old doth fall” (3.3.25).

*Blind to the potential risk (and Edmund's machinations), Gloucester trusts completely in the wrong son, highlighting the parallels between his and Lear's situations. Gloucester anticipates that Cordelia and her French army will destroy Goneril and Regan and return justice and order.*

*But Edmund reveals that his father's trust in him is totally misguided, and in doing so suggests that the justice and order that Gloucester thinks Cordelia is going to bring back may not really exist at all.*

## Act 3 Scene 4

**Lear**, **Kent** and the Fool arrive at the hovel. Lear still insists that the “tempest in his mind” has taken “all feeling” from his senses beyond his anger and sadness at his daughter’s ingratitude. As the Fool goes inside the hovel, Lear pauses to reflect that he has spent too little time thinking about his poor subjects who were regularly exposed to such hardships. If powerful people spent more time thinking about such matters, he decides, they would be more generous with what they have, making the heavens more just.

The Fool darts back out, reporting that someone is in the hovel: a spirit named Poor Tom. **Edgar** emerges raving as if possessed by the “fiend,” or devil, in his Bedlam beggar disguise. Lear comments over and over that Edgar could only have been brought to this lowly state by “unkind” or “pelican daughters” (3.4.77; 81). Then he goes on to observe that Edgar would be better off dead than exposing his “uncovered body” (109) to the storm and that he has reduced himself to the state of an animal (as Edgar said was his plan in 2.3): “unaccommodated man is no more than such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art” (113-5).

**Gloucester** approaches with a torch. Failing to recognize the disguised and raving Edgar as his son, he leads Lear, Kent, Edgar, and the Fool to a house.

*As his daughters' violation of their duties to him, and the physically punishing experience of natural chaos in the form of the storm, drive Lear to madness, his reduced (nearly animal) state gives him a moment of insight into the lives of those less privileged—which he implies he lacked when he was king.*

*In Lear's eyes, Edgar, a madman wearing just the barest rags for clothes, offers a stark contrast to his unjust daughters, dressed in their furs and robes. This semi-animal, semi-human figure emerges from the natural chaos of the storm, and exists outside the usual social/legal order (remember, Edgar is fleeing justice: the price his own father has put upon his head).*

*Gloucester's failure to recognize his own child, echoing Lear's failure to recognize his long-faithful servant Kent, provides a literal emphasis to Lear's metaphorical “blindness” to the true qualities of his daughters.*

## Act 3 Scene 5

**Cornwall** enters with **Edmund**, carrying the letter reporting news of the invasion from France (which **Gloucester** mentioned to Edmund in 3.3). Edmund waffles, feigning remorse at having betrayed his father.

Granting Edmund the title of Earl of Gloucester, Cornwall then sends him to find his father and arrest him. Edmund assents, although he continues to lament a ‘sore conflict’ (3.5.23) between his duty and his blood. Cornwall reassures Edmund that he, Cornwall, will be Edmund’s “dearer father” (26) from here on.

*Edmund's handing over Gloucester as a traitor is an ultimate violation of the father-child bond.*

*Cornwall suggests that just as he can take on the traditional legal role of a father in granting a political title that would usually come from inheritance, he can also replace a biological father of flesh and blood. Incidentally, as he falls for Edmund's performance of hesitation about turning in Gloucester, he misjudges Edmund just as Gloucester and Edgar have before.*

## Act 3 Scene 6

Inside the house to which he has shown them, **Kent** thanks **Gloucester**, and then reports that **Lear** has gone entirely mad. Gloucester exits as Lear, the Fool, and **Edgar** enter, raving together. Lear has Edgar and the Fool sit down, announcing that they are the jury for an imaginary trial of the “she-foxes” (24) **Goneril** and **Regan**, which he persists carrying out as Kent entreats him to rest and Edgar remarks that he is finding it difficult to restrain his tears.

In the middle of the trial of Regan, Gloucester returns. Told once again by Kent that Lear’s “wits are gone” (92), Gloucester tells Kent that he has overheard a plot against Lear’s life. Gloucester then says he has arranged for Lear to be secretly transported to Dover in a litter. He asks Kent to help him get Lear on the litter. All exit except Edgar, who remains on stage. Briefly stepping out of the character of Poor Tom, Edgar expresses his deep pity for Lear, saying that he feels so badly for Lear that he can hardly feel his own pain. Yet he also remarks on the similarity between the two of them: “he chided as I fathered” (120). Then he exits as well.

## Act 3 Scene 7

**Cornwall** enters with **Regan**, **Goneril**, **Edmund** and servants. Handing Goneril the letter with news that the army of France has landed, and telling her to send it to her husband **Albany**, he sends servants to find **Gloucester**. Then Cornwall tells Edmund to leave, as the revenge he plans to take on the traitorous Gloucester is far too brutal for a son to behold. **Oswald** arrives to report that, thanks to Gloucester, **Lear** has been carried away to Dover.

