

## List of characters

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### The Royal House of Britain

LEAR king of Britain  
 GONERILL his eldest daughter  
 REGAN his second daughter  
 CORDELIA his youngest daughter  
 THE DUKE OF ALBANY married to Gonerill  
 THE DUKE OF CORNWALL married to Regan

### The Gloucester family

THE EARL OF GLOUCESTER  
 EDGAR his elder son and heir  
 EDMOND his illegitimate son

### Other characters in the play

FOOL  
 THE EARL OF KENT (later disguised as CAIUS) } in the king's service

THE KING OF FRANCE  
 THE DUKE OF BURGUNDY } suitors to Cordelia

OSWALD Gonerill's steward  
 CURAN a courtier  
 A GENTLEMAN  
 AN OLD MAN Gloucester's tenant  
 A CAPTAIN  
 A HERALD  
 A SERVANT in Cornwall's household

Knights, gentlemen, soldiers, attendants, messengers, servants

The action of the play takes place in various parts of the kingdom of Britain.

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 Excerpt  
[More information](#)

King Lear

Discussing King Lear's plan to abdicate and share out his kingdom, Kent and Gloucester are unsure about which of his two sons-in-law Lear favours. Gloucester introduces Edmond, his illegitimate son.

## 1 Introducing themes

Shakespeare often suggests in his opening scene the themes that his play will go on to explore. Make a list of the main topics of conversation in the script opposite (e.g. fathers and children), then use the list to make some predictions about how you think the play will develop. Write three sentences summarising your predicted story.

## 2 Gloucester gossips, Edmond listens (in groups of three)

Edmond hears himself described as the result of one of his father's sexual adventures, as a 'knave' and a 'whoreson'. He learns that he will soon be sent away again.

Take parts and speak lines 7–28. Read them once as though Gloucester is joking and showing real affection for his illegitimate son and then again as though he is being massively insensitive and cruel.

Afterwards, talk together about (a) your impressions of Gloucester; (b) what Edmond may be thinking about his father's conversation; and (c) how Kent might react at line 13 to cause Gloucester to ask 'Do you smell a fault?'

## 3 'The king is coming'

The way in which King Lear is treated by others is an important element in the play. How might a director ask Kent, Gloucester and Edmond to react to Lear's entrance in order to suggest how the rest of the court will behave in the king's presence?

**affected** favoured

**qualities are so . . . either's moiety**  
 their merits are so evenly balanced, no  
 one can predict what share of the  
 kingdom they will receive  
**brazed to't** hardened to it

**issue** result

**by order of law** born within marriage

**knave** rascal

**whoreson** bastard, son of a prostitute

**out** away for

# The tragedy of King Lear

## Act 1 Scene 1 King Lear's palace

Enter KENT, GLOUCESTER, and EDMOND

KENT I thought the king had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall.

GLOUCESTER It did always seem so to us: but now in the division of the kingdom, it appears not which of the dukes he values most, for qualities are so weighed that curiosity in neither can make choice of either's moiety. 5

KENT Is not this your son, my lord?

GLOUCESTER His breeding, sir, hath been at my charge. I have so often blushed to acknowledge him, that now I am brazed to't.

KENT I cannot conceive you. 10

GLOUCESTER Sir, this young fellow's mother could; whereupon she grew round wombed, and had indeed, sir, a son for her cradle ere she had a husband for her bed. Do you smell a fault?

KENT I cannot wish the fault undone, the issue of it being so proper.

GLOUCESTER But I have a son, sir, by order of law, some year elder than this, who yet is no dearer in my account; though this knave came something saucily to the world before he was sent for, yet was his mother fair, there was good sport at his making, and the whoreson must be acknowledged. Do you know this noble gentleman, Edmond? 15 20

EDMOND No, my lord.

GLOUCESTER My lord of Kent; remember him hereafter as my honourable friend.

EDMOND My services to your lordship.

KENT I must love you and sue to know you better. 25

EDMOND Sir, I shall study deserving.

GLOUCESTER He hath been out nine years, and away he shall again. The king is coming.

