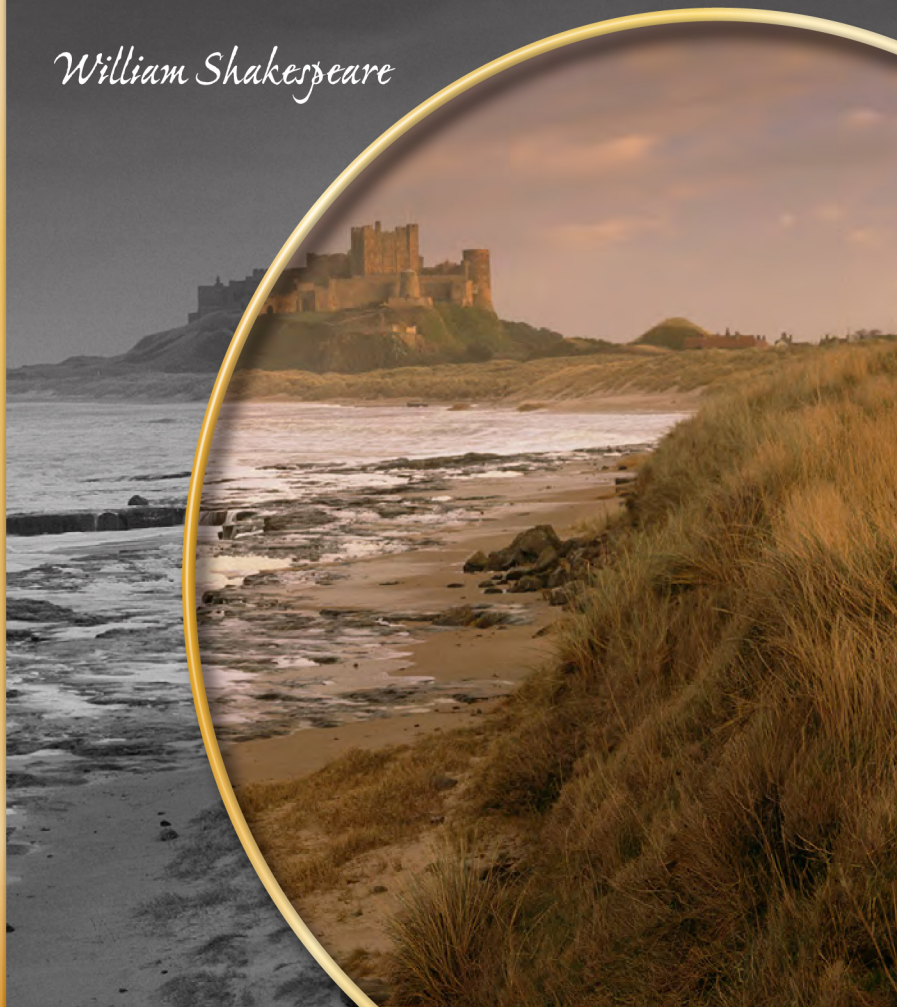


# King Lear

*William Shakespeare*

TIMELESS SHAKESPEARE



## – 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.