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The Tragedy of

King Lear

By

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AN UPDATED EDITION

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SIMON & SCHUSTER PAPERBACKS

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI

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Simon & Schuster
An Imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

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This Simon & Schuster paperback edition June 2016

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Manufactured in the United States of America

30 29 28 27 26 25 24 23 22 21

ISBN 978-0-7434-8276-9

ISBN 978-1-4516-8239-7 (ebook)

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The Tragedy of
KING LEAR

ACT I



1.1 King Lear, intending to divide his power and kingdom among his three daughters, demands public professions of their love. His youngest daughter, Cordelia, refuses. Lear strips her of her dowry, divides the kingdom between his two other daughters, and then banishes the earl of Kent, who has protested against Lear's rash actions. The king of France, one of Cordelia's suitors, chooses to marry her despite her father's casting her away. Lear tells his daughters Goneril and Regan that they and their husbands should divide his powers and revenues; he himself will keep a hundred knights and will live with Goneril and Regan by turns.

-
1. **more affected:** been more partial to
 5–7. **equalities . . . moiety:** i.e., the equal portions (of the divided kingdom awarded by Lear to the dukes) are so balanced that the most minute examination of either can find no difference between their shares **moiety:** share, portion
 9–10. **breeding . . . charge:** (1) upbringing has been at my expense; (2) parentage has been imputed to me
 11. **brazed:** hardened (like brass)
 12. **conceive:** understand (with sexual wordplay in line 13)
 15. **ere:** before
 16. **fault:** misdeed
 17. **issue:** (1) result; (2) offspring, child
 18. **proper:** (1) appropriate, fitting; (2) handsome
 19. **a son . . . law:** i.e., a legitimate son

(continued)

ACT I

Scene 1

Enter Kent, Gloucester, and Edmund.

KENT I thought the King had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall.

GLOUCESTER It did always seem so to us, but now in the division of the kingdom, it appears not which of the dukes he values most, for (equalities) are so weighed that curiosity in neither can make choice of either's moiety. 5

KENT Is not this your son, my lord?

GLOUCESTER His breeding, sir, hath been at my charge. I have so often blushed to acknowledge him that now I am brazed to 't. 10

KENT I cannot conceive you.

GLOUCESTER Sir, this young fellow's mother could, whereupon she grew round-wombed and had indeed, sir, a son for her cradle ere she had a husband for her bed. Do you smell a fault? 15

KENT I cannot wish the fault undone, the issue of it being so proper.

GLOUCESTER But I have a son, sir, by order of law, some year elder than this, who yet is no dearer in my account. Though this knave came something saucily to the world before he was sent for, yet was his mother fair, there was good sport at his making, 20

20. **some year:** i.e., a year or so

20–21. **dearer . . . account:** (1) more loved by me; (2) more valuable in my assessment

21. **this knave:** i.e., Edmund, the illegitimate son (The word **knave** meant “boy” or “fellow,” but was also a term for a servant, a sense playfully continued by Gloucester in “came something saucily . . . before he was sent for,” as if he were an impudent servant who intrudes before he is summoned.) **something:** somewhat

22. **saucily:** (1) impudently; (2) bawdily

23. **fair:** beautiful

24. **whoreson:** bastard (here used affectionately)

24–25. **Do . . . Edmund:** It is possible that Edmund does not hear the conversation until this point.

29. **services:** respects (a courtly term)

30. **sue:** beg, entreat

31. **study deserving:** strive to deserve (your acquaintance)

32. **He:** i.e., Edmund; **out:** i.e., away

33 SD. **Sennet:** trumpets announcing an approach

34. **Attend:** escort (to the king’s presence)

37. **we:** i.e., I (the royal “we,” which continues in the lines that follow)

40. **fast:** firm

43. **son:** i.e., son-in-law

46. **constant will:** firm intention; **publish:** make public

47. **several:** separate, particular; **dowers:** i.e., inheritances, legacies (Only Cordelia’s portion would have been an actual dowry.)

and the whoreson must be acknowledged.—Do you know this noble gentleman, Edmund? 25

EDMUND No, my lord.

GLOUCESTER My lord of Kent. Remember him hereafter as my honorable friend.

EDMUND My services to your Lordship.

KENT I must love you and sue to know you better. 30

EDMUND Sir, I shall study deserving.

GLOUCESTER He hath been out nine years, and away he shall again. (*Sennet.*) The King is coming.

Enter King Lear, Cornwall, Albany, Goneril, Regan, Cordelia, and Attendants.

