

KING LEAR

Shakespeare

Overview Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1607) is one of his last, greatest, and most bitter plays. (Gloucester sums up Shakespeare's own world view, as it darkens this whole tale: 'as flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, they kill us for their sport.') The theme is jealousy, madness, and despair, and no 'dark modern comedy' can touch the pain: a father, in love with his three daughters, sets out to divide his kingdom in three parts, among his three female descendants. His first two daughters, when asked how much they love their dad, lay it on thick, and he eats it up. His third daughter, Cordelia, is 'unable to heave my heart into my mouth,' and replies that her love for her father is exactly what it should be. Furious at what he considers an insult, Lear acts out big time, banishes the precise-talking daughter (Cordelia), and disappears into an insanity of jealousy and rage.

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' 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.

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.

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.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

LEAR (Emotional)

Character King Lear ends up mad, jealous, self-destructive, and yet we call him 'agreeable.' Why? From the start, when he is stepping down as king, and apportioning his kingdom among his three daughters, he is all about harmony and being loved; in fact it is the refusal of Cordelia to affirm the expected hyperbolic love that tees him off, and eventually leads him to curse and banish her. Anything but 'agreeable' in his decline, Lear is thrown by the hairline shock of Cordelia's verbal honesty—itself far the truest expression of love from the daughters—into a downward spiral of narcissistic chaos, from which he is unable to recover.

Parallels The ancient Greeks, by and large members of an honor-based, rather than a merit-based, society, inevitably provide literary figures for whom honor-slights are triggers to decisive action. One can think here of Sophocles' Oedipus, who grows increasingly testy under examination by the nasty Teiresias—who questions the King's honor; of Sophocles' Ajax, deprived of the weapons of Achilles, and sulking honorless on his remote island; or of Achilles, dissed by Agamemnon at the outset of the *Iliad*, and irreconcilably wounded in his honor: all these Sophoclean 'heroes' are dangerously and explosively sensitive to their honor, as was Lear.

Illustrative moments

Fury In the first scene of the play, *King Lear*, the forthcoming drama is fully adumbrated. Awaiting, from his daughter Cordelia, protestations of filial love, such as he had had from his other two daughters, Lear is driven wild by Cordelia's precise and moving response: essentially, she says, she will be obliged to honor and love her husband, when she marries, and thus cannot promise all her love to her dad, whom she loves. At this point, enraged by her inability to flatter, Lear declares Cordelia 'a stranger to my heart and me,' 'my sometime daughter.' Needless to say, dad removes daughter from any claim to inheritance.

Criticized Lear's fury toward Cordelia is doubled when the Earl of Kent, present to the scene and a long time friend to the King, begs the king to reconsider his rage, and to 'realize that the youngest

daughter does not love thee least.' Kent develops the idea that flattery toward power is far from meaningful or lasting, although the King—who will realize the truth here abundantly—is at this time unable to hear Kent's point. Perhaps Kent's good sense doubly infuriates the King, who will without delay also call for a banishment of Kent.

Banishment In the fourth scene of Act One, Lear once more overreacts to the criticism his lords have been lavishing on him, for his judgment against Cordelia. In response, Lear issues a total banishment of Cordelia from the goods of the world: 'Hear Nature, hear: suspend thy purpose if thou didst intend to make this creature fruitful. Into her womb convey sterility. Dry up in her the organs of increase, and from her derogate body never spring a babe to honor her!' We are awed by the trajectory of Lear's mind, from hot tempered sensitivity to brutal curse.

Hatred In the second act we see the fruits of Lear's overall plan, to divide his declining years between the palaces of his two 'faithful daughters,' Goneril and Regan. The two 'faithful daughters' have proven far more interested in themselves and their possessions than in their old dad, and he accordingly bestows his curses on them—as lavishly as he had on Cordelia. 'No, you unnatural hags, I will have such revenges on you both that all the world shall...' I shall not weep, he goes on to say, 'but this heart shall break into a hundred thousand flaws or ere I'll weep...'

