

Literary text • *King Lear*

by William Shakespeare

The story

King Lear tells the story of an old English king called Lear who, in the absence of a male heir, decides to divide up his kingdom among his three daughters according to how much they declare they love him. The first two daughters – Regan, wife of the Duke of Cornwall, and Goneril, wife of the Duke of Albany – exaggerate their affection for their father to increase their inheritance. The youngest daughter, Cordelia, is disgusted by her sisters' hypocrisy: when Lear asks her

how much she loves him she says she loves him as much as is natural for a daughter to love her father. Lear is furious and disinherits Cordelia, who is exiled and marries the King of France. The inheritance is divided between Goneril and Regan on the condition that they promise to maintain the old king, together with a hundred of his knights.

But the two sisters soon reveal their evil intentions. They do not keep their promise and in the end they throw Lear out of the court in the middle of a storm, saying that he has lost his mind.

A parallel plot concerns the Duke of Gloucester, who has problems with his two sons. His illegitimate son Edmund has convinced him that his other son, Edgar, plans to take his lands. But Edmund, like Regan and Goneril, is simply trying to manipulate things to his own advantage.

To make matters worse, thanks to Edmund's insinuations, Gloucester is suspected of complicity with the enemy and he is blinded by the Duke of Cornwall.

Edgar, disguised as a mad beggar, leads the blind Gloucester to join Lear in the wilderness, where they begin to realise their terrible mistakes in favouring the wrong children. Returning to England, Cordelia, now the Queen of France, is briefly reunited with her old father. But then they are imprisoned by Edmund, who has gained power in the kingdom after winning the affections of both Regan and Goneril. The ending of the play is one of the most tragic in all of Shakespeare. Cordelia is hanged on Edmund's orders, and Lear, already mad, dies of grief. Goneril, meanwhile, poisons Regan out of jealousy over Edmund and then kills herself. Gloucester dies after being reunited with his good son Edgar. Edmund is killed by Edgar, but although order is restored at the end of the play, the tone is immensely sad.

Features of the play

King Lear was first printed in 1608. Two versions of the play exist, however, and it is probable that the second version, which first appeared in the Folio edition of 1623, was a major revision which Shakespeare made a few years after he first wrote the play in 1605.

The story of *King Lear* derives from a legend about a British king supposed to have lived about 900 BCE, which Shakespeare knew from sources including Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1577). The play's central themes are love, power, madness, old age, death and responsibility.

The tragedy of *King Lear* is initially provoked by Lear's **excess of paternal love** which is also an **excessive demand for love**. It is perhaps difficult for a modern audience to understand how Lear is able to so violently reject his most beloved daughter. Cordelia insists that her love for her father is limited by the natural bond which exists between father and child, and that when she marries, half her love will go to her husband. Indeed, Lear's rejection of her seems almost monstrous, pointing to dark, unexpressed passions.

Goneril and Regan, on the other hand, with their exaggerated declarations of absolute devotion are able to placate their father, though they actually hate him. They tell him what he wants to hear but then betray him by throwing him out into the wilderness.

In *King Lear*, love is ultimately not a redemptive force but one which destroys and leads to catastrophe. Excessive love is shown as an obstacle to wisdom and good judgement. The central scenes of the play relate to **Lear's exile in the wilderness** during a storm, in which he is later joined by the blinded Gloucester and his legitimate son Edgar disguised as a mad beggar called Tom o'Bedlam. The wilderness is a place of madness, folly, social exclusion and blindness, but it is also for this reason a place where wisdom and the acceptance of the hard truths of existence are possible.

Lear's **madness** expresses **his rage against the pain and absurdity of human life**; the cycle of generation and corruption; his inability to accept that he must soon die and that his daughters' lives will go on without him. Lear's tragedy at the end of the play is made more powerful by the brief moment of tender reconciliation he enjoys with Cordelia, before she is killed and he goes irretrievably mad.

