

**A Guide to
KING LEAR**

by William Shakespeare



Alistair McCallum

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Setting the scene

Shakespeare wrote *King Lear* in or around 1605. He was in his early forties, at the peak of his creative powers, and had established a formidable reputation. He was principal playwright for the King's Men, widely regarded as the best theatre company in England.

The basic story that Shakespeare used for *King Lear* – that of an old king who gives away his kingdom to his three daughters – was a well-known folk tale of the time, with roots in both history and mythology. It is likely that Shakespeare had acted in a play based on the same story – *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* – many years before. The author of this earlier work is not known. Shakespeare, as always, adapted and transformed his source materials, creating from the old legend a tragic masterpiece of astonishing power and intensity.

King Lear is set in the distant past, centuries before the birth of Christ. The world of this play is bleak and uncompromising; its characters are forced to make difficult choices, to confront burning questions, and to try to make sense of their universe. In response to suffering, malice and injustice, they appeal frequently to nature, but nature is indifferent; they call on the gods, but the gods are silent. In *King Lear*, human beings are, inescapably, responsible for their own fate. In the course of the play, this responsibility becomes painfully clear. There is a gradual movement towards self-knowledge, a realisation of people's dependence on one another, and an appreciation of the importance of honesty and compassion. But this understanding is gained at a terrible cost.

The language of *King Lear* is dense, difficult and impatient. It is bursting with references to the animal kingdom, to raw nature, and to physical cruelty. Concepts of justice, society, duty and loyalty are dissected mercilessly, and amid all this richness of language and thought the word 'nothing' echoes sombrely throughout the play.

"It is an immense play, immense in power and meaning and in the weight of tragic knowledge which it conveys. Both poetically and dramatically it goes as far as poetic drama can go."

David Daiches, *A Critical History of English Literature*

The division of the kingdom

Lear, King of Britain, is growing old.

He intends to divide his kingdom between his three daughters, Goneril, Regan and Cordelia. The daughters, along with their respective husbands, will each govern a third of the kingdom: Lear will remain King in title only.

Goneril is married to the Duke of Albany, and Regan to the Duke of Cornwall. Lear's youngest daughter, Cordelia, is unmarried; two suitors, the Duke of Burgundy and the King of France, are now in Lear's court.

Curtain up

An open secret

I, i

Two of Lear's councillors, the Earls of Gloucester and Kent, are discussing the division of the kingdom. Although they had expected the King to show a degree of favouritism one way or another, it now appears that Lear has been scrupulous in making each portion of the kingdom – or at least the two portions destined for his married daughters – equal in size and value.

Gloucester introduces Kent to his son, Edmund, who has been abroad for nine years. Edmund is an illegitimate son, but Gloucester is no longer embarrassed to admit the fact. If anything, Edmund's birth outside wedlock is a source of amusement rather than shame:

Gloucester: ... I have so often blush'd to acknowledge him,
that now I am braz'd¹ to't.

Kent: I cannot conceive you.

Gloucester: Sir, this young fellow's mother could; whereupon
she grew round-womb'd, and had, indeed, Sir, a son
for her cradle ere she had a husband for her bed.

¹ *brazened, hardened*

Gloucester also has a legitimate son, Edgar, who is a year or so older than his illegitimate brother. Gloucester is equally fond of both sons, he assures Kent, mentioning that Edmund is due to go abroad again shortly.

Lear's ceremony comes to grief

King Lear enters with his daughters, sons-in-law and attendants. He sends Gloucester out to bring in Cordelia's suitors, the King of France and the Duke of Burgundy: as well as Lear's public announcement of the division of the kingdom, this is to be the occasion on which Cordelia declares her choice of husband.

Lear then solemnly proclaims that he is relinquishing the government of the kingdom:

Lear: ... 'tis our fast¹ intent
To shake all cares and business from our age,
Conferring them on younger strengths, while we
Unburthen'd crawl toward death.

¹ *fixed, unalterable*

However, before making the final allocation of the three portions of land, Lear presents his daughters with a challenge. He wants each one to make a public declaration of her love for her father: although he has already decided in his own mind on the boundaries of the three portions, and who is to receive each one, he hints that the daughter who can convince him that she loves him the most will be treated more generously than her sisters.

Goneril, Lear's eldest daughter, is asked to speak first. She promptly makes a short, polished speech in which she declares her boundless love for her father:

Goneril: Sir, I love you more than word can wield the matter;
Dearer than eye-sight, space and liberty;
Beyond what can be valued rich or rare;
No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honour;
As much as child e'er lov'd ...