Just then, Gloucester enters. Immediately Cornwall and Regan accuse him as a traitor. Regan even plucks a hair from his “white beard.” Gloucester reproaches them, saying that they are breaking the laws of hospitality by turning on their host. As they keep haranguing him, he gives up, noting that he, like a bear in a bear-baiting show, is “tied to th’ stake” and “must stand the course” (67). Gloucester tells Regan that he helped Lear escape because he could not bear to see how she and Goneril treated him.

Cornwall interjects, saying that Gloucester never will see such a thing. Cornwall ties Gloucester down and pulls out one of Gloucester’s eyes. He is preparing to pull out the second eye when one of his servants interjects. The servant pleads that Cornwall to stop this course of action. Cornwall, angered that the servant would dare to interrupt him, draws his sword. The two fight. Cornwall is seriously wounded. However, Regan takes a sword from a second servant and stabs the first in the back, killing him. Cornwall forces out Gloucester’s other eye, crying “out, vile jelly!” (101).

Blinded, Gloucester calls out to Edmund for help: “enkindle all sparks of nature/ to quit this horrid act” (105-6). Regan informs Gloucester that Edmund hates him, that it was Edmund himself who betrayed his father. Devastated, Gloucester realizes that he was misled regarding **Edgar**. He calls upon the gods to forgive him and to help Edgar prosper.

Wounded Cornwall and Regan leave Gloucester with the second and third servants, instructing them to throw him out of his house. The servants discuss among themselves how horrible they find Cornwall and Regan’s actions. Resolving to find “the Bedlam” (125), i.e. the disguised **Edgar**, to lead Gloucester to safety, they first fetch flax and egg whites to help stop the bleeding from Gloucester’s face.

*Carrying out the imaginary trial—which is almost like a mad parody of the ceremonial love-test Lear put his daughters to in the first scene of the play—Lear shows how far he has descended into madness. Ironically, in this hallucinated parallel trial he has better insight into the nature of the “she-foxes” (and what he now knows as their animal heartlessness) than he did in 1.1.*

*Like Kent, Gloucester shows himself willing to risk himself personally out of loyalty to Lear and what he perceives as right political order (Lear in power, allowed to maintain control) and familial order (Lear not subject to cruelty by his daughters). Although his father continues to misrecognize him, Edgar's moment of pain explicitly draws out the similarities between the Lear/ Cordelia and Gloucester/Edgar situations.*

*Cornwall and Regan's decision to turn on Gloucester, who is their host, highlights the destruction of custom and order in Britain. Cornwall's comment about how brutal his violence against Gloucester is a further expression of lawlessness and chaos.*

*Once caught, and as helpless as a show animal, Gloucester acknowledges that he has acted out of an inward sense of justice—of how both familial relations and political order should work. He could not bear to watch what was taking place. Plucking his white beard, Regan disrespects his age (whereas in 2.1 she had asked him for wise counsel).*

*Turning the language of vision and blindness that has been metaphorical up until this point brutally literal, Cornwall will transform Gloucester, who failed to see his son's true character, into a walking symbol of blindness. Cornwall's servant, however, still viscerally responds to an inward sense of order and balks at this injustice.*

*Ironically, only when he is literally blinded is Gloucester able to see the truth about his sons. His call to the gods to let Edgar prosper reflects his residual belief that the heavens are capable of guarding order and justice.*

*Throwing Gloucester out of his own house, Cornwall and Regan not only violate the laws of hospitality but continue the process of using their authority to disarrange the usual order of the kingdom. Yet the servants still understand what is right and just, and help their former lord.*



## Act 4 Scene 1

**Edgar**, disguised as Poor Tom, stands in the wind, reflecting that it is best to be lowly, because for the “lowest and most dejected thing of fortune” (4.1.3) things can only get better. Then, he sees an Old Man leading the blinded **Gloucester**, who keeps asking him to leave him to die: “I have no way and therefore want no eyes./ I stumbled when I saw” (19-20). Gloucester laments his misjudgment of Edgar and says how much he wants to meet his son once more: “Might I but live to see thee in my touch/ I’d say I had eyes again” (24-5). As the Old Man catches sight of Edgar, Edgar notes his foolishness for thinking of himself as “the lowest” before: “O gods, who is’t who can say ‘I am at the worst’?/ I am worse than e’er I was” (27-8).

The Old Man tells Gloucester that they had found Poor Tom. Gloucester notes that the previous night he saw such a mad beggar who “made [him] think man a worm” (37). He has **learned**, he says, about human lowliness: “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods;/ They kill us for their sport” (41-2). He still does not recognize that the “naked fellow” (46) is his son. Sending the Old Man who was leading him back to fetch some clothing for “Poor Tom” (who is naked), Gloucester offers Poor Tom all the money in his purse to take him to the cliffs at Dover (where he intends to commit suicide).

