

King Lear and Coriolanus: two leaders comparison

Literature



Finding the Middle Ground: Comparing King Lear and Coriolanus as Leaders

Emotions have an immense effect on an individual. There is even a legal term to explain when someone's emotions lead him or her to do heinous things; they simply call it a crime of passion. Passion can manifest in a myriad of ways, but in Shakespeare's plays the leaders tend to have a passion for power. This strive for power often consumes these men leading them into crimes of passion, usually killing everyone in their path to success. In the end it is the overwhelming passion for power that leads these kings their downfall. Lying outside the norm neither Coriolanus nor King Lear seek ways to gain more power than they deserve, yet they are both struggling with the emotions that are tied to ruling. In the end however, the downfall of both kings is still their emotions, whether it be that they lack them or that they revel in them in excess. It is from their juxtaposition that the formula for a good leader emerges.

Charisma is often associated closely with power; essentially leaders tend to be likable. Coriolanus lacks this trait to the point where he seems emotionally stunted. This may be attributed to the fact that he is a soldier first, but it also seems that Coriolanus was blessed/cursed with a pension for pragmatism. It is this pragmatism that puts him in hot water with his subjects. As they protest the price of grain and hope to gain food to offset their hunger Coriolanus is hardly sympathetic. He believes the citizens suffer from shortsighted tunnel vision and are simultaneously unable to fully comprehend the political world. He does not feel the need to withhold this information from them (I. i. 191-196). From these actions and ones similar he

portrays a mentality that allows him to be viewed as “ an anti-plebian hero” (Spates 1). His prowess as a soldier has attained him much status and even catapults him to political power, but his open disdain for the plebeians and unwillingness to participate in politics the “ normal” way leaves him vulnerable to being overthrown early in his governmental career.

King Lear is attempting to step down with as much dignity as possible at the end of his reign. In the end of his days he realizes that he only has daughters and is attempting to keep the land in their name, protect their future. He is simultaneously having his end of life crisis. As he ages he becomes increasingly aware of the fact that he is becoming too feeble to rule as king, but ruling is all he knows. He has been a ruler for long that “ under the label “ king” Lear feels lovable. Under the label “ old man”, he feels wretched and undeserving” (Kerwin 4). Unlike Coriolanus Lear took pride in and gained love from the people around him and reigned as such. Lear shows severe emotional attachment where Coriolanus hardly shows any, even when it would be in his best self-interest.

When it becomes crucial to have the plebeians on his side “ Coriolanus’ emotional privation constitutes a ‘ crucial lack;’ he cannot make the connections that are required (Shrank 2). He recognizes that the senators have worked tirelessly to turn the people against him, but he cannot give an effective speech to sway the crowd the other way. As the tribune begins accusing him of various crimes his responses show that although he has attained the same social status of those around him does not have the cultural capital necessary to navigate the situation for a personally positive outcome. Coriolanus’ “ political imprudence” allows him to fall “ prey to the <https://assignbuster.com/king-lear-and-coriolanus-two-leaders-comparison/>

tribunes vicious manipulation of the people's passions" (3). When he speaks it often appears that there is a "disjunct between the heart and the brain," as if he knows what to say but not how to say it (2). Coriolanus always does the calculated, correct thing, speaking from the brain when it would be better to speak from the heart. This does not fair well when trying to argue his cause and avoid being prosecuted for treason. Coriolanus' best chance is to put his ego aside and get the plebeians on his side by showing vulnerability. This vulnerability would display to them that he actually did have their interest in mind, but he is unable, or more likely unwilling to do so.

Vulnerability is hard for anyone to achieve but especially so for a man at the end of his days watching as his only claim to dignity begins slipping away from him. It is because of this that Lear is "so quick on such slight evidence to feel betrayed," his ego simply cannot take anything less than being puffed up, thus explaining his reaction to Cordelia's modest profession of love (Pressley 1). She tells him that she loves him as much as she should, unlike her two sisters who lay the flattery on thick. His reaction is that of a man, who has felt utter rejection. In his mind his ego has been stomped on and he must regain his own pride. Lear, in a fit of rage, proclaims, "here I disclaim all my paternal care, propinquity and property of blood" (I. i. 113). Once he begins this fit of rage Lear's life becomes one that is consumed with anger.

Lear was attempting to reassure himself that once his kids have all of the land and he is no longer ruler he will still be loved. However, he shows his whole hand in the strange love contest and sets himself up for the betrayal that soon comes. When he gathers his daughters he tells them that which
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ever daughter says they love him the most the “largest bounty may extend” (I. i. 52). If he was truly seeking to see who loved him the most he would have asked them with no promise of any prize and then divided the kingdom based on their honest answers. Lear’s internalized lack of self-worth has led him to a place where he believes that in order to achieve the proclamations of love that he hopes for he must first show his worth as a king. His belief that he is only worthy of love as a king leads him to try and “make the intimate recognition of love fulfill the same role as the public political recognition” (Sanchez 4). Despite his attempts to seem like a benevolent father and king who is simply doing a fun little contest before he gives his daughters the land that they were born into he is actually laying his ego at their feet attempting to trade political power for love.

