

King lear causes us
to choose fools over
knaves.

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



" The play forces us to choose fools over knaves. " Discuss In King Lear virtually every character is either a fool or a knave; however these terms contain multiple layers. The crucial scene in which this idea is presented in the play is act 2 scene 4 when the Fool talks to Kent after he has been put in the stocks, and more specifically his line " The knave turns fool that runs away;/ The fool no knave, perdy. " On one level the Fool is mocking Kent for his loyalty towards Lear despite the fact that Lear's fortunes have disintegrated, and seems to imply that a clever knave would grab the " great wheel" that is Lear, when his fortunes are up and drop him when they are down. Yet, the Fool also says that a self-interested knave " who serves and seeks for gain" abandons his friends while the virtuous fool will " tarry" and " stay". Elizabethan England was a very hierarchical society that demanded absolute deference be paid to the wealthy and the powerful, however King Lear demonstrates how fragile this society actually was; parents and noblemen were vulnerable to the depredations of the unscrupulous younger generation. In this way Shakespeare divides society within the play and allows the viewer to make a moral decision as to whose side they choose. Aristotle believed that the very nature of ' tragedy' has a cathartic effect on the viewer, purging him of negative emotion, but there is also a sense that this genre of play forces us to choose some characters over others, and Shakespeare depicts the fools in the play, both honest and loyal and willing to weather out the storm with those who are suffering, as the positive characters we sympathise with and ' choose' above the clearly selfish knaves. Lear's very first actions in the play involve banishing Cordelia and Kent for being honest despite Kent's pleas to " see better". Cordelia refuses

to "varnish the truth" (Shankar Vedantam) by stating "nothing" when asked to profess her love for her father in order to obtain her section of his kingdom. She explains her choice following Lear's request for her to speak again, when she says "Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave/ My heart into my mouth." This makes her a 'fool' in the eyes of the audience as she cannot morally justify the action of flattery in search of personal gain. This stands in stark contrast to her sisters, Goneril and Regan, who both use elaborate rhetoric in order to gain favour with their father, confessing false love that is "Dearer than eyesight, space and liberty/ Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare," and "an enemy to all other joys which the most precious square of sense possesses" respectively. Even at this early stage in the play we are forced to make a choice between the foolish characters — Cordelia and Kent — and the knaves who lie and essentially abuse the wealthy and the powerful. Shakespeare would have been familiar with the case of William Allen, a mayor of London who was treated very poorly by his three daughters after dividing his wealth among them, and this contemporary story would certainly have influenced the way in which he presents Goneril and Regan as characters. They are portrayed using a "prolific number of animal references" (Tony Tanner) such as "sharp toothed unkindness, like a vulture", "tigers not daughters" and "gilded serpents." By bestialising these characters, you could certainly argue that Shakespeare forces us to choose fools over knaves as we are unable to sympathise with their very rough take on the world. They believe in a nature that you could call "red", where they abuse the way of the world, warping it into a moral vacuum. Edmund is similarly opportunist and primitive in his actions, especially when

he creates a schism between Gloucester and Edgar, as a result of his maltreatment by his father. He decides to turn nature on its head by making himself (the illegitimate "bastard" son) the favoured child. He is the most obvious example of a knave in the play, a ruthlessly pragmatic and 'Machiavellian' character who turns Gloucester as well as Regan against Edgar through deceitful lies, such as saying that he was called an "unpossessing bastard" and telling Regan that he was one of the Knights who behaved raucously at the castle. Oswald is another who symbolises entropy and all that is wrong in the world of the play. Kent takes offence to his knavish behaviour, stating that "he wears no honesty" and that he is a "smiling rogue" alluding to the ideas of flattery and deceit. Kent is then shocked for his blunt but honest and loyal speech, a sign of evil winning over morality and an emblem for the confused values within the play. Again, we are forced to choose Kent's moral but foolish behaviour and the knave who succeeds, but abuses his powers to do so. When Lear is on the heath "the breaking points of the human beings wandering over it" are stretched to their limits. Lear learns, at great personal cost, the depth of his folly but only comes to these realizations because he undergoes the pushing trials of the storm. He is brought to madness, with the storm not only a violent act of nature but also symbolic of the entropy of his mind. His licensed foolery juxtaposes the feigned madness of Edgar, disguised as 'poor Tom'. In this scene we are confronted with 'foolish' but honourable characters. Although the Fool sees following Lear onto the Heath as the unintelligent decision, he still does it, thereby creating an immense sense of sympathy towards his character; "the fool will stay and let the wise man fly." He recognises that

people have left Lear because his fortunes have crumbled, and staying with a man whose fortunes have faded could mean that you "break thy neck following." The Fool is a character who speaks the most sense and is the voice of reason within the play, for example when he berates Lear by calling him "Lear's shadow" after he has made his bad decisions, and in the same way that the fool makes a decision not to be a knave, we are forced to choose fools over knaves. In conclusion, the play acts out a world in which suffering rains on the just but foolish, and knaves stand victorious. Although it is the fools who suffer, and especially the Fool because he is willing to sacrifice himself for Lear, we still choose these characters over the knaves such as Edmund and Oswald because we sympathise with their hard ship. Lear, the Fool, Edgar and Gloucester all suffer terrible pain, and in Gloucester's case he loses his sight, and so we are drawn to them; this is the very nature of tragedy.