*Edgar’s realization, upon seeing his blinded father, that it is impossible to know when you are at the worst, because things can always get even worse, suggest that there is no limit to the potential of unjust power to produce destruction and suffering. Gloucester, meanwhile, in the face of his own errors and the awful brutality of the world, has given up on living except for a desire to meet his true son once more.*



*Gloucester, when he first saw Poor Tom, thought him to be as low as a worm. But now Gloucester realizes that all men are like worms in the eyes of the gods – mere playthings, to be killed for fun. In the face of the terrible things he has done and seen, Gloucester despairs and wants only to cease to exist.*



## Act 4 Scene 2

Having traveled from **Gloucester’s**—now **Edmund’s**—castle, **Goneril** and Edmund arrive at Goneril’s palace. **Oswald** emerges, reporting that **Albany** is “changed” (2.1.4) and that everything that should upset him pleases him. Goneril, irritated, tells Edmund that he should not meet Albany at this time. She gives Edmund a sign of her favor and kisses him. Edmund exits, swearing that he will remain faithful to her until death. After he has gone, she laments that her “fool” (i.e. her husband) “usurps [her] body” (35).

*Goneril, who has spurned the ties of duty between parent and child (and, indeed, sibling and sibling, allowing Cordelia to be taken away) now proceeds to disrespect and violate the bonds of love and duty connecting husband and wife.*



Albany enters and denounces Goneril (and **Regan**) in scathing terms for their mistreatment of their father: “Tigers, not daughters, what have you performed?” (49). Although Goneril tries to shut him up by calling him a coward, he persists, calling her a devil, and says that if Goneril were not a woman he would tear her to pieces.

*As Lear was forced to come to terms with his daughters’ cruelty, now Albany fully recognizes that of his wife. Like Lear (and Kent to Oswald), he describes her and Regan’s misdeeds in animal terms.*



However, a servant interrupts them, bursting in with news of Gloucester’s blinding and that **Cornwall** has died of the wound he received from **Albany**, who had not known of Gloucester’s blinding, cries out that Cornwall’s death is proof that the gods exist: “this shows you are above,/ you justicers” (95-6). Goneril, however, is worried that the widowed Regan will now seduce Edmund from her. She hurries off to answer the messenger’s letter.

*Albany, like Lear, still obviously sets some stock in divine justice and natural order. Goneril, however, is absorbed only with her own selfish and lustful concerns: her sexual desire for Edmund.*



Left alone with the Messenger, Albany asks whether Edmund is with Gloucester. The Messenger explains that it was Edmund who informed against him. Albany vows that he will thank Gloucester for his love toward **Lear** and will revenge his lost eyes. He summons the Messenger to give him more information.

*Like Kent and Gloucester before him, Albany is now willing to risk himself, making his purpose vengeance and the restoration of a just political authority and order.*



## Act 4 Scene 3

In the French war camp, **Kent** asks a Gentleman about **Cordelia’s** reaction to the letter that he sent in 3.1. The Gentleman reports that she was moved to deep pity for her father and rage against her sisters. Kent states that “the stars above us govern our conditions” (39), because there could be no other explanation for how siblings could be so different from each other.

*Kent, like Albany in 4.2, still has faith in the power of the heavens. However, he uses it to explain the (otherwise inexplicable) differences between Cordelia and her siblings, not to guarantee order.*



Kent then explains that **Lear** is in the camp and is occasionally sane. However, he adds, Lear refuses to see Cordelia out of shame at “his own unkindness” (51) and at having given her “dear rights to his dog-hearted daughters” (55). Kent asks the Gentleman to come with him to see Lear, explaining that he must remain in the strange disguise he has adopted for some time yet.

*Like Gloucester in 4.1, Lear has been moved by the extremity of his situation to see his children for what they are. For him, as for Gloucester, insight required a kind of blindness—here the metaphorical blindness of madness.*



## Act 4 Scene 4

**Cordelia**, attended by the Gentleman from 4.3 and a Doctor sends out a search party of one hundred soldiers for her father, who, she has heard, is raving “mad as the vexed sea” (4.4.2). She then promises the doctor that whoever cures **Lear** can have everything she owns. The doctor responds that, in order to be cured, the mad king needs rest.

*Clearly concerned for her father, and prepared to give up anything to restore him, Cordelia proves that she places utmost importance on her duties as a child, setting them before wealth or political power.*



A messenger enters with news that the British are marching on the French camp. Cordelia responds that she is aware, explaining that the whole purpose of France’s war on England is to avenge her father: “No blown ambition doeth our arms incite,/ But love, dear love, and our aged father’s right” (30-1).

*As the British army approaches, the face-off between the self-interested children (Edmund, Goneril, and Regan) and the selfless Cordelia comes to a head.*



## Act 4 Scene 5

Back at **Gloucester’s** former palace, widowed **Regan** questions **Oswald** about **Goneril** and **Edmund**. She pauses to explain that Edmund himself has gone to kill Gloucester—whose pitiful appearance, blinded and wandering, is turning the people against the British—and to also assess the power of the French army. Then, she resumes pestering Oswald, asking him to open the letter that he is carrying from Goneril to Edmund and let her read it. Oswald refuses, but Regan insists that he take the following news to Goneril: **Cornwall** is dead, Edmund and Regan have spoken and concluded that it is more convenient for him to marry Regan than her sister.