The speech is patently insincere, but it delights Lear. He shows her, on the map of Britain, the territory that will from now on belong to her and her husband Albany, and to their heirs, in perpetuity. He then calls on Regan to declare her love. Regan too produces a false, glib speech and Lear, gratified again, presents the third of the kingdom that will be ruled by her and her husband Cornwall.

It is now the turn of Cordelia, Lear's youngest daughter. She has been observing the proceedings with distaste, uncomfortable with her father's desire for flattery and her sisters' complicity. She does not wish to be a part of this shallow, dishonest display, and says so bluntly:

Lear: Now, our joy,
Although our last, and least;¹ to whose young love
The vines of France and milk of Burgundy
Strive to be interest'd;² what can you say to draw
A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.

Cordelia: Nothing, my lord.

Lear: Nothing?

Cordelia: Nothing.

Lear: Nothing will come of nothing: speak again.

Cordelia: Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave
My heart into my mouth ...

¹ *youngest and smallest*

² *connected: joined by marriage*

Lear is displeased. Cordelia persists: she loves him as a daughter should love her father, not with the overwhelming passion that Goneril and Regan claim to feel. If their love for their father dominates their lives so completely, she asks, why did they marry? For her part, she intends to find room in her heart for a husband as well as a father.

Lear gives Cordelia one final chance to follow her sisters' example. She refuses. He erupts in rage, and on a furious impulse disowns her utterly:

Lear: So young, and so untender?

Cordelia: So young, my Lord, and true.

Lear: Let it be so; thy truth then be thy dower:¹
For, by the sacred radiance of the sun,
The mysteries of Hecate² and the night,
By all the operation of the orbs³
From whom we do exist and cease to be,
Here I disclaim all my paternal care ...

¹ dowry (instead of her portion of the kingdom)

² goddess of the underworld

³ spheres within which the stars and planets move

Nothing, my lord.

“The whole titanic drama turns on this ‘Nothing’ and the bizarre fact that Cordelia’s true love cannot find words to declare itself. And it is whirled on this axis by the fact that the treacherous, loveless ones possess an inexhaustible wealth of plausible language.”

Ted Hughes, Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being, 1992

Kent intervenes

The Earl of Kent tries to interrupt, but Lear refuses to give way. What angers him most is that the young Cordelia had been his favourite daughter, and he had looked forward to spending his last years with her:

Lear: I lov'd her most, and thought to set my rest¹
On her kind nursery.²

¹ *stake everything*

² *tender care*

The third of the kingdom that was destined for Cordelia is now to be divided between the other two sisters. All Lear's land, wealth and power is thus to be transferred to Goneril and Regan and their husbands. Lear announces that he will retain the title of King and, escorted by a company of a hundred knights, intends to live with his two daughters, spending a month in the household of each in turn. He hands the coronet which was to be Cordelia's on her marriage – symbolising her rule over a third of Britain – to Albany and Cornwall.

Kent interrupts again. Although he knows he is risking his life by publicly disagreeing with the King, he urges Lear to think again. Cordelia's love is deep and genuine, he insists, and it is an act of folly to dispossess her and give everything to her sisters, who may be more articulate but are certainly less sincere.

Furious at Kent's insolence, Lear draws his sword, and is on the verge of executing him on the spot, but the intervention of Albany and Cornwall saves him. Kent is unrepentant. He has been a loyal servant to Lear for many years and, he insists, his intention is to make the King see reason, for his own good.

Lear solemnly declares that Kent, for his arrogance in contradicting him, is banished:

Lear: Five days we do allot thee for provision
To shield thee from disasters of the world;
And on the sixth to turn thy hated back
Upon our kingdom: if on the tenth day following
Thy banish'd trunk be found in our dominions,
The moment is thy death. Away! By Jupiter,
This shall not be revok'd.

Kent bids a fond farewell to Cordelia, reassuring her that she is in the right. To Goneril and Regan he expresses the cynical hope that their treatment of their father may live up to their fine words. With the consolation that he is escaping the madness that suddenly seems to have engulfed Lear and his court, he takes his leave.

Cordelia's suitors make their decisions

Gloucester now returns, accompanied by the King of France and the Duke of Burgundy. The three men are unaware of the angry scenes that have just taken place.

Lear addresses Burgundy first. He asks him, directly, what he expects to receive as Cordelia's dowry if he should marry her. Burgundy, hoping to come into possession of a third of the kingdom, is thrown into confusion. Maintaining a formal, diplomatic manner, he states that he assumes Lear's original offer to be unchanged. When he learns that Cordelia has been disowned, and will have no dowry whatsoever, Burgundy is lost for words; he cannot publicly admit his disappointment, but on the other hand he does not wish to suggest that he is still interested in Cordelia. He says, politely but evasively, that it is impossible to make a decision in the circumstances.

