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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 2—



**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**



# ACT 1

## Summary

As the play opens, the Earl of Gloucester, a loyal member of King Lear's court, introduces his illegitimate son Edmund to another member of the court, the Earl of Kent. As the men are speaking, trumpets announce the arrival of Lear, his daughters, and two of their husbands, the Duke of Albany and the Duke of Cornwall. Lear surprises them all by saying that he intends to divide his kingdom among his daughters, Regan, Goneril, and Cordelia. When he adds that he'll be "most generous" to the daughter who loves him most, Goneril and Regan make flattering speeches. Cordelia, however, straightforwardly says that she loves him "no more and no less than a daughter should." Lear takes this as an insult and banishes her from his kingdom.





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—