*Presumably, Regan desires Edmund both as a sex-object and as a protector of her political power, now that she is a widow. Her persistent selfishness, which led her to abuse her father, will now erode her bond with her sister, with whom she has been united up to this point.*



Regan concludes by saying that she will show favor to whoever kills “that blind traitor” (41), Gloucester. Oswald responds that if he runs into him en route to Goneril, he will kill Gloucester. Then Oswald rushes off.

*Regan’s command to kill Gloucester reveals her real brutality. Oswald shows the blind willingness to obey in order to ingratiate himself with powerful people, exactly the trait for which Kent mocked him in 2.1.*



## Act 4 Scene 6

**Edgar**, now dressed as a peasant, pretends to lead **Gloucester** up a steep cliff, while in fact they are going over flat ground. At the “summit” Edgar gives a long speech on “how fearful and dizzy it is to cast one’s eyes” (17) over the edge. Taking his bait, Gloucester asks to be led to the cliff and, giving Edgar a purse with a valuable jewel in it, asks him to go away. Edgar does so, and says to himself that he is only playing with Gloucester’s despair in this way only in order to cure it.

*Showing exemplary dutifulness to his father, Edgar encourages him to believe one further illusion, which, however, should cure him of his woes. On stage, Edgar’s description of the huge hill where there is none sounds, however, almost as deluded as Lear’s mad ravings.*





Standing at the “edge” of the nonexistent cliff, Gloucester address the “mighty gods”: he is renouncing the world “in [their] sights” and that if he could bear their “great opposeless wills” any longer, he would live out his life (44-8). However, since he cannot, he asks them to bless Edgar. Then he “leaps”—falling to the ground in a faint. Edgar now pretends to be a new person who saw Gloucester leap from the “cliff,” and approaches Gloucester. Although Gloucester asks to be left alone, Edgar refuses: he keeps telling Gloucester that it is a miracle that he has survived his fall and persuades Gloucester that the creature that led him to the edge of the cliff was in fact the devil. “The clearest gods,” Edgar tells his father, “have preserved thee” (90-1).

Lear enters, raving and mad. Edgar cannot help but exclaim in grief at his appearance: “O, thou side-piercing sight!” (104). Hearing Lear, Gloucester recognizes his voice and calls out to him, asking to kiss the king’s hand. Lear, however, continues raving. **Cordelia’s** gentleman and a group of attendants enter. Spotting Lear, they entreat him to come to Cordelia, but he flees. As Cordelia’s men pursue Lear, Edgar asks one of the Gentleman for an update. He reports that the battle between the British forces of **Edmund**, **Goneril**, and **Regan** and the French force led by Cordelia is imminent.

Gloucester begs the “ever-gentle gods” (241) for forgiveness for his attempted suicide. Edgar approaches him. As he takes Gloucester’s hand, however, **Oswald** appears. Rejoicing to have spotted the “eyeless head” (254) of Gloucester—who Regan bid him to kill in 4.5—he draws his sword. Edgar intercedes, still in the persona of a peasant. Puzzled that a peasant would risk himself for a traitor, Oswald orders Edgar to stand down. They fight; Edgar kills Oswald. As he dies, he asks Edgar to take the money in his purse and bury him, and take the letters therein and deliver them to Edmund, Earl of Gloucester.

Edgar opens Oswald’s purse and reads the letter in it—which is from Goneril to Edmund, attempting to persuade him to murder **Albany** and marry her. Shocked, Edgar resolves to head off and find the “murderous lechers” (304) Edmund and Goneril, and eventually to reveal all to Albany. He approaches Gloucester, who has been privately grieving to himself, and, calling him “father,” takes his hand and leads him away.

## Act 4 Scene 7

Back in the French camp, **Cordelia** thanks **Kent** for all the service that he has shown her father and asks him to take off his peasant’s clothing. However, Kent insists, he must remain in disguise for a short while longer. Cordelia then asks the Doctor how her father is doing. The Doctor replies that he is asleep. Cordelia prays: “O, you kind gods,/ Cure this great breach in his abused nature” (16-7). The Doctor says that they will wake him up. Two servants enter, carrying **Lear** on a chair. The Doctor cues for music to be played. Cordelia kisses her father while commenting on her astonishment at her sisters’ cruelty in throwing Lear out into the storm: “Mine enemy’s dog,/ Though he had bit me, should have stood that night/ Against my fire” (42-4).

