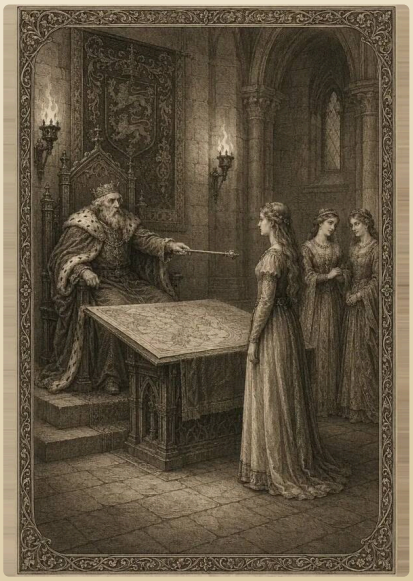
Daily Bard

QUOTATION SHEET

King Lear: key quotes and analysis

The 11 King Lear quotations worth knowing by heart, each with a plain-English reading, an analysis of its language, space for your notes, and a fill-the-gap test.



How to use this sheet

These are the 11 key quotations from the King Lear study guide, set out for revision. Part one gives each quotation with a plain-English reading, a short analysis of what the language is doing, and space for your own notes. Part two prints them again with a word missing from each line, so that you can test yourself.

- [ ] Read the quotation aloud twice. Sound helps memory more than staring does.
- [ ] In the note space, name one method (a device, a word choice, a feature of the verse) and the effect it has.
- [ ] Add one link: to a theme, to another moment in the text, or to a point of context.
- [ ] A day later, cover part one and complete part two from memory.

Part one: the quotations

> Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.
>
> LEAR · ACT 1, SCENE 1 · 1.1.99

Plain English: You will get nothing if you say nothing. Try again.

Lear turns a philosophical proverb into a threat about money. The line treats love as a transaction, words in and land out. The terse imperative "Speak again" shows a king unused to refusal. Ironically, the whole tragedy comes from this "nothing".

Your notes:

Links to: _____

> I love your Majesty
> According to my bond, no more nor less.
>
> CORDELIA · ACT 1, SCENE 1 · 1.1.101-102

Plain English: I love you as a daughter should love her father, exactly that much.

"Bond" means the natural tie of child to parent, but to Lear it sounds like a legal contract. The measured "no more nor less" rejects her sisters' hyperbole with precision that sounds cold in a public ceremony. The line supports both readings of Cordelia: honest, or needlessly unbending.

Your notes:

Links to: _____

> Thou, Nature, art my goddess. To thy law
> My services are bound.
>
> EDMUND · ACT 1, SCENE 2 · 1.2.1-2

Plain English: Nature, you are the goddess I serve. I follow your law and no other.

A soliloquy that opens like a prayer. Edmund's apostrophe to "Nature" replaces custom and legitimacy with energy and merit, and the echo of Cordelia's "bond" in "bound" shows how differently the two children understand obligation. His argument against the label "bastard" is persuasive, which makes his methods more disturbing.

Your notes:

Links to: _____

LEAR Who is it that can tell me who I am?

FOOL Lear's shadow.

LEAR AND THE FOOL · ACT 1, SCENE 4 · 1.4.236-237

Plain English: Can anyone tell me who I am? Fool: You are only the shadow of Lear.

Lear means the question as sarcasm; the Fool answers it seriously. Without power a king is a "shadow", a title with nothing behind it. The exchange turns the political plot into a question of identity, answered only in Act 4.

Your notes:

Links to: _____

O, reason not the need! Our basest beggars
Are in the poorest thing superfluous.

LEAR · ACT 2, SCENE 4 · 2.4.304-305

Plain English: Do not argue about what I need. Even the poorest beggar owns something more than bare necessity.

Lear's daughters have asked why he needs even one follower. His answer is the play's best defence of human dignity: if life is reduced to need, it is "cheap as beast's". Ironically, he will soon meet a beggar who has nothing superfluous at all.

Your notes:

Links to: _____

> I am a man
> More sinned against than sinning.
>
> LEAR · ACT 3, SCENE 2 · 3.2.62-63

Plain English: Others have wronged me more than I have wronged anyone.

The balanced phrasing sounds like a legal verdict, delivered by the accused. It is true as far as his daughters go, but he has not yet reckoned with Cordelia or Kent. Compare it with his language in the same scene's opening, discussed in our essay on "Blow winds, and crack your cheeks": still commanding, still the centre of his own story.

