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Background

King Lear, a stubborn and proud old man, decides to divide his kingdom among his three daughters. He'll give the largest share to the one who loves him most. Unable to tell the difference between flattery and sincere love, he banishes his youngest daughter, the honest Cordelia. He divides the kingdom between Goneril and Regan. These two “gilded serpents” stop pretending affection. They work together to strip him of every possession, no longer pretending any affection. Lear slowly goes mad, but in his lowest state he begins to know himself as a human being.

Like Lear, Gloucester is also blind to the evil he has fathered—in his illegitimate son Edmund. He sees the truth only after he has been literally blinded by his enemies and saved from despair and suicide by his son Edgar. Evil does its worst to both Lear and Gloucester—but the positive result of their physical destruction is spiritual renewal.



—Cast of Characters—



LEAR: King of Britain

KING OF FRANCE: one of Cordelia's suitors

GONERIL: Lear's eldest daughter

DUKE OF ALBANY: Goneril's husband

REGAN: Lear's second daughter

DUKE OF CORNWALL: Regan's husband

CORDELIA: Lear's youngest daughter

DUKE OF BURGUNDY: one of Cordelia's suitors

EARL OF KENT: loyal member of Lear's court

EARL OF GLOUCESTER: loyal member of Lear's court

EDGAR: Gloucester's elder son, later disguised as
Poor Tom, a ragged beggar

EDMUND: Gloucester's younger, illegitimate son

OSWALD: Goneril's steward

CURAN: Gloucester's servant

OLD MAN: Gloucester's tenant

DOCTOR

FOOL: Lear's jester

**KNIGHTS, OFFICERS, MESSENGERS, SOLDIERS, SERVANTS,
and ATTENDANTS**



When the Duke of Kent objects to his rash decision, Lear calls him a traitor and banishes him, too. Then the Duke of Burgundy, who's been engaged to Cordelia, decides that he won't marry her without her inheritance. The King of France, who is also in attendance, takes advantage of this opportunity and offers to marry Cordelia himself. When he and Cordelia depart, Regan and Goneril discuss the king's irrational behavior and begin to plot against him.

In the meantime, jealous Edmund plots to destroy the reputation of his brother Edgar, Gloucester's legitimate son, while the banished Kent disguises himself in order to be hired as a servant in Lear's court, where he will try to protect the king's interests. As the act concludes, Lear's fool warns him of his jeopardy as Goneril and Regan begin to reveal their truly evil intentions toward their father.



Scene 1

England. A room of state in King Lear's palace. **Kent**, **Gloucester**, and **Edmund** enter.

KENT: I thought the king loved the Duke of Albany more than the Duke of Cornwall.

GLOUCESTER: Now that he has divided his kingdom, it's not clear which of the dukes he values most. Their shares are so equal that neither one would prefer the other's.

KENT (*indicating Edmund*): Isn't this your son, my lord?

GLOUCESTER: I fathered him, sir. I have so often blushed to acknowledge him that now I am hardened to it.

KENT: I cannot conceive why.

GLOUCESTER: Sir, this young fellow's mother could! So she got pregnant and had a son for her cradle before she had a husband for her bed. Do you see a fault?

KENT: I cannot wish the fault undone, the result of it being so handsome!





GLOUCESTER: But I have, sir, a legitimate son,
older than this one, though I don't favor
him because of that. Do you know this
noble gentleman, Edmund?

EDMUND: No, my lord.

GLOUCESTER (*introducing him formally*): The Lord of
Kent, and my honorable friend.

EDMUND: At your service, my lord.

(*The sound of trumpets is heard.*)

GLOUCESTER: The king is coming.

(*A **servant** enters, carrying a crown, followed by **King Lear, the Dukes of Cornwall and Albany, Goneril, Regan, Cordelia,** and **attendants.***)

LEAR: Bring in the lords of France and
Burgundy, Gloucester.

GLOUCESTER: I shall, my lord.

(***Gloucester** and **Edmund** exit.*)

LEAR: Meanwhile we shall reveal our plan.

Give me that map. (*Servants bring a map.*)

We have divided our kingdom into three parts.

We wish to shake off all care in our old age,

And to confer them on younger shoulders,



While we crawl toward death without burdens.
Tell me, my daughters, which of you
Shall we say loves us most?
Then we may be most generous where
Natural affection most deserves it. Goneril,
Our eldest child, speak first.

GONERIL: Sir, I love you more than I can say.
You are dearer than eyesight, space, and
liberty.
No less than life itself.

CORDELIA (*aside*): What shall Cordelia say? Just
love, and be silent . . .





LEAR (*indicating Goneril's dowry on the map*): From
Here to here, rich with shady forests,
Fertile plains, and teeming rivers,
We give you to rule forever. (*turning to Regan*)
What does our second daughter say? Speak.

REGAN: I want no other joy than
The happiness I find in your dear love.

CORDELIA (*aside*): Poor Cordelia, then!
But not really so, since I am sure my love is
Richer than my tongue can express.

LEAR: To you and your heirs, take this third
Of our fair kingdom. No less in space, value,
And pleasure than that given to Goneril.
(*turning to Cordelia*) Now, our joy, last-born
But not least—what can you say to attract
A third more valuable than your sisters?
Speak.

CORDELIA: Nothing, my lord.

LEAR: Nothing!

CORDELIA: Nothing.

LEAR: Nothing can come of nothing. Speak again.



CORDELIA: I cannot express what is in my heart.

I love your majesty as a daughter should.

No more, no less.

LEAR: What, what, Cordelia?

CORDELIA: My good lord,

You have fathered me, taught me, loved me.

I return those duties as I should.

I obey you, love you, and honor you most.

Why do my sisters have husbands

If they say all their love is for you?

I hope that when I marry, my husband

Has half my love, care, and duty.

LEAR: Do these words come from your heart?

CORDELIA: Yes, my good lord.

LEAR: So young, and so hardhearted?

CORDELIA: So young, my lord, and truthful.

LEAR: Let your truth then be your dowry!

By the sacred light of the sun, by all the stars

That govern our lives, I hereby disown you!

You are now a stranger to my heart and me.

Stay away forever, my former daughter.

KENT: Your majesty—