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King Lear

Lear intends to divide Britain between his daughters. He sets them a test: whoever expresses the greatest love will be given the largest portion. Gonerill voices limitless love for him and wins a share.



From left to right: Cornwall, Regan, Gonerill, Lear, Cordelia and Albany.  
 What do you think is the significance of the sword?

## 1 Enter King Lear (in large groups)

How might the entrance of Lear, his daughters and the members of the court be staged? See what kinds of effects you can create by staging it in different ways. For example, work out how a director could emphasise various aspects of Lear's character, his role as king or the different family relationships. The pictures of the opening scene on pages v and vi of the colour section and pages 16 and 206 will give you ideas about the different ways directors show this scene.

**Sennet** trumpet fanfare  
**son** son-in-law  
**constant will** firm intention  
**several dowers** separate marriage gifts  
**amorous sojourn** visit as suitors  
**divest us both of** part with

**bounty** generosity  
**nature . . . challenge** natural affection and good qualities are well matched  
**bounds** limits, boundaries  
**champaigns** plains  
**meads** meadows

Act 1 Scene 1

*Sennet. Enter KING LEAR, CORNWALL, ALBANY, GONERILL,  
 REGAN, CORDELIA, and Attendants*

- LEAR Attend the lords of France and Burgundy, Gloucester.  
 GLOUCESTER I shall, my lord. *Exit* 30
- LEAR Meantime we shall express our darker purpose.  
 Give me the map there. Know, that we have divided  
 In three our kingdom, and 'tis our fast intent  
 To shake all cares and business from our age,  
 Conferring them on younger strengths while we 35  
 Unburdened crawl toward death. Our son of Cornwall,  
 And you, our no less loving son of Albany,  
 We have this hour a constant will to publish  
 Our daughters' several dowers, that future strife  
 May be prevented now. The princes, France and  
 Burgundy, 40  
 Great rivals in our youngest daughter's love,  
 Long in our court have made their amorous sojourn,  
 And here are to be answered. Tell me, my daughters  
 (Since now we will divest us both of rule,  
 Interest of territory, cares of state), 45  
 Which of you shall we say doth love us most,  
 That we our largest bounty may extend  
 Where nature doth with merit challenge? Gonerill,  
 Our eldest born, speak first.
- GONERILL Sir, I love you more than word can wield the matter, 50  
 Dearer than eyesight, 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 loved, or father found;  
 A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable; 55  
 Beyond all manner of so much I love you.
- CORDELIA [*Aside*] What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent.
- LEAR Of all these bounds even from this line, to this,  
 With shadowy forests and with champains riched  
 With plenteous rivers and wide-skirted meads, 60  
 We make thee lady. To thine and Albany's issues  
 Be this perpetual. What says our second daughter,  
 Our dearest Regan, wife of Cornwall?

King Lear

Regan claims that her greatest joy is her father's love. Lear gives her land equal to Gonerill's share. Cordelia refuses to join in the love test, saying that she simply loves her father as a daughter should.

### 1 Cordelia says 'Nothing' (in pairs)

Lear does not treat his daughters equally in the division of the kingdom. His words at line 81 suggest he has saved the best for Cordelia – his favourite, his 'joy'. But she refuses to join her sisters in flattering him, answering Lear's request for a declaration of love with 'Nothing', a word that will be used repeatedly in the rest of the play.

How should Cordelia speak the word 'Nothing'? Does Lear respond with instant rage or with embarrassed patience? In one production Lear and his courtiers thought Cordelia was joking and laughed indulgently at her words. (See pictures on page vi, top, of the colour section and p. 55.)

Take parts and speak lines 80–102 in various ways to discover which interpretation you prefer.

### 2 Three sisters (in groups of three)

While Gonerill and Regan emphasise their great 'love' for Lear (lines 50–71), Cordelia speaks only of her duty as his daughter, her 'bond' (lines 82–101). Take parts, and read aloud to each other what each sister says to Lear. Then try the following activities.