If Lear has the capacity to feel but lacks reason and Edmund is a genius of reason but with no real feeling, then Edgar emerges as one of the very few positive figures in the play (the others are Cordelia and Kent, a courtier who stays faithful to Lear). In assuming the role of the mad beggar, Tom o'Bedlam, Edgar voluntarily descends into madness. When he comes out of the experience, he is a much stronger man, but also one who is more depressed and sceptical about life. His faith in the idea of power and authority is shattered and he has no desire to become king. As he says at one point in the play 'the worst is not/So long as we can say "This is the worst"'. Nothing will come of nothing

In the following extract, the aged King Lear proposes to hand his kingdom on to his daughters and their husbands. He has decided to divide the lands according to how devoted each daughter is to him.

BEFORE YOU READ

- 1 Imagine you were one of King Lear's daughters. If you wanted to persuade your father to give you most of his kingdom what would you say to him?
- 2 Read Act I, Scene 1.

- 1 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,
5 Conferring them on younger strengths while we
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
10 May be prevented now. The princes France and Burgundy—
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,
15 Interest of territory, cares of state—
Which of you shall we say doth love us most,
That we our largest bounty may extend
Where nature doth with merit challenge? Goneril,
Our eldest born, speak first.

LEAR Frattanto noi vi renderemo conto del nostro più riposto intendimento. Datemi quella mappa. Sappiate che noi abbiamo suddiviso il nostro regno in tre; e è nostro fermo intento scuotere dalle nostre vecchie spalle tutte le cure e le faccende pubbliche, affidandole a più giovani forze, mentre noi senza più ingombri ci avvieremo alla morte. Voi, figlio nostro della Cornovaglia, e voi, non meno amato figliolo d'Albany – è nostra ferma volontà in que st'ora proclamare quali doti assegnamo alle figlie, così da prevenire ogni dissenso futuro fin da ora. I Principi di Francia e di Borgogna, grandi rivali per l'amore della nostra ultima nata, hanno a lungo protratto il loro amoroso soggiorno presso la nostra corte, ed ora dovranno aver risposta. Figlie mie, poiché ci spoglieremo del potere, delle cure di stato ed anche d'ogni interesse territoriale, dichiarateci adesso quale di voi dovremo dire che ci ami di più, così da estendere la nostra munificenza a colei nella quale la natura fa a gara con il merito. Gonerill, che sei la primogenita, parla per prima.

- GONERIL Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter;
 20 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.
 25 Beyond all manner of so much I love you.
 CORDELIA (aside) What shall Cordelia speak? Love and be silent.
 LEAR (to Goneril) Of all these bounds even from this line to this,
 With shadowy forests and with champaigns riched,
 With plenteous rivers and wide-skirted meads,
 30 We make thee lady. To thine and Albany's issues
 Be this perpetual. – What says our second daughter?
 Our dearest Regan, wife of Cornwall?
 REGAN I am made of that self mettle as my sister,
 And prize me at her worth. In my true heart
 35 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
 40 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 Regan) To thee and thine hereditary ever
 45 Remain this ample third of our fair kingdom,
 No less in space, validity, and pleasure
 Than that conferred on Goneril. (to Cordelia) Now our joy,
 Although our last and least, to whose young love
 The vines of France and milk of Burgundy
 50 Strive to be interested: what can you say to draw
 A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.
 CORDELIA Nothing, my lord.
 LEAR Nothing?
 CORDELIA Nothing.
 55 LEAR Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.
 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.
 60 LEAR How, how, Cordelia? Mend your speech a little
 Lest you may mar your fortunes.

GONERIL Sire, il mio amore è più grande di quanto possano sostenere le parole, più caro della vista, della libertà, dello spazio, maggiore di quel che si valuta raro e prezioso, non minore di una vita piena di grazia, salute, bellezza, onore, pari a quello del figliolo più affettuoso che padre abbia mai trovato; un amore che rende povera la lingua e inetto il discorso. Io vi amo al di là di qualsiasi misura.

CORDELIA [fra sè] Che dirà mai Cordelia? Ama e taci.

LEAR Di tutte queste terre, da questa linea a quest'altra, ricche di ombrose selve e di campagne, con abbondanti fiumi e prati estesi, ti proclamo signora. Ai discendenti tuoi e d'Albany rimangono in perpetuo. – Che cosa dice la nostra seconda, la nostra Regan carissima, sposa di Cornovaglia? Parla.

