

KING LEAR

Character Notes

KING LEAR

The aging king of Britain. Lear is used to absolute power and struggles to come to terms with the consequences of passing his royal responsibilities onto his daughters. Lear is also used to being flattered, and he does not respond well to being contradicted or challenged. This is why he believes the fake flattery he receives from his daughters Goneril and Regan, and fails to recognise modest love from his youngest daughter, Cordelia.

CORDELIA

Lear's youngest daughter, disowned by her father for being honest and straightforward and refusing to flatter him. Cordelia is virtuous and loving, which attracts the king of France who marries her despite her lack of dowry. She remains loyal to her father despite his cruelty towards her, forgives him, and is patient and polite toward her cruel sisters.

GONERIL

Lear's ruthless eldest daughter and the wife of the duke of Albany. Goneril is jealous of her sister Regan and treacherous towards her father. In fact, she is amoral in most of her behaviour! (For example her affair with Edmund). She shows no respect for her father, constantly challenging Lear's authority. She is violent and aggressive, which is evident in her bloodthirsty treatment of Gloucester and her power struggle with her husband.

REGAN

Lear's middle daughter and the wife of the duke of Cornwall. Regan is the mirror of Goneril, she is just as treacherous, violent and amoral as her sister. Both sisters encourage each other to commit acts of treason and horrific cruelty. Regan also jealously competes with Goneril to have an affair with Edmund.

GLOUCESTER

A nobleman loyal to King Lear whose rank, earl, is below that of duke. Gloucester has two sons, the legitimate Edgar and Edmund the bastard. Like Lear, he wrongly believes flattery over truth and misjudges which of his children to trust. Gloucester is also overpowered by the younger generation (like Lear) and is stripped of his position, which humbles him. He only gains insight into human nature once he has been blinded.

EDGAR

Gloucester's older, legitimate son. Edgar is a chameleon, assuming many different roles. When we meet him he comes across as a gullible fool easily tricked by his brother. He is straightforward and honest like Cordelia, which unfairly causes his downfall. Next he assumes the disguise of a mad beggar to evade his father's men, and proves his love for his father by using this disguise to help Lear and Gloucester. Finally, he assumes the position of armoured champion to avenge his brother's treason.

EDMUND

Gloucester's younger, illegitimate son. Edmund resents his status as Gloucester's bastard son but ends up living up to the name! He schemes to disinherit Edgar by usurping Gloucester's title and possessions. He is ruthless and acts without conscience doing whatever is necessary to further his cause. He is a man to be reckoned with as most of his plans are successful, and he manages to bring devastation to most of the other characters.

KENT

An earl (same rank as Gloucester) who is loyal to King Lear. Kent proves his loyalty to Lear by disguising himself as a peasant (called "Caius") so that he can continue to serve Lear even after Lear banishes him. He is extremely loyal and honest, and like Cordelia he gets into trouble by being straightforward and outspoken.

ALBANY

The husband of Lear's daughter Goneril. Albany is a good man at heart, and he eventually denounces and opposes the cruelty of Goneril, Regan and Cornwall. However, he is not brave enough to act alone and lacks foresight, not acting against the evil of his allies until it is practically too late.

CORNWALL

The husband of Lear's daughter Regan. Unlike Albany, Cornwall is a bully and revels in cruelty and violence. Therefore, he actively works with his wife and sister-in-law to persecute Lear and Gloucester.

FOOL

Lear's jester, who provides companionship to Lear when he is left alone. His songs and speeches may seem silly and frivolous but are often important advice. He knows Lear well enough not to try and challenge him, so he presents his advice in a fun and non-threatening form.

OSWALD

The chief servant in Goneril's house. Oswald obeys his mistress's commands without questioning and helps her evil scheming.