*Even though he has suffered so much, Gloucester still believes that a divine order exists. Speaking of the world in the gods’ “sights,” he further describes them as spectators who have the ultimate insight into human affairs. When Edgar approaches him after the “fall,” he, too, describes the gods as looking out for humans.*

*Raving mad, Lear fulfills his own worries before the storm and the prophecy of the Fool in 1.4 that he would become like a Fool playing word games. Edgar sees Lear’s madness as a symbol of the current dissolution of Britain. The imminent battle indicates that that dissolution, in one form or another, is about to come to a head.*

*Right after Gloucester has evoked the gods as spectators and protectors, Edgar is brave enough to stand up and defend his father, despite his father’s former misjudgment and mistreatment of him. In his selflessness, Edgar’s actions parallel Cordelia’s. The self-interested and ambitious Oswald, failing to recognize Edgar, is puzzled by his gesture of selfless devotion.*

*The coincidental confrontation with Oswald gives Edgar insight into all the machinations taking place between Lear’s children, as their personal allegiances fall apart in the political chaos they have created. But, meanwhile, Edgar has now revealed himself to his father, restoring that family bond.*

*Cordelia shows decency, and the faith in the gods, exhibited primarily by older characters in the play, such as Lear and Gloucester. Like Lear, too, she marvels at the unkindness of her sisters using an animal comparison (she would have been kinder to her enemy’s dog than they were to their own father). That she would be kind to an enemy’s dog reflects her innate and a-political sense of decency and justice.*

At the doctor’s urging and with music, Lear wakes up, at first unsure whether he is alive or dead. Cordelia asks him to look at her and give her his benediction. He fears he is “not in [his] perfect mind” (72) but believes that the woman in front of him is Cordelia. She assures him that she is and that he is in his own kingdom. Cordelia asks him to take a walk with her. Begging her to “forget and forgive,” because he is “old and foolish” (99), he accepts. They exit.

Kent remains on stage with a Gentleman. They discuss the state of the battle: **Edmund** is leading the British force. The Gentleman states that there is a rumor that Kent himself is with Edgar in Germany. After he has departed, Kent remarks that the outcome of his ruse, disguising himself, will depend on how the day’s battle is fought.

## Act 5 Scene 1

**Edmund**, leading the British forces with **Regan**, sends a messenger to **Albany** to confirm that Albany will send his forces to join theirs. Regan, meanwhile, pesters Edmund about whether or not he has ever slept with **Goneril**. Edmund tells Regan not to fear, just as Albany and Goneril approach. Goneril remarks to herself that she would rather lose the battle to the French than have Regan come between her and Edmund. Although Albany stresses that he is joining them against their common enemy of the French, not because he approves of their treatment of **Lear** and **Gloucester**, he and Goneril join Edmund and Regan. Edmund says he will join Albany shortly at his tent. Regan forces Goneril to walk off with her.

As the others depart, Edgar, still in disguise as a beggar, approaches Albany. Edgar gives Albany the letter from Goneril to Edmund that he intercepted from **Oswald**, and tells Albany to read it before the battle. Then, Edgar says, if the British side wins, Albany must have a herald sound a trumpet and Edgar will appear again. Edgar exits. Just as Albany is starting to read, Edmund appears and hands him a report describing the strength of the French army. Albany takes it and exits, hurriedly.

Alone on stage, Edmund explains that he has sworn his love to both Goneril and Regan and muses about which it would be more convenient for him to marry. Resolving to leave that problem for the time being, he further reveals that, if the British are victorious, although Albany wishes to spare Lear and **Cordelia**, he never will.

## Act 5 Scene 2

Edgar leads **Gloucester** to the shade of a tree, so that he can rest there during the battle. Then Edgar leaves his father, assuring that if he ever returns again, he will bring him comfort. He exits. After the sound of an alarm signaling a retreat, Edgar appears onstage again. He reports that the French forces have lost and **Lear** and **Cordelia** have been taken prisoner. Gloucester says that he would like to die and rot on the spot, but Edgar insists on leading him along.

*Upon first waking up, unsure of his state, Lear is reluctant to trust the senses, which have so misled him—both when he misjudged his children and in his madness. The reunion between Lear and Cordelia joyfully restores the family bond trampled on everywhere else in the play up to this point.*

*The Gentleman’s failure to recognize Kent, however, reminds the audience that many of the misrecognitions and blind-nesses of the play have yet to be resolved as the conflict comes to a head*

*Goneril’s obsessive jealousy of Edmund, and Regan’s suspicion of Goneril, show the accelerating decay of their relationship and alliance. Albany, meanwhile, stresses that he is only temporarily suspending his principles voiced in 4.2 for the sake of maintaining the integrity of the British kingdoms. (He has not changed in his disapproval of the “tiger daughters.”)*

*By delivering the letter to Albany, Edgar will grant Albany full insight into his wife’s character—and how her treachery will violate their marriage as well as her familial bonds. Edgar, meanwhile, is laying in place the plan to avenge himself on his brother.*

*Edmund’s deceit of the two sisters reveals that they, too, are capable of misjudging. Edmund’s malicious opportunism has an almost unlimited depth, even when compared to such treacherous people as Goneril and Regan.*

