

King Lear

Scene Summaries

Act I

Scene i

This scene introduces most of the major characters. We find that King Lear divides his kingdom between his older daughters Goneril and Regan, disinherits his youngest daughter Cordelia, and banishes the loyal Earl of Kent. By the end of the scene, we get a glimpse of the conspiratorial natures of Goneril and Regan.

Scene ii

The bastard Edmund, son of the Earl of Gloucester, maligns his brother Edgar to Gloucester. Edmund's evil nature becomes more apparent as he also manages to dupe Edgar into believing that he is concerned for his safety in light of Gloucester's anger.

Scene iii

Goneril instructs her steward Oswald to be negligent in serving her father, King Lear. Presumably, Goneril hopes to cajole her father into meekness by causing his needs and desires to go unmet. We find Oswald to be extremely willing to serve his lady and the lady very familiar with her servant.

Scene iv

The disguised but loyal Kent requests and receives employment as one of Lear's band of knights and servants. Also in this scene we meet the Fool, a fascinating character who serves the king as a court jester. The conflict between Goneril and Lear becomes obvious.

Scene v

Lear sends Kent with letters to Gloucester and Regan. The Fool comments upon Lear's errors in judgment. Lear leaves the home of Goneril.

Act II

Scene i

Rumors circulate about a conflict between Albany and Cornwall. Edmund spreads more false tales about Edgar and wins the support of Cornwall.

Scene ii

Kent lets his tongue get the better of him; he insults Oswald at the home of Gloucester and instigates a sword fight. Consequently, the visiting Cornwall puts Kent in the stocks for fighting with Oswald.

Scene iii

Edgar assumes a new identity as a Bedlam beggar, portraying himself as Poor Tom. As this beggar, Edgar adopts the speech and actions of a lunatic and wears a blanket as his sole item of clothing.

Scene iv

Lear finds Kent in stocks at Gloucester's castle. Regan and Goneril team up to deprive Lear of all his attendants. Cornwall orders Lear locked out of Gloucester's home during a windy, stormy night.

Act III

Scene i

Kent and a gentleman discuss Lear's subjection to the storm, commenting upon the king's raving and wandering upon the heath. The two men also discuss the arrival of French troops, implying that war will soon erupt in Britain.

Scene ii

Accompanied by his Fool, Lear sinks into madness and rages at the storm. The Fool provides a sounding board for the growing lunacies of his King.

Scene iii

Gloucester, having received a letter that speaks of divisions between Albany and Cornwall and of French invaders, plans to aid Lear. Edmund, trusted by his father and told of this news, sees an opportunity to betray Gloucester.

Scene iv

Lear, struggling against the madness that he perceives is growing within him, acknowledges the general woes of the poor and meets Edgar who's posing as Tom o'Bedlam. Gloucester offers aid to Lear and his party.

Scene v

Edmund informs Cornwall of Gloucester's aid to Lear. As a reward for this revelation and loyalty, Cornwall promises to strip Gloucester of his estate and title and bestow these upon Edmund.

Scene vi

Lear puts his older daughter "on trial." During this mock trial, Edgar, Kent, and the Fool serve as jurors. Gloucester urges a change of location that deprives Lear of much-needed and potentially healing sleep.

Scene vii

Gloucester is Cornwall's captive. The deepest cruelty of Regan and Cornwall is revealed as Cornwall plucks out the eyes of Gloucester. Servants prove their loyalty; one is killed by Regan because he attacks and mortally wounds Cornwall, and others assist Gloucester after he has been blinded.

Act IV

Scene i

The disguised Edgar now becomes the guide for his blinded father, who has been led to the countryside by a loyal Old Man.

Scene ii

Goneril seeks to gain favor with Edmund and derides Albany's manhood. Albany berates Goneril for her treatment of Lear and learns of Edmund's betrayal of Gloucester.

Scene iii

Kent and a Gentleman discuss Cordelia's emotional state and remark upon the anticipated reunion of Cordelia and Lear.

Scene iv

Cordelia describes the mad condition of her father and indicates preparedness for forthcoming military conflict with Britain.

Scene v

Oswald remains a loyal steward to Goneril yet willingly accepts Regan's commission to murder Gloucester

Scene vi

Edgar leads Gloucester to the Dover "cliffs," from which Gloucester "falls." We observe yet another identity change for Edgar as he and Gloucester encounter the mad Lear. Edgar kills Oswald and obtains a letter that reveals Goneril's planned adultery with Edmund.

Scene vii

Lear and Cordelia reunite as Lear's mind turns toward sanity again. Battle is imminent between France and Britain.

Act V

Scene i

Regan suspects Edmund of dalliance with Goneril. Edgar, still disguised, offers the dead Oswald's letter to Albany. Edmund intends further treason.

Scene ii

The French troops lose the battle, and Edgar seeks safety for Gloucester.

Scene iii

Lear anticipates pleasant captivity with Cordelia, but Edmund's order for the deaths of Lear and his daughter hints that Lear's happiness is to be short-lived. Goneril poisons Regan. Edgar challenges, fights, and mortally wounds Edmund, revealing himself as Edmund's brother. Edmund's order to stop the murders of Lear and Cordelia is too late; we see the heartrending entrance of Lear with the dead Cordelia. Goneril commits suicide, and Lear dies. Kent plans to take his own life.