REGAN Son fatta nel medesimo conio di mia sorella e mi valuto alla sua stregua. Nel mio cuore sincero trovo un identico contratto d'amore, ma il suo è un poco esoso; infatti io mi professo nemica di ogni altra gioia che i sensi nel loro prezioso equilibrio posseggono, e trovo l'unica mia felicità nell'amore della cara Altezza Vostra.

CORDELIA [fra sè] E allora povera Cordelia! Anzi, non povera, poiché son certa che il mio amore è più ricco della mia lingua.

LEAR A te e ai tuoi rimanga in eterno retaggio questo ampio terzo del nostro bel reame, per nulla inferiore in estensione, valore e rendita a quello assegnato a Goneril. – Ed ora, gioia nostra, l'ultima e la più piccola, il cui giovane amore si contendono i vigneti di Francia e il latte di Borgogna, cosa puoi dire per assicurarti un terzo più opulento che non le sue sorelle? Parla!

CORDELIA Nulla, mio signore.

LEAR Nulla?

CORDELIA Nulla.

LEAR Da nulla non sortirà nulla. Parla ancora.

CORDELIA O mia sfortuna: non riesco a sollevare il peso del mio amore fino alle mie labbra; amo Vostra Maestà secondo il nostro vincolo, né più né meno.

LEAR Su, su, Cordelia! Fammi un discorso più accomodante se non vuoi guastare le tue fortune.

CORDELIA Good my lord,
 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.

65 Why have my sisters husbands if they say
 They love you all? Haply when I shall wed
 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.

70 LEAR But goes thy heart with this?
 CORDELIA Ay, my good lord.
 LEAR So young and so untender?
 CORDELIA So young, my lord and true.
 LEAR Let it be so. Thy truth then be thy dower;

75 For by the sacred radiance of the sun,
 The mysteries of Hecate and the night,
 By all the operation of the orbs
 From whom we do exist and cease to be,
 Here I disclaim all my paternal care,

80 Propinquity, and property of blood,
 And as a stranger to my heart and me
 Hold thee from this for ever. The barbarous Scythian,
 Or he that makes his generation messes
 To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom
 Be as well neighboured, pitied, and relieved

85 As thou, my sometime daughter.
 KENT Good my liege –
 LEAR Peace, Kent.
 Come not between the dragon and his wrath.

90 I loved her most, and thought to set my rest
 On her kind nursery. (to Cordelia) 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?

95 Call Burgundy. (Exit one or more)
 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,

100 Pre-eminence, and all the large effects
 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

105 The name and all th'addition to a king. The sway,
 Revenue, execution of the rest,
 Belovèd sons, be yours; which to confirm,
 This crown part between you.
 KENT Royal Lear,

110 Whom I have ever honoured as my king,
 Loved as my father, as my master followed,
 As my great patron thought on in my prayers –
 LEAR The bow is bent and drawn; make from the shaft.

CORDELIA Mio buon signore, da voi fui
 generata, allevata, ed amata. Io ripago quei
 debiti al loro giusto valore: vi obbedisco, vi
 amo, vi onoro sopra tutto. Perché le mie
 sorelle hanno mariti, se dicono di amare voi
 soltanto? Se mai mi sposerò, il signore la cui
 mano accetterà il mio pegno, porterà via con
 sé la metà del mio amore, metà delle mie
 cure e del mio debito.
 Non mi sposerò certo come le mie sorelle,
 per amare soltanto mio padre.
 LEAR Parli col cuore?
 CORDELIA Sì, mio buon signore.
 LEAR Tanto giovane, e già tanto dura!
 CORDELIA Tanto giovane, mio signore, e
 tanto schietta.
 LEAR Così sia! La tua schiettezza sia tutta la
 tua dote! Che, per il sacro fulgore del sole,
 per i misteri d'Ecate e della notte, per tutti
 gli influssi di quei pianeti per i quali viviamo
 cessiamo di esistere, io qui ripudio ogni
 cura paterna, ogni affinità e comunità di
 sangue, e d'ora innanzi ti riterrò sempre
 estranea a me e al mio cuore. Il barbaro
 Scita, o colui che, cibandosi di chi l'ha
 generato, soddisfa il suo appetito, troveranno
 nel mio seno maggiore simpatia, pietà ed
 aiuto di te, mia figlia un tempo.
 KENT Mio buon sovrano...
 LEAR Silenzio, Kent!
 Non metterti fra il drago e la sua furia.
 L'amavo sopra tutte, e intendevo puntare il
 poco che mi resta sulle sue cure affettuose.
 Via, togliati dai miei occhi! Come spero aver
 pace nella tomba, così le nego il mio cuore
 di padre. Chiamate il Re di Francia! Chi si
 muove? Il Duca di Borgogna! Cornovaglia e
 Albany, includete anche la terza nelle doti
 delle mie due figlie. Se la sposi l'orgoglio,
 che lei chiama schiettezza. In voi
 congiuntamente investo i miei poteri, la
 dignità suprema e gli ampi privilegi che
 s'accompagnano allo stato regale. Noi con
 un seguito di cento cavalieri, a vostro carico,
 stabiliremo la nostra residenza presso di voi
 a turni mensili. Ci riserveremo soltanto il
 titolo ed ogni prerogativa di re; a voi, figli
 dilette, spettano il governo, il reddito, il potere
 esecutivo; dividete fra voi questa corona, a
 conferma di questo.
 KENT Regale Lear, che io ho sempre onorato
 come mio re, amato come mio padre, seguito
 come mio signore, e venerato nelle mie
 preghiere come patrono...
 LEAR L'arco è curvato e teso: schivane la
 freccia.

