

The tragedy of King Lear

Act 1 Scene 1

King Lear's palace

Enter KENT, GLOUCESTER, *and* EDMOND

- KENT I thought the king had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall.
- GLOUCESTER It did always seem so to us: but now in the division of the kingdom, it appears not which of the dukes he values most, for qualities are so weighed that curiosity in neither can make choice of either's moiety. 5
- KENT Is not this your son, my lord?
- GLOUCESTER His breeding, sir, hath been at my charge. I have so often blushed to acknowledge him, that now I am brazed to't.
- KENT I cannot conceive you. 10
- GLOUCESTER Sir, this young fellow's mother could; whereupon she grew round wombed, and had indeed, sir, a son for her cradle ere she had a husband for her bed. Do you smell a fault?
- KENT I cannot wish the fault undone, the issue of it being so proper.
- GLOUCESTER But I have a son, sir, by order of law, some year elder than this, who yet is no dearer in my account; though this knave came something saucily to the world before he was sent for, yet was his mother fair, there was good sport at his making, and the whoreson must be acknowledged. Do you know this noble gentleman, Edmond? 15 20
- EDMOND No, my lord.
- GLOUCESTER My lord of Kent; remember him hereafter as my honourable friend.
- EDMOND My services to your lordship.
- KENT I must love you and sue to know you better. 25
- EDMOND Sir, I shall study deserving.
- GLOUCESTER He hath been out nine years, and away he shall again. The king is coming.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-61538-0 – King Lear

Rex Gibson Edited by Elspeth Bain and Nic Amy General Editor Vicki Wienand and Richard Andrews

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Lear intends to divide Britain between his daughters. He sets them a test: whoever expresses the greatest love will be given the largest portion. Gonerill voices limitless love for him and wins a share.

1 Enter King Lear

Imagine you are planning to direct a performance of *King Lear*. Start your own Director's Journal to record your ideas as you go through the play. Remember that costume, props, ceremonious behaviour and the deportment of the actor are important – not only to convey Lear's status, but also to explain the way others treat him. Consider the following:

- How might the entrance of Lear, his daughters and the members of the court be staged? Describe what kinds of effects you can create by staging it in different ways.
- How will it be clear to the audience which figure is the king?
- Will it be obvious what sort of king he is?
- Will it be obvious what sort of father he is?

When you have finished making notes, look again at the images of Lear throughout this book. How closely do your ideas resemble those of other directors?

Language in the play

'our darker purpose' (in pairs)

Lear makes a formal, public declaration of his plans to give his land and power to his daughters and their husbands.

- a** Share a reading of lines 31–49 with your partner and find examples of Lear using the language of power:
- the use of imperatives (orders)
 - the 'royal we' – the use of the plural 'we' and 'our', rather than 'I' or 'mine' (why does he do this?)
 - forceful, determined language.

Re-read the lines to each other, emphasising all these dominant and regal elements of his language.

- b** Talk together about the effect Lear's language might have on the audience.
- c** Lear's desire to 'crawl toward death' without the burdens of kingship seems oddly humble in such an apparently grand and self-important speech. Discuss why he makes this apparently modest statement and how sincere you think he is.

Sennet trumpet fanfare

darker purpose secret intention

fast intent firm intention

son son-in-law

constant will fixed intention

several dowers
separate marriage gifts

amorous sojourn visit as suitors

divest us both of part with

Interest of territory
possession of land

bounty generosity

nature ... challenge
natural affection and good qualities are well matched

word ... the matter
language can convey

bounds limits, boundaries

champaigns plains

meads meadows

issues descendants

*Sennet. Enter KING LEAR, CORNWALL, ALBANY, GONERILL,
REGAN, CORDELIA, and Attendants*

