

King Lear

Schools' synopsis by Rebecca Lenkiewicz

King Lear is old and has decided to give his power over to his three daughters so that he can live his last years untroubled. His eldest daughter, Goneril, is married to the Duke of Albany. Regan is next, her husband is the Duke of Cornwall. Cordelia is the youngest and is Lear's favourite. The King of France and the Duke of Burgundy are at court each hoping to marry her. Before the division of lands Lear asks his daughters who loves him most? Goneril and Regan praise him to the heights. But Cordelia has nothing to say. Lear tries to persuade her but she refuses to play this game. Lear is enraged: 'Nothing? Nothing will come of nothing.'

The Earl of Kent, Lear's loyal adviser, defends Cordelia. Lear banishes him. He must leave within ten days or die. There is no dowry to be had from marriage to Cordelia. Burgundy retracts his proposal. But the King of France steps forward and claims Cordelia. Lear storms out. The King of France and Cordelia leave the court. Goneril and Regan discuss their father, they must act carefully to gain power.

Although banished Kent is still loyal to the king and worries about his power hungry daughters. He disguises himself as a servant and calls himself 'Caius'. He works for Lear and defends his honour when the sisters or their servants are belittling the king.

The Earl of Gloucester is another of Lear's advisers. He has two sons. His eldest is Edgar who will inherit his title and wealth. Gloucester's younger son Edmund was born outside of marriage. Gloucester loves him but Edmund is still plagued by the fact that he is illegitimate, a "bastard", and will therefore inherit nothing. Edmund studies the stars and the constellations for prophesies. He shows his father a letter, supposedly written by Edgar. In which Edgar suggests the killing of their father. Gloucester does not realise that Edmund has faked the letter and is angry and puzzled and hurt. Edmund warns Edgar that he must leave or he will be killed. Edgar runs away. Edmund cuts himself and tells his father that Edgar did it to him. Edgar disguises himself as a beggar and calls himself 'Poor Tom'. He lives in a hovel on the heath and covers his naked body with mud and dirt.

King Lear, now powerless, tries to negotiate with his daughters how many of his knights he can bring with him to their two homes. Goneril and Regan question why he needs even one knight? Lear is outraged, fuming: 'O question not the need!'

Both daughters refuse to house his men. Lear is livid at their refusal. He travels with his Fool who keeps reminding him of how he abandoned his only truly loving daughter. Lear fears that he is losing his mind. He takes off his clothes and runs onto a heath in the rain. He shouts at the wind and challenges the storm and ignores Kent and his Fool who urge him to find shelter. They encounter Edgar in his naked muddy state and Lear feels close to him, both ragged, fragile in their minds. They spend time in a makeshift shelter where Lear imagines his daughters in court and his trial of them.

Gloucester arrives and wants to help Lear. Edmund tells Regan and Cornwall of his father's attempts to help him. Gloucester's allegiance to the King is seen as treachery. Regan and Cornwall tie Gloucester up. They torture him and put out his eyes.

Lear is taken secretly to Dover. Cordelia has landed there with a French army. The blinded Gloucester meets his son Edgar whilst wandering. Edgar is hugely distressed by his father's condition but disguises his grief and continues to be 'Poor Tom'. He leads his father to Dover. Gloucester wants to kill himself. Edgar leads him to what he describes as a cliff. It is really just flat beach. Gloucester throws himself off but survives as there was no real fall. Lear and Cordelia are wonderfully reconciled. She forgives him and he is so happy to be with her again. But now there is a battle and they are captured by Goneril and Regan's soldiers. Lear comforts Cordelia:
'We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage.'

Goneril and Regan are both in love with Edmund. He has promised himself to both women. Albany discovers this and accuses Edmund of treachery. An unknown visored knight challenges Edmund. They fight. Edmund is fatally wounded. The knight reveals himself to be Edgar.

Goneril poisons Regan and kills herself. Edmund is dying but repentant. He tries to stop his order to hang Cordelia. But it is too late. Lear enters with the dead Cordelia in his arms. His Fool too has been hanged. Lear holds Cordelia. He dies, broken. Edgar takes over power and breathes hope after so much despair.