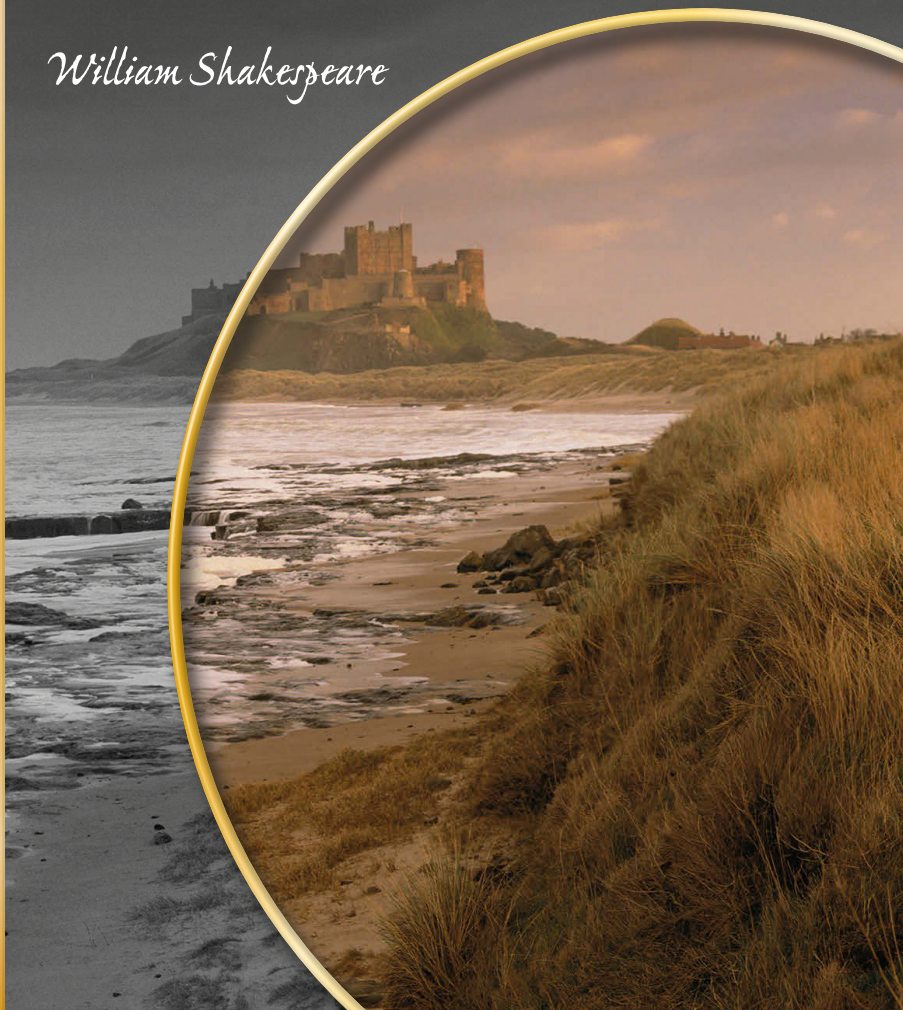
TIMELESS SHAKESPEARE

King Lear

William Shakespeare



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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**

ACT 1

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—

LEAR: Silence, Kent! I loved Cordelia most
And thought I would spend my final years
with her. Go, out of my sight!
My grave will be my only peace, since here
I take her father's love from her.
Cornwall and Albany, with my
Two daughters' dowries, add this third:

Let pride, which she calls truth, marry her!
I turn over to you my power, authority, and
All the ceremony that goes with kingship.
We shall live with you on alternate months,
Keeping the right to have 100 knights
Maintained at your expense.
We retain only the title and all the honors
due to a king.
Policy, taxation, and business matters,
Beloved sons, will be yours. To confirm this,
This crown is divided between you.

(The servant presents the crown to the dukes.)

KENT: Royal Lear, whom I have always
Honored as my king, loved as my father—
Kent must be rude when Lear is mad.
What are you doing, old man? Honor
demands plain talk when kings fall to folly.
Keep your kingdom,
And think again about your rash decision.
I'll stake my life on it—your youngest
daughter does not love you least.
Nor are they empty-hearted whose speeches
Contain no hollow flattery.

LEAR: Kent, on your life, say no more!

KENT: I do not fear losing my life when your
safety is the goal.

LEAR: Out of my sight!

KENT: See better, Lear, and let me—as ever—

Remain clear-sighted on your behalf.

LEAR: Hear me, traitor! Since you have tried
To make us break our vow—
Which we have never done before—hear this!
We give you five days to prepare yourself
For the troubles of the world.
On the sixth day, turn your hated back
Upon our kingdom. If you are seen here
On the tenth day—that moment is your death.
Away! By Jupiter, this will not be revoked!

KENT: Farewell, King. If this is what you want,
Freedom is elsewhere.
(to Cordelia) The gods protect you, maid.
Your thinking is right, and your words are true!
(to Regan and Goneril) May your deeds live up
to your fancy speeches.

