

Shakespeare's demonstration of loyalty in king lear

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



"Loyalty is a noble quality, so long as it is not blind and does not exclude the higher loyalty to truth and decency." Putting one's faith in something that is not real is worse than putting one's faith in nothing at all. Cloudy thinking and unreasonable thoughts lead to such a thing. This is shown throughout Shakespeare's King Lear. Characters question the loyalty of offspring with no evidence. Characters also are unreasonable in thoughts surrounding those true to them within the kingdom. As well, characters form an erroneous view of what love is, and that makes them unreasonably question loyalties. In Shakespeare's King Lear, when one is illogical in determining where loyalties lie, it leads to treachery and suffering, until one recognizes the error.

Devotion from one's offspring is wrongly judged. In parenting, it is difficult to do what is right and wrong all the time, poor decisions will always be made. In the case of Gloucester, he chooses to favour his legitimate son, Edgar, over the illegitimate, Edmund. This is through no fault of Edmund's save birthright. That unfairness causes flaws in Edmund's character. After years of feeling inadequate, evil begins to manifest within him, or just misunderstanding. He feels the need to get even with his father and his brother for the easy life they have led. This caused him to come up with a ruse to convince Gloucester that Edgar was planning to kill Gloucester and claim his inheritance:

Seeing how loathly opposite I stood/
To his unnatural purpose, in fell
motion/My unprovided body, launched mind arm;/
And when he saw my best
alarmed spirits,/ Bold in the quarrel's right,
roused to the encounter,/ Or
whether gasted by the noise I made,/ Full suddenly he fled./
Let him fly far./
Not in this land shall he remain uncaught (II, I, 57-63)

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The fact that Gloucester is so prepared to accept his faithful son as a traitor is disturbing. Edgar is not only a faithful son, but also the one he has favoured all of their lives. This causes the favour to change from Edgar to Edmund, through trickery. Though it was achieved dishonestly, it fulfills the balance of the universe, where no person can have all the luck. Gloucester's decision to trust Edmund is a bad one. Not only is Edmund a cheat and a liar, but he also intends to do just what he says Edgar is planning; to kill Gloucester and claim the inheritance.

Based on his bad call of judgement, the ploy of Edgar comes closer and closer to fruition. He betrays his father repeatedly. Edmund uses the people against Lear to his advantage. They do not look kindly on those supporting Lear, and are so against Gloucester. Gloucester tells Edmund of a secret letter from Cordelia that has come into his possession. He also tells of his plot to sneak out of his own castle, under occupation by Regan and Cornwall, to assist Lear. He tells both of these things in confidence. The problem with this is that it is not a faithful son he is talking to, but a backstabber. This causes Edmund to run off to Cornwall and Regan with the news: " This courtesy, forbid thee, shall the Duke/Instantly know, and of that letter too./This seems a far deserving, and must draw me/That which my father loses-no less than all./ The younger rises when the old doth fall." (III, iii, 21-25) Gloucester becomes more heartbroken at the prospect that his dear Edgar has turned against him and was hiding, plotting to take his life for mere money and land. In the meantime, Edmund has been ceremoniously awarded the title Earl of Gloucester, by Regan, Cornwall and Goneril, in the absence of his father. Edmund, who is evil, gains more and more fortune at

this time, as Gloucester and Edgar both suffer. Edgar himself is in hiding as a poor man, freezing to death in nothing but a loincloth, acting as one who is mentally ill. This shows how much impact one bad decision one makes can have on one's one life, or on the life of someone close to one.

Slowly, through enlightenment, Gloucester admits he was wrong. As time passes, Gloucester finds out more and more about the situation, and notices something doesn't seem right. When Regan and Cornwall reward his hospitality by plucking out his eyes, Gloucester learns the truth about Edmund's treachery. He then regrets with all his heart the way he treated Edgar. Unfortunately he has no idea where Edgar has gone to, and has an additional disability with the lack of eyes. An additional setback is his declining health, mainly mentally, as depression sets in. None of these help his predicament. He reaches poor Tom (Edgar) who agrees to help him locate Lear, yet his will to live falters, eventually failing: " This world I do renounce, and, in your sights,/ Shake patiently my great affliction off./If I could bear it longer and not fall. To quarrel with your great opposeless wills,/My snuff and loathed part of nature should/Burn itself out. If Edgar live, O, bless him!/Now, fellow, fare thee well." (IV, vi, 35-41) The significance of this is obvious. Gloucester has realized his mistake, and wishes to make up for his past actions, but does not know where to begin. He feels hopeless about being able to ever gain Edgar's forgiveness, as Edgar is very well hidden. What Gloucester does not realize is that Edgar understands, and has stuck by him all throughout the good times and the bad, as a good son should. He has been under disguise, to protect himself, but nevertheless, he has been there. The hopelessness of his situation haunts him as he thinks

that Edgar could never possibly forgive him for so great a transgression. This is reinforced upon thinking that he had once tried to hunt down and kill his son. He does not realize that Edgar is so close, and so forgiving, and so gives up on life altogether, not seeming worth it without his son. This shows the bond that truly exists between father and son, on both sides. With such a bond, it is proven that Gloucester is truly irrational in his hasty judgement of loyalties.

