We are introduced to the two families: Lear's and Gloucester's. From Kent's opening line, the concern of favoring one child over another is raised.

Lear, who wants to divide his kingdom and power among his three daughters, demands public expressions of their love.

While Goneril and Regan try to outdo each other in their statements, Cordelia refuses to participate, saying simply

I love your majesty
According to my bond, no more nor less

Lear can hardly believe his youngest daughter's response, and when she repeats that she has nothing more to say, his reply is

Nothing will come of nothing

Again, Lear practically begs Cordelia to change her response:

But goes thy heart with this?
So young and so untender

And then becomes enraged:

Let it be so. Thy truth, then, be thy dower

Kent tries to reason with him, but to no avail and Lear turns his rage on him, calling him a traitor and banishing him.

However, Lear's harshest words in this scene are for Cordelia, when he says to her:

Better thou
Hadst not been born than not t'have pleased me better

The scene ends with Regan and Goneril agreeing to take turns housing him, but expressing concern over his rash actions.
I.ii.

The scene opens with Edmund the Bastard, Gloucester's illegitimate son, contemplating the words "bastard" and "legitimate" and their implications for him and his brother, Edgar.

He plots to make himself heir by convincing Gloucester that Edgar has turned against him.

A dismayed Gloucester wonders about heavenly influences in the recent downward turn of things:

*These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us…Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide… T'is strange*

Edmund clearly lets the audience know his opinion of this outside influence when he says:

*This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune we make guilty of our own disasters the sun, the moon, and stars…*

And after he easily convinces Edgar that he has offended and enraged their father,

Edmund again allows us to see the rising tyranny within and to compare the evil with the good:

*A credulous father and a brother noble,  
Whose nature is so far from doing harms  
That he suspects none; on whose foolish honesty 
My practices ride easy*

I.iii.

It isn't long before Goneril starts to complain about her father:

*By day and night he wrongs me. Every hour  
He flashes into one gross crime or other,  
That sets us all at odds. I'll not endure it*

She refuses to see him and tells Oswald to treat Lear and his knights coldly.
I.iv.

Kent may be banished, but here he returns in disguise to help Lear, who, not recognizing Kent, accepts his services.

Goneril is upset with Lear and demands that he give up half his knights. Goneril hints that he has changed somewhat

This admiration, sir, is much o’ th’ savor/Of other your new pranks,

and he is furious with her:

Ingratitude, thou marble-hearted fiend,
More hideous when thou show’st thee in a child
Than the sea monster!

He is also furious with himself for getting into this position, and he chastises himself:

O Lear, Lear, Lear!
Beat at this gate that let thy folly in
And thy dear judgment out…

I.v.

Lear sends the disguised Kent on ahead to deliver a letter to Regan, while he and the Fool walk together. Lear admits (about Cordelia):

I did her wrong.
And as is often the case, the Fool is a source of great honesty and insight:

Thou wouldst make a good Fool.

If thou wert my Fool, nuncle, I’d have thee
beaten for being old before thy time.

Thou shouldst not have been old till thou
hadst been wise.

Also in this scene, Lear begins to fear for his sanity:

O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven!
Keep me in temper. I would not be mad!
II.i.

Act II begins with Edmund, who continues his deceitful ways against his brother and tricks him into fleeing from Gloucester’s castle:

*My father watches. O sir, fly this place!*
*Intelligence is given where you are hid.*
*You have now the good advantage of the night*

Edmund wounds himself and blames it on Edgar, thus turning Gloucester against his one honest son:

*Let him fly far!*
*Not in this land shall he remain uncaught,*
*And found – dispatch…*

…I will proclaim it
*That he which finds him shall deserve our thanks,*
…I that conceals him, death

Cornwall and Regan arrive and hear the lies against Edgar. They welcome Edmund into their service as Gloucester welcomes them into his castle.

II.ii.

At Gloucester’s castle, Kent insults Oswald and challenges him to fight. Oswald, a steward of Goneril, cries out *Help, ho! Murder, murder!*, which summons Cornwall, Reagan and Gloucester to his rescue. The hotheaded – and still disguised – Kent continues to insult Oswald in response to Cornwall’s questions. His payment?

*Fetch forth the stocks. – As I have life and honor*
*There shall he sit till noon. (Cornwall)*

But that’s not enough for Regan, who’s even nastier than Cornwall:

*Till noon? Till night, my lord, and all night, too*

The scene ends with Gloucester apologizing to Kent, and blaming the Duke for what has happened.

II.iii.

Edgar disguises himself as Poor Tom, a beggar of Bedlam.
II.iv.

