King Lear

Study Guide by Course Hero

What's Inside

Book Basics

AUTHOR
William Shakespeare

YEARS WRITTEN
1605–06

GENRE
Tragedy

ABOUT THE TITLE
Shakespeare took the title from an earlier anonymous play, *The True Chronicle History of King Leir and His Three Daughters, Gonerill, Ragan and Cordelia*, which was also a source of the story. The source play was performed as early as 1594.

In Context

Elizabethan Theater

Several aspects of Elizabethan theater provide context for *King Lear*. First, formal sets were minimal. The stage would have been largely bare, with just a few objects providing a loose framework for the play. As a result, Shakespeare's characters often comment on what they are seeing around them in the course of the action.

In addition, all the actors were male. The female roles were played by men or boys. It has been suggested that the same actor might have played the Fool and Cordelia, as they are never onstage at the same time.

The professional Elizabethan theaters were run by distinct companies, and playwrights made their livings by writing plays for those companies. This meant they often wrote for specific actors. Shakespeare was fortunate enough to be part of the Lord Chamberlain's Men (later the King's Men) with Richard Burbage, widely considered the greatest actor in London. Burbage was known for playing tragedy particularly well, and he was the first actor to play Hamlet, Othello, Richard III, Macbeth, and King Lear. Because the men worked together for years and Shakespeare knew Burbage's strengths, the part of Lear may have been written with him in mind.

Another attribute of the Elizabethan stage relevant to *King Lear* is the relationship between the theaters and the royal family. All theater companies wanted royal patronage, and Shakespeare's had it. The company was renamed the King's Men after James I was crowned. Shakespeare and his company performed for the king and his court—*King Lear* was performed for the king on December 26, 1606—and a number of Shakespeare's plays focus on monarchy and kingship in ways that would directly comment on and appeal to James I.

For example, James had succeeded a female monarch who had no heirs, and he had unified a fragmented kingdom. He was also deeply and directly concerned about monarchy in theory and wrote two works on kingship. James's 1594 work, *Basilikon doron* (which means "royal gift"), was written in the form of a letter to his eldest son. His address to the general public, *The True Law of Free Monarchies*, was published in 1598. This later work argues for royal absolutism and for the divine right of kings. Both *Macbeth* and *King Lear* show what happens to those who rebel against a king and break up a kingdom, and both plays include very dark female characters. In *King Lear*, the purity of male characters such as the Earl of Kent and Edgar is in marked contrast to the scheming of women characters like Regan and Goneril.

Production History

King Lear is now considered one of Shakespeare's defining masterpieces, but it has a complex production history. The script is difficult to perform, given the emotional extremes and shifts in pacing. In 1681 Nahum Tate published an adaptation of the play that became the primary version performed for roughly 150 years (until 1838). That version has a much more conventional morality. Instead of dying alongside the evil characters, the good characters live and are rewarded. Cordelia and Edgar end up as lovers, and Lear lives to an old age.

In addition, there was a 10-year span, from 1810 to 1820, when *King Lear* wasn't performed professionally at all. During that era, the reigning king, George III, suffered from periodic madness, and because Lear goes mad, the play was considered inappropriate for public performance.

Author Biography

Scholars generally agree that William Shakespeare lived from April 23, 1564, to April 23, 1616. He was born in the small town of Stratford-upon-Avon, England. On November 28, 1582, he married Anne Hathaway of Stratford. Their first child, Susanna, was born in 1583 and was 18 months old when the twins Hamnet and Judith were born. Shakespeare spent much of his professional life in London, where he worked as an actor and a playwright. The author of 38 plays and 154 sonnets, Shakespeare is considered England's national poet and the greatest dramatist that nation, and perhaps the world, ever produced.

Shakespeare wrote several types of plays—histories, tragedies, and comedies—and often used existing histories, stories, and plays as his source material. In the case of *King Lear*, Shakespeare drew his story from sources familiar to a 17th-century audience, including Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England* (1587) and an existing play, published anonymously, titled *The True Chronicle History of King Leir and His Three Daughters, Gonerill, Ragan and Cordella* (published in 1605 but performed around 1594). While Holinshed's history includes the core event of the plot, in which Lear divides his kingdom among his daughters and finds Cordelia's answer insufficient, that story has a happy ending: Lear is restored to the throne for two more years, and Cordelia succeeds him as queen. In turn, Holinshed drew his source information from *Historia Regium Britanniae*, a history written in the 12th century by Geoffrey of Monmouth.

Like several other of Shakespeare's plays, such as *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, *King Lear* is a tragedy. Shakespeare's tragedies feature individual men struggling with their humanity. *King Lear* centers on a larger than life character who has a tragic flaw, an imperfection that leads to his eventual downfall. This tragic flaw sets off a series of events from which there is no turning back. Shakespeare's tragedies expose life's dark side, focusing on such universal themes as death, justice, loyalty, and the corrupting influence of power.

During Shakespeare's life, two monarchs ruled over England. Elizabeth I reigned from 1558 to 1603. During her long reign, Elizabeth did not marry, and she died without an heir, which left the English understandably anxious about the future of their country. This situation is reflected in the bitterness over inheritance and the insults regarding sterility that fill *King Lear*. Elizabeth was succeeded by James I, previously known as James VI of Scotland. A unified kingdom was important to James, and readers can see those concerns play out in *King Lear*; the tragedy shows the disaster that results when a kingdom splinters.

Characters

King Lear

Lear's world falls apart because he trusts himself too much; he thinks he can manipulate events, tell who loves him, and stay king even after setting his throne aside. He is proud and full of power at the start of the play, but he crumbles into doubt and,

eventually, madness. The entire play follows Lear down from the throne and into exile; from there, he weathers a storm, despair, and madness. Lear dies at the end of the play.

Edmund

Edmund schemes, first to displace his brother, Edgar, and then to betray his father. He lies and manipulates. He has affairs with both Regan and Goneril. When he is charged with treason in Act 5, he fights an anonymous challenger who is seeking to prove Edmund's guilt through trial by combat. This unknown knight turns out to be his brother, Edgar, who kills Edmund.

Edgar

Edgar starts the play quite naïve, and he is quickly taken in by his brother's schemes. Once he's banished, he disguises himself as Poor Tom, a crazy beggar, to stay in the kingdom. He cares for his father, showing his loyalty. Edgar guides his father through a suicide attempt, lying to him as Gloucester leaps from what he thinks are the cliffs of Dover. Edgar rises in stature throughout the play, killing the treacherous Goneril's servant Oswald and his own traitorous brother, Edmund. In the play's final lines, Edgar is made joint ruler of the kingdom.

Earl of Gloucester

Gloucester is an older nobleman within Lear's kingdom. He is quite loyal to Lear and at times stands in for him. Gloucester has two sons: Edgar, his older and legitimate son, and Edmund, who is illegitimate. Gloucester is deceived by Edmund's betrayal of Edgar, and he banishes his elder son. Gloucester remains loyal to Lear throughout, and the Duke of Cornwall punishes him for this loyalty by gouging his eyes out. Gloucester wants to kill himself due to his despair, and he asks someone he thinks is a poor beggar to guide him to the cliffs of Dover. Gloucester dies at the end of the play.

Cordelia

When Lear divides his kingdom in Act 1, Scene 1, Cordelia refuses to play her assigned role and declare how much she loves her father. As a result, he strips her of her dowry. Only the King of France is willing to marry her without a dowry, a fact that shapes her fate and Britain's. She is absent through most of the first three acts, then returns to Britain late in the play, bringing French forces with her. In the final battle, the rebel forces capture her. Edmund arranges for her to be put to death, and she's hanged in Act 5. Because of her steadfast loyalty to her father, she is a saintly figure throughout King Lear.

