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[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



Kayla Jacklin Dr. Treschow English 153 25 March 2013 Power Corrupts a Happily Ever After The theme of authority is prominent in William Shakespeare's play King Lear. The play has many situations that allow readers to observe the negative effects that ones authority can have, and the negative effects that the lust for power will bring. Having authority is an important responsibility that is often misused. Even in today's society there are world leaders either taking the wrong irrational action or taking no action at all, which results in consequences for themselves and their people. In Shakespeare's play we are presented with the idea that having a great deal of authority can make one seem " blind" by making poor thoughtless decisions. These characters, and the readers of the play, will learn something from those mistakes through observing the outcomes the characters are faced with. Also in our society, there is corruption from a strong desire for power. Throughout history many dictators and tyrants have caused disruption for the people from their personal greed. In Shakespeare's play, the characters who have a strong want for power will causes corruption which can teach the readers the downfalls of authoritative behavior. When a person of high power ends up in a situation they are not pleased with, they often act irrationally. Most times they act too quickly without proper analysis of the situation, leading to poor decisions. An example of this occurs in the play when King Lear decides to split up his kingdom equally among his three daughters. He asks his daughters to express their love for him, which he will use to decide who gets which land. The most love and admiration will get the best land. When Lear finds out Cordelia, the daughter he loves most, has the least love to express he acts unreasonably. Lear is furious, and he banishes

Cordelia from the kingdom, refusing to give her the power he initially intended too. He degrades her in front of her possible suitors, making her undesirable to the Duke of Burgundy. This scene portrays how Lear is blind to his daughter's intentions from his self centered personality. Authority often makes one self centered because they are constantly worshipped by other people and they do not hear things they disapprove of often. Cordelia does not love her father the least, she is attempting to use honesty to show how her two sisters were exaggerating and lying about their love for Lear. Lear sees this as pure betrayal because he is used to being bowed down to at any expense. Cordelia doesn't express the great love he is expecting, so he is stunned. This causes him to act irrationally without thinking anything through or trying to understand the situation. Here I disclaim all my paternal care, Propinquity, and property of blood, And as a stranger to my heart and me Hold thee from this for ever. The barbarous Scythian, Or he that makes his generation messes To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom Be as well neighbored, pitied, and relieved As thou my sometime daughter. —

(Shakespeare 1. 1. 110-117) Lear tells Cordelia how he has disowned her from the royal family and then tells her that he cares for her as much as he cares for savages that eat their own children. This extreme reaction from Lear illustrates how power has corrupted his thinking. Lear provides another example of acting irrationally, but with Kent this time. Kent argues with Lear about his decision to banish Cordelia. Kent believes Lear is making the wrong decision, and being the nobleman he is, he must attempt to change it. Since Kent is a noble man he will stand up for what is right, even if that means doubting his majesty's decisions. " See better, Lear, and let me still remain/

The true blank of thine eye" (Shakespeare 1. 1. 156-157). Kent tells Lear to see better because Lear is misunderstanding Cordelia's intentions. But because Lear is being so arrogant, he refuses to understand Kent and banishes him also. Lear's arrogance will lead to an unhappy ending for all, just like Dan Brayton states in his journal article: " What Lear cannot see, and what is perhaps glimpsed by Cordelia and Kent in their reactions to Lear's living will, is that the process of division initiated with the display of the map will become uncontrollable, as the play proceeds to leave nearly all of its major characters propertyless, bereft, or dead" (402). Lear is blind to the good intentions of Kent and Cordelia, which brings punishments upon himself. These irrational decisions lead to negative consequences for Lear. After Cordelia is banished, all the power is split between his other two daughters Goneril and Regan. In their deep lust for power, Goneril and Regan turn on Lear. Now that the two daughters have all the power they feel no need to respect their father and his wishes. They find no benefit in keeping him around and they find him a nuisance. The two daughters won't let their father keep all his noble knights; they refuse to house the only thing he has left in his waning life. Here do you keep a hundred knights and squires, Men so disordered, so debauched and bold That this our court, infected with their manners, Shows like a riotous inn. Epicurism and lust Make it more like a tavern or a brothel Than a graced palace. The shame itself doth speak For instant remedy. Be then desired By her that else will take the thing she begs, A little to disquantity your train, - (Shakespeare 1. 4. 223-231) Goneril tells Lear that there are too many ill-mannered knights crowding the palace, and if he does not reduce their number she will do it herself. Lear has given

