

King Lear: Chronology of Events

Act 1: Lear

Gloucester

Significance

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| <p>Love test – Lear has decided to divide up his kingdom but motivated by vanity he first wants to be told how much he is loved. He wants the authority & prestige of being King (<i>“the name and all th’ addition to a king”</i>) without any of the responsibility (<i>“shake all care and business from our age”</i>).</p> <p>Kent protests (<i>“Be Kent unmannerly when Lear is mad”</i>) that <i>“power to flattery bows”</i>.</p> <p>Lear punishes Cordelia & Kent (disrespect/ speaking the truth) by banishing them.</p> | <p>Letter trick – Edmund tricks Gloucester into believing that Edgar is plotting to murder him, because (like a sulky teenager), he’s sick of having to live by his father’s rules!</p> <p>Arouses G’s suspicion by pretending the letter is ‘nothing’, & claiming he doesn’t believe it!</p> <p>Tells Edgar his father Gloucester is angry with him, and his life is in danger! Offers to help, (<i>“I do serve you in this business”</i>), tells him to hide out & not to go out unarmed.</p> | <p>First impressions of Lear – vain & foolish, Cordelia - honest (<i>“I cannot heave my heart into my mouth”</i>) refuses to grovel, Goneril & Regan & Edmund – greedy, manipulative liars, Kent – loyal & wise, Gloucester – insensitive (<i>“he hath been out nine years and away he shall again”</i>), credulous & poor judge of character, Edgar – naïve & trusting.</p> <p>Introduces themes of family, loyalty & betrayal (filial ingratitude), kingship, blindness.</p> |
| <p>Lear’s advisors – Kent disguised & the Fool.</p> <p>Fool, as Lear’s conscience, tries to make him see foolishness of his actions <i>“thou hast pared thy wit o’ both sides and left nothing i’ th’ middle”</i>. Kent agrees <i>“This is not altogether Fool, my Lord”</i>. He has given away the land & the throne, & now has nothing.</p> | <p>Edmund’s philosophy is outlined: <i>“A credulous father and a brother noble... Let me, if not by birth, have lands by wit”</i></p> | <p>Lear’s journey towards self-knowledge begins as he is forced to realise that without power he has no authority and will not be obeyed now that Goneril has what she wants. He cannot accept his new status as an ordinary human being, rather than a powerful King <i>“does anyone here know me?”</i></p> |

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| <p>Goneril & Lear's argument – <i>“you strike my people and your disordered rabble make servants of their betters”</i> (Goneril) <i>“O Lear, Lear, Lear! Beat at this gate, that let thy folly in and thy dear judgement out”</i> <i>“How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child”</i></p> | | <p>His reaction, however, is out of proportion to her ‘crime’ – <i>“into her womb convey sterility”</i> Realises that Cordelia's fault was <i>“small”</i>. He is full of empty threats to take back the throne <i>“Thou shalt find that I'll resume the shape which thou dost think I have cast off forever”</i>.</p> |
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Act 2: Lear

Gloucester

Significance

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| <p>Kent is put in the stocks by Regan and Cornwall for fighting Oswald. Gloucester objects, saying <i>“the King must take it ill”</i> but is ignored.</p> | <p>Edmund persuades Edgar to flee, then slices open his arm to make it look like Edgar attacked him. Gloucester declares Edgar an outlaw & sentences him to death for treason!</p> | <p>Regan avoids her father by deliberately being away from home, and is determined, following Goneril's lead, to make her father realise that he no longer has any authority.</p> |
| <p>Regan & Lear's argument – <i>“I pray you father, being weak, seem so...”</i> Lear: <i>“I gave you all”</i> Regan: <i>“And in good time you gave it”</i>.</p> | <p>Gloucester pleads with Regan and Cornwall to have pity for Lear when he goes out into the storm <i>“for many miles about there's scarce a bush”</i>. Regan replies <i>“Shut up your doors”</i></p> | <p>Lear finds their disrespect the hardest to take: <i>“tis worse than murder to do upon respect such violent outrage”</i> He still measures love by wealth: <i>“thy fifty yet doth double five and twenty, and thou art twice her love”</i>.</p> |