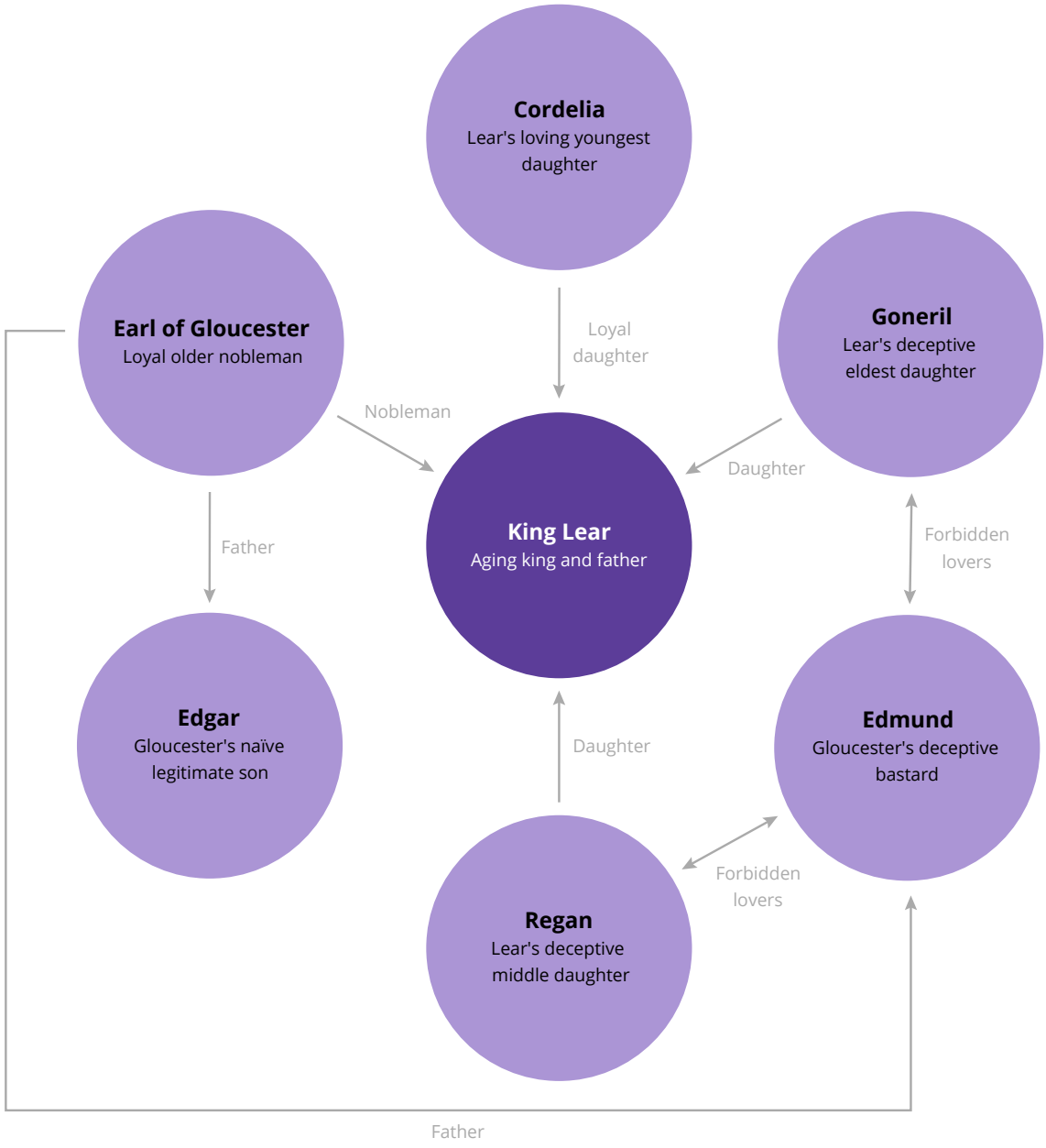
Goneril

Goneril is a true villain. She shows this by lying to her father about how much she loves him and by acting to erode Lear's authority and position. She's married to the Duke of Albany, but as she rebels against her father and seeks power, her relationship with her husband deteriorates until the two of them actively loathe one another. She begins an affair with Edmund. When he's killed, she poisons her sister Regan and stabs herself.

Regan

Like Goneril, Regan is a true villain. At the beginning of the play, she makes public declarations of intense love for her father, but she follows this by finding ways to undermine his authority. She and Goneril turn their father out to wander in a storm. Regan suggests that her husband, the Duke of Cornwall, blind Gloucester for his treachery. When a servant tries to prevent this, she picks up a sword and kills him. Like Goneril, she begins an affair with Edmund and dies after he's killed, when Goneril poisons her.

Character Map



- Main character
- Other Major Character
- Minor Character

Full Character List

Character	Description
King Lear	Lear is king of Britain, but he is tired and ready to step down at the end of a long life.
Edmund	Edmund is Gloucester's younger, illegitimate son. He is a scheming manipulator.
Edgar	Edgar is Gloucester's older, legitimate son. He is loyal to his father.
Earl of Gloucester	Gloucester is a loyal nobleman and the father of Edgar and Edmund.
Cordelia	Cordelia, Lear's youngest daughter, is sincere and saintly.
Goneril	Goneril is Lear's eldest daughter. She is power-mad and unscrupulous.
Regan	Regan is Lear's middle daughter. She is treacherous and cold.
Curan	Curan is a gentleman of Gloucester's house.
Duke of Albany	Goneril's husband is measured and careful.
Duke of Burgundy	The Duke of Burgundy wants to marry Cordelia but retreats when Lear removes her dowry.
Duke of Cornwall	The Duke of Cornwall, Regan's husband, is a violent, self-interested traitor.
Earl of Kent	The Earl of Kent serves the king loyally even when banished.
First Servant	Cornwall's servant attacks his master in an effort to keep him from blinding Gloucester.
The Fool	The Fool is the king's companion and guide.
King of France	The King of France is Cordelia's suitor. He shows his true love for Cordelia by marrying her even though Lear has removed her dowry.
Oswald	Oswald is Goneril's steward.

Plot Summary

King Lear is set in Britain in an unspecified period of the Middle Ages. Everything in *King Lear* unfolds from two overarching plot elements. First, Lear is old. He wants to step down from the throne and divide his kingdom among his three daughters. Second, the Earl of Gloucester has an illegitimate son, Edmund, who is unhappy with his bastard status and decides to displace his older brother and the legitimate heir, Edgar.

Lear holds a public ceremony during which he asks his three daughters to declare their love for him. The older two daughters, Goneril and Regan, make great declarations of love. Each receives a third of Lear's kingdom. Lear's youngest daughter, Cordelia, objects to her sisters' false flattery and won't take part in the ceremony. Outraged, Lear strips her of her dowry and divides the remaining third of the kingdom between Goneril and Regan, oblivious to the insincerity of his elder daughters. The King of France is one of Cordelia's suitors, and he accepts her as his wife without a dowry or her father's approval. Banished by her father, Cordelia goes to France and becomes queen. When the Earl of Kent objects to Lear's treatment of Cordelia, Lear banishes him as well.

Meanwhile, Edmund convinces his father that Edgar is plotting treason, and Gloucester exiles Edgar under pain of death. Edgar disguises himself as a crazy beggar, calling himself Poor Tom, so he can stay in the kingdom.

Kent remains loyal to Lear, and he disguises himself so he can stay with the king and serve him. Lear's plan is to divide his time between his elder daughters' estates, accompanied by 100 knights. In reality, however, neither daughter wants him in her home, and both take actions to cast him out. First, Goneril and Regan object to his knights' conduct and the fact that he has so many serving him. When Kent disciplines Oswald, Goneril's steward, she and her husband, the Duke of Albany, betray Lear's authority by putting Kent in the stocks. Finally,

when the sisters suggest their father put aside most (or all) of his 100 knights, Lear rages off into the night.

Lear wanders in a storm accompanied by the Fool. Kent (in disguise) soon finds the king and helps him. Between the storm and his daughters' treachery, Lear's mind is in turmoil, and he begins to go mad. While the king and the two other men are taking shelter from the storm in a hut, Edgar (disguised as Poor Tom) joins them.

Kent secretly updates Cordelia on her father's situation. When Gloucester tells Edmund that French forces have landed in England to help restore Lear to the throne, Edmund sees a way of gaining his inheritance more quickly. He betrays his father by telling Regan, Goneril, and their husbands that Gloucester is working with the French. When the Duke of Cornwall (Regan's husband) learns that French forces have landed, he and Regan punish Gloucester by gouging out his eyes. One of Cornwall's servants is so upset by this that he tries to stop them. He wounds Cornwall fatally but is also killed.

Regan and Cornwall (who dies soon after) turn out Gloucester, now blind, to wander through the countryside. One of his peasants helps him at first, and then Edgar, disguised as Poor Tom, takes over that task. Gloucester asks Edgar to guide him to the high cliffs of Dover so he can jump off and commit suicide. Edgar says he will, but he leads his father instead to a low ledge and tricks him into thinking he has survived a great fall.

During an update on the battle, a split between Goneril and her husband, the Duke of Albany, is revealed; they are quarreling, and she accuses him of cowardice. While they are fighting, a messenger arrives and reports that the Duke of Cornwall is dead. When Albany asks why and learns Cornwall was killed for blinding Gloucester, he praises Gloucester's loyalty. This indicates that Albany's loyalties lie with Lear, finalizing the split with his wife.

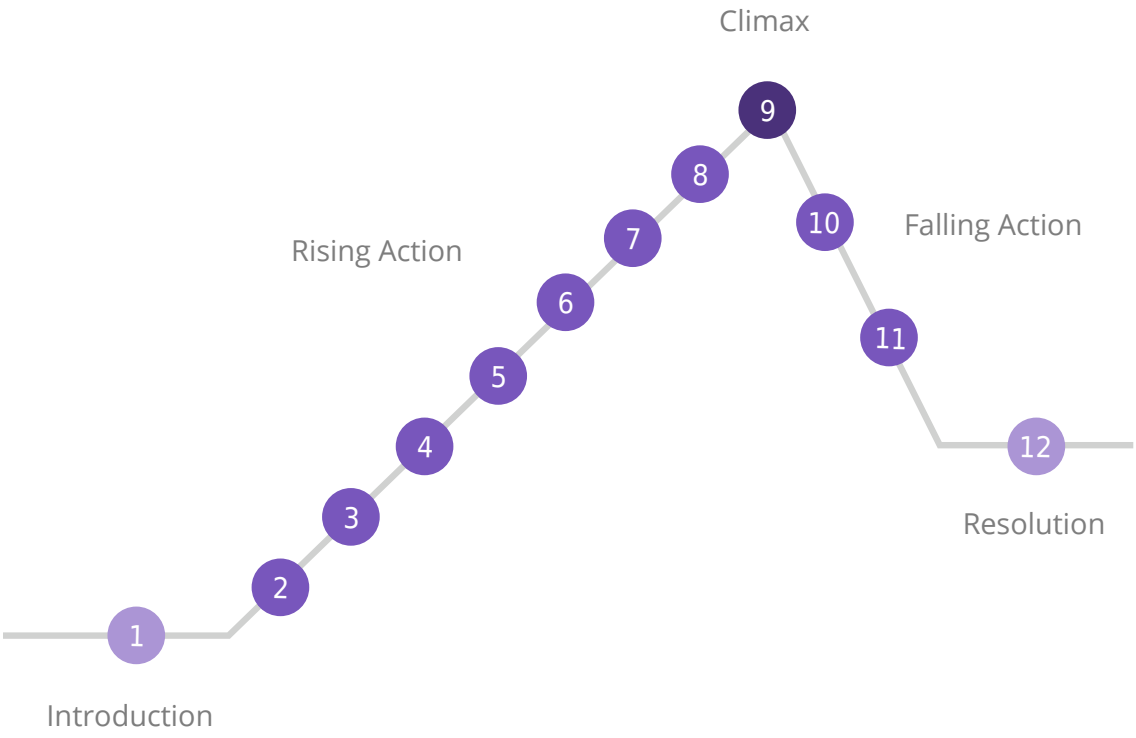
Cordelia returns from France and joins forces with Kent. She takes care of her father as a battle looms between French forces supporting Lear and rebel forces led by Edmund and backed by Regan and Goneril. During this period, Lear largely regains his sanity.