*Edgar shows care and tenderness for his father to the last. Meanwhile, Shakespeare sets the main action of the battle offstage—solving a dramatic problem (how to show a whole army on stage) but also maintaining focus on what is most important in the play—not war, but rather familial relationships.*

## Act 5 Scene 3

**Edmund** orders that the captured **Lear** and **Cordelia** be taken away to prison. Cordelia, speaking with Lear, wonders if they should ask to see **Goneril** and **Regan**. But Lear, delighted to be with Cordelia again, says no. He says that they will enjoy prison, where they can laugh and sing and tell old stories and mock the courtiers and their petty political gossip. He says that in prison they will live longer than “hordes” of rulers who will come and go on the whims of fortune. They exit. As they go, Edmund calls back a Captain, one of the soldiers accompanying them and hands him a letter, instructing him that if he kills Lear and Cordelia he will gain “noble fortunes” (35). The Captain says that he will do it.

**Albany**, Goneril, Regan and other soldiers enter to the sound of a flourish from a trumpet. Albany asks to have Lear and Cordelia brought to him so that they can be protected until they can be judged. Edmund explains that he has already sent them off. Albany reminds Edmund that he does not think of him as a brother, yet, but merely as an ally in the war. Regan interjects that she will give him herself and her property—all he requires to become Albany’s brother. Goneril interjects that Regan should not get ahead of herself, and the two descend into squabbling, which Regan cuts off only because she feels sick to her stomach. In brief, she tells Edmund that he can take her soldiers, prisoners, and inheritance; she here makes him her “lord and master” (92).

Albany cuts all off when he announces that he is placing Edmund, as well as Regan, under arrest for capital treason. Albany calls for his men to let the trumpet sound and throws down his glove: if no one appears to fight with Edmund, in order to avenge his treasons, Albany vows that he himself will do so. As this is going on, off to one side, Regan grows increasingly sick. Goneril remarks to herself that Regan had better be sick—Goneril herself has poisoned her out of jealousy over Edmund. Denying that he is a traitor, Edmund accepts the challenge, throwing down his glove, as Regan is helped to exit.

A herald reads a declaration calling for any man who would like to declare that Edmund is a traitor to come forth. He sounds the trumpet three times. On the third sounding, Edgar enters, armed (with his face covered). He refuses to identify himself: he has lost his name, he says, because of treason. Yet, he says, he is noble and will fight to prove Edmund a traitor. Edmund accepts. They fight. Edmund is wounded. When Edmund falls, Goneril becomes hysterical, cursing Edmund because he was not obligated by the laws of war to accept a challenge from an unknown assailant. Albany cuts her off, brandishing the letter that she wrote to Edmund, plotting against his life. Goneril shuts him up, reminding him that political power is hers, not his. She exits. Noting that she seems hysterical, Albany sends a soldier after her.

Encouraging the fallen Edmund to “exchange charity” (200) with him, Edgar then identifies himself, concluding that “the gods are just, and of our pleasant vices/ Make instruments to plague us” (204-5), observing that **Gloucester** was punished for his adultery with Edmund’s mother by the loss of his eyes. Edmund agrees: “the wheel is come full circle” (209). Edgar then explains everything that happened. He finishes by describing how he revealed himself to his father only right before leaving to fight Edmund. Gloucester, unable to bear his mixture of joy and grief, died on the spot. Edgar adds that **Kent** came upon them, as Gloucester was dying, and revealed himself as having served Lear in disguise, all this time.

*Reunited with Cordelia, Lear seems to see prison as offering the same kind of opportunity that he thought he would get by giving up power: an escape from political responsibility that will let him stand outside the usual rules of the court and be amused by it. Yet Lear’s idea is based on an assumption that, as tradition and custom dictates, Edmund will treat his prisoners well until they can stand trial. But Edmund cares only about power, not tradition, and he plays off the greed and ambition of others, such as the Captain, to corrupt them too.*

*Albany attempts to stand up and preserve the just order of law, which Edmund has just violated in his instructions to the Captain to kill Cordelia and Lear illegally. Meanwhile, personal conflict between Regan and Goneril pushes all onstage further toward disorder and destruction. Regan, boldly trying to seize Edmund from Goneril, completely abrogates their former sisterly bond.*

*While Albany is setting the stage for Edgar’s revenge on Edmund, he is also living up to his vow in 4.2 that he would avenge Lear’s suffering and Gloucester’s lost eyes. His gesture, undertaken out of a sense of desire to guarantee just order by his authority, takes place just as the subplot between Goneril and Regan comes to a head, breaking their sisterly bond forever.*

*Edgar initially obscures his identity because he feels he lost it, when he was disinherited by his father and forced to take on the vagrant character of Poor Tom. With Edgar’s rightful revenge on Edmund, the tides start to turn from the lowpoint (where Cordelia and the French lost their battle) back toward a restoration of just order in England. It is ironic that Edmund is killed because he himself is deceived by a disguise, and does not recognize his brother Edgar as his challenger.*

