Extracts from *King Lear*

We have included four extracts from the play which showcase different aspects of Lear’s ageing. Those passages which are particularly relevant have been highlighted in bold.

**From Act 1, Scene 1**

*In this extract, Lear has just announced that he is handing over his kingdom and his rule to his daughters and sons-in-law. He has demanded that his daughters declare their love for him in exchange for their portion of the kingdom. So far, Goneril and Regan have made extravagant speeches professing their filial love, and have been rewarded accordingly. Now Lear turns to his youngest, most beloved daughter, who is more honest than her scheming sisters.*

This scene demonstrates Lear’s irrational thinking and quick temper. In it, he banishes his beloved daughter Cordelia, as well as his trusted friend and advisor Kent, for speaking the truth. At the end of the scene, Goneril and Regan discuss their father’s behaviour, suggesting that he has always been rash, and that this is a personality trait now exaggerated by his age.

*Lear:* [...] Now, our joy,

Although the last, not least; to whose young love

The vines of France and milk of Burgundy

Strive to be interest; what can you say to draw

A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.

*Cordelia:* Nothing, my lord.

*Lear:* Nothing?

*Cordelia:* Nothing.

*Lear:* Nothing can 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,

Lest it may mar your fortunes.

*Cordelia:* Good my lord,

You have begot me, bred me, lov’d me; I

Return those duties back as are right fit,

Obey you, love you, and most honour 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: 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 all 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 messes
To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom
Be as well neighbour’d, pitied, and reliev’d,
As thou my sometime daughter.

Earl of Kent: Good my liege-

Lear: Peace, Kent!
Come not between the dragon and his wrath.
I lov’d her most, and thought to set my rest
On her kind nursery.- Hence and avoid my sight!-
So be my grave my peace as here I give
Her father’s heart from her! Call France! Who stirs?
Call Burgundy! Cornwall and Albany,
With my two daughters’ dowers digest this third;
Let pride, which she calls plainness, marry her.
I do invest you jointly in my power,
Preeminence, and all the large effects
That troop with majesty. Ourself, by monthly course,
With reservation of an hundred knights,
By you to be sustain’d, shall our abode
Make with you by due turns. Only we still retain
The name, and all th’additions to a king. The sway,
Revenue, execution of the rest,
Beloved sons, be yours; which to confirm,
This coronet part betwixt you.

Earl of Kent: Royal Lear,
Whom I have ever honour’d as my king,
Lov’d as my father, as my master follow’d,
As my great patron thought on in my prayers-
Lear: The bow is bent and drawn; make from the shaft.

Earl of Kent: Let it fall rather, though the fork invade The region of my heart! Be Kent unmannerly When Lear is mad. What wouldst thou do, old man? Think'st thou that duty shall have dread to speak When power to flattery bows? To plainness honour's bound When majesty falls to folly. Reverse thy doom; And in thy best consideration check This hideous rashness. Answer my life my judgment, Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least, Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sound Reverbs no hollowness.

Lear: Kent, on thy life, no more!

Earl of Kent: My life I never held but as a pawn To wage against thine enemies; nor fear to lose it, Thy safety being the motive.

Lear: Out of my sight!

Earl of Kent: See better, Lear, and let me still remain The true blank of thine eye.

Lear: Now by Apollo-

Earl of Kent: Now by Apollo, King, Thou swear'st thy gods in vain.

Lear: O vassal! miscreant! [Lays his hand on his sword.]

Duke of Albany: [with Cornwall] Dear sir, forbear!

Earl of Kent: Do! Kill thy physician, and the fee bestow Upon the foul disease. Revoke thy gift, Or, whilst I can vent clamour from my throat, I'll tell thee thou dost evil.