As the battle nears, the rebels are quarreling. At some point, Edmund started having affairs with both Regan and Goneril. Regan is so obsessed with having him that she doesn't care if the rebels win or lose the battle.

Edmund's forces capture Lear and Cordelia. Edmund sends them to prison and then sends a messenger with orders to kill them. Albany charges Edmund with betraying the king and says he'll prove Edmund's treason through one-on-one combat. An anonymous knight appears and volunteers to fight Edmund. The knight wins the contest, wounding Edmund mortally. The knight then reveals he is Edgar, Edmund's brother. Their father, Gloucester, dies after hearing this. Edmund dies a few moments later.

A servant enters to announce that Goneril has poisoned Regan and stabbed herself. Lear enters, carrying Cordelia. She's dead, as is Lear's Fool, and Lear has killed the man who executed Cordelia. Lear dies of grief. Albany tells Kent and Edgar they will rule the kingdom together until order has been restored.

Plot Diagram



Introduction

1. Lear divides his kingdom among daughters, exiles Kent.

Rising Action

2. Edmund plans to betray and displace his brother.

3. Kent disguises himself to help Lear.

4. Regan and Goneril kick Lear out.

5. Lear goes mad.

6. Cornwall blinds Gloucester.

7. Gloucester tries to jump to his death from cliffs of Dover.

8. Edgar kills Oswald when he tries to kill Gloucester.

Climax

9. Edgar defeats Edmund in single combat.

Falling Action

10. Cordelia is hanged.

11. Lear and his fool die.

Resolution

12. Albany announces Kent and Edgar will rule together.

Timeline of Events

Sometime in the Middle Ages

King Lear divides his kingdom among his daughters.

Soon after

Edmund declares his intention to displace his brother, Edgar.

Within a few days

Kent disguises himself to stay with Lear.

A few days later

when Regan and Goneril refuse to let him keep his knights, Lear leaves.

That night

Lear and his fool get caught in the storm.

The next day

Cornwall blinds Gloucester as punishment for helping the king.

That day

Cornwall dies after his servant attacks him.

Soon after

French forces land to assist Lear.

That day

Edgar kills Edmund in a duel.

A few minutes later

Cordelia, Lear, Gloucester, and the Fool die.

Scene Summaries

Act 1, Scene 1

Summary

The Earl of Kent and the Earl of Gloucester are talking about what has been happening in the kingdom. When Kent asks about Gloucester's son Edmund, Gloucester jokes about Edmund's conception. Gloucester introduces Edgar to Kent.

King Lear enters. The Dukes of Albany and Cornwall walk with him, as do his daughters, Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia, and some servants. Lear says he's ready to divide his kingdom among his three daughters. He'll give the largest portion to the daughter who loves him most. Goneril and Regan both give positive and poetic answers, and Lear gives each of them a third of his kingdom. He then asks Cordelia. She refuses to make any claim about how much she loves him.

Furious, Lear disowns Cordelia and splits her third of the kingdom between her sisters. Kent tries to advise the king against his actions. Lear banishes Kent for interfering.

Cordelia's suitors, the Duke of Burgundy and the King of France, enter. When Burgundy learns Cordelia no longer carries a dowry, he declines to marry her. The King of France accepts Cordelia as his wife without a dowry. Everyone leaves except the King of France and Lear's three daughters. Cordelia tells her sisters she knows what they are really like and asks them to take care of their father. Regan tells her to leave them alone, and Goneril tells Cordelia she needs to focus on pleasing her husband. Cordelia and her husband leave. Once Goneril and Regan are alone, they talk about how Lear is changing with age and how they will need to act to address the situation.

Analysis

In this first scene, Shakespeare introduces all the themes of the play, and he sets all of the plot threads in motion. Kent and Gloucester's discussion of recent events in the country signals that their king is changing and changeable and that more change is to come.

This change soon appears. Lear repeatedly refers to Cordelia as his favorite, saying she is "our joy." However, as soon as she doesn't conform to his expectations, he changes completely. Removing her dowry not only makes Cordelia an oddity (in this period, a noblewoman was expected to have a dowry) but also puts her at risk. She might never marry as a result. Lear's reaction to his daughters' responses shows that he's in an odd place mentally; he either doesn't know his family nearly as well as he thinks he does, or he's willing to accept everyone at face value. Neither quality is worthy of a king.

As for his daughters, they immediately show their true natures when they talk amongst themselves. Cordelia attempts to give her elder sisters advice, saying, "I know you what you are, / And like a sister am most loath to call / Your faults as they are named. Love well our father." When her sisters dismiss her concern and then treat their father's actions toward them not as their good fortune but as something to be upset about, they signal their selfishness.

Finally, in addition to the obvious themes of family relations, aging, and order, Shakespeare introduces the theme of vision. He shows how important vision is by demonstrating what happens when Lear—and, to a lesser extent, Gloucester—lack it. Both men are heads of their families and carry considerable social authority, but neither can see who his children truly are or how his actions will influence them.

Act 1, Scene 2

Summary

Gloucester's son Edmund enters, ranting about his status as a bastard and how he plans to displace his legitimate brother, Edgar. Gloucester enters, and Edmund uses a letter, supposedly written by Edgar, to manipulate his father into thinking Edgar plans to betray him. Gloucester explodes, saying he'll arrest Edgar, but Edmund cautions against moving without proof and makes plans to get more evidence of Edgar's plans.

Once Gloucester leaves, Edmund reflects on how people create their own destinies and then find excuses for their actions in the heavens. Edmund is mainly focused on people's weaknesses of character, particularly that of a sexual nature, and their tendency to blame their mistakes on the gods. Edgar enters, and Edmund manipulates his brother, making him

think their father is angry with him. Edmund tells Edgar he should arm himself.

Analysis

Act 1, Scene 1 sketches the subplot by indicating Gloucester has an illegitimate son; this scene shows what this means to the characters. While Gloucester might joke about the details of Edmund's conception, the absence of a marriage between Gloucester and this woman has effectively ruined Edmund's life. His illegitimacy drives him and defines him.

Edmund is able to manipulate his father quite easily, and this scene reveals the nature of their relationship to the audience. On the surface, Gloucester loves his son and trusts him implicitly. Darker (and more likely) interpretations are that Gloucester doesn't know or understand either of his sons, and, as a result, he can't know how to act in relation to them.

This scene is thematically linked to the first scene through the disruption of social order and through dysfunctional family relationships. Finally, this scene introduces a plot device that will quickly become symbolic: the letter.

Act 1, Scene 3

Summary

Goneril consults with her steward, Oswald, complaining about how her father and his men have been acting. Oswald reports that Lear recently hit one of Goneril's servants because the servant scolded Lear's fool. Goneril says Lear complains about everything and his knights are out of hand. She tells Oswald to tell her father she's sick, if he asks, and that Oswald and the other servants should be less attentive to Lear and his knights.

Analysis

This scene documents the process of social disintegration that continues throughout *King Lear*. Either Lear's men have been misbehaving, or they've been behaving as they always have and this is the first time Goneril has had to deal with it. In either case, her irritation shows how little slack she's willing to cut her supposedly beloved father.

Goneril's discussion with Oswald also shows how readily she turns to lies. Rather than speaking with her father directly, Goneril's first instinct is to lie and be rude. She also shows a casual disregard for the social order, telling her servant to show less respect for the king—a serious offense.

Finally, this scene is the first in which a pivotal event takes place offstage, a device Shakespeare uses throughout *King Lear*. This shifts the audience's focus; they cannot simply watch Lear's knights and conclude for themselves that they are being rude. Instead, the scene becomes one about character and judging character.

Act 1, Scene 4

Summary

Kent takes the stage alone. He has disguised himself so he can stay near Lear, despite Lear's having banished him. When Lear enters with his knights, the disguised Kent talks his way into Lear's service.