Lear and his Fool arrive at Gloucester’s castle to find his messenger, the disguised Kent, in the stocks. Lear can’t believe his own daughter and son-in-law would do such a thing:

*They durst not do’t.*
*They could not, would not do’t. T’is worse than murder*

And he becomes more baffled, even incensed, when Gloucester attempts to placate him at the same time he tells him that Regan and Cornwall will not speak with him:

*Lear: Deny to speak with me? They are sick? They are weary?*
*…The King would speak with Cornwall. The dear father*
*Would with his daughter speak…*

When Cornwall, Regan and Gloucester return, Kent is set free and they do speak with Lear, who is in a rather awkward position. That is, he has left Goneril because he is fed up with her, and now he begins to realize that neither will it be easy to stay with Regan, who suggests he apologize and return to Goneril.

Lear tries to convince Regan to let him stay, suggesting that she is the much better, kinder daughter (*Thy tender-hefted nature shall not give/Thee o'er to harshness*) and reminding her of his gift:

*Thy half o’ th’ kingdom hast thou not forgot,*
*Wherein I thee endowed*

When Goneril arrives, the two sisters immediately team up against their frustrated father, offering him shelter only if he gives up his knights.

One of Lear’s finest speeches follows (*O, reason not the need!* wherein he beseeches the heavens for help (*You heavens, give me that patience, patience I need!*), turns his emotions to anger (*-- No, you unnatural hags,/I will have such revenges on you both/That all the world shall – I will do such things – *),

And then, sadness and fear:

*No, I'll not weep,*
*I have full cause of weeping, but this heart*[Storm and tempest.]*
*Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws*
*Or ere I'll weep. – O Fool, I shall go mad!*
And as the storm rages, Lear, Kent and Fool exit. Cornwall, Regan and Goneril retreat to the shelter of the castle, and Gloucester’s entreaties that they call Lear back fall on deaf ears.

### III.i.

Act III begins with Kent searching for Lear.

### III.ii.

Lear and Fool are in the middle of the storm.

*Blow winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow! You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks. You sulph’rous and thought-executing fires, Vaunt-couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts, Singe my white head. And thou, all-shaking thunder, Strike flat the thick rotundity o’ th’ world*

His anger with his daughters is obvious.

*Rumble thy bellyful! Spit fire! Spout rain! Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire are my daughters.*

And he, again, speaks to the heavens and makes it clear that he believes in the power of fate:

*I never gave you kingdom, called you children; You owe me no subscription. Then let fall Your horrible pleasure. Here I stand your slave…*

### III.iii.

Gloucester tells Edmund that he’s going to help Lear, which has brutal consequences later on.

Edmund lets us in on his betrayal in the scene’s last line:

*The younger rises when the old doth fall*
III.iv.

The disguised Kent leads Lear and Fool to a hovel and although the storm still rages outside, that is not what most upsets Lear:

This tempest in my mind  
Doth from my senses take all feeling else  
Save what beats there. Filial ingratitude!

Edgar, disguised as Poor Tom, a madman-beggar, is also in the shelter, and it isn't long before Gloucester arrives carrying a torch, which Edgar sees as the foul fiend Flibbertigibbet (122).

III.v.

Edmund, true to his name, tells Cornwall that Gloucester is helping Lear; Cornwall makes him an Earl.

III.vi.

Lear appears to be sinking deeper into madness. Gloucester tells Kent of the plot to kill Lear and suggests they take him to Cordelia, in Dover, for welcome and protection.

III.vii.

Cornwall sends men to find Gloucester, now considered a traitor. Regan and Goneril suggest punishments:

Regan: Hang him instantly.

Goneril: Pluck out his eyes

Cornwall’s plan is so vicious that he sends Edmund away:

The revenges we are bound to take upon your traitorous father are not fit for your beholding…

Gloucester is bound and taunted mercilessly before Cornwall puts out his eye. A servant, unable to watch the torture longer, draws her sword on Cornwall. Regan draws as well and kills the servant, who just before dying wails

O, I am slain! My lord, you have one eye left  
To see some mischief on him. O!
whereupon Cornwall, in the full throes of bloodlust responds

*Lest it see more, prevent it. Out, vile jelly!*

as he puts out Gloucester’s other eye. Not knowing the truth, Gloucester pleads for Edmund to end the torture, to which Regan coldly responds:

*Out, treacherous villain! Thou call’st on him that hates thee. It was he That made the overture of thy treasons to us, Who is too good to pity thee*

And Gloucester at once understands:

*O my follies! Then Edgar was abused.*

He is thrown out, helpless, by Regan and Cornwall, and two servants are left trying to ease his pain and calling on heaven to help him.

**INTERMISSION – 15 minutes**

**IV.i.**

Act IV begins as Gloucester, led by an Old Tenant, comes upon Edgar, still disguised as Poor Tom but who, seeing his father in such a state, has trouble maintaining his persona.

Gloucester offers him reward in exchange that Edgar take him *to the very brim of Dover’s high cliffs.*

**IV.ii.**

Arriving at her castle, Goneril and Edmund are warned by Oswald of Albany’s displeasure.

Goneril, with a favor and a kiss, quickly sends Edmund back to Cornwall.