LEAR

Attend the lords of France and Burgundy,
Gloucester. 35

GLOUCESTER I shall, my lord. *He exits.*

LEAR

Meantime we shall express our darker purpose.—
Give me the map there. *[He is handed a map.]*

Know that we have divided

In three our kingdom, and 'tis our fast intent 40
To shake all cares and business from our age,
Conferring them on younger strengths, [while we
Unburdened crawl toward death. Our son of
Cornwall

And you, our no less loving son of Albany, 45
We have this hour a constant will to publish
Our daughters' several dowers, that future strife
May be prevented now.]

The (two great) princes, France and Burgundy,
Great rivals in our youngest daughter's love, 50
Long in our court have made their amorous sojourn
And here are to be answered. Tell me, my
daughters—

[Since now we will divest us both of rule,

55. **Interest of:** claim or title to

58. **Where nature . . . challenge:** i.e., **where merit** and natural affection lay claim to it (i.e., to Lear's **largest bounty**)

60–61. **wield the matter:** express the substance (of her love)

63. **valued:** estimated, appraised

65. **found:** i.e., **found** himself to be loved

66. **breath:** voice; **unable:** unequal to the task

69. **these bounds:** i.e., the lands within these boundaries

70. **shadowy:** shady; **champains riched:** i.e., rich plains

71. **wide-skirted meads:** broad meadows

72. **issue:** descendants

76. **self:** same; **mettle:** (1) temperament; (2) metal

77. **prize:** esteem, value (with a secondary sense of "price")

78. **my . . . love:** i.e., **my love** exactly

79. **that:** i.e., in that

81. **square of sense:** No satisfactory explanation of these words has been found. Among the possible meanings of **square** are (1) area; (2) measure (i.e., carpenter's square); (3) perfection.

83. **felicitate:** made happy

87. **More ponderous:** weightier (and therefore more significant)

Interest of territory, cares of state—] 55
 Which of you shall we say doth love us most,
 That we our largest bounty may extend
 Where nature doth with merit challenge. Goneril,
 Our eldest born, speak first.

GONERIL

Sir, I love you more than word can wield the 60
 matter,
 Dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty,
 Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare,
 No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honor;
 As much as child e'er loved, or father found; 65
 A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable.
 Beyond all manner of so much I love you.

CORDELIA, *aside*¹

What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent.

LEAR, *pointing to the map*¹

Of all these bounds, even from this line to this,
 With shadowy forests [and with champains riched, 70
 With plenteous rivers] and wide-skirted meads,
 We make thee lady. To thine and Albany's (issue)
 Be this perpetual.—What says our second
 daughter,
 Our dearest Regan, wife of Cornwall? (Speak.) 75

REGAN

I am made of that self mettle as my sister
 And prize me at her worth. In my true heart
 I find she names my very deed of love;
 Only she comes too short, that I profess 80
 Myself an enemy to all other joys
 Which the most precious square of sense
 (possesses,)
 And find I am alone felicitate
 In your dear Highness' love.

CORDELIA, *aside*¹

Then poor Cordelia! 85
 And yet not so, since I am sure my love's
 More ponderous than my tongue.

90. **validity:** value
 93. **vines:** i.e., vineyards; **milk:** i.e., pastures
 94. **to be interested:** (1) to have a right or share;
 (2) to be closely connected; **draw:** gain
 99. **Nothing . . . nothing:** proverbial
 102. **bond:** duty or obligation (of child to father)
 106. **bred me:** educated me, brought me up
 107. **right fit:** fitting, appropriate
 110. **Haply:** perchance, perhaps
 111. **must take my plight:** will receive my vow
 or pledge



"He that makes his generation messes." (1.1.130)
 From *Bauern-praktik, Bawren Practica, odder
 Wetterbüchlin . . .* (1555).

LEAR

To thee and thine hereditary ever
 Remain this ample third of our fair kingdom,
 No less in space, validity, and pleasure 90
 Than that conferred on Goneril.—Now, our joy,
 Although our last and least, to whose young love
 [The vines of France and milk of Burgundy
 Strive to be interested,] what can you say to draw
 A third more opulent than your sisters'? Speak. 95

CORDELIA Nothing, my lord.

[LEAR Nothing?

CORDELIA Nothing.]

LEAR

Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.

CORDELIA

Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave 100
 My heart into my mouth. I love your Majesty
 According to my bond, no more nor less.

LEAR

How, how, Cordelia? Mend your speech a little,
 Lest you may mar your fortunes.

