

*King Lear*

**CHARACTER/ACT BREAKDOWN**

**KEY CHARACTERS:**

*Lear*, King of Britain

*The Fool*, Lear's confidant, entertainer

*Goneril*, Lear's eldest daughter

*Regan*, Lear's daughter

*Cordelia*, Lear's youngest daughter

*Duke of Albany*, Goneril's husband

*Duke of Cornwall*, Regan's husband

*Earl of Gloucester*, Lear's loyal friend

*Edgar*, Gloucester's son

*Edmund*, Gloucester's bastard son

*Earl of Kent*, Lear's loyal friend

**ACT I:**

The setting is Britain, in a mythical past, being ruled by a once beloved King Lear. He is however, in his twilight and fallen prey to an unsound mind. Lear decides to divide his inheritance according to which of his three daughters loves him the most.

Goneril guilds the lily with buckets of flattery, insincerely claiming to love him more than life itself. Regan outdoes her sister by claiming that she loves him so much that she forgoes all other pleasure. It works. The flattered Lear gives one third of his kingdom to each daughter...saving the best part for his favorite daughter, Cordelia.

The problem is that she can't work it the way her serpentine sisters can...she instead answers that she loves him as she should, but that she cannot give him all her love, or else she would have nothing left for a husband. In a rage, he

disinherits Cordelia and gives her share to be split between the other two daughters.

Kent tries to reason with Lear, but this only makes Lear angrier to the point that he banishes Kent.

At that moment, the King of France arrives...he doesn't seem to mind Cordelia's new banishment and agrees to marry her anyway.

Gloucester's eldest son, Edgar stands to inherit all...except, his half brother Edmund (a bastard, born out of wedlock from an affair of Gloucester's) has other ideas.

Edmund forges a letter that seems to be Edgar's writing. "Edgar" (really Edmund) urges Edmund to help Edgar kill their father so that they can get their hands on the inheritance immediately.

Gloucester falls for it and thinks his son Edgar is out to kill him.

Kent does not actually leave Britain...he is so true blue and worried about his king that he disguises himself and enters Lear's service. Lear's fool attends him as well, but he sees all...and that his master may be more foolish than he.

Lear suggests that each Regan and Goneril get half the kingdom and that he will live with each for one month at a time, attended by 100 knights. The daughters reject this and plot to strip him of everything he has.

Goneril whittles him down to half his attendants...this frightens and worries Lear.

He then decides he'll go stay with Regan instead...but Goneril has already written to sis, urging her to do the same. They plan to break him down slowly.

## **ACT II:**

Edgar is painfully, albeit sometimes foolishly honest. Edmund takes advantage of this trait in his half brother, and continues to plot against him. He warns Edgar that their father is out to get him and suggests that for his own safety, he run away. Edmund continues to play both sides...to a fault. He cuts himself with a sword and tells his father that the wound was made by Edgar's hand. Gloucester actually buys it and sends out a bulletin calling for Edgar's capture.

Regan and Cornwall visit Gloucester to avoid being home when Lear arrives to visit. Kent discovers a messenger between Goneril and Regan, and finds that the two sisters are plotting against Lear. Kent attacks the messenger, but is interrupted by Cornwall, who orders Kent to be put in the stocks...this is a punishment reserved for common thieves, not for attendants on the king.

Lear follows Regan to Gloucester's, only to find Kent in the stocks, about which he is enraged and demands his release. He complains about Goneril's mistreatment of him and asks Regan to take them in, which she refuses. Goneril

arrives and the daughters team up against him. They demand that he dismiss all his servants and attendants...this would leave him completely reliant upon them and very vulnerable. He refuses...

A storm is setting in and the night becomes wild outside...Lear and his fool withdraw into the stormy night.

### **ACT III:**

Kent learns that the King of France is landing an army in Britain to rescue Lear. He attempts to bring the news to Lear...but his age, feelings of betrayal and all of the mounting pressure are a bad combination and Lear cracks under it's weight. He rages against the storm...his fool stays close and true while Kent searches out shelter for them. A hovel is revealed and they hide away from the maelstrom...only to discover that Edgar (who is referring to himself as "poor Tom") is also residing in the hovel, and quite as mad as Lear seems to be. They are bonded by their crisis and the mad weather.

Crazy crazy crazy.

The next morning, Gloucester feels guilt for the mistreatment of his king...he sends Lear, Kent, and the fool to Dover where they will meet Cordelia and the French army. He fails to recognize his own son Edgar, however.

He confides in Edmund, whom he considers loyal.

Edmund betrays his father to Cornwall, who as a punishment to Gloucester, blinds him...Regan has a hand in this event as well.

A servant flips out about this horror and attacks Cornwall. Regan kills the servant, but not before the servant deals a fatal wound to Cornwall.

Regan shoves the now blind Gloucester out of his own home and tells him to find his own way to Dover.

### **ACT IV:**

Poor Tom, or Edgar, meets his father on the road...he agrees to lead the blind man to Dover. Gloucester now realizes the treachery of Edmund and that his true and loyal son is actually Edgar. Edgar doesn't reveal his real identity...yet.

Edmund has become the heart's desire of both Goneril and Regan.

Goneril's husband, Albany, doesn't like the cruel treatment that the sisters have inflicted on their father.

Then he hears about the blinding of Gloucester, and that makes him confront his wife. Goneril is angry because her husband is not as blood thirsty as she.

Regan is a widow, which means she is free to marry...this doesn't set well with Goneril.

In Dover, the French army and Cordelia prepare for attack. Kent brings Lear to her. Edgar brings Gloucester to Dover where they meet Lear, though he doesn't recognize them.

They also find a servant of Goneril's, whom Edgar kills...he discovers that the servant had a letter from her, entreating Edmund to kill her husband and marry her.

Edgar at last has the proof of Edmund's treachery.

### **ACT V:**

As Regan, Edmund and Goneril spin their web more and more tightly around themselves, Albany chooses to join armies with them to fight against the French. And they win.

Lear and Cordelia are taken prisoner and Edmund secretly gives the order to hang them.

Albany asks that they be brought before him, but Edmund refuses to comply, saying that it would be better to wait.

Regan is ready to marry Edmund, but is suddenly ill and must retire to her tent. Albany accuses Edmund to treason.

Edgar challenges Edmund to a duel (at last), and wins.

Goneril claims that the fight was not fair, but her husband shows her the letter that Edgar found which reveals her murderous plot against him. She storms off.

Edgar reveals himself to his dying brother and tells how their father died when he learned who Edgar really was.

A messenger enters and says that Regan and Goneril are dead. Regan had been poisoned by her sister. When she saw that Edmund was wounded, she ran off and killed herself.

After seeing the wreck he had caused, Edmund attempts to redeem himself somehow by sending a messenger to stop the secret murder of Lear and Cordelia.

Alas, too late...Cordelia is hanged.

Lear killed the hangman, and carries Cordelia's body onstage, finally dying with her.

Albany turns over Britain to Kent and Edgar, but Kent follows his master-killing himself-leaving Edgar in charge.