- | | | |
|------------|---|----------------|
| LEAR | Attend the lords of France and Burgundy, Gloucester. | |
| GLOUCESTER | I shall, my lord. | <i>Exit</i> 30 |
| 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,
Conferring them on younger strengths while we 35
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
May be prevented now. The princes, France and Burgundy, 40
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,
Interest of territory, cares of state), 45
Which of you shall we say doth love us most,
That we our largest bounty may extend
Where nature doth with merit challenge? Gonerill,
Our eldest born, speak first. | |
| GONERILL | Sir, I love you more than word can wield the matter,
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; 55
Beyond all manner of so much I love you. | |
| CORDELIA | <i>[Aside]</i> What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent. | |
| LEAR | Of all these bounds even from this line, to this,
With shadowy forests and with champains riched
With plenteous rivers and wide-skirted meads, 60
We make thee lady. To thine and Albany's issues
Be this perpetual. What says our second daughter,
Our dearest Regan, wife of Cornwall? | |

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-61538-0 – King Lear

Rex Gibson Edited by Elspeth Bain and Nic Amy General Editor Vicki Wienand and Richard Andrews

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Regan claims that her greatest joy is her father's love. Lear gives her land equal to Gonerill's share. Cordelia refuses to join in the love test, saying that she simply loves her father as a daughter should.

1 How to say 'Nothing' (in pairs)

Lear seems to suggest that he favours Cordelia in the division of the kingdom (line 81). However, she refuses to join her sisters in flattering her father, answering his request for a declaration of love with 'Nothing' – a word that will be used repeatedly in the rest of the play.

- a** How should Cordelia speak the word 'Nothing'? Discuss this in your pairs.
- b** How does Lear respond – with instant rage or with embarrassed patience? In one production the king and his courtiers thought Cordelia was joking and laughed indulgently at her words. (See below, pp. vi top and 55 for different stagings of this scene.) Take parts and speak lines 80–102 in different ways to discover which interpretation you prefer.
- c** Keep a record of uses of the word 'nothing' during the rest of the play. You could do this in your Director's Journal or on a poster.

▼ **The division of the kingdom.** In many productions, a clear ceremonial pattern – followed in turn by Gonerill and Regan – is established before Cordelia breaks it by saying: 'Nothing.'



self-mettle same spirit

prize me at her worth

judge myself equally valuable

very deed true document

square of sense human body,

perfect feeling

felicitate happy

ponderous heavy, valuable

thine hereditary your heirs

validity value

interested admitted, married

draw win

opulent rich

bond duty as a daughter

mar damage

begot fathered

bred reared

take my plight accept my
wedding vow

REGAN	I am made of that self-mettle as my sister And prize me at her worth. In my true heart 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 In your dear highness' love.	65 70
CORDELIA	<i>[Aside]</i> Then poor Cordelia, And yet not so, since I am sure my love's More ponderous than my tongue.	
LEAR	To thee and thine hereditary ever Remain this ample third of our fair kingdom, No less in space, validity, and pleasure Than that conferred on Gonerill. Now our joy, Although our last and least, to whose young love The vines of France and milk of Burgundy Strive to be interested. What can you say to draw A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.	75 80
CORDELIA	Nothing, my lord.	
LEAR	Nothing?	
CORDELIA	Nothing.	
LEAR	Nothing will come of nothing, speak again.	85
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.	
LEAR	How, how, Cordelia? Mend your speech a little, Lest you may mar your fortunes.	
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. Why have my sisters husbands, if they say They love you all? Happily, 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. But goes thy heart with this?	90 95
LEAR	But goes thy heart with this?	
CORDELIA	Ay, my good lord.	

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-61538-0 – King Lear

Rex Gibson Edited by Elspeth Bain and Nic Amy General Editor Vicki Wienand and Richard Andrews

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Enraged, Lear disowns Cordelia and divides her inheritance between Gonerill and Regan. He proposes that he and his one hundred knights live with Gonerill and Regan in turn. Kent protests.

1 A father's curse (in large groups)

In lines 102–14, Lear invokes ancient beliefs to curse and reject Cordelia. He is bitterly angry at her unwillingness to declare unqualified love for him. This activity will help you explore the force of Lear's furious words and their effect on Cordelia.

