

Kingship in *King Lear*



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Role of the King

- ❖ More than just a governor of the realm
- ❖ God's representative on earth
- ❖ Should be a model of virtues such as morality, compassion good judgement and integrity
- ❖ A source of guidance for his subjects



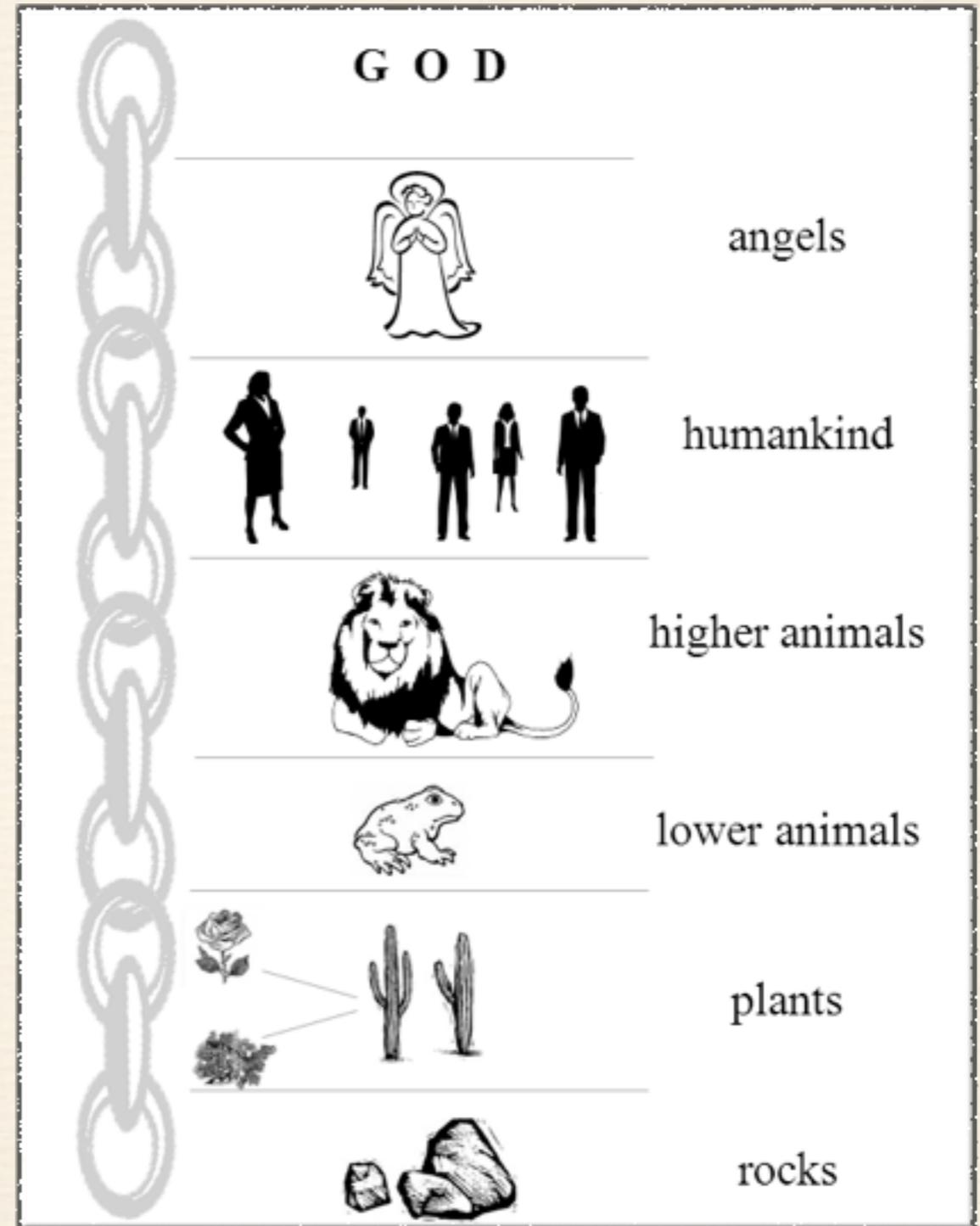
Kingship in Shakespeare's England

- ❖ Elizabeth I had seen off the Spanish when they attempted to invade in 1588
- ❖ Unity was key
- ❖ Shakespeare's audience would have known the value of a strong ruler of a united country
- ❖ Lear's decision to divided the kingdom would have horrified them



The Great Chain of Being

- ❖ God
- ❖ Angels
- ❖ Humans
- ❖ Animals
- ❖ Plants
- ❖ Nonliving Objects



Humans

- ❖ Kings
- ❖ Queens
- ❖ Nobles
- ❖ Merchants
- ❖ Peasants

Going Against The Divine Order

- ❖ God established this order
- ❖ Anyone who goes against it will be punished
- ❖ The larger the betrayal, the larger the punishment
- ❖ If a noble overthrew or killed a king (Macbeth) then natural disasters would follow
- ❖ A child disobeying its father might result in the child falling ill