Goneril and Regan all his power so he has no choice but to obey his daughters. He went from a King to a lonely old man because he was fooled by his two selfish daughters. The author of the journal article " Sex and Authority in ' Hamlet, King Lear' and ' Pericles'", Kay Stockholder, adds to this point: " Having lost Cordelia to another king, Lear embarks on an inner journey through desolate isolation and victimization" (26). Stockholder's words can be interpreted such that Lear's daughters Goneril and Regan isolate him by ignoring him and his wishes. Since Lear has given up his power he is slowly being forgotten. He then becomes Goneril's and Regan's victim in their thirst for power. Lear's poor decisions have fueled his already coming insanity. Goneril and Regan betray their father in their personal desire for power, they are so concerned with their own well being they have lost all intent to care for and love their father. The double plot of this play, Lear and his daughters along with Gloucester and his sons, brings in another significant example with Gloucester and his two sons Edgar and Edmund. Edmund is Gloucester's bastard son who seeks revenge and full inheritance from his father. Edmund knows that because he is the bastard son he will not be the son to take the place of his father; Edgar will. Edmund has been made to feel less than his brother his whole life and has a strong desire to be on top for once. In Edmund desire to get his father's inheritance he will commit multiple acts of betrayal. He begins by telling his father of a fake letter which explains that Edgar is going to kill Gloucester. He then tells Edgar that Gloucester is angry with him and that he should avoid him till he can calm him down. Now that Edmund has created some tension, he expands on his plot. Edmund is with Edgar in Gloucester's castle when they hear Gloucester

coming. Edmund tells Edgar to flee for his safety while he draws his own sword and wounds himself. When Gloucester enters Edmund tells him Edgar wounded him. This angers Gloucester and he sends out servants to find Edgar for punishment. In addition to Gloucester and Edgars plot, Gloucester is involved with King Lear. Cornwall and Regan have taken over Gloucester's home and have forbidden him to help Lear. Gloucester knows he must help Lear, so he tells Edmund to distract Cornwall and Regan while he sneaks out to find Lear. Edmund immediately betrays his father by telling Cornwall and Regan what Gloucester has gone off to do. All this betrayal and cruelty come from Edmunds motivation to receive inheritance of his father; he wants the power from his father. These evil actions are a result of Edmunds greedy mentality, and with evil actions comes punishment like all of Shakespeare's plays. At the end of the play, Edmund finally gets what he has coming for himself. Albany realizes Edmund committed treason and calls him to a duel. Just as the Herald calls up anyone who agrees so Albany's assumption of Edmund, Edgar walks in and takes over the fight. Edmund falls and eventually dies. While Edmund is dying he comes to the realization that his actions were wrong. 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! - (Shakespeare 5. 3. 242-246)

Edmund appears to regret his wicked actions as he explains how he wishes he could live longer to do a little good. He also tells Albany and Edgar to go quickly to the castle in hope to save King Lear and Cordelia from the death he had sentenced on them. This gesture shows that he has recognized wrong from right and is making any attempt he can to do good before his life's end.

Along with Edmund learning from his actions, the audience too learns from his actions. Tragic endings like such are not pleasant, but they are eye openers for readers and observers. The readers can learn how the misuse of authority has negative effects without having to experience it themselves in real life. After observing the negative effects in the text, they can understand and recognize the same situations in real life to avoid them. Throughout King Lear attention is drawn to the idea that authority can have consequences if misused. The two plots in the play signify its importance by being very tragic and upsetting. King Lear's loss of Cordelia shows how egotistical actions and misused power lead to loss. He is blind to the signs Cordelia and Kent present him with which eventually lead to his demise. Goneril and Regan exemplify how a strong aspiration for power can lead to insensitive and wrong decisions. They betray their father, and anyone who stands in their way. Edmund also exemplifies how an immense want for power leads to his demise by betraying the two people dearest to him, his father and brother, just to inherit the power of his father. He commits acts of pure evil from inner greed. Although the play introduces so many sinful acts and wrong doings upon characters, in the end the readers learn valuable lessons.

Authority corrupts when it is taken too far. Authority must not be taken for granted, and it should be used wisely. It should be used for the good of the people, not just for the good of one. Work Cited Brayton, Dan. "Angling in the Lake of Darkness: Possession, Dispossession, and the Politics of Discovery in 'King Lear'" *ELH* 70. 2 (2003): 399-426. Summons. Web. 24 Mar. 2013. Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. New York: Pearson, 2005. Print. Longman Cultural Edition. Stockholder, Kay. "Sex and Authority in 'Hamlet,

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