- One person (volunteer only!) plays Cordelia. The others, who all represent Lear, stand in a circle around her.
- Each 'Lear' chooses a short section of the king's words that they feel conveys his rejection of Cordelia. This extract can be as short as five or six words, or as much as three lines.
- In turn, speak the words you have chosen. When you have spoken your words, turn your back on Cordelia.
- Repeat the activity, adding gestures to emphasise your words.
- Cordelia can try ways of gesturing and speaking lines from earlier in the script to respond to these attacks, but may not leave the circle.

After you have tried several versions of the activity, talk together about the way in which the words and ideas express Lear's feelings, and the effect they have on Cordelia.

Stagecraft

Reaction (in pairs)

The court assembled expecting a formal ceremony in which the kingdom would be divided. Afterwards there would probably have been celebrations of Cordelia's betrothal to one of her suitors. By this point, however, things are clearly not going as expected. In some productions (particularly film versions), the court is represented by many actors. In others, only the named characters appear on stage.

- Talk together about how the onlookers should react and behave. Lear's words at line 120 suggest that some people at least are frozen in shock. It is important that minor characters do not draw the audience's attention from the main action. How could these 'extras' convey a reaction without being a distraction? Make notes in your Director's Journal suggesting how to handle this.
- How would you advise Gonerill and Regan to react?
- Work with another pair to create a tableau (a 'freeze-frame') showing the reactions of Gonerill, Regan and the court. Members of another pair should interpret and comment on the tableau.

Hecate goddess of witchcraft
operation of the orbs
 astrological influence of the stars

Propinquity ... of blood
 closeness and relationship

Scythian cruel savage
makes his generation messes
 eats his children (messes = meals)

nursery care

Pre-eminence high status
large effects outward shows
by monthly course
 month by month

addition titles, honours
sway control
execution of the rest
 responsibility for everything else
coronet crown

make from the shaft
 get out of the way of the arrow

LEAR	So young, and so untender?	100
CORDELIA	So young, my lord, and true.	
LEAR	Let it be so, thy truth then be thy dower. For by the sacred radiance of the sun, The mysteries of Hecate and the night, By all the operation of the orbs	105
	From whom we do exist and cease to be, Here I disclaim all my paternal care, Propinquity and property of blood, And as a stranger to my heart and me Hold thee from this forever. 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, As thou my sometime daughter.	110
KENT	Good my liege –	
LEAR	Peace, Kent, Come not between the dragon and his wrath. I loved her most, and thought to set my rest On her kind nursery. 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? Call Burgundy. – 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, Pre-eminence, and all the large effects	115
	That troop with majesty. Ourselves 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 The name and all th'addition to a king: the sway, Revenue, execution of the rest, Beloved sons, be yours; which to confirm, This coronet part between you.	120
KENT	Royal Lear, Whom I have ever honoured as my king, Loved as my father, as my master followed,	125
LEAR	As my great patron thought on in my prayers – The bow is bent and drawn, make from the shaft.	130

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-61538-0 – King Lear

Rex Gibson Edited by Elspeth Bain and Nic Amy General Editor Vicki Wienand and Richard Andrews

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Kent challenges Lear's decisions. Kent states his loyalty, but continues to criticise the king's actions. Lear warns Kent to stop his protest on pain of death. Lear is outraged, and begins to declare Kent's punishment.

Language in the play

Kent's plain speaking (in pairs)

In lines 138–48, Kent accuses Lear of madness, criticises Gonerill's and Regan's empty flattery, urges Lear to hold on to power and defends Cordelia's sincerity. He addresses Lear as 'thou' – an inappropriately intimate and casual term for a subject to use to his monarch, who would expect the courtesy of the plural 'you' in such a public conversation.

- One of you speaks Kent's lines. The other, in role as Lear, moves around the room, changing direction as often as they want. Kent must keep reading aloud, following Lear as closely as possible to make him listen. Lear must stop and turn round whenever Kent says something that has a big impact on his feelings as a king and father.
- Talk together about which of Kent's remarks you think Lear would find the most hurtful.