Oswald is repeatedly rude to Lear, prompting Lear and the disguised Kent to talk about how they've been mistreated. Lear sends one servant to fetch his daughter and another to fetch the Fool. While he's waiting, Oswald reenters. When he speaks rudely to Lear, Lear hits Oswald, and Kent trips him.

The Fool enters. He comments on how Kent is foolish to join Lear's company now. When the Fool teases Lear about the situation he's set up with his daughters, Lear threatens to whip him. The Fool gives Lear advice and then returns to chiding the king for giving away his crown, calling him a fool.

When Goneril enters, she and Lear clash over how his company has been acting and the duties a daughter owes a father. They go back and forth about these issues, sometimes with Albany in the mix, until Lear storms out, saying he will go stay with Regan instead. Goneril sends her sister a letter to warn her.

Analysis

Though this is technically one scene, there are four distinct "beats," or developments, within it. Kent demonstrates just how loyal he is to Lear, as he's willing to risk death to stay with him. He also demonstrates one of the play's complexities,

showing that not all deception is wrong. Instead, the value of a deceptive act (in this case, Kent's disguising himself) is determined by its intent.

Oswald's mistreatment of Lear and the knight shows the kingdom is continuing to disintegrate. Another important event has happened offstage, leaving the audience to wonder whether Goneril's household is mistreating Lear's company or if Lear and his men are out of hand.

The Fool's commentary introduces a new theme: the value of foolishness or madness. The Fool turns the order of things upside down in mocking Lear and offering Lear the hat of the court jester. Lear becomes the Fool and the Fool becomes the wise man in this turn of fortune. The Fool comments on Lear's failing condition and says, "Thou art nothing." In essence, Lear has become nothing by dividing his kingdom. He has lost his kingdom, the power he once had, and the respect he expects to retain. The animal metaphors Lear uses to describe Goneril indicate that he believes she has lost her human feelings.

The final exchange advances the plot. Lear won't be able to settle permanently in one location or to move between his daughters when he chooses. When a daughter treats him too badly or when he gets too mad (or both), he'll move on.

Act 1, Scene 5

Summary

Lear, his Fool, and Kent (in disguise) enter. Lear sends Kent to Gloucester with a letter. Lear's Fool predicts Regan will treat Lear better than her sister has, even though Regan's disposition is just as sour. The Fool continues his practice of entertaining the king while making surprisingly wise comments about the current situation. Just before they leave to get their horses, Lear openly worries about going mad.

Analysis

Shakespeare uses letters in this scene for both dramatic and symbolic purposes. By choosing to send Kent, whom Lear believes he has just met, with a letter, Shakespeare shows how much Lear trusts Kent. In a way, this character trait is both touching and damning; Lear trusts too easily, and he trusts people because they say what he wants to hear, as Kent does, and show their loyalty in public, as his daughters did.

Though this scene is brief, it is marked by both verbal irony and foreshadowing. If Regan has the same disposition as her sister does, why in the world would the Fool predict her treatment of the king will be better? Lear's comments about madness foreshadow his madness later in the play while also signaling that his self-awareness is growing.

Act 2, Scene 1

Summary

Edmund and an acquaintance named Curan discuss the fact that Regan and her husband, the Duke of Cornwall, will be at Gloucester's castle that night. They also gossip, relating how Cornwall and Albany are feuding.

After Curan exits, Edmund continues to speak of how this news fits with his plans, as his father, Gloucester, is ready to arrest Edgar. When Edgar enters, Edmund warns him that their father is coming, and he convinces Edgar that they must pretend to fight. Edgar leaves, and Edmund cuts his own arm with his sword. When Gloucester enters, Edmund then claims his brother has fled after trying to draw Edmund into his plot to murder their father. Gloucester issues a death sentence on Edgar.

Cornwall, Regan, and their servants enter. Gloucester confirms the rumors of Edgar's treachery. Regan blames Edgar's change in character on his associating with Lear's knights. Cornwall praises Edmund for acting like a good son and promises to punish Edgar severely if he's caught.

Analysis

When Curan and Edmund take the stage, they do so from different directions, indicating that they come from different places. This suggests how widely discussion of the current political upheaval has spread. When Curan leaves the stage, he leaves the play as well, which manages to further suggest a disordered kingdom; people who are intimate with the nobility are simply vanishing. The content of their discussion matters as well. When royalty or nobility clash, everyone is affected.

Edmund's manipulation of his brother and father comes close to genius. When he says to Edgar, "Pardon me. / In cunning I

must draw my sword upon you," his request for "pardon" is meant to deceive. How could someone so polite be a villain? Edmund's decision to wound himself and then call for his father's help is similarly convincing. Who else but an attacker could have drawn blood?

Regan, though, is a close second in manipulation, as she manages to tie Edgar's supposed change in character to her consuming issue, the behavior of Lear's knights. Although there is no indication that Edgar is spending time with these men, Regan manages to trace all upheaval in the kingdom back to Lear.

Act 2, Scene 2

Summary

Still in disguise, Kent arrives at Goneril's house. When Oswald greets him, Kent insults Oswald and then attacks him. Edmund, Goneril, Cornwall, and Gloucester rush onstage. Cornwall puts Kent in the stocks as punishment. Gloucester protests, arguing that the king will punish Kent for any misdeeds and might take offense if someone else does. Cornwall says he'll take responsibility. Everyone leaves except Gloucester, who stays with Kent (now in the stocks) long enough to apologize. Once Gloucester leaves, Kent takes out a letter from Cordelia, which says she promises to find a way to make things better.

Analysis

This scene is like a primer in medieval rights and hierarchy. Oswald has never done anything terribly wrong to Kent, but Kent responds to him with tremendous anger, calling him "a knave, a rascal, an eater of broken meats," and other insulting names. Kent is profoundly angry because Oswald was rude to Lear and he is responding on Lear's behalf. When he warns that Lear is likely to want to punish Kent himself, Gloucester is also standing in for the king, speaking up for his concerns and rights. In staying behind to apologize, Gloucester shows he is loyal to the king. By contrast, Cornwall's decisions should set off warning bells for the audience. When he takes responsibility for Kent's punishment, he is essentially taking the king's place, as he is choosing to discipline the king's man.

The scene is also unexpectedly funny. When he first appears in *King Lear*, in Act 1, Scene 1, Kent is stiffly proper. To hear him rattle off line after line of inventive insults is amusing.

Finally, the audience will notice the key role of the letter. This one foreshadows Cordelia's eventual return. It is also bittersweet, because the letter promises to make things better, but the worst is yet to happen.

Act 2, Scene 3

Summary

Edgar takes the stage by himself. He's been declared an outlaw and is on the run. His plan is to dirty his face, muss his hair, strip down to almost nothing, and pretend to be crazy.

Analysis

This is the second instance in *King Lear* in which a good and innocent character chooses to disguise himself in order to stay in the kingdom. Whereas Kent becomes a serving man to blend in with others in Lear's service, Edgar becomes something wilder: Poor Tom. The scene ends with the line, "'Edgar' I nothing am," which shows the fragility of characters' identities in the play. One good trick by his brother, and Edgar's entire life and identity have been stripped away.

Act 2, Scene 4

Summary

Lear and his Fool find Kent in the stocks. Lear can't believe this, and he can't get anyone to explain. The Fool, who had been joking about the situation, delivers a long speech on how bad a sign this is. Lear goes inside to look for Regan. While he's gone, the Fool delivers a longer speech about the lessons Kent should have learned about how the world works. Lear returns with Gloucester. The king is raging because his daughter and her husband have refused to see him. Eventually, Regan and Cornwall come out and set Kent free. Lear begins to rage against Goneril. However, instead of taking his side, Regan tells Lear he's likely at fault—that he probably misunderstands Goneril, doesn't appreciate her value, and should apologize.

When Regan tells him to go back to Goneril, Lear swears he never will and curses Goneril.

Oswald enters, followed by Goneril. Cornwall admits he put Kent in the stocks but claims that he deserved it. Goneril and Regan speak with Lear, arguing that he doesn't need servants. Lear storms out. He cries out that his heart "shall break into a hundred thousand flaws" before he will weep, and then he exclaims to his Fool that he will go mad. Gloucester, Kent, and the Fool accompany him. Regan and Goneril reach an agreement: they'll host their father, but no servants. They note there's a storm coming, and they go to lock down the house against the weather.

Analysis

When Lear first sees Kent in the stocks, he is shocked. When Lear asks who put Kent in the stocks and Kent tells him that it was his "son and daughter," Lear refuses to believe the the words. When Lear says, "No," Kent says, "Yea." When Lear says, "No, I say," Kent says, "I say yea." This is funny for a time, until Lear erupts with anger, saying the treatment of his man is "worse than murder."

In Act 1, Scene 1, Lear is able to banish people and ruin them for talking back to him. Here, just one act later, everyone contradicts him, denies him, and rejects him, over and over. It is as if the world is conspiring to show him how his power has declined. He asks his daughter for answers but doesn't get them. He asks Regan to take his side against Goneril, but she won't. He tells Regan he'll come to her house with his knights, and she denies him. Regan flatly tells him, "O sir, you are old," and goes on to tell Lear that he should now let others take care of him. This reveals the problems with Lear's original plan—he wanted to step down from the duties of king but retain its rights and privileges. This scene shows Lear can't relinquish one without letting go of the other. The audience sees his daughters' coldheartedness when they don't try to stop him him from wandering around in the terrible storm they see coming at the end of the act.

