

King Lear

King Lear (which probably dates from 1605-1606) is, by general agreement, the darkest of the tragedies, and the bleak, comfortless plot is expressed in language that seems deprived of all decoration, all ornament. For many critics it is the greatest of the tragedies. At its heart is an analysis of human and divine justice; behind the play seem to lie two biblical quotations. One is the 'Magnificat': 'He has put down the mighty from their thrones and raised up the lowly'. The other is the question of the psalmist: 'Why do the wicked prosper?'

The play has two plots that run parallel to each other and intertwine. The King and the Duke of Gloucester suffer from the scheming of wicked children; in each case one good son, Edgar, and one good daughter, Cordelia, 'redeem nature' by their love. The play places the King and the Fool side by side, and suggests that the Fool is the only wise man. In a parallel plot, Gloucester is robbed of his sight.

(1)

The two old men end up on a bleak heath together deprived of sight and reason: together they discuss 'how this world goes'. This is the first passage on the handout. It is a devastating analysis of human justice, and prefaced by a stunning phrase: 'I see it *feelingly*'. As a critique of human authority and the hypocrisy of those in power, whether statesmen, judges or politicians, it has never been surpassed, and its view that money is what determines justice seems as true in our time as in 1606. 'Plate sins with gold/ And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks.'

(2)

By the end of the play King Lear has been reunited with his loving daughter, Cordelia, only for her to be killed and the play ends in a shocking confusion as Albany and Kent try to restore justice and order only for their attempts to be interrupted by King Lear entering the stage, carrying the body of his dead daughter. Many critics and many audiences have found this too hard to bear, and the language is as pared down, as stripped of all decoration as any in Shakespeare. 'Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have breath and thou no life at all.' It is not surprising that the characters are made to ask whether this is 'the promised end': the end of the world. This is the second extract on the handout.

[*All italics are to indicate certain key passages*]

(1) *'How this world goes'*

KING LEAR: O, ho, are you there with me? No eyes in your head, nor no money in your purse? Your eyes are in a heavy case, your purse in a light; yet you see how this world goes.

GLOUCESTER: I see it feelingly.

KING LEAR: What, art mad? A man may see how this world goes with no eyes. Look with thine ears: see how yond justice rails upon yond simple thief. Hark, in thine ear: change places; and, handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief? Thou hast seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar?

GLOUCESTER: Ay, sir.

KING LEAR: And the creature run from the cur? There thou mightst behold the great image of authority: a dog's obeyed in office. Thou rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand! Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thine own back; Thou hotly lust'st to use her in that kind For which thou whipp'st her. The usurer hangs the cozener. Through tatter'd clothes small vices do appear; Robes and furr'd gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold, And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks: Arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw does pierce it. None does offend, none, I say, none; I'll able 'em: Take that of me, my friend, who have the power To seal the accuser's lips. Get thee glass eyes; And like a scurvy politician, seem To see the things thou dost not. Now, now, now, now: Pull off my boots: harder, harder: so.

EDGAR: O, matter and impertinency mix'd!
Reason in madness!

KING LEAR: If thou wilt weep my fortunes, take my eyes.
I know thee well enough; thy name is Gloucester:
Thou must be patient; we came crying hither:
Thou know'st the first time that we smell the air,
We wawl and cry. I will preach to thee: mark.

GLOUCESTER: Alack, alack the day!

KING LEAR: *When we are born, we cry that we are come
To this great stage of fools. . .*

(Act IV.5)

(2) *'The promised end'*

KING LEAR: 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 for ever!
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.

KENT: *Is this the promised end?*

EDGAR: *Or image of that horror?*

ALBANY: *Fall, and cease!*

KING LEAR: This feather stirs; she lives! if it be so,
It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows
That ever I have felt.

KENT: [Kneeling] O my good master!

KING LEAR: Prithee, away.

EDGAR: 'Tis noble Kent, your friend.

KING LEAR: A plague upon you, murderers, traitors all!
I might have saved her; now she's gone for ever!
Cordelia, Cordelia! stay a little. Ha!
What is't thou say'st? Her voice was ever soft,
Gentle, and low, an excellent thing in woman.
I kill'd the slave that was a-hanging thee.

Captain: 'Tis true, my lords, he did.

KING LEAR: Did I not, fellow?
I have seen the day, with my good biting falchion
I would have made them skip: I am old now,
And these same crosses spoil me. Who are you
Mine eyes are not o' the best: I'll tell you straight.

KENT: If fortune brag of two she loved and hated,
One of them we behold.

KING LEAR: This is a dull sight. Are you not Kent?

KENT: The same,
Your servant Kent: Where is your servant Caius?

KING LEAR: He's a good fellow, I can tell you that;
He'll strike, and quickly too: he's dead and rotten.

KENT: No, my good lord; I am the very man,--

KING LEAR: I'll see that straight.

KENT: That, from your first of difference and decay,
Have follow'd your sad steps.

KING LEAR: You are welcome hither.

KENT: Nor no man else: *all's cheerless, dark, and deadly.*
Your eldest daughters have fordone themselves,
And desperately are dead.

KING LEAR: Ay, so I think.

ALBANY: He knows not what he says: and vain it is
That we present us to him.

EDGAR: Very bootless.

Enter a Captain.

Captain: Edmund is dead, my lord.

ALBANY: That's but a trifle here.
You lords and noble friends, know our intent.
What comfort to this great decay may come
Shall be applied: for us we will resign,
During the life of this old majesty,
To him our absolute power:
[To EDGAR and KENT.]

 you, to your rights;
With boot, and such addition as your honours
Have more than merited. All friends shall taste
The wages of their virtue, and all foes
The cup of their deservings. O, see, see!

KING LEAR: And my poor fool is hang'd! No, no, no life!
*Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never!*
Pray you, undo this button: thank you, sir.
Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips,
Look there, look there!
[Dies.]

(Act V.3)