Lear delivers his verdict on Kent.
Which line from the script opposite do you think is being said at this moment?

fork arrow-head

Reserve thy state

keep your powers

Reverb no hollowness

do not echo like an empty vessel

wage stake, make war

true blank centre of a target or line of sight

Apollo god of the sun

vassal wretched slave

Miscreant unbeliever, scoundrel

forbear stop

Revoke cancel, alter

vent clamour make noise

recreant traitor

strained excessive

potency power

- KENT Let it fall rather, though the fork invade
The region of my heart. Be Kent unmannerly
When Lear is mad. What wouldst thou do, old man? 140
Think'st thou that duty shall have dread to speak
When power to flattery bows? To plainness honour's bound,
When majesty falls to folly. Reserve thy state,
And in thy best consideration check
This hideous rashness. Answer my life, my judgement: 145
Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least,
Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sounds
Reverb no hollowness.
- LEAR Kent, on thy life no more.
- KENT My life I never held but as a pawn
To wage against thine enemies, ne'er feared to lose it, 150
Thy safety being motive.
- LEAR Out of my sight!
- KENT See better, Lear, and let me still remain
The true blank of thine eye.
- LEAR Now by Apollo –
- KENT Now by Apollo, king,
Thou swear'st thy gods in vain.
- LEAR O vassal! Miscreant! 155
- ALBANY, CORNWALL Dear sir, forbear.
- KENT Kill thy physician, and thy fee bestow
Upon the foul disease. Revoke thy gift,
Or whilst I can vent clamour from my throat,
I'll tell thee thou dost evil.
- LEAR Hear me, recreant, 160
On thine allegiance hear me.
That thou hast sought to make us break our vows,
Which we durst never yet; and with strained pride,
To come betwixt our sentence and our power,
Which nor our nature nor our place can bear, 165
Our potency made good, take thy reward.
Five days we do allot thee for provision
To shield thee from disasters of the world,

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-61538-0 – King Lear

Rex Gibson Edited by Elspeth Bain and Nic Amy General Editor Vicki Wienand and Richard Andrews

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Lear banishes Kent from Britain, threatening execution if he remains. Kent praises Cordelia's honesty, and urges Gonerill and Regan to fulfil their words of love. Lear offers Cordelia in marriage to Burgundy, without a dowry.

Write about it

Kent's parting words

Enraged by Kent's plain speaking, Lear banishes him and threatens him with a death sentence should he return. Before he says farewell, Kent addresses Lear, Cordelia and her sisters in turn, speaking each time in **rhyming couplets** (two lines of the same length that rhyme at the end). Couplets are often used in the play to indicate the end of a scene or that a character is about to leave the stage. They are also used to draw attention to a moment of significant emotion or to a proverbial statement or 'moral'.

- a** Why do you think Shakespeare gave Kent rhyming couplets here? What effect does it have on the audience? Write down your ideas.
- b** In rhyming couplets, write responses to Kent for Lear, Cordelia, Gonerill and Regan. Use what you have learnt so far of their characters, mood and language to help you with the style and tone of their replies.

1 Who speaks line 182? (in pairs)

A director has to decide whether or not to alter a script in performance. *King Lear* presents several options for variations, as it has survived in two slightly different versions – the Quarto and the Folio (see pp. 244–9). This is also why the spelling of some characters' names varies between copies of the play (for example, Edmond and Gonerill are often Edmund and Goneril in other editions).

In this scene, line 182 is attributed to different characters in the two versions of the script. There are three possible speakers. In the Quarto edition, the line is given to 'Glost' (Gloucester, who has escorted the two suitors into the king's presence). The Folio edition gives the line to 'Cor', which could mean either Cordelia or Cornwall.

- a** Talk to your partner about which speaker you would choose to deliver the line. Give reasons for your choices and record them in your Director's Journal.
- b** Looking at the pictures on pages v, vi and 55 will give you an idea of the different ways this scene can be staged. Experiment with ways in which line 182 in particular could be delivered. In the light of your experiments, note down any advice you would give to the actor on his or her body language and tone of voice.

trunk body**Jupiter** ruler of the gods**large speeches** grand words**adieu** goodbye for ever**old course** former habits**Flourish** trumpet fanfare**rivalled** competed**present dower** marriage gift**tender** offer, give**ought** anything**little seeming substance**

small deceptive thing

pieced added**fitly like** suitably please**infirmities she owes**

deficiencies she possesses