

KING LEAR | FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Shakespeare's language can seem scary, but give it a try! *Go at your own pace, and have fun!*



SHAKESPEARE IN PRISON

DETROIT PUBLIC THEATRE'S
SIGNATURE COMMUNITY PROGRAM

We're maybe ten minutes into the play, and things are escalating quickly! All we know so far is that King Lear is really feeling his age and wants to retire, so he's decided to divide his kingdom into three parcels: one for each of his three daughters. Some of the other characters think this is not a great idea, to put it mildly. But Lear's gonna do what Lear's gonna do. And here's what he does...

The Shakespeare

LEAR

Give me the map there. Know that we have divided In three our kingdom; and 'tis our fast intent 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, 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, 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, Interest of territory, cares of state— 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 do love you more than words can wield the 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, A love that makes breath poor and speech unable, Beyond all matter of so much I love you.

CORDELIA (aside)

What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent.

LEAR

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

REGAN

Sir, 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 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)

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

LEAR

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

CORDELIA

Nothing, my lord.

LEAR

Nothing?

CORDELIA

Nothing.

LEAR

Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.

CORDELIA

Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave 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, Least you may mar your fortunes.

CORDELIA

Good my lord, 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, 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.

LEAR

But goes thy heart with this?

CORDELIA

Ay, good my lord.

LEAR

So young and so untender?

CORDELIA

So young, my lord, and true.

LEAR

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

Check out those long pauses between Cordelia's and Lear's lines. What is Shakespeare telling us about these characters, their objectives, and their relationship?

The Translation

LEAR

Hand me that map over there. I hereby announce that I've divided my kingdom into three parts, which I'm handing over to the younger generation so I can enjoy a little rest and peace of mind in my old age. Cornwall and Albany, my loving sons-in-law, I now want to announce publicly what each of my daughters will inherit, to avoid hostilities after I die. The two great princes of France and Burgundy, competing for the hand of my youngest daughter Cordelia, have been at my court a long time and will soon have their answers. —My daughters, since I'm about to give up my throne and the worries that go along with it, tell me which one of you loves me most, so that I can give my largest gift to the one who deserves it most. — Goneril, my oldest daughter, you speak first.

GONERIL

Sir, I love you more than words can say. I love you more than eyesight, space, and freedom, beyond wealth or anything of value. I love you as much as life itself, and as much as status, health, beauty, or honor. I love you as much as any child has ever loved her father, with a love too deep to be spoken of. I love you more than any answer to the question "How much?"

CORDELIA (aside)

What will I say? I can only love and be silent.

LEAR

I give you all this land, from this line to that one—dense forests, fertile fields, rivers rich with fish, wide meadows. This land will belong to your and Albany's children forever.—And now what does my second daughter Regan, the wife of Cornwall, have to say? Tell me.

REGAN

Sir, I'm made of the same stuff as my sister and consider myself just as good as she is. She's described my feelings of love for you precisely, but her description falls a little short of the truth. I reject completely any joy except my love for you, and I find that only your majesty's love makes me happy.

CORDELIA (aside)

Poor me, what am I going to say now? But I'm not poor in love—my love is bigger than my words are.

LEAR

You and your heirs hereby receive this large third of our lovely kingdom, no smaller in area or value than what I gave Goneril.—Now, you, my youngest daughter, my joy, courted by the rich rulers of France and Burgundy, what can you tell me that will make me give you a bigger part of my kingdom than I gave your sisters? Speak.

CORDELIA

Nothing, my lord.

LEAR

Nothing?

CORDELIA

Nothing.

LEAR

Come on, "nothing" will get you nothing. Try again.

CORDELIA

I'm unlucky. I don't have a talent for putting my heart's feelings into words. I love you as a child should love her father, neither more nor less.

LEAR

What are you saying, Cordelia? Revise your statement, or you may damage your inheritance.

CORDELIA

My lord, you brought me up and loved me, and I'm giving back just as I should: I obey you, love you, and honor you. How can my sisters speak the truth when they say they love only you? Don't they love their husbands too? Hopefully when I get married, I'll give my husband half my love and half my sense of duty. I'm sure I'll never get married in the way my sisters say they're married, loving their father only.