Lear now turns to the King of France. He will not insult the great King, he says, by offering him the hand of the worthless Cordelia.

France, more open and frank than his rival Burgundy, is curious to know how Cordelia has so suddenly fallen out of favour. He cannot believe her capable of doing anything terrible enough to warrant her punishment. At this point Cordelia speaks up in her own defence, and France immediately understands the nature of what has happened:

Cordelia: ... It is no vicious blot, murder or foulness,
No unchaste action, or dishonour'd step,
That hath depriv'd me of your grace and favour,
But even for want¹ of that for which I am richer,
A still-soliciting eye,² and such a tongue
That I am glad I have not, though not to have it
Hath lost me in your liking.

Lear: Better thou
Hadst not been born than not t'have pleased me better.

France: Is it but this? a tardiness³ in nature
Which often leaves the history unspoke
That it intends to do?

¹ *lack*

² *an eye that is continually looking out for
opportunities and advantages*

³ *reticence, reserve*

France also realises that Burgundy's interest in Cordelia has been for her dowry, not herself. He prompts his rival to commit himself one way or the other: Burgundy replies that he will gladly marry Cordelia on the terms originally agreed, but cannot accept her now that she has displeased her father.

France finds that his feelings for Cordelia, rejected for her simple honesty, are now stronger than ever, and he immediately asks for her hand in marriage:

France: Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich, being poor;
Most choice, forsaken; and most lov'd, despis'd!
Thee and thy virtues here I seize upon ...
Thy dowerless daughter, King, thrown to my chance,
Is Queen of us, of ours, and our fair France:
Not all the dukes of wat'rish¹ Burgundy
Can buy this unpriz'd precious maid of me.
Bid them farewell, Cordelia, though unkind:
Thou lovest here, a better where to find.

¹ *of the country, rich in rivers and streams:
of the man, weak and unemotional*

Lear, scornful of France's decision, tells him that he is free to marry her; she is no longer his daughter. He refuses to say a single word of good will to France or Cordelia, and never wishes to see either of them again. He makes an angry exit, followed by his sons-in-law, attendants and the unlucky Burgundy.

“Cordelia simply resists Lear’s claim to be the sun around which everything revolves. The mere presence of another inviolable person is enough to shatter Lear’s identity.”

Linda Bamber, *The Woman Reader in King Lear*, 1986

King Lear's request to his daughters to declare their love publicly is generally regarded as an act of vanity and folly. However, it is possible to interpret the scene in an entirely different way.

Lear had been planning to live with Cordelia, the daughter whom he loved (and perhaps trusted) the most. There is the suggestion that her third of the kingdom was richer than those of her sisters: could it be that his ultimate intention was for her to succeed to the throne on his death? If so, it was essential to forestall the objections of Goneril and Regan:

"His shrewd knowledge of his elder daughters put them in a position in which it would have been ludicrous for them to repudiate their father's judgement after their fulsome speeches of devotion ... the love-test, taking them by surprise, trapped them into professions which they otherwise might never have made."

Harry V. Jaffa, *The Limits of Politics*, 1957

Cordelia foresees trouble

Cordelia now takes her leave of her sisters. She is deeply concerned about her father's welfare, which will now be in their hands:

Cordelia: The jewels of our father, with wash'd eyes
Cordelia leaves you: I know you what you are;
And like a sister am most loth to call
Your faults as they are named. Love well our father:
To your professed bosoms¹ I commit him:
But yet, alas! stood I within his grace,
I would prefer him to a better place.

¹ *the love that you claim to feel*

Regan and Goneril respond sharply: Cordelia should mind her own business and be thankful that, impoverished as she now is, she has a husband to provide for her.

Apprehensive about the future, but powerless to do anything, Cordelia sets off with her husband for a new life in France.

Lear's future is discussed

Regan and Goneril, now alone, broach the subject of their father's behaviour. They quickly establish that they are of the same mind. Lear has always been unstable and temperamental, they agree, and in his old age is likely to become more so:

Goneril: ... he always lov'd our sister most; and with what poor judgment he hath now cast her off appears too grossly.¹

Regan: 'Tis the infirmity of his age; yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself.

Goneril: The best and soundest of his time² hath been but rash ...

¹ *obviously*

² *the most stable, rational time of his life*

They are united in their determination: Lear must not be allowed to ruin their new-found power and status with further bouts of unpredictable behaviour, particularly as he will be living in their households from now on. The utmost strictness will be necessary.