Act 3: Lear

Gloucester

Significance

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| <p>Lear wanders in the storm – the weather reflects the turmoil in his mind: <i>“I am a man more sinned against than sinning”</i>. Begins to show concern for others <i>“Poor Fool and knave. I have one part in my heart that’s sorry yet for thee”</i>. He projects his own misery onto Poor Tom: <i>“Didst thou give all to thy daughters? And art thou come to this?”</i> and seems slightly mad. He holds a mock trial of his daughters, at which point he has completely lost his mind. Telling the storm what to do – he is still behaving as though he has power.</p> | <p>Gloucester decides he must help Lear but makes the mistake of confiding in Edmund <i>“If I die for it, as no less is promised me, the King my old master must be relieved”</i>. He is similarly distraught when he visits their hovel: <i>“Thou sayest the King grows mad. I’ll tell thee friend, I am almost mad myself”</i>. Cornwall & Regan interrogate Gloucester and pluck out his eyes. Gloucester believes in cosmic justice <i>“I will see the winged vengeance overtake such children”</i> Regan informs him that he has trusted the wrong son & he replies <i>“O my follies! Then Edgar was abus’d. Kind gods, forgive me that, and prosper him”</i>.</p> | <p>Lear begins to understand the hardship of poverty and regrets that he did not ease their burden when he had the power to do so as King <i>“Poor naked wretches...that bide the pelting of this pitiless storm... Oh I have ta’en too little care of this”</i> Lear realises that without possessions and flattery, man is no more than an animal <i>“unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor bare forked animal as thou art”</i>. Lear accepts this, & begins to tear off his clothes. Gloucester introduces the idea that the Gods will punish those who commit evil deeds, and reward those who remain good and loyal – does the play prove this to be true or false?</p> |
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Act 4: Lear

Gloucester

Significance

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| <p>Albany sees Goneril for what she truly is. <i>“Tigers, not daughters, what have you perform’d? A father, and a gracious aged man...”</i></p> <p>Vows to avenge the wrongs done to both Lear and Gloucester. Albany believes that Cornwall’s death is evidence that the Gods will punish evil deeds: <i>“This shows you are above, you justicers...”</i></p> | <p>Blindness allows him to see the truth: <i>“I have no way, and therefore want no eyes; I stumbled when I saw”.</i></p> <p>Loses his faith in divine justice: <i>“As flies to wanton boys are we to the Gods, they kill us for their sport”.</i> Becomes suicidal.</p> <p>Asks the Gods for social equality: <i>“So distribution should undo excess and each man have enough”</i> (echoing Lear’s earlier speech)</p> | <p>The two plots constantly mirror and reinforce each other. Gloucester wanders lonely on the heath, just like Lear.</p> <p>There is a lot of discussion of the role played by the Gods in human affairs. Do they punish the wicked? Or are they cruel Gods who delight in human suffering?</p> |
| <p>Lear’s “burning shame detains him from Cordelia”. Cordelia insists that her motives in bringing the French army to England are pure <i>“No blown ambition doth our arms incite/ But love, dear love, and our aged father’s right”.</i></p> <p>Blind Gloucester meets Mad Lear. Lear is reconciled with Cordelia: <i>“I am a very foolish, fond old man... If you have poison for me, I will drink it”</i> He is genuinely sorry & is prepared to further pay for his actions. He finally takes full responsibility for his foolish actions and begs forgiveness: <i>“Pray you now, forget and forgive. I am old and foolish”.</i></p> | <p>Regan & Goneril both fall for Edmund. Regan’s only regret is that <i>“It was great ignorance, Gloucester’s eyes being out, to let him live. Where he arrives he moves all hearts against us”.</i></p> <p>Edgar saves Gloucester by tricking him into believing that he jumped from the cliff, but the Gods saved him. This ‘miracle’ restores Gloucester the will to live <i>“Henceforth I’ll bear affliction till it do cry out itself ‘Enough, enough’ and die”</i></p> <p>Blind Gloucester meets Mad Lear – both of them have learnt to see in new ways. Edgar realises that Lear is wiser now, than he ever was when he was a sane & powerful king <i>“Reason in madness”.</i></p> | <p>Plots converge – madman & blindman. Lear realises <i>“They told me I was everything, tis a lie”</i> & has lost all pride – when G wants to shake his hand he says <i>“let me wipe it first, it smells of mortality”.</i> Also realises <i>“behold the great image of authority: a dog’s obeyed in office”</i> – a leaders moral qualities are irrelevant; if he is powerful, people will obey him regardless.</p> <p>Lear is struck by the injustice of the world: the poor & weak are punished for their crimes, whilst the rich get away with it <i>“through tatter’d clothes small vices do appear; robes and furr’d gowns hide all”.</i></p> <p>Lear sees life as inherently tragic & meaningless <i>“when we are born, we cry that we are come to this great stage of fools”.</i></p> |