*Edgar, after revealing himself and ending the deception of his disguise, invokes the gods to explain that all the suffering that has happened is part of a just order that has now restored him to his rightful place. Edgar’s revelation of Kent’s identity furthers the process of unveilings that need to take place before all characters gain insight into everything that the audience (or the gods as divine spectators) have seen.*

As Edgar is wrapping up his story, a Gentleman runs in, crying for help, with a bloody knife. He exclaims that he has just taken it from the heart of Goneril—who, after confessing to having poisoned Regan, committed suicide. Edmund confesses that he had pledged to wed both, and that now all three will be united in death. Albany orders the Gentleman to bring in the bodies. As he speeds off to do so, Kent arrives asking to see Lear. Reminded, Albany asks Edmund where Lear and Cordelia can be found. Edmund, saying he would like to do some good before he dies, orders them to send someone quickly to the king and his daughter—for he has written instructions for his Captain to kill them (earlier in 5.3). Edmund gives the messenger-soldier his sword, as a sign of the authenticity of the message. He explains that he instructed his soldier to hang her, and make it look like suicide, as Albany orders that he be carried off.

At this moment, Lear enters with Cordelia’s body in his arms, crying: “Howl, howl, howl [...] she’s gone forever” (309-11). Although, he explains, half-mad, he killed the man who hanged her, he did so too late to save her. Then, seeing Kent, he asks, confused, who he is, noting that his “eyes are not o’ th’ best” (337). Kent identifies himself and explains that he has been serving Lear, in disguise as his servant Caius, all this time. Kent also reports to Lear that his two other daughters have committed suicide, but Lear does not seem to understand. Albany quiet Kent, pointing out that it is no use to attempt to explain such things to Lear now.

A messenger enters, reporting that Edmund is dead. Albany brushes off this “trifle” (359), then declares that, for the duration of Lear’s life, they will return absolute power to him and all will be rewarded or revenged upon, according to their behavior. Lear, however, descends into raving with grief over Cordelia: “Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,/ And thou no breath at all?” he asks. “Thou’lt come no more,/ Never, never, never, never never” (370-2). He faints with grief; as he does, Kent prays that Lear’s heart break, finally releasing him. Lear dies.

Albany orders that the corpses on stage be carried away, so that all can begin their general mourning. He then tells Kent and Edgar that they will rule over and rebuild Britain. Kent, however, says that he, too, must soon commit suicide in order to rejoin his master. Edgar announces that they all must learn the lessons of these sad times, “to speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.” He concludes: “The oldest have borne most. We that are young shall never see so much nor live so long” (393-4).

*However, before order can be restored, the destruction and annihilation that has been unfolding ever since Cordelia’s first speaking “nothing” has more to wreck in its path. With Edmund’s confession that he pledged himself to both Goneril and Regan, the audience and the other characters see what poisoned their allegiance as sisters. Edmund also reveals the danger that Lear and Cordelia have been in, all while Albany and others believed them to be under the protection of law, awaiting judgment...*

*Lear is so devastated to be confronted with the loss of his one loyal child—a loss that ultimately resulted from his own misjudging her at the beginning of the play—that he can hardly process the fact that his entire family has now been annihilated. His confusion upon seeing Kent revealed, like his confusion upon waking up and being reunited with Cordelia in 4.7, reminds the audience that he is half-mad.*

*Albany proves that he is truly just and dutiful toward his father in law, insofar as he is willing to return power to him. However, the destruction has clearly gone too far for such a restoration of the order of pre-divided Britain. Lear’s irrational raving about animals suggests a crazed sense of injustice; his full line of “nevers” suggests that he cannot see meaning in anything anymore, and he seems to embrace death as an escape.*

*Albany seeks to restore order to the kingdom by having Kent and Edgar, the only two characters remaining to have acted nobly through the play, take leadership of Britain. Kent’s sense of duty remains so strong, however, that he cannot live without Lear, his master. Yet that does leave Edgar, who’s inheritance was almost stolen from him by Edmund, to now rule over Britain. And Edgar, in taking power, pronounces an end to disguise or subterfuge in saying that all should speak what they feel and not what they think they should say, while also restoring a sense of order through his reverence for the older generation that was so abused by the younger, and which has now passed away.*

# Important Quotes

## Act 1 Quotes

"Although the last, not least." – Lear, 1.1.92

"Nothing will come of nothing." – Lear, 1.1.99

"Mend your speech a little,  
Lest it may mar your fortunes." – Lear, 1.1.103-4

"I want that glib and oily art  
To speak and purpose not." – Cordelia, 1.1.258-9

"Time shall unfold what plighted cunning hides." – Cordelia, 1.1.325

"Yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself." – Regan, 1.1.339-40

"Thou, Nature, art my goddess." – Edmund, 1.2.1

"Now, gods, stand up for bastards!" – Edmund, 1.2.21

"These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us." – Gloucester, 1.2.109-10