CORDELIA

Good my lord, 105
 You have begot me, bred me, loved me.
 I return those duties back as are right fit:
 Obey you, love you, and most honor you.
 Why have my sisters husbands if they say
 They love you all? Haply, when I shall wed, 110
 That lord whose hand must take my plight shall
 carry
 Half my love with him, half my care and duty.
 Sure I shall never marry like my sisters,
 (To love my father all.) 115

LEAR But goes thy heart with this?

CORDELIA Ay, my good lord.

LEAR So young and so untender?

CORDELIA So young, my lord, and true.

122. **mysteries:** secret rites; **Hecate:** goddess of witchcraft and of the moon. (Her name, in Shakespeare, is pronounced as a two-syllable word.)

123–24. **operation . . . be:** i.e., influence of the planets that govern human life and death

126. **Propinquity . . . blood:** kinship

127–28. **as . . . this:** i.e., consider you a **stranger from this** moment

129. **Scythian:** member of a tribe noted in classical literature for savagery (See picture, page 22.)

130. **makes . . . messes:** eats his own offspring (See picture, page 12.)

132. **well neighbored:** closely placed; **relieved:** helped in distress

133. **sometime:** former

137–38. **thought . . . nursery:** i.e., expected to commit myself entirely to her loving care **set my rest:** venture everything (The term is from the card game of primero.) **nursery:** i.e., caretaking

140. **So . . . as:** i.e., as I hope to rest in **peace in my grave**

141. **France:** i.e., the king of **France; Who stirs?:** an impatient outburst: “Does no one move?”

144. **digest the third:** i.e., absorb what was to be Cordelia’s dowry

145. **plainness:** plain-speaking, frankness; **marry her:** i.e., get her a husband

146. **invest:** endow; clothe

147–48. **large effects . . . majesty:** i.e., considerable signs (of power), or splendid shows, that are associated with rulership

148. **Ourself:** the royal “we”; **by monthly course:** i.e., a month at a time

(continued)

LEAR

Let it be so. Thy truth, then, be thy dower, 120
 For by the sacred radiance of the sun,
 The ¹mysteries¹ of Hecate and the night,
 By all the operation of the orbs
 From whom we do exist and cease to be,
 Here I disclaim all my paternal care, 125
 Propinquity, and property of blood,
 And as a stranger to my heart and me
 Hold thee from this forever. The barbarous
 Scythian,
 Or he that makes his generation messes 130
 To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom
 Be as well neighbored, pitied, and relieved
 As thou my sometime daughter.

KENT Good my liege—

LEAR Peace, Kent. 135

Come not between the dragon and his wrath.
 I loved her most and thought to set my rest
 On her kind nursery. ¹To Cordelia.¹ Hence and avoid
 my sight!—
 So be my grave my peace as here I give 140
 Her father's heart from her.—Call France. Who stirs?
 Call Burgundy. ¹An Attendant exits.¹ Cornwall and
 Albany,
 With my two daughters' dowers digest the third.
 Let pride, which she calls plainness, marry her. 145
 I do invest you jointly with my power,
 Preeminence, and all the large effects
 That troop with majesty. Ourselves by monthly course,
 With reservation of an hundred knights
 By you to be sustained, shall our abode 150
 Make with you by due turn. Only we shall retain
 The name and all th' addition to a king.
 The sway, revenue, execution of the rest,

149. **With reservation of:** i.e., reserving for myself
150. **sustained:** provided for
152. **addition to:** titles of
153. **revenue:** accent on second syllable; **execution:** carrying out, performance; **rest:** i.e., everything else associated with kingship
160. **Make . . . shaft:** get out of the way of the arrow
161. **fork:** forked arrowhead
- 165–66. **To plainness . . . bound:** i.e., honor obliges one to speak bluntly
167. **Reserve thy state:** keep your power
168. **in . . . consideration:** i.e., by pausing for reflection; **check:** stop
- 169–70. **Answer . . . judgment:** i.e., I will bet my life on the truth of my opinion that
- 172–73. **those . . . hollowness:** Proverbial: “Empty vessels have the loudest sounds.”
175. **pawn:** (1) something to be set at risk; (2) chess piece of least value
176. **wage:** (1) wager, bet; (2) risk in warfare
178. **motive:** i.e., my reason for acting
181. **blank:** white bull’s eye in the center of a target (See picture, page 26.)
182. **Apollo:** god of the sun
185. **vassal:** slave; **Miscreant:** misbeliever; villain