

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in Shakespeare

CORDELIA (King Lear) (conscientious)

Character Cordelia, as the reader knows from the start, is unable to ‘heave her heart into her mouth,’ that is to say what is commanded of her. (Is she beset at all by a slight aphasic slip, or is she congenitally devoted to plain and accurate speech?) . Her careful response to her father is too plain for him to tolerate, in his mood (and moment) of extravagant pride and self-indulgence, and he subjects her in the end to the most savage of curses. It is the triumph of Cordelia, that she alone of the daughters remains faithful and true to her father, doing her best to ease the fatal madness which ushers out his days.

Bond Eager to feel assured that his daughters love him, Lear turns to Cordelia, who will only say that ‘I love your Majesty according to my bond, not more nor less.’ She goes on, explaining the plainness of her earlier statement, to say that she cannot ‘heave my heart into my mouth,’ that is, invent elaborate praises, of her father and her love, which are inaccurate. By her bond, she goes on to explain, she means her appropriate loving duty and fondness, and with due consideration, she goes on to explain, for her own upcoming marriage, which will inevitably require that she devote some portion of her love to her husband—and accordingly not to her father.

Request Seeing that her father’s response, to her definition of her love for him, will not be changed, she asks a particular favor. She asks him to announce that what displeased him, about her response, was not ‘some vicious blot, murder, or foulness,’ on her part, but rather ‘the want of that for which I am richer, a still-soliciting eye (i.e. a favor begging eye), and such a tongue as I am glad I have not,’ by which of course she means a flattering and easy talking tongue. The response, of course, only maddens Lear the more, leading him to wish that she did not have exactly the kind of tongue she says she is glad not to have.

Compassion In Act 4, scene 4, Cordelia comes searching her dad in the French camp near Dover, where he has been seen suffering a fit of madness. She sends a hundred soldiers in search of him, to ‘search every acre in the high-grown field...’ Upon finding him her compassion overwhelms her, as it had not overwhelmed her sisters. ‘Why he was met even now, as mad as the vexed sea, singing aloud...’ she declares. Lear is found, raging, and a doctor is called in, to employ ‘all blest secrets of the earth’ as remedies for Lear’s insanity. ‘Be aidant and remediate in the good man’s distress!’

Terrified Although in Act 4 Cordelia herself is involved in high affairs of state, and must hurry from what may be her last sight of her father, she can barely tear herself from him. Tearing herself away from him, that she may do his duty too, that of supporting the Kingdom of Britain, Cordelia urges those left behind, with the King, to watch out ‘lest his ungoverned rage dissolve the life that wants the means to lead it.’ ‘No blown (overblown) ambition doth our arms incite, but love, dear love, and our aged father’s right.’

Parallels Ancient Greek societies, largely ‘traditional’ and family based, naturally generated many examples of family love and loyalty—such as Cordelia’s. We think of Antigone, sacrificing her life (as it turns out) by insisting on burying the corpse of her proscribed brother (in Sophocles’ *Antigone*); of Homer’s *Iliad*, where by a shocking reversal, we see the Trojan patriarch, Priam, prostrating himself before the Greek leader, Achilles, as he begs for the return of the body of his son Hector; or of the reunion of Odysseus with his old farmer dad, in the last tense scenes of Homer’s *Odyssey*, scenes which invoke the entire Greek tradition of filial respect.

Discussion questions

The major theme of *King Lear*—the crisis between Lear and his daughters—is laid out before us in the first scene of the play. Does the remainder of the play simply build on what we have already encountered?

Regan and Goneril—who profess great love for their father—prove to be unkindly hosts to Lear, when he visits their castles. Are they justified in their treatment of their father?

Exactly what kind of responsible love for her father does Cordelia declare? Would you (as her father) have been pleased with her profession of love to you?