

King Lear

by David P. Gontar (November 2016)



This article expands the redaction of Shakespeare's play initiated in "Unreading Lear," Chapter Four of [Hamlet Made Simple and Other Essays](#), New English Review, 2013)

1. King Lear has three daughters and no wife. He finds himself in love with the youngest, Cordelia, who resembles him in important aspects of character. He decides to retire and partition his kingdom, two portions to be given to the elder, married, daughters, and a larger portion to the youngest, his avowed "favorite," with whom he plans to reside. This unfair legacy will be justified on the basis of a contest in protestations of love, in which it is expected that Cordelia will outdo her sisters in fulsome praise of her father and the love she bears him. This speech of love will also serve as a token of forgiveness for years of sexual intrusions. To his dismay, Cordelia refuses to give the anticipated speech, wrecking Lear's plan. He therefore lets Goneril and Regan split the kingdom between them and sends Cordelia off with the King of France,

only to discover that he cannot obtain hospitality with the elder sisters. During a terrible storm on the heath, abandoned by Goneril and Regan, and haunted by Cordelia, Lear goes mad. Learning of her father's catastrophe and fearing he will be an early casualty in the brewing war of Regan against Goneril (a bloody struggle made inevitable by Lear's vivisection of his realm), Cordelia returns with her new husband to rescue her father. The King of France has by this time naturally learned of Cordelia's obsession with her father and abandons her in England, where she and her father are captured. Father Lear and daughter Cordelia both die.

The answer, then, to those who wring their hands over the "unhappy" ending of *King Lear*, and cannot understand how Shakespeare can be so insensitive as to allow Lear and his beatific daughter Cordelia to suffer death, is that Lear and Cordelia are not saints. Rather, they resemble King Antiochus and his daughter, knee deep in a forbidden incestuous affair. This misalliance leads through a bizarre concatenation of events to a bloodbath and the violent end of many persons at court. Most amusing, then, is the fancied "happy ending," in which father and daughter are spared, the intransigent and self-righteous Cordelia being swept off her feet by Edgar! Even if she obtained an annulment of her marriage to France, given her total preoccupation with her redoubtable father, it isn't likely that she would be an ideal wife for "Poor Tom." He'd be out in the cold again for sure.

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David P. Gontar's latest book is [Hamlet Made Simple and Other Essays](#), New

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