Your notes:

Links to: _____

> O, I have ta'en
> Too little care of this. Take physic, pomp.
> Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel
>
> LEAR · ACT 3, SCENE 4 · 3.4.37-39

Plain English: I have neglected this. Let the powerful take their medicine and feel what the poor feel.

The moral turning point. For the first time Lear's attention moves from his own injuries to the "Poor naked wretches" of his kingdom. The imperatives are now aimed at himself: "pomp" is personified and prescribed "physic", medicine.

Your notes:

Links to: _____

> As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods;
> They kill us for their sport.
>
> GLOUCESTER · ACT 4, SCENE 1 · 4.1.41-42

Plain English: The gods treat us as careless boys treat flies. They kill us for fun.

The simile shrinks humanity to insects and the gods to idle children. The play's darkest view of providence, it is spoken by a man just blinded, and it is one voice among several: Edgar insists the gods are just. Quote it as Gloucester's despair, not as Shakespeare's settled belief.

Your notes:

Links to: _____

> I am a very foolish fond old man,
> Fourscore and upward, not an hour more nor less
>
> LEAR · ACT 4, SCENE 7 · 4.7.69-70

Plain English: I am a silly, doting old man, eighty and more, not an hour more or less.

Plain monosyllables replace the thunder of the early acts. The man who asked who could tell him who he was now tells us, without title. "no more nor less" echoes Cordelia's words in the love test, so the reunion answers the first scene: he has learnt her language of exact truth.

Your notes:

Links to: _____

> Thou 'lt come no more,
> Never, never, never, never, never.
>
> LEAR · ACT 5, SCENE 3 · 5.3.371-372

Plain English: You will never come back. Never.

A whole pentameter line made of one word. The rhythm is reversed, five trochees (stressed then unstressed) falling where iambs normally rise, so the verse itself seems to collapse. After a play full of eloquence, grief is reduced to repetition. It refuses any consolation of an afterlife.

Your notes:

Links to: _____

> The weight of this sad time we must obey,
> Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
>
> EDGAR · ACT 5, SCENE 3 · 5.3.392-393

Plain English: We must bear this grief and say what we truly feel, not what is expected.

The closing couplet returns to the love test, where Goneril and Regan said what they ought and Cordelia what she felt. The muted rhyme offers order of a kind, but no triumph.

Your notes:

Links to: _____

Part two: test yourself

Fill each gap from memory, then check against part one. Mark the ones you missed and come back to them tomorrow.

> _____ will come of nothing. Speak again.
>
> LEAR · ACT 1, SCENE 1

> I love your _____
> _____ to my bond, no more nor less.
>
> CORDELIA · ACT 1, SCENE 1

> Thou, Nature, art my _____. To thy law
> My _____ are bound.
>
> EDMUND · ACT 1, SCENE 2

> LEAR Who is it that can tell me who I am?
> FOOL _____ shadow.
>
> LEAR AND THE FOOL · ACT 1, SCENE 4

> O, reason not the need! Our basest _____
> Are in the poorest thing _____.
>
> LEAR · ACT 2, SCENE 4

> I am a man
> More sinned _____ than sinning.
>
> LEAR · ACT 3, SCENE 2

> O, I have _____
> Too _____ care of this. Take physic, pomp.
> Expose thyself to feel what _____ feel
>
> LEAR · ACT 3, SCENE 4

> As flies to _____ boys are we to th' gods;
> They kill us for _____ sport.
>
> GLOUCESTER · ACT 4, SCENE 1

I am a very _____ fond old man,
_____ and upward, not an hour more nor less

LEAR · ACT 4, SCENE 7

Thou 'lt come no more,
_____, never, never, never, never.

LEAR · ACT 5, SCENE 3

The _____ of this sad time we must obey,
_____ what we feel, not what we ought to say.

EDGAR · ACT 5, SCENE 3

Next steps

For more quotations, sorted by theme and analysed: **power**, **family**, **madness**, **nature**. Turn three of these quotations into full paragraphs with the **essay planner**, and check your method against the **close reading toolkit**. For a small daily dose of the language, **Daily Bard** shows one passage each morning with a plain-English reading on the back of the leaf.



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