Act 3, Scene 1

Summary

Kent and one of Lear's gentlemen meet in a field. Kent tells the gentleman three things: the king is out in the storm with only his Fool for company, Albany and Cornwall are feuding, and the King of France has sent troops to England to take advantage of the disorder. Kent sends the gentleman to Dover to report on the king's pathetic situation. Kent gives him a ring to show Cordelia so she will know the message comes from a genuine source (Kent). They then agree to look for the king and to call to each other if they see him, and then they leave in different directions.

Analysis

This is a brief but highly useful scene. Because Act 2 closes with Lear's daughters essentially consigning their father to the storm, the audience will be wondering about the king's welfare as Act 3 opens. Here, Kent confirms that he is indeed outdoors in the storm.

Lear has been petulant at times, and the audience might doubt his version of the storm, but Kent has been nothing but straightforward. He is a trustworthy source of information.

Kent's idea of sending a message to Cordelia kindles hope in the audience that the good daughter will come back. It also continues the motif of written communication.

Act 3, Scene 2

Summary

Lear and his Fool wander in the storm. Lear rages against the elements and his daughters. His Fool comments on his complaints and tries to get him to apologize to his daughters so they can go inside. Kent (still in disguise) finds them, and he tries to get Lear into shelter. Lear instead calls for the storm to punish his enemies (his daughters). His mind begins to wander, and he himself says he's going mad. Eventually, he gives in and goes with Kent toward a nearby hut. The Fool is left alone in the storm, where he delivers a prophecy about a time when England will be turned completely upside down.

Analysis

This legendary scene is one reason why *King Lear* is considered hard to perform. It presents a complex blend of the literal and the symbolic, and the symbols are layered on each other closely. When Lear says, "Blow winds, and crack your cheeks," he is referring to the literal winds, though he also personifies them as malevolent beings. When he talks about the cataracts and hurricanes having "drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks," he is both describing weathercocks in a deluge and making a sexual reference. Lear is the only male in his family, and he's being soaked by his daughters' actions. They are engaged in an elemental war of the sexes, and he's losing.

The storm is like a punishment that Lear does not deserve. After all, as Lear says, "I never gave you kingdom, called you children; / You owe me no subscription." His daughters, in contrast, have received half a kingdom each as a reward, and they owe him everything. Yet here he is, out in the storm.

The storm and his daughters' treatment combine to break Lear's mind, and he starts to go mad. Kent and the Fool know it, but all they can do is force him into a little shelter. The scene ends with the Fool delivering an address on how Britain is turned completely upside down. The speech is far from foolish—is actually spot on—but because he delivers it alone in the rain, only the audience benefits.

Act 3, Scene 3

Summary

At Gloucester's castle, Gloucester complains to Edmund about the state of affairs: earlier, when he complained about how the king was being treated, he was kicked out of his own house. As Edmund encourages his father, Gloucester tells him he has received a letter telling him armed forces have landed in England. Once his father leaves and Edmund is alone on the stage, he announces he'll take this news directly to Cornwall. Edmund plans to speed up his inheritance by betraying his father. He will tell Cornwall that his father is going to see Lear, which is forbidden. Edmund says that he will be rewarded by receiving all of Gloucester's lands.

Analysis

The audience watches Edmund's duplicity in horror, while Gloucester is oblivious to it. Gloucester's figurative blindness foreshadows horrific events to come.

Previously, the audience might have had sympathy for Edmund. Gloucester did father him out of wedlock, and in Act 1, he jokes about it. It is admirable to try to shape one's own destiny, as Edmund plans, rather than accept fate. But by this scene, roughly in the middle of the play, Edmund's villainy is becoming more evident as events unfold.

Here again, Shakespeare uses a letter as a critical form of communication. While this is a common method of increasing drama, it also illustrates the fragmentation in the kingdom. When *King Lear* starts, all of the major players in the kingdom talk to one another directly. Now they are scattered and must communicate at a distance via messages that can easily go astray.

Act 3, Scene 4

Summary

Out in the storm, Kent escorts Lear into the hut. At first Lear sends the Fool inside but refuses to enter the hut himself. There's a voice from inside. It is Edgar, disguised as Poor Tom (a madman). He and the Fool join Kent and Lear in the storm. They talk, and Lear grows sympathetic toward the madman, even trying to give him his clothes. Gloucester joins them and offers shelter, but Lear says he wants to consult with Poor Tom first, whom he calls a "philosopher." While Lear and Edgar speak in private, Kent and Gloucester consult. Gloucester recaps Lear's situation and his own with regard to their respective children. After noting that people say the king is mad, Gloucester says he's afraid he's going crazy himself. They all leave together.

Analysis

This is one of the bitterest scenes in a bitter tragedy. It is also filled with symbolism and insight. Although the storm and his daughters' betrayal seem to have caused Lear to lose his wits, his "mad" ravings are marked by more self-awareness than his

earlier, sane comments revealed. When Lear says, in response to Edgar's ravings, "Have his daughters brought him to this pass? / Couldst thou save nothing? Wouldst thou give 'em / all?" he sounds crazy. While posing as a madman, Edgar's been complaining about the "foul fiend" tormenting him but has never mentioned having daughters. Lear's talk of daughters is a sign of how far he is from reality, for it symbolically equates his own daughters' actions with demonic action. But his words show how much they have hurt him and how evil he judges their actions to be.

This scene also clusters all of the good characters who are currently in Britain. Events have forced them all together. Their fates are more than related—they are interwoven.

Act 3, Scene 5

Summary

Back at Gloucester's castle, Edmund and Cornwall take the stage. Cornwall swears revenge on Gloucester, while Edmund is worried people will criticize him for siding with Cornwall instead of his own father. He gives Cornwall a letter documenting the fact that Gloucester has been sending information to France. Cornwall promises Edmund's reward for this will be to take his father's place as Earl of Gloucester.

Analysis

Just as the previous scene shows the good characters clustering together, this scene shows the evil ones doing the same. By betraying his father to Cornwall, Edmund links his own fate to the Duke of Cornwall's. He's also growing increasingly treacherous; having displaced his brother, now he has betrayed his father.

This scene includes the critical letter. In this instance, the letter is not just a communication. The letter, which initially indicated Gloucester's continuing loyalty to Lear and Cordelia, has been appropriated by Cornwall as evidence of Gloucester's role as a spy for the French. Cornwell thus fosters this false interpretation, allowing Edmund appear to gain power over his father. However, Edmund is still operating in the shadow of the law, and he is still a villain.

Act 3, Scene 6

Summary

Gloucester, Lear, the Fool, Kent (in disguise), and Edgar (in disguise) are in the hut. Gloucester leaves for a while. Edgar seems to rave; the Fool continues to comment on the situation. Lear at times answers the Fool, but at other times he spins off into despair. Lear holds a mock trial for Goneril and Regan, and Kent plays along. The Fool does too, but Edgar is so moved by the king's suffering he's afraid he'll start crying and give away the fact that he is not mad.

After "trying" his daughters, Lear calls for them to be dissected to see what is wrong with them. Lear finally goes to sleep. When Gloucester returns, he begs them to get the king moving toward Dover. There's a plot to kill him, and even half an hour's delay would be too long. Kent and the Fool help the king leave with Gloucester, leaving Edgar alone in the hut.

Analysis

Lear's mad mock trial and dissection of his daughters causes Kent and Edgar to turn away. Edgar must stay in disguise or risk his life, but he's so moved by the sight of Lear trying his daughters, he almost breaks character by weeping openly.

The sequence—trial followed by dissection—underscores Lear's emotional pain. Early in the play, he trusts his own judgment of his daughters' actions and characters. Now he turns to the legal profession and then to natural philosophy (what a modern audience would call science) for help in understanding them.

The scene ends with another wise reflection delivered by a pathetic figure alone in a field. Edgar comments that when a man sees that those who are superior to himself have the same problems, it makes him almost forget his own misery. He says that the person who suffers alone suffers the most and that companions in sorrow help alleviate grief.

Act 3, Scene 7

Summary

At Gloucester's castle, Cornwall, Regan, Goneril, and Edmund take the stage, accompanied by servants. Cornwall announces that the French army has landed and sends servants to find Gloucester. Oswald enters, and he informs them that Gloucester has helped the king escape to Dover. Oswald, Edmund, and Goneril leave. The servants bring Gloucester in and, at Cornwall's order, tie him up. When interrogated, Gloucester says he helped the king escape because the two sisters treated him so badly that he felt he must protect Lear from what they might do in the future. In response, Cornwall gouges out one of Gloucester's eyes and stomps on it. One of the servants tries to convince Cornwall to stop. After Regan sneers at the servant, he launches himself at Cornwall. The two fight, and the servant wounds Cornwall. Regan kills the servant. Cornwall gouges Gloucester's other eye out. In pain and despair, Gloucester calls for his son Edmund. Regan adds insult to injury by telling Gloucester it was Edmund who betrayed him. She has servants drive the now-blind Gloucester into the night.

Cornwall leans on Regan as they exit the stage. The servants who are left behind talk about how unjust their lord and lady are and how badly they are acting. They decide to follow Gloucester to help take care of him.

Analysis

Many people die in *King Lear*, but this is by far the most brutal and disturbing scene. Gloucester has done nothing except remain loyal to the man to whom he swore loyalty. In response, the conspirators choose to torture him in a public and gruesome fashion. Earlier in the play, the ambiguity of the secondhand—and conflicting—reports about the actions of Lear's knights make it possible for the audience to feel a moderate degree of sympathy for Regan and Goneril.

