

# King Lear

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QNW-IFQg3uw>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=abMwECGVsx4&NR=1>

## Introduction

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DD-PQPOw5cU&feature=related>

## Characters

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=22MuYbhrWk4&feature=related>

## Themes

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_a6Vs3sbAW8&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_a6Vs3sbAW8&feature=related)

## Critical Guide to King Lear

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9dQXauKKLc&feature=related>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJ11Chw7e>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ce8BnQPk238&feature=related>

The play begins with two noblemen, Gloucester and Kent, discussing the fact that King Lear is about to divide his kingdom. Their conversation quickly changes, however, when Kent asks Gloucester to introduce his son. Gloucester introduces Edmund, explaining that Edmund is a bastard being raised away from home, but that he nevertheless loves his son dearly.

Lear, the ruler of Britain, enters his throne room and announces his plan to divide the kingdom among his three daughters. He intends to give up the responsibilities of government and spend his old age visiting his children. He commands his daughters to say which of them loves him the most, promising to give the greatest share to that daughter.

Lear's scheming older daughters, Goneril and Regan, respond to his test with flattery, telling him in wildly overblown terms that they love him more than anything else. But Cordelia, Lear's youngest (and favorite) daughter, refuses to speak. When pressed, she says that she cannot "heave her heart into her mouth," that she loves him exactly as much as a daughter should love her father, and that her sisters wouldn't have husbands if they loved their father as much as they say (I.i.90–91). In response, Lear flies into a rage, disowns Cordelia, and divides her share of the kingdom between her two sisters.

The earl of Kent, a nobleman who has served Lear faithfully for many years, is the only courtier who disagrees with the king's actions. Kent tells Lear he is insane to reward the flattery of his older daughters and disown Cordelia, who loves him more than her sisters do. Lear turns his anger on Kent, banishing him from the kingdom and telling him that he must be gone within six days.

The king of France and duke of Burgundy are at Lear's court, awaiting his decision as to which of them will marry Cordelia. Lear calls them in and tells them that Cordelia no longer has any title or land. Burgundy withdraws his offer of marriage, but France is impressed by Cordelia's honesty and decides to make her his queen. Lear sends her away without his blessing.

Goneril and Regan scheme together in secrecy. Although they recognize that they now have complete power over the kingdom, they agree that they must act to reduce their father's remaining authority.

### **Analysis: Act I, scenes i–ii**

The love test at the beginning of Act I, scene i, sets the tone for this extremely complicated play, which is full of emotional subtlety, conspiracy, and double-talk, and which swings between confusing extremes of love and anger. Lear's demand that his daughters express how much they love him is puzzling and hints at the insecurity and fear of an old man who needs to be reassured of his own importance. Of course, rather than being a true assessment of his daughters' love for him, the test seems to invite—or even to demand—flattery. Goneril's and Regan's professions of love are obviously nothing but flattery: Goneril cannot even put her alleged love into words: “A love that makes . . . speech unable / Beyond all manner of so much I love you” (I.i.59); Regan follows her sister's lead by saying, “I find she names my very deed of love; Only she comes too short” (I.i.70–71).

In contrast to her sisters, whose professions are banal and insincere, Cordelia does not seem to know how to flatter her father—an immediate reflection of her honesty and true devotion to him. “Love, and be silent,” she says to herself (I.i.60). When her father asks her the crucial question—what she can say to merit the greatest inheritance—she answers only, “Nothing, my lord,” and thus seals her fate (I.i.86). Cordelia's authentic love and Lear's blindness to its existence trigger the tragic events that follow.

The shift of the play's focus to Gloucester and Edmund in Act I, scene ii, suggests parallels between this subplot and Lear's familial difficulties. Both Lear and Gloucester have children who are truly loyal to them (Cordelia and Edgar, respectively) and children who are planning to do them harm (Goneril and Regan, and Edmund, respectively); both fathers mistake the unloving for the loving, banishing the loyal children and designating the wicked ones their heirs. This symbolic blindness to the truth becomes more literal as the play progresses—in Lear's eventual madness and Gloucester's physical blinding.

Moreover, Gloucester's willingness to believe the lies that Edmund tells him about Edgar seems to reflect a preexisting fear: that his children secretly want to destroy him and take his power. Ironically, this is what *Edmund*, of course, wants to do to Gloucester, but Gloucester is blind to Edmund's treachery. Gloucester's inability to see the truth echoes the discussion between Goneril and Regan at the end of Act I, scene i, about Lear's unreliability in his old age: the “infirmity of his age” (I.i.291) and his “unconstant starts” (I.i.298) evoke images of senility and suggest that his daughters ought to take control from him, just as Edmund is taking control from Gloucester.

Edmund is significantly more complicated than the other major villains in the play, Regan and Goneril. He schemes against his father's life, but not just because he wants to inherit his wealth and land; indeed, his principal motive seems to be desire for *recognition* and perhaps even the love denied him because of his bastard status. The first time we see Edmund, at the beginning of Act I, scene i, his own father is mocking him because he is illegitimate. Edmund's treachery can be seen as a rebellion against the social hierarchy that makes him worthless in the eyes of the world. He rejects the “plague of custom” (I.ii.3) that makes society disdain him and dedicates himself to “nature” (I.ii.1)—that is, raw, unconstrained existence. He will not be the only character to invoke nature in the course of the play—the complicated relationships that obtain among the natural world, the gods above, and fate or justice pervade the entire play. ([www.sparknotes.com](http://www.sparknotes.com))