

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

King Lear

King Lear, probably written around 1605–1606, is one of Shakespeare’s tragic masterpieces, though, not a completely original one. The earliest account of the tale is in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s 12th-century *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Shakespeare probably used Raphael Holinshed’s 1587 version in *The Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Irelande*.

Shakespeare also drew from current events in writing this play. In 1603, the two eldest daughters of Sir Brian Annesley sued to have their father declared legally insane so they could take over his estate. His youngest daughter, Cordell, protested on his behalf. Whatever his sources, Shakespeare made the story immeasurably moving and all his own.



King Lear is mostly a domestic play, dealing with a family’s fears and tensions. In Shakespeare’s time, the father held sovereignty over his family just as a king held sovereignty over his land. The play also explores other themes, including power and powerlessness, appearance and reality, wisdom and folly, youth and age, and sight and blindness (both physical and intellectual).

Activity: Ask each student to write a one-page essay, telling what they think a child owes his or her parents, and how they think Shakespeare’s three daughters measured up to what they believe are a child’s filial duties. Invite students to share their essays and discuss the question: What does a child owe his or her parents?

BARD CARD

King Lear

Plot Summary: *King Lear*, which takes place in Britain in the first century B.C., is the story of an old king whose foolish pride causes him to lose his kingdom, the only daughter who loves him, and his life.

Main Characters

- King Lear:** old king of Britain
- Goneril:** Lear’s first daughter
- Regan:** Lear’s second daughter
- Cordelia:** Lear’s youngest and once-favorite daughter
- Earl of Kent:** King Lear’s friend
- Earl of Gloucester:** Lear’s honest subject
- Duke of Albany:** Goneril’s honest husband
- Duke of Cornwall:** Regan’s husband
- Edgar:** Earl of Gloucester’s legitimate son
- Edmund:** Earl of Gloucester’s traitorous illegitimate son

Glossary

- apprehension:** arrest
- banish’d:** exiled; required to leave the country
- dowry:** the money, goods, or estate that a woman brings to her husband in marriage
- hovel:** hut
- overture:** introduction
- pawn:** a person that can be used to further the purposes of another person
- procure:** bring about
- rack:** an instrument of torture on which a body is stretched
- raiment:** clothing
- steward:** supervisor of servants
- stocks:** a wooden frame with holes in which the feet and hands can be locked as punishment
- tempest:** a violent storm
- vouchsafe:** to grant or furnish
- writ:** a written order