Coriolanus is not preoccupied with love in the slightest and therefore has no interest in bargaining for the love of those around him, and especially not from those beneath him. The main question that is raised with Coriolanus is if there is “room in a democracy for an aristocrat who refuses to play the popularity game (Teachout 1). The short answer is no, despite his dislike of pandering to citizens, attempting “to flatter them for their love” Menenius works to, and succeeds at, convincing Coriolanus that it is necessary for him to show humility to the people. It is clear that the citizens come to him with reservations many calling him out on his clear contempt for them, one saying that he both nobly deserved and did not deserve his position. Upon prompting the citizen explains “you have been a scourge to her [the country’s] enemies, you have been a rod to her friends; you have not indeed lov’d the common people” (II. ii. 88-93). He responds in a way that suggests

that he has been kind in not allowing his love to be equal across the board. What he misses is the awareness of the citizens he spends so much time denouncing them and saying that they are easily swayed that he does not notice that they do have a grasp on the necessities of having a strong country; however, he overlooks the fact that this means the plebeians are getting the information from somewhere, most likely the tribunes. Coriolanus is often too matter of fact to be a proper politician, there is no nuance or open statements things that help politicians get ahead.

His emotional stunting potentially comes from his mother; she also has an extremely black and white view of society. Volumina is not afraid to work hard to push her son to work harder. She has ambitions of being the mother of someone with great political power as well as honor. Honor is very important to her and when prompted about losing Coriolanus she says that she'd "rather had eleven [sons] die nobly for their country than one voluptuously surfeit out of action" (I. ii. 24-25). This demonstration of intense national pride seems almost excessive. It would seem that Volumina "plays the role of a lady who values Rome over her own flesh and blood with a convincing gravitas" (Spates 3). Volumina's moves seem painstakingly calculated; she reached her level of affluence by making the pragmatic choice as opposed to one propelled by emotion. Whether or not she is personally emotionally stunted these traits were passed down to Coriolanus as she raised him, grooming him for greatness.

Lear felt that he was doing the same with his daughters when he offered them the land. Although his actions do have an element of selfishness as he is seeking to be reassured that he is loved he is also doing what any parent

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would do. He is doing all he can to ensure that they have good life. By splitting the land Lear feels that he is protecting his daughters from the wars that he believes would begin after his death. The professions of love are what he uses to reassure him. In a short amount of time; however, Lear comes to terms with the fact that he made important decisions based on empty words. Regan and Goneril show their true colors once it is secured that they will be splitting the kingdom. Both daughters go on the power trip that Lear has managed to avoid his entire life. Lear trusted them and once he learns otherwise he denounces them calling Goneril “bile, a plague-sore, or embossed carbuncle,” clearly feeling betrayed yet again (II. iv. 223-4). This entire story stems from Lear’s desire to have his downtrodden ego puffed up; once they received his land his mentality shifted and “in his eyes they owe him obedience, as king and father” (Keeping 2). Lear is hurt on a personal level; now in his mind his fear of being alone and unneeded once he was no longer acting king has been fulfilled. Before Lear allows himself descend into sadness and later insanity he lets his anger brew until Goneril and Regan’s act of betrayal builds upon the anger that he had merely days before and manifests both in his words and in a major storm.

The storm brews and begins as he gives his final speech to his daughters making it clear that they will not break him. He proclaims that although they think he will cry he will not do so despite the fact that he has “full cause of weeping,” it is with these words that the storm finally breaks (III. i. 284). It is clear that the storm and tempest is “an externalization of Lear’s anger” (3). Lear has been driven by his emotions from the beginning of the play and it is with this final action that Lear allows them to consume him screaming in the

midst of the storm that he will not weep, but that he “ shall go mad” (III. i. 286). And it is with this final proclamation that Lear as a king and as a man begins to devolve, his mind being overrun by his emotions.

Coriolanus may have fared a little better had he allowed himself to be consumed by any emotion other than pride. It was his pride that kept him from respecting the plebeians, and this same pride kept him from arguing his case in a way that would have overthrown the tribunes. Instead when the tribunes call him a traitor and all the plebeians call for his death he said that even for one grain a day he “ would not buy their mercy at the price of one fair word” (III. iii. 90-1). At the end when his life on the line Coriolanus holds true to his pride and further insults the plebeians. He refused to ever be seen as weak and because of this he was blinded by the passion of hubris.

While passion is often deemed the downfall of a king there is still a happy medium between immense passion and a lack thereof. Coriolanus’ lack of passion not only kept him from building a strong and necessary relationship with the people beneath him, but it also kept him from gaining the support that he would need to effectively overthrow a manipulative and vindictive government. King Lear had passion for his job, but at the end he found that it was hard to transfer that love and the failure to successfully do so threw him into a fit of rage that led to his ultimate downfall. If both of these men had found the middle ground Coriolanus could have had a long and prosperous political career, and Lear could have ended his life happy and loved amidst those who truly cared for him. The middle ground is not universal however. Lear’s middle ground would have been to put equal stock into family, country and self. Had he spread his passions as one, being king, slipped

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away it would not have been as devastating as it was for him. Thus allowing him to avoid the all-consuming rage that he fell victim to. For Coriolanus the middle ground would have been one of humility. Had he recognized and came to terms with the fact that he could not rule a country in the same way that he fought in war, solitary with no need for others approval, he could have developed a style that was mutually beneficial. His hubris blinded him from a solution and ultimately this led to his exile and death. A good leader is one that can accurately self-examine. This leader would need to find their flaw, essentially what they tended towards in excess, and then find a way to find the middle ground.