

PLOT SUMMARY OF **KING LEAR**

Old King Lear has three daughters: Goneril (wife of Albany), Regan (wife of Cornwall), and Cordelia (who has two suitors, Burgundy and France). Gloucester – Lear’s counsellor, like him a widower – has two sons: Edgar, and the illegitimate Edmund. Lear has decided to abdicate, and divide his kingdom between his daughters, promising the largest portion to the one who loves him most. Goneril and Regan effusively declare their love, but Cordelia is revolted by this “love-test”, replying that she loves him as any daughter should love a father. This enrages Lear, who disinherits her. Kent attempts to intervene – but is banished from the court. Burgundy withdraws his marriage offer, but Cordelia accepts that of France, and they leave together.

Now powerless, Lear is at the mercy of his elder daughters. When Goneril criticizes his behaviour, Lear angrily leaves to join Regan – but he is rapidly running out of friends. Only the Fool (his enigmatic court-jester) and the ever-faithful Kent (who has disguised himself to aid his master) stay loyal. When Kent arrives at Gloucester’s castle, where Regan and Cornwall are staying, he is set in the stocks for insulting Goneril’s servant Oswald. Lear is enraged at this – but then driven to madness when his two daughters unite against him. A storm breaks and he rages into the night, with only the Fool and Kent for company.

Meanwhile, Edmund has effected his plan to steal Edgar’s inheritance by turning Gloucester against him. Edgar has

fled, disguising himself as the madman “Poor Tom”, and is seeking shelter in a countryside hovel during the storm when Lear, the Fool, and Kent arrive. Appalled at Regan and Goneril’s behaviour, Gloucester seeks them out to offer the shelter of his castle. But Edmund betrays his father, and when Gloucester returns home, he is savagely punished by having his eyes put out. Kicked out of his own house, he is placed in the charge of the madman “Poor Tom” (his own disguised son Edgar). Assuming further rôles for his blind father, Edgar counsels him against despair.

Gloucester’s blinding proves the turning-point: Cornwall is killed by an outraged servant (leaving Regan free to court Edmund); Albany vows revenge against Goneril (who has her eyes on Edmund herself); and Edgar kills Oswald when he tries to capture Gloucester. Cordelia lands with the French army, and is reunited with Lear, whom her doctor restores to sanity. But the French lose the battle, Cordelia and Lear are captured, and the terrible final phase begins.

Jealous of her relationship with Edmund, Goneril poisons Regan. In single combat, Edgar fatally wounds Edmund, to whom he reveals his identity, relating Gloucester’s death from the shock at learning who “Poor Tom” really was. Goneril commits suicide. The dying Edmund reveals that he has ordered Lear and Cordelia’s execution – but it is too late: Lear now enters with Cordelia’s corpse, mad again with grief, and dies raving. Kent renounces the world; Lear’s kingdom passes to Albany and Edgar.