Edmund states his case

I, ii

Edmund, illegitimate son of the Earl of Gloucester, is burning with resentment. He feels himself to be the victim of two meaningless social traditions: first, that illegitimate children are regarded as base and inferior; and second, that a father's property is inherited by the eldest son. On both counts, his brother Edgar has the advantage, and stands to inherit Gloucester's title and estate on his death.

Edmund has come up with a plan to trick his father into disinheriting Edgar. He has no scruples about the dishonesty that will be involved. The conventions of religion, morality and the law all seem to be against him, and he is determined to pursue his own interests ruthlessly:

Edmund: Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law
My services are bound. Wherefore should I
Stand in the plague of custom,¹ and permit
The curiosity of nations² to deprive me ...

¹ *respect traditions which I find hateful*

² *the fastidious distinctions made by societies*

“Edmund, who refuses all moral rules and restraints, who does not recognise the very concept of morality, is the one who is made to underline the absolute moral responsibility for their own actions of everyone, himself included, in the play – and outside it.”

C. W. R. D. Moseley, *Shakespeare's History Plays*, 1988

Far from feeling inferior to the legitimate Edgar, Edmund believes himself to be more spirited and forceful than his elder brother:

Edmund: Why brand they us
With base? with baseness? bastardy? base, base?
Who in the lusty stealth of nature take
More composition and fierce quality¹
Than doth, within a dull, stale, tired bed,
Go to th'creating a whole tribe of fops,²
Got³ 'tween asleep and wake? Well then,
Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land ...

¹ *a more complete mixture of characteristics,
and an energetic nature*

² *lifeless fools*

³ *conceived*

Edmund's plan to gain his father's inheritance involves a forged letter, which he has already prepared. The next step is to trick his father, Gloucester, into believing it to be genuine; and he is now approaching.

A shock for Gloucester

Gloucester is in a despondent mood. There seems to have been a sudden, inexplicable outbreak of madness in the court, what with Kent's banishment, the breaking off of relations with France, and Lear's voluntary handover of power.

As he comes across his son Edmund, Gloucester notices him hastily stuffing a letter into his pocket. He is curious to know what news it contains, and why he should want to hide it so urgently. Edmund at first denies the existence of the letter, thus arousing his father's curiosity even further.

Edmund then admits that he has a letter, from his brother Edgar; but he has only partly read it, he claims, and from what he has read is concerned that his father might find it offensive. By now Gloucester is determined to see the letter, and Edmund, with a show of unwillingness, hands it over. Gloucester reads:

This policy and reverence of age makes the world bitter to the best of our times;¹ keeps our fortunes from us till our oldness cannot relish them ... Come to me, that of this I may speak more. If our father would sleep till I wak'd him, you should enjoy half his revenue for ever, and live the beloved of your brother, EDGAR.

¹ *this tradition of respecting the old is a blight on our youth, which should be the best time of our lives*

The message is unmistakable. Edgar, impatient to inherit Gloucester's wealth, wants Edmund to collude with him in the murder of their father. If he agrees, Edgar will reward him with half the estate. Gloucester is horrified.

Edmund reluctantly admits that the handwriting appears to be his brother's, but he refuses to accept that Edgar really means what he has written. On the other hand, he remarks to Gloucester, he has often heard his brother voice the opinion that a son, when he comes of age, should take over the wealth of his ageing father and manage his affairs. Gloucester is convinced that the letter is genuine. Aghast at Edgar's treachery, he decides to have him seized immediately.

Edmund tries to calm his father down, and offers an alternative explanation: he believes that Edgar wrote him the letter to test his loyalty to their father. To prove this, he will arrange to meet Edgar and talk about the contents of the letter in a spot where Gloucester can overhear them.

Edmund reassures his father that this will prove Edgar's innocence. Gloucester, desperate to know the truth, agrees to go along with the plan.

Gloucester foresees a bleak future

The whole episode has shaken Gloucester deeply. He is convinced, more than ever, that there is some malign power at work in the world. All these problems were foreshadowed by recent signs in the heavens, he believes:

Gloucester: These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us ... Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide: in cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond crack'd 'twixt son and father. This villain of mine comes under the prediction;¹ there's son against father: the King falls from bias of nature;² there's father against child. We have seen the best of our time³ ...

¹ *Edgar's villainous behaviour is proof that the predictions are accurate*

² *the natural tendency to love one's child*

³ *our best days are over*

Gloucester leaves, anxious and dejected. Edmund, pleased that his scheme is going according to plan, is greatly amused by the old man's faith in astrological predictions:

Edmund: This is the excellent foppery¹ of the world, that, when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeits² of our own behaviour, we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and stars; as if we were villains on necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion ...

¹ *foolishness*

² *results of excesses*