Discussion questions

Why is Lear so excruciatingly sensitive to Cordelia's honest response? Must we say that Lear's lack of discernment is the source of the play's tragedy? Or is it the spiritual ineptness of his two 'faithful daughters'?

Why is Lear unable to listen to his advisors, who tell him to cool it with Cordelia? Would you have been able to listen to them, under the circumstances?

How does the play substantiate the idea that we are playthings to the gods, who kill us for their sport?

CORDELIA (conscientious)

Character Cordelia, as the reader knows from the start, is unable to 'heave her heart into her mouth,' that is to say what is commanded of her. (Is she beset at all by a slight aphasic slip, or is she congenitally devoted to plain and accurate speech?) . Her careful response to her father is too plain for him to tolerate, in his mood (and moment) of extravagant pride and self-indulgence, and he subjects her in the end to the most savage of curses. It is the triumph of Cordelia, that she alone of the daughters remains faithful and true to her father, doing her best to ease the fatal madness which ushers out his days.

Parallels Ancient Greek societies, largely 'traditional' and family based, naturally generated many examples of family love and loyalty—such as Cordelia's. We think of Antigone, sacrificing her life (as it turns out) by insisting on burying the corpse of her proscribed brother (in Sophocles' *Antigone*); of Homer's *Iliad*, where by a shocking reversal, we see the Trojan patriarch, Priam, prostrating himself before the Greek leader, Achilles, as he begs for the return of the body of his son Hector; or of the reunion of Odysseus with his old farmer dad, in the last tense scenes of Homer's *Odyssey*, scenes which invoke the entire Greek tradition of filial respect.

Illustrative moments

Bond Eager to feel assured that his daughters love him, Lear turns to Cordelia, who will only say that 'I love your Majesty according to my bond, not more nor less.' She goes on, explaining the plainness of her earlier statement, to say that she cannot 'heave my heart into my mouth,' that is, invent elaborate praises, of her father and her love, which are inaccurate. By her bond, she goes on to explain, she means her appropriate loving duty and fondness, and with due consideration, she goes on to explain, for her own upcoming marriage, which will inevitably require that she devote some portion of her love to her husband—and accordingly not to her father.

Request Seeing that her father's response, to her definition of her love for him, will not be changed, she asks a particular favor. She asks him to announce that what displeased him, about her response, was not 'some vicious blot, murder, or foulness,' on her part, but rather 'the want of that for which I am

richer, a still-soliciting eye (i.e. a favor begging eye), and such a tongue as I am glad I have not,' by which of course she means a flattering and easy talking tongue. The response, of course, only maddens Lear the more, leading him to wish that she did not have exactly the kind of tongue she says she is glad not to have.

Compassion In Act 4, scene 4, Cordelia comes searching her dad in the French camp near Dover, where he has been seen suffering a fit of madness. She sends a hundred soldiers in search of him, to 'search every acre in the high-grown field...' Upon finding him her compassion overwhelms her, as it had not overwhelmed her sisters. 'Why he was met even now, as mad as the vexed sea, singing aloud...' she declares. Lear is found, raging, and a doctor is called in, to employ 'all blest secrets of the earth' as remedies for Lear's insanity. 'Be aidant and remediate in the good man's distress!'

Terrified Although in Act 4 Cordelia herself is involved in high affairs of state, and must hurry from what may be her last sight of her father, she can barely tear herself from him. Tearing herself away from him, that she may do his duty too, that of supporting the Kingdom of Britain, Cordelia urges those left behind, with the King, to watch out 'lest his ungoverned rage dissolve the life that wants the means to lead it.' 'No blown (overblown) ambition doth our arms incite, but love, dear love, and our aged father's right.'

Discussion questions

The major theme of *King Lear*—the crisis between Lear and his daughters—is laid out before us in the first scene of the play. Does the remainder of the play simply build on what we have already encountered?

Regan and Goneril—who profess great love for their father—prove to be unkindly hosts to Lear, when he visits their castles. Are they justified in their treatment of their father?

Exactly what kind of responsible love for her father does Cordelia declare? Would you (as her father) have been pleased with her profession of love to you?