Lear: Hear me, recreant! On thine allegiance, hear me! Since thou hast sought to make us break our vow- Which we durst never yet- and with strain'd pride To come between our sentence and our power,- Which nor our nature nor our place can bear,- Our potency made good, take thy reward. Five days we do allot thee for provision To shield thee from diseases of the world, And on the sixth to turn thy hated back Upon our kingdom. If, on the tenth day following, Thy banish'd trunk be found in our dominions, The moment is thy death. Away! By Jupiter, This shall not be revok'd.
Earl of Kent: Fare thee well, King. Since thus thou wilt appear, 
Freedom lives hence, and banishment is here. 
[To Cordelia] The gods to their dear shelter take thee, maid, 
That justly think'st and hast most rightly said! 
[To Regan and Goneril] And your large speeches may your deeds 
approve, 
That good effects may spring from words of love. 
Thus Kent, O princes, bids you all adieu; 
He'll shape his old course in a country new. Exit.

Flourish. Enter Gloucester, with France and Burgundy; Attendants.

[We have cut a short passage from the scene here. France and Burgundy are suitors vying for Cordelia’s hand. Now that she lacks a dowry, Burgundy departs, while France declares his love and his desire to marry her].

King of France: Bid farewell to your sisters.

Cordelia: The jewels of our father, with wash'd eyes 
Cordelia leaves you. I know you what you are; 
And, like a sister, am most loath to call 
Your faults as they are nam'd. Use well our father. 
To your professed bosoms I commit him; 
But yet, alas, stood I within his grace, 
I would prefer him to a better place! 
So farewell to you both.

Goneril: Prescribe not us our duties.

Regan: Let your study 
Be to content your lord, who hath receiv'd you 
At fortune's alms. You have obedience scant'd, 
And well are worth the want that you have wanted.

Cordelia: Time shall unfold what plighted cunning hides. 
Who cover faults, at last shame them derides. 
Well may you prosper!

King of France: Come, my fair Cordelia.

Exeunt France and Cordelia.

Goneril: Sister, it is not little I have to say of what most nearly 
appertains to us both. I think our father will hence to-night.

Regan: That's most certain, and with you; next month with us.

Goneril: You see how full of changes his age is. The observation we 
have made of it hath not been little. He always lov'd our 
sister most, and with what poor judgment he hath now cast her 
off appears too grossly.

Regan: 'Tis the infirmity of his age; yet he hath ever but slenderly 
known himself.
Goneril: The best and soundest of his time hath been but rash; then must we look to receive from his age, not alone the imperfections of long- ingrained condition, but therewithal the unruly waywardness that infirm and choleric years bring with them.

Regan: Such unconstant starts are we like to have from him as this of Kent's banishment.

Goneril: There is further compliment of leave-taking between France and him. Pray you let's hit together. If our father carry authority with such dispositions as he bears, this last surrender of his will but offend us.

Regan: We shall further think on't.

Goneril: We must do something, and i' th' heat.

Exeunt.
From Act 1, Scene 4

Here, Lear is staying with his daughter Goneril, along with his train of one hundred knights. Lear is angry and distressed because he believes that Goneril’s household servants have been treating him disrespectfully. He has just struck the servant Oswald for his insolence.

Lear is used to being served and obeyed as a king, but in Goneril’s household, he is ignored and dismissed by her servants; to them, he is not ‘King Lear’, but rather ‘my lady’s father’. We see Lear struggling to come to terms with this new lack of status and power. His very identity is in question, as we see at the beginning of the passage. Lear’s behaviour is petulant and childish – he has, after all, struck one of Goneril’s attendants – but we also see his vulnerability in this scene. When Goneril asks him to halve his train of knights, he curses her in his rage, but he also appears to weep in spite of himself, angry at his own eyes for their weakness.

Lear: Doth any here know me? This is not Lear.
Doth Lear walk thus? speak thus? Where are his eyes?
Either his notion weakens, his discernings
Are lethargied- Ha! waking? ’Tis not so!
Who is it that can tell me who I am?
Fool: Lear’s shadow.

Lear: I would learn that; for, by the marks of sovereignty,
Knowledge, and reason, I should be false persuaded
I had daughters.

Fool: Which they will make an obedient father.