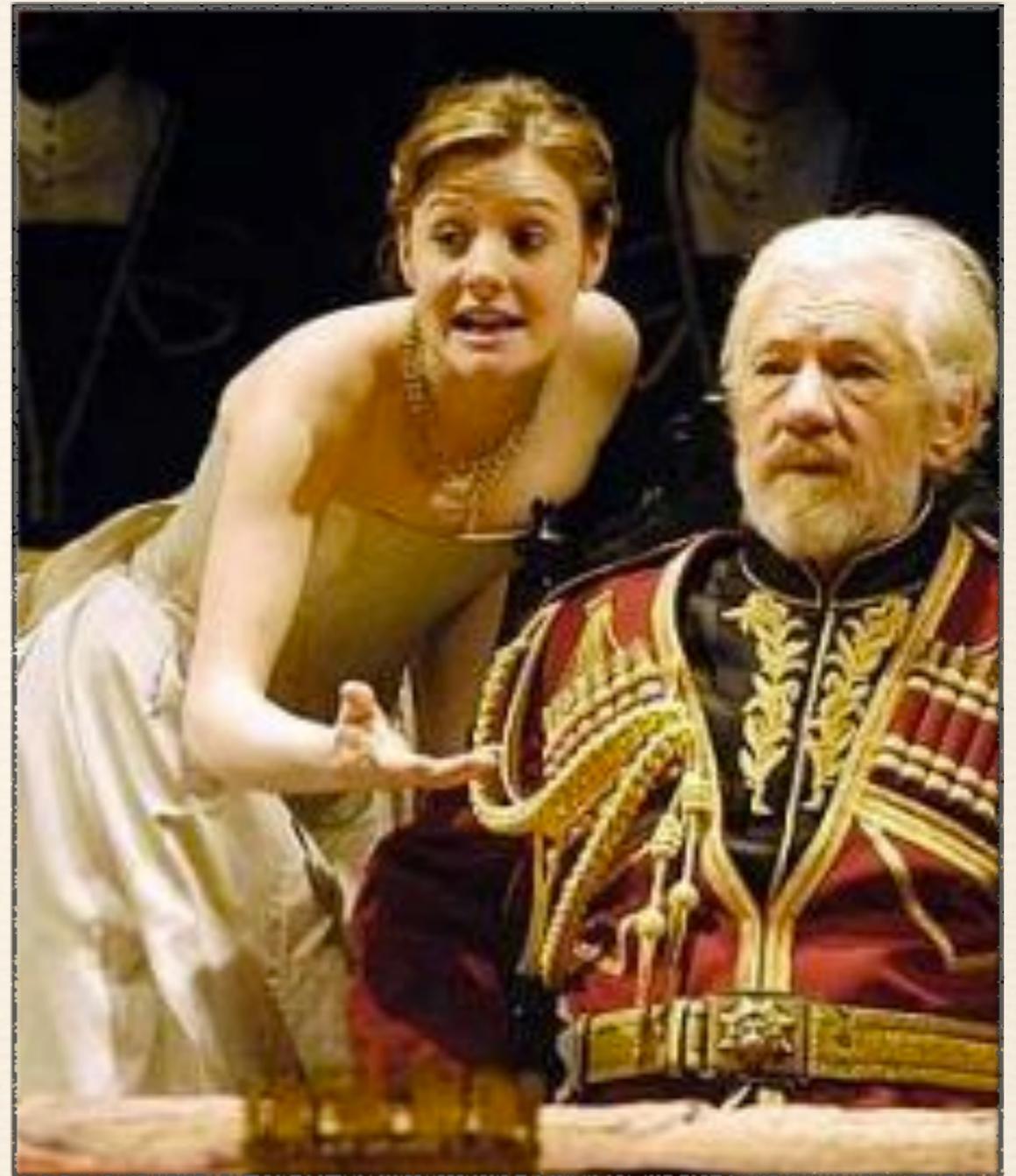
When a king fails in his duty...

- ❖ If a king does not possess the correct kingly attributes or if he neglects his duty, then the kingdom will fall into cruelty, violence, lies, unnatural behaviour and treachery. In short, chaos will ensue.
- ❖ The people are no longer under divine protection
- ❖ Goneril and Regan embody the type of government that can follow a king's failure to rule