Act 5: Lear

Gloucester

Significance

Albany hesitates to choose sides – on the one hand, a foreign invader (France) must be fought and defeated; on the other, Lear should not be held responsible, as he has genuine grievances.

Lear embraces the opportunity to spend time with his beloved daughter and is able to accept defeat & humiliation of imprisonment with a positive joy *“We two alone will sing like birds i’ the cage”*.

Edmund toys with the sisters: *“Which of them shall I take? Both? One? Or neither? Neither can be enjoyed if both remain alive”*
Albany tries to arrest Edmund & Goneril.

Goneril poisons Regan, who dies.
Edgar kills Edmund.
Goneril kills herself.

Gloucester dies (offstage) *“his flawed heart... ’Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief/ Burst smilingly”*

The Gods are evoked again: Edgar believes that Gloucester deserves his punishment because he sinned in committing adultery: *“the Gods are just, and of our pleasant vices make instruments to plague us. The dark and vicious place where thee he got/ Cost him his eyes”*. (Divine justice).

All of the evil children die – Regan, Goneril & Edmund *“all three now marry in an instant”*

Edmund is redeemed on his deathbed by his attempt to save Cordelia & Lear and by his honesty *“what you have charged me with, that I have done; And more, much more”*

Lear enters with Cordelia dead in his arms:

“Howl, howl, howl!...She’s gone for ever. I know when one is dead and when one lives. She’s dead as earth. Lend me a looking glass; if that her breath will mist or stain the stone, why then she lives!”

“I might have saved her! Now she’s gone forever! Cordelia, Cordelia, stay a little! Ha! What is’t thou say’st? Her voice was ever gentle, soft and low, an excellent thing in a woman. I kill’d the slave that was a-hanging thee”.

Kent sees his death as a blessed release:

“He hates him that would upon the rack of this tough world stretch him out longer”

Albany calls out *“the Gods defend her”* but his hope is in vain, as Lear immediately enters with the dead Cordelia in his arms. The Gods have not intervened, and saved this beautiful, innocent creature.

Kent glimpses the apocalypse in this horrific sight *“Is this the promised end?”*

“All’s cheerless, dark and deadly”

Albany offers to hand back power to Lear *“We will resign, during the life of this old Majesty/ To him our absolute power”*

He offers him too late, what his daughters should have encouraged him to keep in the first place.

Albany’s vision of the future is stubbornly optimistic: *“All friends shall taste/the wages of their virtue, and all foes/ The cup of their deservings”* .

This is in direct contrast to the speech which follows from Lear, and immediately, his death *“Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life and thou no breath at all? Thou’lt come no more; Never, never, never, never, never”*.

Edgar has the final word:

“The weight of this sad time we must obey; Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say. The oldest hath borne most: we that are young Shall never see so much nor live so long”
The truth, Cordelia’s mistress, must take precedence over what we ‘should’ say.