- a Compare the language and imagery used by the different sisters. Consider also the length and complexity of the sentences they use and their specific choice of words.
- b Talk together about what their different verbal styles suggest about the differing personalities of the sisters and how they really feel about their father. Sum up each sister in a sentence of your own.
- c Look at the pictures on page v (bottom) of the colour section and on page 4, and suggest how the sisters' speeches could be staged to convey the character and unspoken feelings of each.

**self-mettle** same spirit

**square of sense** human body, perfect feeling

**felicitate** happy

**ponderous** heavy, valuable

**validity** value

**interested** admitted, married

**opulent** rich

**bond** duty as a daughter

**mar** damage

**begot** fathered

**bred** reared

**take my plight** accept my wedding vow

- REGAN I am made of that self-mettle as my sister  
 And prize me at her worth. In my true heart 65  
 I find she names my very deed of love.  
 Only she comes too short, that I profess  
 Myself an enemy to all other joys  
 Which the most precious square of sense possesses,  
 And find I am alone felicitate 70  
 In your dear highness' love.
- CORDELIA [*Aside*] Then poor Cordelia,  
 And yet not so, since I am sure my love's  
 More ponderous than my tongue.
- LEAR To thee and thine hereditary ever  
 Remain this ample third of our fair kingdom, 75  
 No less in space, validity, and pleasure  
 Than that conferred on Gonerill. Now our joy,  
 Although our last and least, to whose young love  
 The vines of France and milk of Burgundy  
 Strive to be interested. What can you say to draw 80  
 A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.
- CORDELIA Nothing, my lord.
- LEAR Nothing?
- CORDELIA Nothing.
- LEAR Nothing will come of nothing, speak again. 85
- CORDELIA Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave  
 My heart into my mouth: I love your majesty  
 According to my bond, no more nor less.
- LEAR How, how, Cordelia? Mend your speech a little,  
 Lest you may mar your fortunes.
- CORDELIA Good my lord, 90  
 You have begot me, bred me, loved me. I  
 Return those duties back as are right fit,  
 Obey you, love you, and most honour you.  
 Why have my sisters husbands, if they say  
 They love you all? Happily, when I shall wed, 95  
 That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry  
 Half my love with him, half my care and duty.  
 Sure, I shall never marry like my sisters.
- LEAR But goes thy heart with this?
- CORDELIA Ay, my good lord.

King Lear

Enraged, Lear disowns Cordelia and divides her inheritance between Gonerill and Regan. He proposes that he and his one hundred knights live with Gonerill and Regan in turn. Kent protests.

### 1 A father's curse (in large groups)

In lines 102–14 Lear invokes ancient beliefs to curse and reject Cordelia. He is bitterly angry at her unwillingness to declare unqualified love for him. Here's one way to help you explore the force of Lear's angry words and their effect on Cordelia.

One person (volunteer only!) plays Cordelia. The others stand in a circle around her. Each one chooses a short section of Lear's words which they feel conveys his rejection of Cordelia. This extract can be five or six words, or as much as three lines. In turn, speak the words you have chosen. When you have spoken your words, turn your back on Cordelia.

Repeat the activity, adding suitable gestures to illustrate your words. Cordelia can try ways of gesturing and speaking lines from earlier in the script to respond to these attacks, but may not leave the circle.

After you have tried several versions of the activity, talk together about the way in which the language expresses Lear's feelings and the effect it has on Cordelia.

### 2 The language of authority (in small groups)

Lear asserts his authority in lines 115–33. He issues orders and proclaims his intentions. But to whom? Work through the lines, a sentence or small section at a time, identifying the person or persons addressed at each point.

### 3 Director's advice

Line 137 may mean 'stop blathering and get to the point' or 'I've made up my mind. Shut up or I'll make you suffer.' Suggest how an actor could experiment with saying this line and the gestures they could use to convey each of these different meanings.

