

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

LEAR

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Lear (in Shakespeare's *King Lear*)**Emotional**

Overview Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1607) is one of his last, greatest, and most bitter plays. (Gloucester sums up Shakespeare's own world view, as it darkens this whole tale: 'as flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, they kill us for their sport.') The theme is jealousy, madness, and despair, and no 'dark modern comedy' can touch the pain: a father, in love with his three daughters, sets out to divide his kingdom in three parts, among his three female descendants. His first two daughters, when asked how much they love their dad, lay it on thick, and he eats it up. His third daughter, Cordelia, is 'unable to heave my heart into my mouth,' and replies that her love for her father is exactly what it should be. Furious at what he considers an insult, Lear acts out big time, banishes the precise-talking daughter (Cordelia), and disappears into an insanity of jealousy and rage.

Character King Lear ends up mad, jealous, self-destructive, and yet we call him 'agreeable.' Why? From the start, when he is stepping down as king, and apportioning his kingdom among his three daughters, he is all about harmony and being loved; in fact it is the refusal of Cordelia to affirm the expected hyperbolic love that tees him off, and eventually leads him to curse and banish her. Anything but 'agreeable' in his decline, Lear is thrown by the hairline shock of Cordelia's verbal honesty—itself far the truest expression of love from the daughters—into a downward spiral of narcissistic chaos, from which he is unable to recover.

Parallels The ancient Greeks, by and large members of an honor-based, rather than a merit-based, society, inevitably provide literary figures for whom honor-slights are triggers to decisive action. One can think here of Sophocles' Oedipus, who grows increasingly testy under examination by the nasty Teiresias—who questions the King's honor; of Sophocles' Ajax, deprived of the weapons of Achilles, and sulking honorless on his remote island; or of Achilles, dissed by Agamemnon at the outset of the *Iliad*, and irreconcilably wounded in his honor: all these Sophoclean 'heroes' are dangerously and explosively sensitive to their honor, as was Lear.

Illustrative moments

Fury In the first scene of the play, *King Lear*, the forthcoming drama is fully adumbrated. Awaiting, from his daughter Cordelia, protestations of filial love, such as he had had from his other two daughters, Lear is driven wild by Cordelia's precise and moving response: essentially, she says, she will be obliged to honor and love her husband, when she marries, and thus cannot promise all her love to her dad, whom she loves. At this point, enraged by her inability to flatter, Lear declares Cordelia 'a stranger to my heart and me,' 'my sometime daughter.' Needless to say, dad removes daughter from any claim to inheritance.

Criticized Lear's fury toward Cordelia is doubled when the Earl of Kent, present to the scene and a long time friend to the King, begs the king to reconsider his rage, and to 'realize that the youngest daughter does not love thee least.' Kent develops the idea that flattery toward power is far from meaningful or lasting, although the King—who will realize the truth here abundantly—is at this time unable to hear Kent's point. Perhaps Kent's good sense doubly infuriates the King, who will without delay also call for a banishment of Kent.

Banishment In the fourth scene of Act One, Lear once more overreacts to the criticism his lords have been lavishing on him, for his judgment against Cordelia. In response, Lear issues a total banishment of Cordelia from the goods of the world: 'Hear Nature, 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 honor her!' We are awed by the trajectory of Lear's mind, from hot tempered sensitivity to brutal curse.

Hatred In the second act we see the fruits of Lear's overall plan, to divide his declining years between the palaces of his two 'faithful daughters,' Goneril and Regan. The two 'faithful daughters' have proven far more interested in themselves and their possessions than in their old dad, and he accordingly bestows his curses on them—as lavishly as he had on Cordelia. 'No, you unnatural hags, I will have such revenges on you both that all the world shall...' I shall not weep, he goes on to say, 'but this heart shall break into a hundred thousand flaws or ere I'll weep...'

Discussion questions

Why is Lear so excruciatingly sensitive to Cordelia's honest response? Must we say that Lear's lack of discernment is the source of the play's tragedy? Or is it the spiritual ineptness of his two 'faithful daughters'?

Why is Lear unable to listen to his advisors, who tell him to cool it with Cordelia? Would you have been able to listen to them, under the circumstances?

How does the play substantiate the idea that we are playthings to the gods, who kill us for their sport?