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*King Lear*  
Shakespeare

# Study Guide on William Shakespeare's *King Lear*

In Act III, Scene 2, King Lear proclaims, "I am a man / More sinned against than sinning" (II.2.59–60<sup>1</sup>). Is this true? Who is responsible for the tragic action of the play?

What is Lear trying to accomplish with his division of the kingdom in the first scene? Does he exhibit political prudence? Does he have motivations other than the common political good? Consider the following:

- Has Lear already decided which daughter will get which portion of the kingdom, before he asks for their professions of love? Recall: "what can you say to draw / A third more opulent than your sisters?" (I.1.85–86)
  - If so, on what principle has he divided his kingdom (I.1.124–125)?
  - Had Lear always been planning to split the coronet between his two sons-in-law (I.1.140)?
  - Are the professions of love meant to be a mere formality, or something more? If a formality, why does Lear take Cordelia's opposition so seriously? If something else, does Lear confuse his roles?
- What potential strife does Lear allude to in saying, "We have this hour a constant will to publish / Our daughters' several dowers, that future strife / May be prevented now" (I.1.43 ff.).
  - Given this, was it prudent for Lear to divide up his kingdom when he did? Does Lear act with counsel and prudence, or with emotional affection?
  - Why are Kent and Gloucester surprised at the beginning of the play (I.1.1 ff.)? What does this reveal about Lear's decision?

What motivates Cordelia to respond to her father as she does? To what degree is she responsible for what follows (I.1.89–108)?

- Is she too blunt? Could she have been more prudent by modestly expressing her love, or giving a "diplomatic answer"?
- Does Cordelia have a principled objection to going along with her father's request? If so, what is the principle which requires her to act as she does?
- Could Cordelia have known or reasonably suspected that her actions would lead to being disinherited? If so, was she aware of all the potential consequences for her family and father?
  - Do the two asides she makes during her sisters' flatteries shed light on this question? (I.1.62 & 76–78)
  - If you think Cordelia did have such foresight, how does this affect your interpretation of her actions?

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare. *King Lear: A Conflated Text*. Edited by Stephen Orgel. New York: Penguin Group, 1999. (All line numbers refer to this edition.)

In Act I, Scene 1, Kent presses Lear to “see better” (161). By the end of the play, has Lear come better to see himself, his daughters, and the real nature of love?

- Where does he start from? How great does Lear consider Cordelia’s fault to be at the beginning of the play? Consider I.1 as well as I.4.262 and I.5.23.
- By the end, does Lear come to “know himself” (I.1.298–9)? See IV.7.62 and IV.7.74—What do these passages indicate in Lear’s trajectory as a character?
- At IV.3.46–8, Lear is described as being ashamed to see his daughter. How does this fit with redemption and “seeing better”? Is it fitting for Lear to feel so ashamed towards his daughter?

Does the parallel plot of Gloucester, Edmund, and Edgar shed any light on the plot of Lear and his family? What about vice versa?

- Does Gloucester see better after he is blinded? What exactly does he see finally? (See IV.1.19: “I stumbled when I saw”)
- Is Gloucester responsible for Edmund’s deception? Is he at fault for being susceptible to this kind of trick?
  - Is Gloucester too affectionate toward Edmund? (See I.1.18–19, II.1.67 ff.)
  - Does Gloucester’s affection extend too far in that he trusts Edmund’s word against Edgar? In this, is Gloucester fond, foolish, or something else?
- What does Shakespeare intend to illustrate in the actions of Gloucester, Edgar, and Edmund? Does the social and political community rightly or wrongly distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate children?
- With the plots of Lear and Gloucester in mind, when and how (if at all) does affection rightly guide characters in this play?

Gloucester says, “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods / they kill us for their sport” (IV.1.37–38) To what extent does Shakespeare propose this view in the play?

- Consider Lear’s continual appeals to the gods to curse his daughters (II.4.188–191). Is this a delusional expression of his madness, or a true portrait of man’s life?
- To what extent does Kent see things in this way? How, for example, should one interpret his words, “It is the stars, / The stars above us govern our conditions; / Else one self mate and make could not beget / Such different issues” (IV.3.33–36)?

Albany says, “All friends shall taste / The wages of their virtue, and all foes / The cup of their deservings.—O, see, see!” (V.3.309–311). Do the characters in this play get what they deserve? Consider the servants at (III.7.100 ff.) and Albany’s remark on the justice of Cornwall’s death (IV.2.79 ff.)

What is “Nature” to Edmund’s mind? (See I.2.1 ff., and consider I.2.119 ff.) What does “nature” mean in the play as a whole? (Consider Lear’s announcement at I.1.51 ff.)



How do you judge Kent in this play? Is he well-intentioned? Is he prudent? Is he wise?

Should *King Lear* be called a “redemptive tragedy”? Are the characters of Lear and Gloucester redeemed? Is England redeemed, so that there is hope for her future?

- In what way, and to what extent, is Lear redeemed?
- Who, if anyone, is now fit to rule England? Does Albany seem ready to rule? If not Albany, then who? (Consider V.3.305 ff., 5.3.326 ff.)
- In what state is Kent left at the end of the play? What does his last speech indicate (V.3.328)?
- What hope remains for Edgar? Why does Shakespeare end the play with Edgar’s words?

**Suggested use:** This study guide includes a few questions and observations about William Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Among possible uses, one could consider these comments while reading the work; or one could use them as starting points for a classroom discussion.