Lear: Your name, fair gentlewoman?

Goneril: This admiration, sir, is much o’ th’ savour
Of other your new pranks. I do beseech you
To understand my purposes aright.
As you are old and reverend, you should be wise.
Here do you keep a hundred knights and squires;
Men so disorder’d, so debosh’d, and bold
That this our court, infected with their manners,
Shows like a riotous inn. Epicurism and lust
Make it more like a tavern or a brothel
Than a grac’d palace. The shame itself doth speak
For instant remedy. Be then desir’d
By her that else will take the thing she begs
A little to disquantity your train,
And the remainder that shall still depend
To be such men as may besort your age,
Which know themselves, and you.

Lear: Darkness and devils!
Saddle my horses! Call my train together!
Degenerate bastard, I’ll not trouble thee;
Yet have I left a daughter.

Goneril. You strike my people, and your disorder’d rabble
Make servants of their betters.

Enter Albany.
Lear: Woe that too late repents!- O, sir, are you come? Is it your will? Speak, sir!- Prepare my horses. Ingratitude, thou marble-hearted fiend, More hideous when thou show’st thee in a child Than the sea-monster! Duke of Albany: Pray, sir, be patient.

Lear: [to Goneril] Detested kite, thou liest! My train are men of choice and rarest parts, That all particulars of duty know And in the most exact regard support The worships of their name.- O most small fault, How ugly didst thou in Cordelia show! Which, like an engine, wrench’d my frame of nature From the fix’d place; drew from my heart all love And added to the gall. O Lear, Lear, Lear! Beat at this gate that let thy folly in [Strikes his head.] And thy dear judgment out! Go, go, my people.

Duke of Albany: My lord, I am guiltless, as I am ignorant Of what hath mov’d you.

Lear: It may be so, my lord. Hear, Nature, hear! dear goddess, hear! Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend To make this creature fruitful. Into her womb convey sterility; Dry up in her the organs of increase; And from her derogate body never spring A babe to honour her! If she must teem, Create her child of spleen, that it may live And be a thwart disnatur’d torment to her. Let it stamp wrinkles in her brow of youth, With cadent tears fret channels in her cheeks, Turn all her mother’s pains and benefits To laughter and contempt, that she may feel How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is To have a thankless child! Away, away! Exit.

Duke of Albany: Now, gods that we adore, whereof comes this?

Goneril: Never afflict yourself to know the cause; But let his disposition have that scope That dotage gives it.

Enter Lear.

Lear: What, fifty of my followers at a clap? Within a fortnight?

Duke of Albany: What’s the matter, sir?

Lear: I’ll tell thee. [To Goneril] Life and death! I am asham’d That thou hast power to shake my manhood thus; That these hot tears, which break from me perforce,
Should make thee worth them. Blasts and fogs upon thee!
Th' untented woundings of a father's curse
Pierce every sense about thee! - Old fond eyes,
Beweep this cause again, I'll pluck ye out,
And cast you, with the waters that you lose,
To temper clay. Yea, is it come to this?
Let it be so. Yet have I left a daughter,
Who I am sure is kind and comfortable.
When she shall hear this of thee, with her nails
She'll flay thy wolvish visage. Thou shalt find
That I'll resume the shape which thou dost think
I have cast off for ever; thou shalt, I warrant thee.

Exeunt [Lear, Kent, and Attendants].
From Act 2, Scene 4

Lear has departed from Goneril’s and travelled to stay with his middle daughter, Regan, along with his train of knights. When he arrives, however, he finds that Regan and Goneril are united against him; indeed, Regan demands that he reduces his party of knights by more than fifty.

In this scene, we witness Lear’s pride, obstinacy and strength of will, as he refuses to comply with his daughters’ orders and reduce his train. We see Lear angry and confused, struggling to articulate a punishment suited to his daughters’ crimes. Shakespeare does not idolise his ageing protagonist. We are left in no doubt that it would be very difficult to be his child. Yet Shakespeare invites us to pity him, in spite of his challenging behaviour. Goneril and Regan appear unnecessarily callous, and their humiliating refusal to take in Lear with any of his knights amounts to a banishment, condemning their aged father to a night on a bare and stormy heath.

