

# King Lear

## SYNOPSIS

### *The Tragedy of King Lear*

King Lear has summoned a meeting. Before it the Earl of Gloucester introduces his illegitimate son Edmund to the Earl of Kent. At the meeting Lear announces that he will abdicate and divide his kingdom among his three daughters, but keep the title of king and a hundred followers. When his favourite daughter Cordelia says nothing when asked how much more she loves him, Lear disinherits her and divides her portion between her sisters Goneril and Regan and their husbands. One of Cordelia's suitors, the Duke of Burgundy, now rejects her, but the King of France marries her. Kent is banished for criticizing Lear's decision. Gloucester, deceived by Edmund, believes his legitimate son Edgar wants to kill him. Edgar is forced to escape. Lear quarrels with Goneril about the behaviour of his followers and his fool, who also makes witty criticisms of Lear's stupidity. She says she will only accept fifty followers. Lear, enraged, goes to visit Regan, sending ahead his new servant Caius, who is in fact Kent in disguise.

When Lear arrives he finds Caius has been put in the stocks. Regan, who has been warned by Goneril's messenger, does not welcome Lear warmly, and suggests that twenty-five followers would be enough. Both daughters in fact suggest that Lear does not need any followers. Lear leaves in a rage as a storm breaks over barren heathland.

With Caius and the fool, Lear — who is going mad — meets Edgar, who is disguised as a mad, naked beggar called 'Poor Tom'. Lear takes off his clothes in the storm to be as near nothing as possible. He philosophizes with Poor Tom and conducts a mock trial of his daughters.

Gloucester, for trying to help Lear, has his eyes put out by Regan and her husband Cornwall, although Cornwall is wounded by a protesting servant. Lear manages to escape towards Dover, where Cordelia has landed with a French army. The blinded Gloucester meets Edgar, without recognizing him, and Edgar becomes his guide to Dover, where Gloucester wants to throw himself off the cliff. Edgar tricks him into thinking he has fallen and miraculously survived. Gloucester also meets Lear, who, though mad, shows a new type of wisdom. Cordelia's men find Lear, and he and his daughter are reconciled.

In the battle which follows, however, Lear and Cordelia are captured by Goneril and Regan, who are both in love with Edmund. Cornwall has died of his wound, but Goneril's husband Albany forces Edmund to defend himself against a charge of treachery if any challenger appears. Edgar challenges Edmund and fatally wounds him. News arrives that Goneril has poisoned Regan and then committed suicide. Before dying, Edmund reveals that he has ordered the deaths of Lear and Cordelia. Lear enters with Cordelia's body, having failed to prevent her being hanged, before dying himself. Gloucester has also died. Kent, who has revealed his true identity to Lear, leaves the running of the country to Albany and Edgar.

**Media:****DVD:**

*Broken Lance* (1954), dir. Edward Dmytryk (Western loosely based on *King Lear*)  
*King Lear* (1970), dir. Peter Brook, with Paul Scofield  
*King Lear (Korol Lir)* (1971), dir. Grigori Kozintsev (Russian version)  
*King Lear* (BBC TV Shakespeare 1983), dir. Jonathan Miller, with Michael Hordern  
*King Lear* (1984), dir. Michael Elliott, with Laurence Olivier  
*Ran* (1985), dir. Akira Kurosawa (a retelling of the story in feudal Japan)  
Godard's *King Lear* (1987), dir. Jean-Luc Godard (an eccentric version)  
*A Thousand Acres* (1997), dir. Jocelyn Moorhouse, with Michelle Pfeiffer and Jessica Lange (adaptation of the story set on an Iowa farm)  
*King Lear* (1998), dir. Richard Eyre (National Theatre production)  
*King Lear* (1999), dir. Brian Blessed  
*The King Is Alive* (2001), dir. Kristian Levring (travellers in the Namibian desert rehearse *Lear*)  
*The Dresser* (2004) dir. Peter Yates (a play by Ronald Harwood about an actor playing *Lear*)  
*King Lear* (2008), dir. Trevor Nunn (RSC production) with Ian McKellen

**CD Audio:**

*King Lear* (Naxos)  
*King Lear* (Arkangel Complete Shakespeare)

[Michael Mitchell]