Albany enters, full of contempt for his malicious wife:

*O Goneril, You are not worth the dust which the rude wind Blows in your face...*
In this scene, Albany’s anguish and humanity could not be more clear in contrast to Goneril’s viscous and evil nature:

...What have you done?
Most barbarous, most degenerate, have you madded
Humanity must perforce prey on itself

Goneril’s response might remind us of Lady Macbeth:

Milk-livered man,
That bear’st a cheek for blows, a head for wrongs;
Who hast not in thy brows an eye discerning
Thine honor from thy suffering…

There is no mistaking their differences here:

Albany: See thyself, devil!
Proper deformity shows not in the fiend
So horrid as in woman.

Goneril: O vain fool!

Albany leaves with the messenger, who gives him the news of Gloucester’s blinding and the duke of Cornwall’s death.

**IV.iii. & iv.**

Kent and Gentle(wo)man discuss Cordelia’s love for Lear and that he’s too ashamed to see her. Cordelia sends out a search party for Lear.

**IV.v.**

The “love” story becomes more complicated: Regan confides in Oswald that, with her husband dead, she has more claim to Edmund than her sister.

Regan sends her off with something for Edmund, and requests that Oswald try to return Goneril to her senses so that she can marry Edmund.

**IV.vi.**

Gloucester is determined to commit suicide and enlists Edgar’s help. Edgar tricks him into believing that he is jumping off the cliff.
Before his “leap” Gloucester prays:

O you mighty gods!
This world I do renounce, and in your sights
Shake patiently my great affliction off
If Edgar live, O bless him! –

Edgar, disguised now as a peasant, convinces him that he fell a long way and that his life's a miracle.

Lear, quite mad, comes upon them. Gloucester recognizes his voice.

When one of Cordelia’s search party shows up, Lear runs off.

Oswald now comes upon them and is practically giddy at the chance to kill Gloucester:

A proclaimed prize! Most happy!
That eyeless head of thine was first framed flesh
To raise my fortunes. Thou old unhappy traitor,
Briefly thyself remember; the sword is out
That must destroy thee

Edgar, still disguised, fights and kills Oswald.

Edgar finds the letters that make clear Goneril’s plan to have her legal husband, Albany, murdered.

IV.vii.

Lear, obviously confused, awakens in the presence of his daughter, Cordelia, and thinks she is a spirit. He finally recognizes that it is Cordelia with him, and he acknowledges his earlier wrongdoing:

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

The gentle and loving Cordelia responds with:

No cause, no cause,

and with Lear’s asking for forgiveness:
You must bear with me. I am old and foolish,

We are given some small hope that things will change for the better.

V.i.

Act V begins as Regan lets Edmund know that she suspects he has been intimate with her sister. She tries to convince him that he’d be better off with her.

Albany and Goneril appear, ready to join their army with Regan’s to go against France.

Some sisterly rivalry is evident.

Edgar appears in his peasant disguise and, alone with Albany, gives him the letter that tells of the murderous plot against him.

Edmund muses regarding the two sisters and their love for him:

To both these sisters have I sworn my love,
Each jealous of the other as the stung
Are of the adder. Which of them shall I take?
Both? One? Or neither? Neither can be enjoyed
If both remain alive…

However, his thinking is clear when it comes to Albany’s murder, and the killings of Cordelia and Lear should the British army win.

V.ii.

Edgar encourages his father Gloucester to hang on and hurry to safety as we learn that Cordelia’s French army is defeated.

V.iii.

Lear and Cordelia are prisoners, and Edmund secretly orders a captain to carry out their executions.

Albany requests that Edmund turn over Lear and Cordelia. Edmund will not, and Albany accuses him of treason, making clear his knowledge of both the adultery and the plan to kill him.

Albany challenges Edmund, but before they can fight, Regan becomes ill and has to be helped to her tent.
Edgar arrives and proclaims Edmund a traitor:

*False to thy gods, thy brother, and thy father,*
*Conspirant 'gainst this high illustrious prince,*
*And from th' extremest upward of thy head*
*To the descent and dust below thy foot,*
*A most toad-spotted traitor…*

He and Edmund fight, and Edmund is mortally wounded.

Edgar reveals his true identity and Edmund acknowledges that Fortune’s …*wheel is come full circle; I am here.*

We discover that Goneril and Regan are both dead – Goneril by her own hand, and Regan by Goneril as well (poison).

As Edmund lies dying, Albany asks:

*Speak, Edmund, where's the King? And where's Cordelia?*

Edmund, seemingly yearns to repent and show some goodness:

*I pant for life. Some good I mean to do*
*Despite of mine own nature. Quickly send –*
*Be brief in it – to th' castle, for my writ*
*Is on the life of Lear, and on Cordelia.*
*Nay, send in time*

But it’s too late. Lear enters with the dead Cordelia in his arms:

*Howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones!*
*Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so*
*That heaven's vault should crack. She's gone forever*

Lear's death follows as he looks upon his beloved Cordelia.

The play ends with Kent and Edgar contemplating their own mortality.