"As if we were villains on necessity; fools by heavenly compulsion." – Edmund, 1.2.128-9

"Old fools are babes again." – Goneril, 1.3.20

"Thou hast pared thy wit o' both sides and left nothing in the middle." – Fool, 1.4.191-2

"How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is  
To have a thankless child." – Lear, 1.4.302-3

## Act 2 Quotes

"My old heart is cracked; it's cracked." – Gloucester, 2.1.106

"Nothing almost sees miracles  
But misery." – Kent, 2.2.180-1

"I will preserve myself, and am bethought  
To take the basest and most poorest shape  
That ever penury in contempt of man  
Brought near to beast." – Edgar, 2.3.6-9

" 'Edgar' I nothing am." – Edgar, 2.3.21

"O sir, you are old.  
Nature I you stands on the very verge  
Of his confine." – Regan, 2.4.165-7

"O heavens  
If you do love old men, if your sweet sway  
Allow obedience, if you yourselves are old,  
Make it your cause. Send down and take my part." – Lear, 2.4.218-21

"O, reason not the need! Our basest beggars  
Are in the poorest thing superfluous.  
Allow not nature more than nature needs,  
Man's life is cheap as beast's." – Lear, 2.4.305-8

"Let not women's weapons, water drops,  
Stain my man's cheeks.  
[...]  
You think I'll weep.  
No, I'll not weep." – Lear, 2.4.319-25

## Act 3 Quotes

"Blow winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow!" – Lear, 3.2.1

"Here's a night pities neither wise men nor fools." – Fool, 3.2.14-5

"I am a man  
More sinned against than sinning." – Lear, 3.2.62-3

"My wits begin to turn." – Lear, 3.2.73

"The art of our necessities is strange  
And can make vile things precious." – Lear, 3.2.76-7

"The younger rises when the old doth fall." – Edmund, 3.3.25

"Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,  
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,  
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,  
Your looped and windowed raggedness defend you  
From seasons such as these? O I have taken  
Too little care of this." – Lear, 3.4.32-7

"Is man no more than this? [...] Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art." – Lear, 3.4.09-15

"I am almost mad myself  
[...]  
The grief hath crazed my wits." – Gloucester, 3.4.177-80

"Child Rowland to the dark tower came  
His word was still 'Fie, foh, and fum,  
I smell the blood of a British man.'" – Edgar, 3.4.195-7

"Thou shalt find a dearer father in my love." – Cornwall, 3.5.25-6

"All the power of his wits have given way to his impatience." – Kent, 3.6.4-5

"Pluck out his eyes." – Goneril, 3.7.6

"Upon these eyes of thine I'll set my foot." – Cornwall, 3.7.81

"Out, vile jelly!" – Cornwall, 3.7.101

## Act 4 Quotes

"The worst is not  
So long as we can say 'This is the worst.'" – Edgar, 4.1.30-1

"The nature which contemns its origin  
Cannot be bordered certain in itself." – Albany, 4.2.41-2

"Patience and sorrow strove  
Who should express her goodliest." – Gentleman (of Cordelia), 4.3.19-20

"It is the stars.  
The stars above us govern our conditions." – Kent, 38-9

"How fearful  
And dizzy 'tis to cast one's eyes so low!  
[...]  
I'll look no more  
Lest my brain turn and the deficient sight  
Topple down headlong." – Edgar, 4.6.16-29

"Why I do trifle thus with his despair  
Is done to cure it." – Edgar, 4.6.342-3

"Alack, I have no eyes." – Gloucester, 4.6.74

"O, thou side-piercing sight!" – Edgar, 4.6.104

"Nature's above art in that respect." – Lear, 4.6.105

"Gloucester: Oh let me kiss that hand!  
Lear: Let me wipe it first; it smells of mortality." – 4.6.147-8

"O ruined piece of nature! This great world  
Shall so wear out to naught." – Gloucester, 4.6.149-50

"A man may see how this world goes with no eyes." – Lear, 4.6.165-6

"I am a very foolish, fond old man." – Lear, 4.7.69

"You must bear with me.  
Pray you now, forget and forgive." – Lear, 4.7.97-8

## Act 5 Quotes

"No, no, no, no. Come, let's away to prison.  
We two alone will sing like birds in the cage." – Lear, 5.3. 9-10

"Know my name is lost,  
By treason's tooth bare-gnawn and canker-bit." – Edgar, 5.3.145-6

"Howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones!  
Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so  
That heaven's vault should crack. She's gone forever." – Lear, 5.3.308-10

"Is this the promised end?" – Kent, 5.3.316

"No, no, no life?  
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,  
And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,  
Never, never, never, never, never." – Lear, 5.3.369-72

"Vex not his ghost. O, let him pass! He hates him  
That would upon the rack of this tough world  
Stretch him out longer." – Kent, 5.3.380-2

"The oldest hath borne most; we that are young  
Shall never see so much nor live so long." – Albany, 5.3.394-5