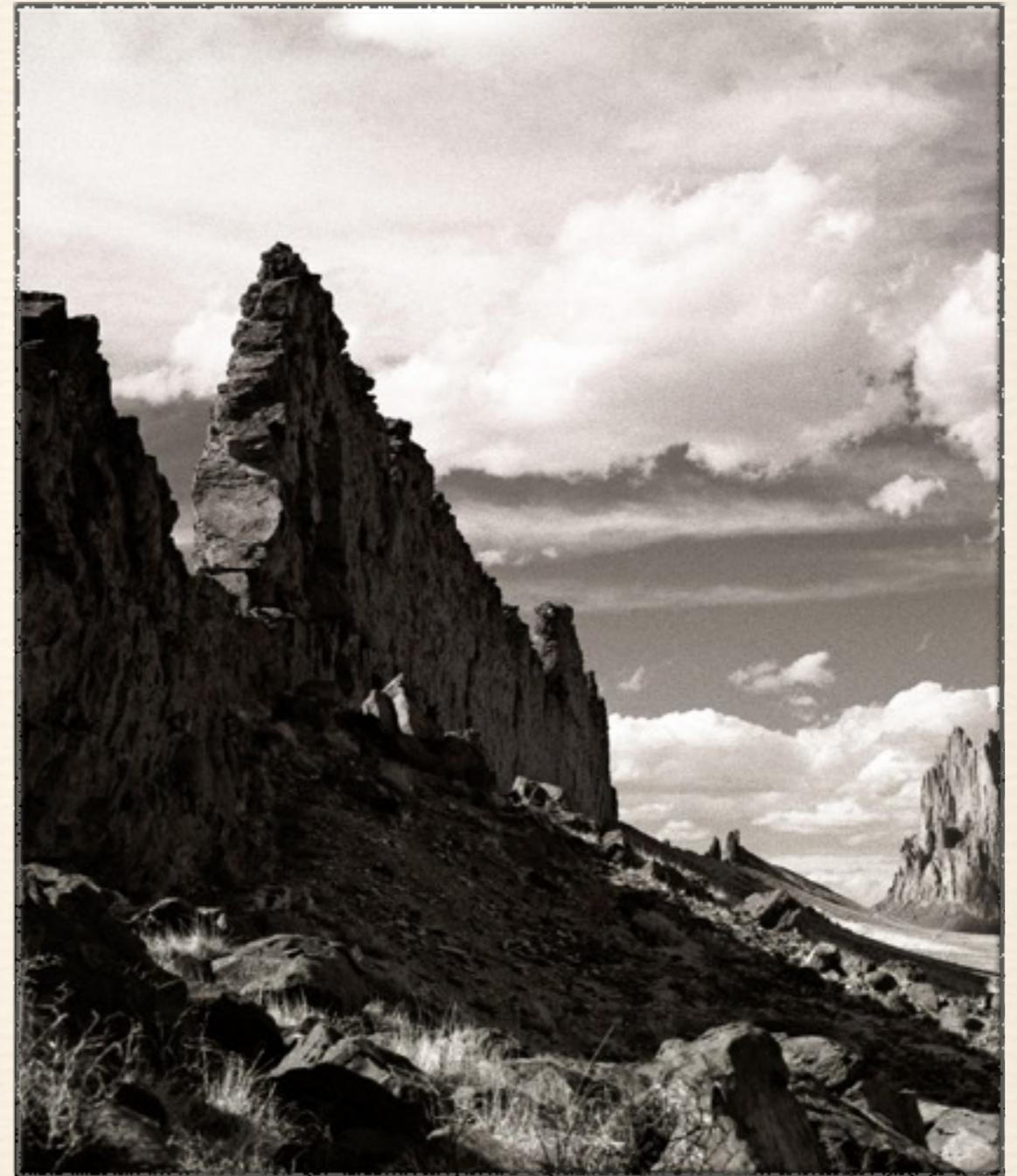
Lear as king

- ❖ He has clearly earned the love and respect of those whose opinions matter. (Kent and Cordelia)
- ❖ Has begun to confuse his position with his person
- ❖ Has become short-tempered, short-sighted and vain
- ❖ Shows poor judgement in planning to divide his kingdom
- ❖ Is unrealistic and irresponsible in abdicating his duty while hoping to retain the more attractive parts of kingship



The Love Test

- ❖ Shows Lear's lack of judgement
- ❖ He believes Goneril and Regan's false flattery as they pander to his ego
- ❖ He clearly does not know Cordelia as well as he thinks he does because he is taken aback by her refusal to play the game



- ❖ The test itself creates tension and competition
- ❖ He pits the sisters against one another, setting the stage for Goneril and Regan to gloat at the former favourite's fall from grace, while also increasing the rivalry between the two older siblings

Lear's lack of understanding

- ❖ Lear fails to see that he cannot 'retain / The name, and all h'addition to a king' when he gives away his kingdom
- ❖ Ironically, he hopes 'that future strife / May be prevented' by his dividing his kingdom when in fact it leads to war



- ❖ It is easy to forget, as the play progresses, that Lear was ever a great king
- ❖ Cordelia, Kent and the Fool show unwavering devotion to him despite his treatment of them, thus reminding us that Lear was once worthy of such loyalty

Emotion Versus Reason

- ❖ One of Lear's greatest faults as king is his emotional reaction to events
- ❖ He divides the kingdom, which is in itself a foolish thing to do, but compounds the error by choosing the future rulers based on love rather than ability to rule
- ❖ Marrying Cordelia to a foreign monarch is also a questionable act, although France embodies the qualities of a good king



New Rulers

- ❖ Goneril, Regan, Cornwall and Edmund care only for themselves
- ❖ They lack morality, compassion, good judgement and integrity
- ❖ England could not possibly prosper under their selfish, brutal and uncaring rule



Edgar as King

- ❖ Albany appoints Kent and Edgar to rule jointly: a poor decision!
- ❖ Kent's refusal means that England will once more be united under a single leader
- ❖ Edgar has proven himself in combat but has also shown himself to have compassion, a keen sense of justice and integrity

