

KING LEAR

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Story As in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, *King Lear* concerns high passions and tragedy on the level of royal kings and court. Ambition drove Macbeth to his death, Indecision did the same for Hamlet, while Lear was felled by a combination of bad judgment, madness and senile loneliness.

As the play opens, Lear has decided to step down from the throne, and to divide his kingdom equally among his three daughters. His two older daughters (Goneril and Regan) flatter him wildly, when he asks them if they love him, but the third daughter, Cordelia, simply says she has no words to express her feelings toward her father. King Lear is furious at this reticence, and instantly disinherits this daughter. As it turns out, however, Cordelia is the only one of the girls who truly loves her father, whereas the others try to reject the old man.

The remainder of this element of the play tracks the gradual decline of Lear, who has fled onto the heath in a terrible thunderstorm, accompanied by Cordelia, his fool, and by a loyal nobleman, the Duke of Kent, in disguise. The madness of Lear generates the kinds of interior monologue we have shivered at with Lady Macbeth, and overheard throughout *Hamlet*, as Hamlet himself is ceaselessly debating how to avenge himself for his father's death. The parallel plot in *King Lear* involves a second elderly nobleman, Gloucester, who is struggling with family problems like Lear. Deceived by his illegitimate son into believing that his legitimate son, Edgar, is trying to kill him, Gloucester decides that he should try to help his fellow sufferer, Lear. Lear's daughter Regan, and her husband, Cornwall, discover Gloucester helping Lear, accuse him of treason, and turn Gloucester out to wander, blinded, in the countryside—in every way a mirror image of Lear himself. Edgar, Gloucester's legitimate (and truly loving) son, joins his father in disguise, and leads him toward the city of Dover, where Lear has also been taken.

Dover is the scene of a landing by the French army, led by Cordelia, who is determined to save her father. A fatal conflict looms there, between French forces and English, driven by the wish to capture the traitor Lear. Gloucester himself tries to commit suicide, but his son Edgar saves him. Lear and Cordelia are captured. In the final scene, a Shakespeare torrent of catastrophes strikes the still living: Edgar kills Edmund, and Gloucester dies; Goneril poisons Regan, then kills herself when the secret comes out; the betrayed Cordelia is condemned to execution in prison; Lear himself dies at the tragic death of his own loving daughter.

The plot complexity of *King Lear* is precisely the kind of 'wild English drama' that the French stage, a few decades later, scorned. Racine, with his faith in the strict Aristotelian unities of drama, found Shakespeare repeatedly 'guilty' of overdeveloping his plots, introducing adventitious material; Racine's *Phedre*, for example, is strict as a bare bone, right to the point. How do you feel about the addition, to the stark tale of King Lear, of the supporting narrative concerning Gloucester, and indeed the tale of Regan and Goneril, their husbands, and the diverse parts their husbands play in the conclusion of the drama.

Characters

King Lear is not aging gracefully. He is too eager to be loved, and thus falls easily into the trap of flattery. He is unable, until it is too late, to see where true love—Cordelia's—lies, and by the time it is too late she is also a victim of circumstances. Lear, Shakespeare tells us, was doomed from the initial demand for a daughterly declaration of love.

Cordelia is the daughter who did not have words to tell her father that she loved him. She was unable to spout platitudes, and her father took her careful reticence for a negative attitude. Her fidelity to her father was amply proven by her later services to him, but sadly this compensation did not extract mercy from fate, which saw to her execution.

Themes

Intuition Shakespeare makes a strong point that *'listening with the third ear,' intuition, is indispensable for successful life.* King Lear's initial deafness, to Cordelia's response about love, was the fatal step that brought on the tragedy of the play—the hostility of two of his daughters, the ultimate death of the daughter who understood him.

Love *True love is often a hard sell, because it goes along with honesty, and no one, especially someone seeking an expression of love, is up for an expression of honesty—which is always multiform, with rough edges.* Witness Lear's reaction to Cordelia.