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Literature, William Shakespeare



Ember Jenison Mrs. Hinds DE Brit. Lit. — Critical Essay 11/26/12 King Lear: Self-Inflicted Tragedies King Lear, written by William Shakespeare, tells of the tragedies the old king experiences. Lear loses his kingdom, is betrayed by his daughters, loses his pride and dignity, and loses the one daughter who truly loves him. All of these events could have been easily avoided. The tragedies that King Lear experience are of his own devices. Every event listed above are consequences of Lear's own views, decisions, and actions. King Lear makes many mistakes that lead him to his own doom. His first mistake is paying more attention to his daughters' pretty words than their actual personalities and aims. When deciding how to divide his kingdom amongst his daughters, King Lear asks them the question: " Which of you shall we say doth love us most? " (line 50. 1144) Lear's intentions are genuine; he only wishes to divide his kingdom fairly among his daughters and give them all individual dowries. Lear's eldest daughters, Goneril and Regan, proclaim their love for him with extravagant and very flattering speeches. Cordelia, Lear's third daughter, does not use flattery. She is honest with her father saying, " Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth, I love your majesty / According to my bond; nor more nor less" (91-93. 1145). Lear expects the extravagance and flattery he received from the others. His expectations cause him to overlook the greedy selfishness of Goneril and Regan and the selfless love of Cordelia. Lear makes a second mistake when he casts out the two people who truly care for him: Cordelia and Kent. Cordelia's honesty enrages the king. He completely disowns her, stating that he loved her the most but she does not love him at all. When Kent tries to intervene and show him that Cordelia truly does love

him, Lear ignores his words and tells him to be silent. Kent, knowing how wrong Lear is, still attempts to inform the king of his mistake. " See better, Lear; and let me still remain / The true blank of thine eye" (159-160. 1147). Kent's constant attempts to warn Lear further enrages him. Lear banishes Kent as well. Blinded by rage, Lear's biggest mistake is trusting the two selfish daughters and getting rid of the two people that want to help him. These actions leave Lear in the company of Goneril and her husband, the Duke of Albany along with Regan and her husband, the Duke of Cornwall. Lear's remaining daughters have no real love for him and plot to obtain complete authority over him and the kingdom. Both Kent and Cordelia try their best to aid King Lear, despite being exiled. This further shows their love for him. King Lear's third and final mistake is giving his entire kingdom to Goneril and Regan. He does not leave himself any land and now fully depends on his daughters. Both daughters view him as a nuisance and wish to be rid of him. Lear first resides with Goneril. She is irritated with him and commands her servant, Oswald, to ignore and be rude to him. Oswald's actions lead into an argument between Lear and Goneril. Goneril says that Lear's ways of living are foolish, that he has no need to have so many knights and squires, that her home is " more like a tavern or a brothel / Than a graced palace" (239-240. 1161). Her words enrage Lear, he decides to leave and live with Regan. When he meets with Regan and informs her of Goneril's appalling actions she merely says, " O, sir, you are old; / Nature in you stands on the very verge / Of her confine. / You should be ruled and led / By some discretion, that discerns your state / Better than yourself" (143-147. 1176). The daughters ultimately cast him out into a storm, not caring about

his frailty or his feelings. Only one character throughout King Lear informs the king that he makes stupid mistakes, that all of the events are his own fault. The Fool mocks King Lear for his mistakes and laughs in his face. He speaks his mind and says that Lear's own actions lead him to the state he is in. The Fool points out that Lear is insane for giving away his land. He also points out that Lear has given away all of his titles; he is no longer king if he does not have his kingdom or the authority he had over it before. He criticizes Lear on his decision to banish Cordelia. The Fool tells King Lear, "Thou hadst / little wit in thy bald crown, when thou gavest thy golden / one away" (157-158. 1159). The Fool's words all point to one thing: King Lear makes these foolish mistakes completely on his own. King Lear is blind to his eldest daughters' true personalities. He gives everything to them and casts away those who honestly do care for him. Only in the end, when the wrongs are committed, does he realize his awful judgment and his erroneous decisions. Lear himself is to blame for his tragedies. He exchanges his land, his power, his happiness, and his dignity for betrayal, confusion, madness, and death. Kent was correct when he told the king, "Reverse thy doom, / And, in thy best consideration, check / This hideous rashness. Answer my life my judgment, / Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least; / Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sounds / Reverb no hollowness" (150-154. 1147). Lear's acknowledgement of Kent would have prevented the tragedies told in this play. But, he is blind and narrow-minded. He believes only what he thinks and ignores any and all warnings he receives. Works Cited Shakespeare, William. " King Lear." The Norton Anthology of English Literature. 8th ed. Vol. 1. New York: W. W. Norton &, 2006. 1143-223. Print.