However, the blinding of Gloucester ends any sympathy an audience has for the sisters. As for Lear's daughters, it is Goneril who says, "Pluck out his eyes," and Regan who, after the first eye is out, says, "One side will mock another. Th' other too." These are the women who earlier claimed to love Lear profoundly and completely.

Act 4, Scene 1

Summary

Edgar, still disguised, takes the stage and delivers a speech to say that change is good; now that he's at the bottom, any change is welcome. An old man, one of Gloucester's peasants, leads Gloucester, now blind into view. Gloucester asks who is there, and the peasant tells him it is a mad beggar.

When Edgar approaches in his disguise, Gloucester dismisses the old man guiding him, saying the madman can guide him to Dover. After the old man leaves, Gloucester asks Edgar if he knows the way to Dover. When Edgar says he does, Gloucester pays Edgar to guide him to the top of the highest cliff so he can throw himself off.

Analysis

There are many instances of irony in the play. As soon as Edgar says change is good, he sees his blinded father being led around by an old peasant, an example of situational irony. That sight shows him how wrong he is about his own state; he isn't anywhere near the bottom, as there are many possible changes that would be worse.

Gloucester's actions also emphasize the theme of madness and foolishness. It seems crazy for Gloucester to choose a madman, rather than his trusted peasant, as his guide. However, the world is so insane that madness seems a good guide. In addition, the trusted peasant would likely try to prevent Gloucester from jumping off a cliff, whereas the madman might be easily duped into helping Gloucester achieve his aim.

Act 4, Scene 2

Summary

Goneril and Edmund enter, followed by Oswald. Oswald reports that Albany seems changed and is responding to news inappropriately. When he was told foreign troops had landed and that Gloucester had betrayed the rebels, Albany smiled, but when told of Edmund's loyalty, he frowned. Goneril says

her husband is too meek and so she'll have to take the male part and Albany the female. She kisses Edmund. Once he leaves, she comments on how Edmund, not her husband, deserves her loyalty. Albany then enters; he tells her she is "not worth the dust which the rude wind / Blows in [her] face" and that her betrayal of her family is unspeakable. Goneril dismisses his words, but Albany insists that the sins Goneril and Regan have committed deserve divine punishment. Goneril rejects both his words and his status as a man.

A servant arrives and tells them the Duke of Cornwall is dead, killed by a servant for blinding Gloucester. He delivers a letter from Regan to Goneril. Albany quizzes the servant, asking if Edmund knows his father has been blinded. The answer is yes; Edmund is the one who betrayed Gloucester. Albany praises Gloucester for his loyalty, and everyone leaves.

Analysis

This scene conveys some key information: the troops are arriving in Britain, and Cornwall has died from his wounds. The reaction of the characters to this news shows that the forces of evil in the play are beginning to disintegrate. Cornwall is dead; Goneril and Albany, who once functioned as a team, are now in conflict with each other. Goneril has rejected her husband as a man, pledging herself to Edmund.

Goneril's shift in affection also signals that neither she nor Edmund have the focus needed to reshape a kingdom. Edmund has displaced Edgar and his father, but instead of taking up their duties, he starts an affair. Likewise, Goneril has inherited half a kingdom and disowned her father, but she too commits to an affair. Because both of them should be preparing to fight the foreign troops that have just landed, this means that they aren't fit to rule and that they are are destined to lose badly.

Act 4, Scene 3

Summary

Kent and a gentleman take the stage, talking about recent developments. The King of France has had to go back home, but he has left his marshal in charge. Cordelia has read Kent's letters, which caused her to weep and struggle to control herself. Kent tells the gentleman that Lear is in town but refuses to see Cordelia because he's ashamed of how he treated her.

The gentleman tells Kent that Cornwall and Albany's forces are marching to battle, and Kent says he'll take the gentleman to the king.

Analysis

This is another brief scene blending necessary exposition with character development. The audience needs to know Cordelia is in Britain and that her husband has temporarily gone back to France; the first detail heightens the stakes, while the second controls the timeline for the final battle.

This brief scene also advances the audience's understanding of Cordelia. In Act 1, Scene 1, her reasoning seems sound enough, but the audience has little reason to sympathize with her. Now she's returned home, not as Lear's daughter, but as a queen. Her control over her emotions matches her stature: "It seemed she was a queen / Over her passion, who, most rebel-like, / Fought to be king o'er her."

In this scene, the audience can also read *King Lear* as a fight between characters ruled by their passions (Regan and Goneril) and those who are the master of their passions, such as Cordelia.

Act 4, Scene 4

Summary

Cordelia takes the stage with a doctor and some soldiers. She sends some soldiers to look for the missing king. Once they leave, she asks the doctor what can be done. He says that perhaps rest will help the king recover his senses. Another messenger arrives, telling her the enemy forces of Cornwall and Albany are getting close. They all leave.

Analysis

This is another scene blending exposition and character development, although there's also some subtle symbolism. The audience learns that Lear is still mad and that Cordelia wishes to help him, showing her goodness, loyalty, and level-

headedness. Whereas Lear made bad decisions about his kingdom of his own volition, Cordelia is wise enough to seek professional help. Her calmness at the news of the approaching enemy force shows the depth of her character. She deserves to be queen more than Lear deserves to be king.

Act 4, Scene 5

Summary

Regan and Oswald take the stage, talking about how Albany's forces have arrived. Regan says that blinding Gloucester and leaving him alive was a terrible mistake, because everyone who sees him feels pity for him. Edmund, she thinks, has gone searching for his father to kill him. Regan tells Oswald to stay with her, but he can't, as Goneril has ordered Oswald to carry a letter to Edmund. Regan tries to persuade Oswald to take her letter to Edmund instead. They part, headed in opposite directions.

Analysis

The evil characters continue to fight amongst themselves. In this scene, the audience learns how out of balance they are; a man should always be the "better soldier," yet Goneril is a fiercer fighter than her husband is. Oswald is Goneril's sworn servant, yet Regan tries to turn his errand to her own purpose, showing that she acts only in her own self-interest. Her regret for blinding Gloucester because it garners pity for him shows her gross immorality.

The audience also gets another reminder of the danger inherent in communicating through messengers. One party can always persuade, bribe, or trick a messenger, causing the message to go astray. Once again, Shakespeare uses the letter motif to build tension and increase the stakes.

Act 4, Scene 6

Summary

Gloucester follows the disguised Edgar, who claims he's leading Gloucester up a steep hill to the cliffs of Dover so that Gloucester can kill himself. When they reach what Edgar claims is the highest cliff, Gloucester jumps and falls to the ground, unconscious.

Edgar wakes his father and spins a story about how high the cliff was and how he saw some devil or spirit beside Gloucester at the top of the cliff. Lear enters, and Gloucester recognizes the king by his voice. Lear continues to rant, complaining about women. At last Lear recognizes Gloucester and offers him his eyes so Gloucester can cry over Lear's situation. Some of Cordelia's servants enter, hoping to take Lear to Cordelia, but Lear runs away.

Edgar quizzes the servants for news of the battle, and then they leave. Oswald enters, intending to kill Gloucester for a reward. Gloucester would welcome it, but Edgar intervenes. He kills Oswald, but before Oswald dies, he tells Edgar he's carrying letters for Edmund. Edgar reads the letters. One is a love letter from Goneril to Edmund. Drums sound, signaling the battle is near, and Edgar leads his father to safety.

Analysis

After three short scenes that are filled with information, Shakespeare gives his audience drama in the form of deception, reversal, reunion, and violence. The deception comes as a disguised Edgar tricks his father into thinking they've gone up to a cliff. Here, Gloucester takes what might be called a leap of trust. He is helpless, unable to kill himself the way he wants to, and so he must depend on others. He is a pathetic character but also a brave one, as he thinks he's at the top of the cliffs of Dover when he leaps. When he falls only a few feet to the grass, he believes he has fallen a great distance and expects to die.

By spontaneously helping his father without a clear sense of what will happen next, Edgar shows his goodness. The evil characters in *King Lear* act on their own behalf and try to consciously reshape events. The good ones act for others and do not try to control outcomes as forcefully.

Oswald's death at Edgar's hands eliminates another bad character. It also shows that Edgar is no longer hiding to protect himself but acting to try to right some of the kingdom's wrongs.

Act 4, Scene 7

Summary

Cordelia, Kent, the doctor, and some servants take the stage. Cordelia opens the scene by acknowledging Kent's character: "O, thou good Kent, how shall I live and work / To match thy goodness?" She urges Kent to take off his disguise, but Kent says he needs it to finish his duties. Servants carry the sleeping Lear onstage. Cordelia talks to Lear while he's sleeping. Lear wakes, and he is still disturbed. Eventually, Lear recognizes Cordelia, saying, "If you have poison for me, I will drink it"—because she has cause to be angry with him. The doctor pronounces him largely cured. Lear, Cordelia, and the doctor exit, leaving Kent and one of the gentlemen onstage. The gentleman shares news with Kent: Cornwall is dead, and Edmund is leading his forces. He also shares false reports about Edgar being in Germany. Both men then leave.