**Hecate** goddess of witchcraft  
**operation of the orbs** astrological  
 influence of the stars  
**Propinquity . . . of blood** closeness  
 and relationship  
**Scythian** cruel savage

**makes his generation messes** eats  
 his children (messes = meals)  
**Pre-eminence** high status  
**addition** titles, honours  
**sway** control  
**coronet** crown

Act 1 Scene 1

- LEAR So young, and so untender? 100
- CORDELIA So young, my lord, and true.
- LEAR Let it be so, thy truth then be thy dower.  
 For by the sacred radiance of the sun,  
 The mysteries of Hecate and the night,  
 By all the operation of the orbs 105  
 From whom we do exist and cease to be,  
 Here I disclaim all my paternal care,  
 Propinquity and property of blood,  
 And as a stranger to my heart and me  
 Hold thee from this forever. The barbarous Scythian, 110  
 Or he that makes his generation messes  
 To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom  
 Be as well neighboured, pitied, and relieved,  
 As thou my sometime daughter.
- KENT Good my liege –
- LEAR Peace, Kent, 115  
 Come not between the dragon and his wrath.  
 I loved her most, and thought to set my rest  
 On her kind nursery. Hence and avoid my sight!  
 So be my grave my peace, as here I give  
 Her father's heart from her. Call France. Who stirs? 120  
 Call Burgundy. – Cornwall and Albany,  
 With my two daughters' dowers digest the third.  
 Let pride, which she calls plainness, marry her.  
 I do invest you jointly with my power,  
 Pre-eminence, and all the large effects 125  
 That troop with majesty. Ourself by monthly course,  
 With reservation of an hundred knights  
 By you to be sustained, shall our abode  
 Make with you by due turn; only we shall retain  
 The name and all th'addition to a king: the sway, 130  
 Revenue, execution of the rest,  
 Beloved sons, be yours; which to confirm,  
 This coronet part between you.
- KENT Royal Lear,  
 Whom I have ever honoured as my king,  
 Loved as my father, as my master followed, 135  
 As my great patron thought on in my prayers –
- LEAR The bow is bent and drawn, make from the shaft.

King Lear

Kent challenges Lear's decisions. Kent states his loyalty, but continues to criticise the king's actions. Lear warns Kent to stop his protest on pain of death. Lear is outraged, and begins to declare Kent's punishment.

### 1 Kent's plain speaking (in pairs)

In lines 138–48 Kent accuses Lear of madness, criticises Gonerill's and Regan's empty flattery, urges Lear to hold on to power and defends Cordelia's sincerity. He addresses Lear as 'thou', an inappropriately intimate term for a subject to use to his monarch (who would expect the courtesy of the plural 'you' in such a public conversation).

One student speaks Kent's lines. The other, as Lear, moves around the room, changing direction as often as they want. Kent must keep reading aloud, following Lear as closely as possible to make him listen. Lear must stop and turn round when Kent says something that bites deep into his feelings as a king and father. Afterwards talk together about which of Kent's remarks you think Lear would find the most hurtful.

### 2 Loyal Kent . . . the 'true blank'

Sight and blindness will become key themes. Kent implores Lear to 'See better', and offers to act as 'The true blank of thine eye' (lines 152–3). 'Blank' means centre of target or line of sight. Imagine that the actor playing Kent asks, 'Does it mean Lear should keep Kent in view, or that Kent is the model of an honest truth-teller, or what?' Make your reply.

### 3 Kent hears his 'reward'

Kent completes his protest (line 160) and Lear issues his verdict. On stage Kent could be shown to be overpowered by Albany and Cornwall or by Lear's soldiers. He could seem to be exhausted or he could appear to give up a hopeless attempt to alert the king. If you were the director, how would you stage the moment when Kent finishes his speech? For one production's version, see colour section, page vi (bottom).

**fork** arrow-head  
**Reserve thy state** keep your powers  
**Reverb no hollowness** do not echo  
 like an empty vessel  
**wage** stake, make war  
**Apollo** god of the sun

**vassal** wretched slave  
**Miscreant** unbeliever, scoundrel  
**forbear** stop  
**Revoke** cancel, alter  
**vent clamour** make noise  
**recreant** traitor