LEAR

But do you mean what you're saying?

CORDELIA

Yes, my lord.

LEAR

So young and so cruel?

CORDELIA

So young, my lord, and honest.

LEAR

Then that's the way it'll be. The truth will be all the inheritance you get. I swear by the sacred sun, by the mysterious moon, and by all the planets that rule our lives, that I disown you now as my daughter. As of now, there are no family ties between us, and I consider you a stranger to me. Foreign savages who eat their own children for dinner will be as close to my heart as you, ex-daughter of mine.

Heads up:

Goneril is married to Albany.

Regan is married to Cornwall.

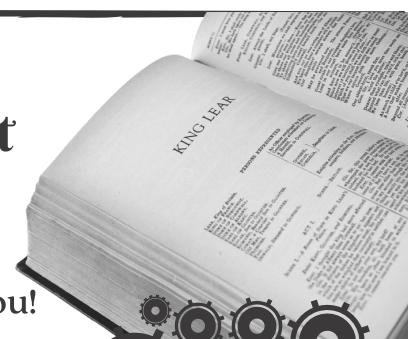
Cordelia is essentially on a Shakespearean version of *The Bachelorette*.



KING LEAR | FOOD FOR THOUGHT

You can respond to these in any way you choose:

Write **ACT IT OUT** Talk about it
Draw **THINK ABOUT IT**
... up to you!



SHAKESPEARE IN PRISON

DETROIT PUBLIC THEATRE'S
SIGNATURE COMMUNITY PROGRAM

Act I Scene I of *King Lear* is yet another great scene that has all sorts of potential for staging... and all sorts of challenges! That's part of what makes it so fun.

Nearly every character in *King Lear* is seen by the audience for the first time in this scene. So in addition to everything else you want to keep in mind when directing a play, you'll need to make sure the audience is clear about who is who. The characters on stage are:

- King Lear (duh)
- Kent (his loyal right hand man)
- Goneril and Regan (Lear's daughters)
- Albany and Cornwall (their husbands)
- Cordelia (Lear's youngest daughter)

Luckily, Lear calls most of them out by name. (Thanks, Shakespeare!) What can you do in your staging to make sure the audience is clear about all these characters and their relationships? This includes set, costumes, and—perhaps most importantly—**the actors' movements and interactions, and reactions, even if they're not speaking.**

Cordelia is not doing herself any favors by being honest with her father. So why doesn't she fake it? Her sisters have no problem lying to get what they want.

What does that tell you about these characters—their personalities, their values, their relationship with their father?

Immediately after this, Kent steps in to try to convince Lear to take back his decision to cut off Cordelia. But Lear won't listen, and it doesn't take long before he banishes Kent, too.

Lear gives Cordelia several chances to give a different response, and when she doesn't, his reaction is... pretty extreme. Some people see this as a sign of dementia, and he *is* an old dude, but that's not the only possible answer.

Why else might he react this way?

Let's say you were in Kent's position. Would you speak up? If so, what would you say to try to get Lear to change his mind?



If Goneril and Regan remind you of the wicked stepsisters in *Cinderella*... you're not alone! At the very least, they're clearly very different from Cordelia.

With that in mind, how would you costume these siblings? Think not just about clothes, but about hair, makeup, jewelry, and other accessories.



When a character speaks "aside," they are speaking to the audience—no one else on stage can hear them. (Think about a movie where someone turns and talks directly to the camera!) The thing about asides is they are always truthful, and Shakespeare often uses them in situations where characters can't speak their minds to the other characters. They give us insight into what someone is really thinking.

So look at Cordelia's asides. What do they reveal about her character? Why doesn't she say those things so the people on stage can hear? Is the scene the same if you cut the asides?

And: Just because Cordelia is speaking to the audience doesn't mean she has to turn and speak directly to someone in the front row! How would you stage her asides? Or would you cut them out?

One more small—but important thing: you've gotta stage this so the audience catches Cordelia's asides. Speaking of which...