*(**Kent** exits. Trumpets announce the entry of **Gloucester**, the **King of France**, the **Duke of Burgundy**, and their **attendants**.)*

LEAR: My Lord of Burgundy, we address you first.
You have been courting our daughter.
What is the *least* dowry you would require,
Without which you'd end your quest of
love?

BURGUNDY: Most royal majesty, I beg no more
Than your highness has already offered.

LEAR: When we loved her, we valued her more.
Now her price has fallen.
As she stands, she comes with our

Displeasure, and nothing more. No dowry.
If you want her, she is yours.

BURGUNDY *(upset)*: I don't know what to say.

LEAR: Will you take her or leave her?

BURGUNDY: Pardon me, royal sir,
Decisions cannot be made on such terms.

LEAR: Then leave her, sir, for I'm telling you
That's all she's worth. *(to France)* As for you,
great king, I would not risk our friendship
By marrying you to one I hate. So I beg you
To turn your affection in a worthier direction.

FRANCE: This is very strange! She was so precious
To you, the comfort of your old age.
Suddenly she has done a thing so monstrous
As to destroy all your affection? Your love
Must have been false, or her offense very
Great indeed. I could never believe that of her.

CORDELIA: I beg your majesty to make it known
That it is no vicious deed, murder, or evil
That has deprived me of your grace and favor.
Rather, it is because I lack
an eye for seeking favors and
such a tongue that I am glad not to have.

FRANCE: Is this all? A natural shyness that often
Keeps inner thoughts unspoken? My Lord
Of Burgundy, what do you say to the lady?
Love's not love when it is mixed with
concerns that miss the entire point.

Will you have her? She is a dowry in herself.

BURGUNDY *(to Lear)*: Royal king, just give
The dowry that you yourself proposed,
And I'll take Cordelia by the hand right now.

LEAR: I give nothing. I have sworn it.

BURGUNDY *(to Cordelia)*: I am sorry, then.
Losing a father has lost you a husband.

CORDELIA: Peace be with Burgundy!
Since he loves respectability and wealth
So much, I shall not be his wife.

FRANCE: Fairest Cordelia, you and your virtues
I here claim! If it is lawful, I will take up
What has been cast away. The gods! The gods!
It's strange that their cold neglect
Should inflame my love!
Let your penniless daughter be my queen.
Say farewell, Cordelia, though they are unkind,
You lose here to gain more elsewhere.

LEAR: Take her, France. We have no daughter,
Nor shall we ever see her face again. Go,
Without our grace, our love, or our blessing.
Come, noble Burgundy.

*(**Lear, Burgundy, Cornwall, Albany, Gloucester,** and **attendants** exit.)*

FRANCE: Say goodbye to your sisters.

CORDELIA: My father's jewels, in tears I leave you.
I know what you are, but as a sister, I hesitate

To name your faults. I leave our father to
Your so-called love, though
I would prefer a better place for him.

GONERIL: Try to make your husband happy.
He has taken you as a handout from fortune.
You deserve what you got.

CORDELIA: Time will reveal what deceit hides.
Those who conceal their faults are finally
shamed. May you prosper well!

FRANCE: Come, my fair Cordelia.

*(**France** and **Cordelia** exit.)*

GONERIL: Sister, we have mutual interests to
discuss. Our father will leave tonight.

REGAN: With *you*. Next month he'll stay with us.

GONERIL: You see how much he changes in his
old age! He always loved our sister most.
His poor judgment is clear
From the way he has now cast her off.

REGAN: It's because he's so old. But then,
He has always lacked self-control.

GONERIL: Even in his prime he was hotheaded.
So now we must expect to see
Not only his lifelong faults—but new ones
That come with age and infirmity.

REGAN: No doubt we can expect sudden whims
Such as Kent's banishment.

GONERIL: And there's the rude way he said

goodbye to France! Well, then, let's work
together on this. If our father continues
to exercise his authority so rashly,
he will be a problem to us.

REGAN: We must do something—and soon!

*(**Goneril** and **Regan** exit.)*

Scene 2

*A hall in the Earl of Gloucester's castle. **Edmund** enters, holding a letter.*

EDMUND *(to himself)*: Why should society
Limit my rights, just because I am
12 or 14 months younger than my brother?
And why—just because my father didn't
marry
My mother—am I considered inferior?
I am as smart and as good-looking as the son
Of any married woman. Legitimate Edgar,
I must have your inheritance! Our father
Loves me just as much as he loves you.
(waving the letter) If this letter succeeds
And my plan works, Edmund the illegitimate
Will beat Edgar the legitimate! I will prosper!

*(His father, the **Earl of Gloucester**, enters.)*

GLOUCESTER: Kent banished like that!
And France has left in anger!

TIMELESS SHAKESPEARE

King Lear

The king is weary. To get peace in his old age, he turns over his kingdom to his daughters. What does he get in return for his generosity? Betrayal, warfare…and madness.

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