Regan: I am glad to see your Highness.

Lear: Regan, I think you are; I know what reason I have to think so. If thou shouldst not be glad, I would divorce me from thy mother’s tomb, Sepulchring an adultress. [To Kent] O, are you free? Some other time for that.- Beloved Regan, Thy sister’s naught. O Regan, she hath tied Sharp-tooth’d unkindness, like a vulture, here! [Lays his hand on his heart.] I can scarce speak to thee. Thou’lt not believe With how deprav’d a quality- O Regan!

Regan: I pray you, sir, take patience. I have hope You less know how to value her desert Than she to scant her duty.

Lear: Say, how is that?

Regan. I cannot think my sister in the least Would fail her obligation. If, sir, perchance She have restrain’d the riots of your followers, 'Tis on such ground, and to such wholesome end, As clears her from all blame.

Lear: My curses on her!

Regan: O, sir, you are old! Nature in you stands on the very verge Of her confine. You should be rul’d, and led By some discretion that discerns your state Better than you yourself. Therefore I pray you That to our sister you do make return; Say you have wrong’d her, sir.

Lear: Ask her forgiveness? Do you but mark how this becomes the house: 'Dear daughter, I confess that I am old. [Kneels.] Age is unnecessary. On my knees I beg That you’ll vouchsafe me raiment, bed, and food.'
Regan: Good sir, no more! These are unsightly tricks.
Return you to my sister.
Lear: [rises] Never, Regan!
She hath abated me of half my train;
Look'd black upon me; struck me with her tongue,
Most serpent-like, upon the very heart.
All the stor'd vengeances of heaven fall
On her ingrateful top! Strike her young bones,
You taking airs, with lameness!

Duke of Cornwall: Fie, sir, fie!

Lear: You nimble lightnings, dart your blinding flames
Into her scornful eyes! Infect her beauty,
You fen-suck'd fogs, drawn by the pow'rful sun,
To fall and blast her pride!

Regan: O the blest gods! so will you wish on me
When the rash mood is on.

Lear: No, Regan, thou shalt never have my curse.
Thy tender-hefted nature shall not give
Thee o'er to harshness. Her eyes are fierce; but thine
Do comfort, and not burn. 'Tis not in thee
To grudge my pleasures, to cut off my train,
To bandy hasty words, to scant my sizes,
And, in conclusion, to oppose the bolt
Against my coming in. Thou better know'st
The offices of nature, bond of childhood,
Effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude.
Thy half o' th' kingdom hast thou not forgot,
Wherein I thee endow'd.

Regan: Good sir, to th' purpose.

Tucket within.

Lear: Who put my man i' th' stocks?

Duke of Cornwall: What trumpet's that?

Regan: I know't- my sister's. This approves her letter,
That she would soon be here.
[Enter [Oswald the] Steward.]
Is your lady come?

Lear: This is a slave, whose easy-borrowed pride
Dwells in the fickle grace of her he follows.
Out, varlet, from my sight!

Duke of Cornwall: What means your Grace?

Enter Goneril.

Lear: Who stock'd my servant? Regan, I have good hope
To Goneril] Art not ash'm'd to look upon this beard?

O Regan, wilt thou take her by the hand?

Goneril: Why not by th' hand, sir? How have I offended?

All's not offence that indiscretion finds
And dotage terms so.

Lear: O sides, you are too tough!

Will you yet hold? How came my man i' th' stocks?

Duke of Cornwall: I set him there, sir; but his own disorders

Deserv'd much less advancement.

Lear: You? Did you?

Regan: I pray you, father, being weak, seem so.

If, till the expiration of your month,

You will return and sojourn with my sister,

Dismissing half your train, come then to me.

I am now from home, and out of that provision

Which shall be needful for your entertainment.