Analysis

This scene confirms Cordelia's wisdom in consulting a doctor. Lear may not be fully recovered, but his madness breaks. Her public praise of Kent shows she is an accurate judge of his behavior, something her father was not at the beginning of the play. The scene also shows how fully humbled Lear is, as he calls himself "very foolish" and offers to drink poison.

This scene also functions as a quiet and at times amusing interlude between the pathos of Gloucester at Dover and the rush of action that is about to come in Act 5.

Act 5, Scene 1

Summary

Edgar and Regan enter. Edgar asks if anyone knows whether Albany's decision remains the same or if he has changed his mind, and he sends a gentleman to find out. As soon as he leaves, Regan pumps Edgar for gossip, asking if he has slept with Goneril yet. Edmund refuses to answer, saying the question is beneath her, and Regan tries to convince him she's asking because she is concerned about their political plans. Albany and Goneril enter, and Regan reflects to herself that she'd rather lose the battle than lose Edmund to Goneril. Albany is concerned about the French invasion. Edgar enters, still disguised, and begs to speak to Albany. Everyone else leaves, and Edgar shows Albany the letter carried by Oswald, which alludes to the affair between Goneril and Edmund. Edgar says he'll provide a champion to prove by combat what the letter says is true. Edgar leaves, and Edmund enters to tell Albany about troop movements. After Albany departs to ready his forces, Edmund is alone. He talks to himself about how he's promised himself to both sisters—and how both are like poisonous snakes. Edmund plans to use Albany's authority to win the battle and then kill Lear and Cordelia.

Analysis

In *King Lear*, good is associated with order and evil with disorder. Edmund refers to Regan and Goneril as different kinds of poisonous snakes; there is no way his affairs with the sisters can end well.

The ability of the evil characters to lie is breaking down. In Act 1, Edmund delivers subtle lies to mislead his father. In Act 5, when Regan claims she cares about Edmund's relationship with Goneril only because of what it means for their rebellion, she is clearly not being truthful.

This scene also demonstrates Edgar's rising stature. His offer to prove the truth through a trial by combat is heroic. Like so many other characters in *King Lear*, good or bad, Edgar uses a letter as a signal of transformation.

Act 5, Scene 2

Summary

Cordelia leads Lear across the stage and exits, followed by the sounds of battle. Edgar enters, leading Gloucester. He leaves his father under a tree briefly and exits; his return is announced by fainter sounds of battle. "King Lear hath lost," he tells his father; he adds that Lear and Cordelia have been captured. Gloucester says the spot is as good a place to die as any, but Edgar convinces him to persevere a little longer, and they exit.

Analysis

This scene is an interlude between the fighting set in motion in the previous scene and the outcome revealed in the following scene. Gloucester's admission that he is ready to die foreshadows his impending death.

Act 5, Scene 3

Summary

Edmund and his soldiers enter, with Lear and Cordelia as captives. Edmund sends them to prison and then dispatches a captain to follow them and kill them there. Albany, Goneril, and Regan enter, followed by more soldiers. Edmund explains what he's done with the king, and Albany objects, saying Edmund is his subordinate. Regan disagrees, saying that it is her decision to make. After a brief squabble with Goneril, Regan claims Edmund as her "lord and master." When Goneril asks if Regan means to sleep with Edmund, Albany arrests Edmund for treason and forbids Regan's declaration of marriage to Edmund.

As Regan bemoans her feelings of illness, Albany and Edmund request a herald to call anyone who will prove Edmund's guilt through combat. Edgar arrives on the third trumpet blast. He won't show his face or give his name, saying he has lost it through treachery, but he also says his blood is as good as Edmund's. The brothers fight, and Edgar wounds Edmund mortally. Goneril runs away. Edgar reveals himself and explains how he disguised himself and took care of their father, Gloucester, and how Kent likewise disguised himself to take care of Lear. Gloucester dies after hearing this news.

A servant enters, carrying a "bloody knife." Goneril has killed herself, prior to which she confessed to poisoning Regan. Kent enters. Edmund repents his plan to kill Lear and Cordelia and calls for someone to stop it. Edmund is carried offstage. Lear enters, carrying Cordelia, lamenting her death but hoping she's alive. Lear has killed the man who hanged Cordelia, and finally he recognizes Kent for who he is. A messenger arrives to say that the wounded Edmund has died. Lear says that the Fool has also been hanged, and then the old king dies of grief. Albany tells Kent and Edgar they will rule the kingdom together. Kent says he has a journey ahead, which suggests he will soon die. Albany speaks ambiguously, saying, "The oldest hath borne most: we that are young / Shall never see so much, nor live so long."

Analysis

This final scene wraps up all of the plot threads and provides final flourishes on a number of themes. The exchanges among Regan, Goneril, Edmund, and Albany at the opening of the scene are chaotic. The audience will remember Lear arranging Cordelia's marriage in Act 1, Scene 1, so for Regan to claim Edmund as her "lord and master" shows an inversion of social norms, as does her proclamation that Edmund should be considered Albany's equal. Because Edmund is both younger and illegitimate, he should rank lower than an older man of legitimate birth.

The fight between Edmund and Edgar resolves the contest between them started by Edmund in Act 1, Scene 2 and proves Edgar to be the superior brother. Edmund does attempt to redeem himself by rescinding his execution order for Lear and Cordelia, as if his reconciliation with his brother has raised his ethical standards.

This final scene is emotionally rich. It has almost every element of drama an audience could want: a charged argument, a lovers' spat, a treason charge, trial by combat, two characters dying of broken hearts, two revelations of hidden identities, Edmund's change of heart and death, the assassination and suicide of Regan and Goneril, revenge against the man who hangs Cordelia, a change of dynasty, redemption for Cordelia and Edgar, and Cordelia's tragic death.

This incredible climax is needed to cleanse the disorder created through the two crises that open the play: Lear's division of his kingdom, and Edmund's challenge to Edgar. Order is restored through Albany's directive, but with the ambiguous ending, *King Lear* does not promise happiness for its surviving characters.

“ Quotes

> *"Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again."*

— King Lear, Act 1, Scene 1

In the opening scene of *King Lear*, Lear asks his daughters to publicly declare their love for him. This is the final line in the exchange between Lear and Cordelia, in which Cordelia says she has nothing to say on the matter.

The exchange is marked by foreshadowing, irony, and sadness. Lear's two elder daughters have already pledged their love in the extreme. Cordelia, though, just says, "Nothing," because her father should know how much she loves him and because it is not right or dignified to make this sort of declaration. And Lear's right: nothing does come from nothing, but it is he who ends up with nothing. He starts with a kingdom and three daughters, and in the end, all four of them are dead and the kingdom is fragmented.

"I am made of that self mettle as my sister/And prize me at her worth."

— Regan, Act 1, Scene 1

Regan, Lear's middle daughter, starts her declaration of love after her elder sister, Goneril, has made her statement. Regan and Goneril are very much alike: they do share the same "mettle" and "worth." Regan means to claim great love and stature when she says this, but in fact both she and Goneril are malicious traitors who don't seem to love anyone.

"Peace, Kent./Come not between the dragon and his wrath./I loved her most and thought to set my rest/On her kind nursery."

— King Lear, Act 1, Scene 1

Lear says this to Kent when his loyal servant tries to tell him the truth (and Lear doesn't want to hear it). This line is important because it shows Lear's self-image and his understanding of the situation. He sees himself as mythically powerful, like a dragon, and openly declares he loved Cordelia best. No doubt his words would offend Goneril and Regan: their father loves their baby sister best!

In addition, this passage shows that part of the reason Lear is so upset is that things aren't going his way. This makes him seem less like a dragon or a king and more like a spoiled child.

"Thou, Nature, art my goddess. To thy law/My services are bound. Wherefore should I/Stand in the plague of custom, and permit/The curiosity of nations to deprive me/For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines/Lag of a brother? why "bastard"? Wherefore "base"?"

— Edmund, Act 1, Scene 2

This declaration opens *King Lear*'s second scene, and it sets the play's subplot in motion. Edmund, who is Gloucester's younger, illegitimate son, is here declaring that he's unwilling to let social conventions shape his destiny. He's only considered a "bastard" or illegitimate because of society's rules—that is, because his parents weren't married.

The audience might well sympathize with Edmund, since he did not choose his situation, but there's a great deal of arrogance in thinking he can identify natural law on his own. Edmund is right that, according to the laws of nature, he is just as much Gloucester's son as is Edgar. His arrogance is in regarding himself as an exception to the laws of mankind and in thinking he has a greater right to what Edgar stands to inherit under these laws.

"How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is/To have a thankless child.—Away, away!"

— King Lear, Act 1, Scene 4

This line comes near the end of a scene in which Lear has to

face for the first time the rupture he's created by dividing his kingdom (and trusting Goneril and Regan). The "thankless child" he refers to is his eldest daughter, who only recently publicly swore how much she loved him. But that was before the kingdom was divided. Now that she has half a kingdom, she shows no gratitude.

"That such a slave as this should wear a sword,/Who wears no honesty."

— Earl of Kent, Act 2, Scene 2

Kent delivers this line late in a scene in which he trots out some glorious insults for Oswald. Those earlier insults have a kind of crude poetry to them. This line, though, which Kent delivers after the Duke of Albany asks why he's angry, is clear and direct. It sums up one of the play's themes: disorder. A man who wears a sword should be a knight, worthy and ethical, but Oswald is only a tool for his scheming mistress. In his taking up a sword, the entire world is turned upside down.

"Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow!/You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout/Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks./You sulph'rous and thought-executing fires,/Vaunt-couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts,/Singe my white head."

— King Lear, Act 3, Scene 2

These lines open Scene 2, in which Lear is exposed to the elements. He ends up in the storm when his stubbornness clashes with that of his daughters. They want him to change his behavior, give up some of his knights, and apologize. He refuses and so gets cast out into the storm.

Here he meets nature as though he were a force of nature himself, like the dragon he claimed to be in Act 1, Scene 1. Lear challenges the storm to do its worst, personifying the winds as ancient Greek myths did. Lear is setting himself up as a challenger to Zeus (or Jove/Jupiter, since elsewhere in *King Lear*, Shakespeare uses the Roman names for the gods). In Greek mythology, challenging the gods always ends badly.

"I am a man/More sinned against than sinning."

— King Lear, Act 3, Scene 2

This line is from the scene in which Lear is out in the storm. He and his fool have just been joined by Kent in disguise. Here Lear explains his situation, concluding with this line. It functions as both a summary and commentary: this is how Lear sees himself.

Is he more sinned against than sinning? Yes, in relation to Goneril and Cordelia. However, insisting on this interpretation absolves him of any responsibility. Lear refuses to see how he created and still contributes to his suffering, and so it continues.

"Lest it see more, prevent it. Out, vile jelly!"

— Duke of Cornwall, Act 3, Scene 7

The Duke of Cornwall says this as he forces out Gloucester's second eye, rendering him fully blind. This is horrific in itself, of course, and seems more cruel, perhaps, than killing him. But what makes this line powerful and memorable is what it shows about Cornwall and his character.

His servant, who has served Cornwall his entire life, has just broken his oath of loyalty, first, in trying to persuade Cornwall not to blind Gloucester and, then, in attacking his master to prevent the torture. He wounds Cornwall, but he is slain himself. When the servant dies, he takes some satisfaction in knowing he's preserved one of Gloucester's eyes. That is when Cornwall delivers this line, mocking his dying servant and reducing Gloucester's eyes to "vile jelly."

"As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods;/They kill us for their sport."

— Earl of Gloucester, Act 4, Scene 1

The blind Gloucester speaks this line to the old peasant who is guiding him through Britain. Edgar is watching the man guide his father, and he is horrified by his father's condition.

When Gloucester delivers this line, he's talking to his guide but speaking for the benefit of his son Edgar, and, through him, the audience. This line sums up the casual nature of violent suffering in *King Lear*. It is as if there are a host of pagan gods who choose to kill or maim people for fun.

"O Goneril,/You are not worth the dust which the rude wind/Blows in your face. I fear your disposition."

— Duke of Albany, Act 4, Scene 2

The Duke of Albany is speaking to Goneril, his wife. There is no subtle symbolism here. He is making a devastating comment on her character. Albany is flatly stating that he has come to fear his wife for her actions.

"You do me wrong to take me out o' th' grave./Thou art a soul in bliss, but I am bound/Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears/Do scald like molten lead."

— King Lear, Act 4, Scene 7

Reunited with Cordelia, Lear speaks metaphorically and symbolically here, but in ways that clearly state how far he has fallen and how badly he feels. By declaring that Cordelia is wrong to take him out of his grave, he's saying he is dead. He goes on to describe his torment, in what is clearly a kind of hell: tied to a "wheel of fire" and burning himself with his own tears. As for Cordelia, Lear now sees the daughter he discarded as "a soul in bliss" (heavenly, like an angel).

"Jesters do oft prove prophets."

— Regan, Act 5, Scene 3

Regan is speaking to her sister Goneril late in the play, when the two of them are openly fighting over Edmund's love. Regan means it as a sneer, something with which to taunt Goneril for her previous joke about Edmund becoming a husband to Regan.

However, this line also serves as a commentary on the play: Lear's fool may be the wisest man in the play. He certainly delivers more good advice than anyone else.

"In wisdom I should ask thy name,/But since thy outside looks so fair and warlike,/And that thy tongue some say of breeding breathes,/What safe and nicely I might well delay/By rule of knighthood, I disdain and spurn."

— Edmund, Act 5, Scene 3

Edmund delivers these lines to the unknown challenger who has come to prove Edmund's treachery through a trial by combat. In this speech the secondary plot of *King Lear* comes full circle, for in his first monologue (in Act 1, Scene 2), Edmund rejects social constraint and embraces nature. Here, though, Edmund says he can tell his challenger is noble by how he looks and speaks. (As indeed he is: the mysterious knight is Edmund's brother, Edgar.

"Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are

men of stones!/Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so/That heaven's vault should crack. She's gone forever./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."

— King Lear, Act 5, Scene 3

Lear delivers these lines while walking onstage holding Cordelia's dead body in his arms.

The opening "Howl, howl, howl!" echoes his call at the start of Act 3, Scene 2 for the winds to blow. In that earlier scene, Lear was defying the natural elements. In this one, he's trying to deny a broken heart and terrible pain: the death of his daughter Cordelia. He is so shaken by her loss he can't tell why others aren't howling with sadness, and he says he wants to use their voices to lament and crack heaven open.

Symbols

Crown

Lear divides his kingdom and sets aside his crown. In Act 1, Scene 4, the Fool shares an extended joke with Lear about crowns. The Fool splits an egg in half, producing two "crowns" (the two halves of the eggshell), which, when considered separately, constitute nothing of great value. The Fool tells Lear that this is what Lear has accomplished by dividing his royal crown between his elder daughters—and that he was an idiot for doing so.

The Storm

Some scenes in *King Lear* take place during a powerful storm, but that storm is also deeply symbolic of the savage disorder in the kingdom. Lear equates the storm's violence and destructiveness with his daughters' treatment of him.

Blindness

The inability to see is a motif that appears throughout *King Lear*. The disability is sometimes literal and temporary—for example, Lear's inability to see through Kent's disguise. Blindness is sometimes literal and permanent, as when the Earl of Gloucester's eyes are gouged out. But these instances of literal blindness are also symbolic, and other instances of blindness are completely symbolic. These include Lear's inability to see Cordelia's love or Gloucester's inability to see his son Edmund's treachery.

Themes

Aging

Everything that happens in *King Lear* occurs because the king is old and weary. His decision to divide his kingdom and step down sets almost all other action in the play in motion. The only exception is Edmund's plot against his father, Gloucester. However, Edmund's ruse is linked thematically to the main plot, as one of the reasons Edmund claims Edgar wants to displace their father is that he is unwilling to wait for Gloucester's death to take his place.

Much of the tragic irony in *King Lear* revolves around aging. The king, who admits to being old and tired, wants to retire while retaining all the privileges of being a king. His elder daughters think he took too long to step down from the throne. This tension between a younger generation's loyalty to a patriarch versus that generation's desire for power is visible

not only in Lear's daughters but also in the way Gloucester's son Edmund jockeys for early advancement.

Family Relations

King Lear addresses family relationships, including those between children and fathers and between siblings themselves. However, family relations do not occur in a vacuum; they are entwined with the theme of order. A ruler's decision to relinquish his position and depend on his children's love would be fraught in any situation, but in this case, where the decision entails dividing a kingdom, the family intersects with the social order.

Family relationships have legal and emotional repercussions. Gloucester laughs about fathering Edmund out of wedlock in Act 1, Scene 1, but his son's illegitimacy is the source of tremendous suffering for his entire family later. Edmund's resentment of his illegitimacy is one of the emotional engines of the play. Lear doesn't just want to love his daughters and to have them love him. In that same opening scene, he asks them to publicly proclaim their love. His responses to all three daughters, but especially to Cordelia, show his profound misunderstanding of them.

Madness and Foolishness

Throughout *King Lear*, many characters attempt to reason clearly and determine the right course of action. However, their reason often fails them, as they are blinded by self-interest, naivete, or excessive trust. It is as if the entire kingdom's rational vision is blurred or clouded. When characters set aside their rationality, through either madness or foolishness, they see and speak more clearly. The king's Fool is the first to do this—he accurately and bitterly diagnoses the situation in the kingdom, taxing Lear for his misjudgment.

Order

In dividing his kingdom, Lear disrupts the order of his nation, his household, and his family. Many developments throughout the play reinforce this upheaval and show how bad it is for everyone involved. Lear's Fool provides commentary on this disruption of order many times. Historically, it is one of a court fool's roles to comment on events no one else can address, but in *King Lear*, the Fool must do so throughout the play. The Fool's work begins in earnest in Act 1, Scene 4, when he calls Lear foolish for having given his kingdom away.

However, the play comments on disorder in many other ways. Cordelia and Kent are loyal to Lear, but because he cannot see their loyalty, he banishes them. Edmund and Edgar are brothers and should love one another, but Edmund displaces Edgar. And when Lear is most upset with his daughters, he calls down a curse to make their wombs infertile (a disruption of both nature and social expectations) so as to end his line.

Vision

Vision is a major theme throughout *King Lear*. Shakespeare explores this theme in many ways, both literal and symbolic. These explorations begin in the play's first scene; before Lear ever appears onstage, other characters (Kent and Gloucester) discuss changes recently seen in him. Lear later acts as if he can see into his daughters' hearts, but he quickly shows he cannot penetrate their words or Kent's disguise.

Suggested Reading

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