COMPREHENSION

- Go back to the plot summary and explain who the characters in this scene are.
- Focus on the first part of the text (up to line 14). What reason does King Lear give for wanting to divide his kingdom?
- How does Lear propose to decide which daughter deserves the greatest part of the inheritance?
- Compare the responses of the three daughters. What do they say about their feelings for their father? Match the names with the responses.
 - Goneril a She says that she loves him as much as is right and natural for a daughter to love her father and that there is therefore nothing to be said about the matter.
 - Regan b She says that she loves him so much she is unable to find words adequate to express her love.
 - Cordelia c She says that she loves him so much that no other love is of importance to her and that her love for him is the only thing in which she takes pleasure.
- What is Lear's response to each? Which daughter makes him angry and why?
- What does he decide to do with her inheritance?
- Who attempts to intervene on her behalf?
- What is Lear's reaction? How would you describe Lear's overall behaviour in the scene?

ANALYSIS

- Identify where the following appear in the text. Write the lines next to each feature.
 - aside
 - monologue
 - dialogue
- At the beginning of the scene Lear describes his division of the kingdom as 'our darker purpose'. What do you think he means by this? Choose the interpretation you find most convincing or add your own interpretation if you like.
 - dividing the kingdom, like writing a will, involves admitting one's own mortality
 - he refers to his belief that the kingdom is destined to fall into ruin
 - he implies that the division of the kingdom is in itself a bad thing

d he doesn't believe that any of his daughters deserve to inherit the kingdom

e

- Consider the things to which Goneril compares her love. How would you describe her response to her king? Choose from the following or use a word of your own:

truthful • exaggerated • absurd • poetic •
cynical • moving • realistic

- During her speech Goneril contradicts herself. How does she do this?
- Now look at Regan's response. Who might be angered by what she says?

a Goneril

b Lear

c Cornwall, her husband

- Cordelia's response is to say nothing. Why does she do this? Fill in the following text with the correct words.

absolute • words • threatens • married •
natural • nothing

For Cordelia the bond that joins her to her father is the **1** bond of child to parent. Therefore, it is implicit in their relationship and there is **2** more to be said about it. Cordelia's response reveals Lear's demand for **3** love as excessive, which **4** the natural order of humanity. She also reveals the hypocrisy of her sisters, who though already **5**, continue to claim they love only their father. More generally, Cordelia does not believe that love can be measured by or translated into **6**

- Read Cordelia's asides again. What do they reveal about her notion of love?
- How would you describe the overall atmosphere of this scene? Do you find it more tragic or comic, or does it contain elements of both? Support your ideas with quotes from the text.

DISCUSSION

In pairs or small groups talk about the following topics and then report your ideas to the class.

- Do you think Cordelia was right to be honest with her father? Can you think of another way that Cordelia could have behaved?
- In response to Cordelia Lear says 'nothing will come of nothing'. Do you think we have a duty to our parents in the way we live our lives or are we free to reinvent ourselves completely if we want?