Lear: Return to her, and fifty men dismiss'd?

No, rather I abjure all roofs, and choose

To wage against the enmity o' th' air,

To be a comrade with the wolf and owl-

Necessity's sharp pinch! Return with her?

Why, the hot-blooded France, that dowerless took

Our youngest born, I could as well be brought

to knee his throne, and, squire-like, pension beg

To keep base life afoot. Return with her?

Persuade me rather to be slave and sumpter

To this detested groom. [Points at Oswald.]

Goneril: At your choice, sir.

Lear: I prithee, daughter, do not make me mad.

I will not trouble thee, my child; farewell.

We'll no more meet, no more see one another.

But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter;

Or rather a disease that's in my flesh,

Which I must needs call mine. Thou art a boil,

A plague sore, an embossed carbuncle

In my corrupted blood. But I'll not chide thee.

Let shame come when it will, I do not call it.

I do not bid the Thunder-bearer shoot

Nor tell tales of thee to high-judging Jove.

Mend when thou canst; be better at thy leisure;

I can be patient, I can stay with Regan,

I and my hundred knights.
Regan: Not altogether so.
I look’d not for you yet, nor am provided
For your fit welcome. Give ear, sir, to my sister;
For those that mingle reason with your passion
Must be content to think you old, and so-
But she knows what she does.

Lear: Is this well spoken?

Regan: I dare avouch it, sir. What, fifty followers?
Is it not well? What should you need of more?
Yea, or so many, sith that both charge and danger
Speak ‘gainst so great a number? How in one house
Should many people, under two commands,
Hold amity? ’Tis hard; almost impossible.

Goneril: Why might not you, my lord, receive attendance
From those that she calls servants, or from mine?

Regan: Why not, my lord? If then they chanc’d to slack ye,
We could control them. If you will come to me
(For now I spy a danger), I entreat you
To bring but five-and-twenty. To no more
Will I give place or notice.

Lear: I gave you all-

Regan: And in good time you gave it!

Lear: Made you my guardians, my depositaries;
But kept a reservation to be followed
With such a number. What, must I come to you
With five-and-twenty, Regan? Said you so?

Regan: And speak’t again my lord. No more with me.

Lear: Those wicked creatures yet do look well-favour’d
When others are more wicked; not being the worst
Stands in some rank of praise. [To Goneril] I’ll go with thee.
Thy fifty yet doth double five-and-twenty,
And thou art twice her love.

Goneril: Hear, me, my lord.
What need you five-and-twenty, ten, or five,
To follow in a house where twice so many
Have a command to tend you?

Regan: What need one?

Lear: O, reason not the need! Our basest beggars
Are in the poorest thing superfluous.
Allow not nature more than nature needs,
Man’s life is cheap as beast’s. Thou art a lady:
If only to go warm were gorgeous,
Why, nature needs not what thou gorgeous wear’st
Which scarcely keeps thee warm. But, for true need-
You heavens, give me that patience, patience I need!
You see me here, you gods, a poor old man,
As full of grief as age; wretched in both.
If it be you that stirs these daughters’ hearts
Against their father, fool me not so much
To bear it tamely; touch me with noble anger,
And let not women’s weapons, water drops,
Stain my man’s cheeks! No, you unnatural hags!
I will have such revenges on you both
That all the world shall- I will do such things-
What they are yet, I know not; but they shall be
The terrors of the earth! You think I’ll weep.
No, I’ll not weep.
I have full cause of weeping, but this heart
Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws
Or ere I’ll weep. O fool, I shall go mad!
From Act 4, Scene 7

Lear has spent the night exposed to the elements, accompanied by his Fool and, later, by his faithful servant Kent, in disguise. Lear was eventually persuaded to take shelter in a hovel, but not before he had been soaked through on the heath, driven to wild raving by his daughters’ cruelty. Now, his kind daughter Cordelia has returned to England to seek her father and end her sisters’ tyranny. In the previous scene, Lear was rescued by Cordelia’s gentlemen and taken into his daughter’s care.

In this scene, we witness Lear reunited with his beloved daughter. He awakes, fearful and confused, until Cordelia reassures him that he is safe, that she is real, and that all is forgiven. We see Lear at his most vulnerable in this tender exchange between father and daughter. His rage has dissipated, and instead we witness a frail old man, afraid and ashamed, in need of the loving support of his daughter.

Cordelia: Then be’t so, my good lord. [To the Doctor] How, does the King?

Doctor: Madam, sleeps still.

Cordelia: O you kind gods,
Cure this great breach in his abused nature!
Th’ untun’d and jarring senses, O, wind up
Of this child-changed father!

Doctor: So please your Majesty
That we may wake the King? He hath slept long.

Cordelia: Be govern’d by your knowledge, and proceed
I’ th’ sway of your own will. Is he array’d?

Enter Lear in a chair carried by Servants.

Gentleman: Ay, madam. In the heaviness of sleep
We put fresh garments on him.

Doctor: Be by, good madam, when we do awake him.
I doubt not of his temperance.

Cordelia: Very well.

Music.

Doctor: Please you draw near. Louder the music there!

Cordelia: O my dear father, restoration hang
Thy medicine on my lips, and let this kiss
Repair those violent harms that my two sisters
Have in thy reverence made!

Earl of Kent: Kind and dear princess!

Cordelia: Had you not been their father, these white flakes
Had challeng’d pity of them. Was this a face
To be oppos’d against the warring winds?
To stand against the deep dread-bolted thunder?
In the most terrible and nimble stroke
Of quick cross lightning? to watch- poor perdu!
With this thin helm? Mine enemy's dog,
Though he had bit me, should have stood that night
Against my fire; and wast thou fain, poor father,
To hovel thee with swine and rogues forlorn,
In short and musty straw? Alack, alack!
'Tis wonder that thy life and wits at once
Had not concluded all.- He wakes. Speak to him.

Doctor: Madam, do you; 'tis fittest.

Cordelia: How does my royal lord? How fares your Majesty?

Lear: You do me wrong to take me out o' th' grave.
Thou art a soul in bliss; but I am bound
Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears
Do scald like molten lead.

Cordelia: Sir, do you know me?

Lear: You are a spirit, I know. When did you die?

Cordelia: Still, still, far wide!

Doctor: He's scarce awake. Let him alone awhile.

Lear: Where have I been? Where am I? Fair daylight,
I am mightily abus'd. I should e'en die with pity,
To see another thus. I know not what to say.
I feel this pin prick. Would I were assur'd
Of my condition!

Cordelia: O, look upon me, sir,
And hold your hands in benediction o'er me.
No, sir, you must not kneel.

Lear: Pray, do not mock me.
I am a very foolish fond old man,
Fourscore and upward, not an hour more nor less;
And, to deal plainly,
I fear I am not in my perfect mind.
Methinks I should know you, and know this man;
Yet I am doubtful; for I am mainly ignorant
What place this is; and all the skill I have
Remembers not these garments; nor I know not
Where I did lodge last night. Do not laugh at me;
For (as I am a man) I think this lady
To be my child Cordelia.

Cordelia: And so I am! I am!

Lear: Be your tears wet? Yes, faith. I pray weep not.
If you have poison for me, I will drink it.
I know you do not love me; for your sisters
Have, as I do remember, done me wrong.
You have some cause, they have not.

**Cordelia:** No cause, no cause.

**Lear:** Am I in France?

**Earl of Kent:** In your own kingdom, sir.

**Lear:** Do not abuse me.

**Doctor:** Be comforted, good madam. The great rage
You see is kill’d in him; and yet it is danger
To make him even o’er the time he has lost.
Desire him to go in. Trouble him no more
Till further settling.

**Cordelia:** Will't please your Highness walk?

**Lear:** You must bear with me.
Pray you now, forget and forgive. I am old and foolish.