One's unfounded worries create a question of fidelity within the kingdom. When there is a time of great conflict, the people around someone can suddenly seem to turn against him or her. The irrationality of King Lear in this situation is originally through the tension he felt through the large decisions he had to make. The division of his Kingdom was something that weighed heavily on Lear's mind. He is old, he is tired, he wants out. However, he has not yet come to realize that this, as well as the simple truth of his age, is affecting his state of mind. He is not thinking clearly, is not making wise, well planned decisions. Instead, he has quickly become very emotional, and very suspicious, questioning first those most dear and loyal to him:

Hear me recreant!/On thine allegiance, hear me!/That thou has sought to
make us break our vows,/Which we durst never yet, and with strained
pride/To come betwixt our sentence and our power,/Which nor our nature nor
our place can bear,/Our potency made good, take thy reward./Five days we
do allot thee for provision/To shield thee from disasters of the world,/And on
the sixth to turn they hated back/Upon our kingdom. (I, i, 168-178)

Dear Kent, King Lear's loyal subject is one so subjected to the irrationality of Lear's troubled mind. King Lear cannot abide anyone telling him he is wrong at this point, especially not one so far under him as one of his mere servants. Kent seems to bear the brunt of Lear's rage, as well as mental deterioration. By Kent speaking out against Lear in his decision to banish Cordelia, Lear feels it is a direct act against him, an accusation even as to how he chooses to live his life, treason. This is, of course, unfounded, as Kent merely hopes to show Lear that he is casting away something precious. Lear chooses to see this as a betrayal, deciding that Kent is not, and perhaps has never been loyal to him.

As he lets the situation progress, he is betrayed time and again. He is first let down by his dear Goneril, and then his beloved Regan, as well as her husband, the Duke of Cornwall. From this, he only knows pain. As Lear has sent two of the most influential, and, more than that, beloved persons he knows away from him forever, there have been certain ramifications. To begin with, Lear at his age was never completely stable, nor mentally sound before this. However, since, his stability and mental state have severely deteriorated. He has, to put it simply, gone crazy. As if his judgement was not already skewed enough, he now has this disability, taking away any decision-making capabilities. Lear has suffered so much, and learned so much about real suffering, in the time since he banished Kent, and turned his back on his kingdom. He has become overpowered by this pain, to the point where he very rarely recalls who he is anymore. This craziness is not something of an amusing sort, but of a real debilitation. It is something that

prevents him from any sort of normal semblance of life, something from which he cannot recover:

Alack, 'tis he! Why, he was met even now/
As mad as the vexed sea, singing aloud,
Crowned with rank fumiter and furrow-weeds,
With hardocks, hemlock, nettles, cuckoo-flowers,
Darnel, and all the idle weeds that grow
In our sustaining corn. A century send forth.
Search every acre in the high-grown field
And bring him to our eye. What can man's wisdom
In the restoring his bereaved sense?
He that helps him take all my outward worth.
(IV, iv, 1-9)

All there is in Lear's life now is suffering. His conscious life, that is, that time from which he escapes the bondage of his mental disorder, to come back to a comparative normality is a nightmare. All he sees is darkness. The darkness of knowing that there is nothing in your life worth living for, that everything that gave you happiness is far away. The betrayals he himself committed against himself and against those he cared about tear him to pieces. Then to think of the betrayals of other loved ones against him is just too much to bear.

Lear eventually starts to see the error of his ways, and tries to overcome it. Over time, he becomes more guilt-ridden rather than self-pitying, though whether it sends him further over the edge or not is hard to say. One thing is certain, he comprehends the wrong he has done, and feels remorse over it, wishing there was some way to fix things. It is almost as if, in an effort to preserve his sanity, he pushes thoughts of Kent and his duties to his kingdom out of his head. When he meets Kent again, it is of someone he

hardly recognizes. Kent is a memory so vague, so far behind. Yet it is a generally happy one. This reunion brings about only good, as both are satisfied to be in each other's company, much as things once were. In fact, not much has changed save for names from the Caius who was serving Lear during Kent's absence:

Lear: Are you not Kent?/

Kent: The same;/Your servant Kent. Where is your servant Caius?/

Lear: He's a good fellow, I can tell you that./He'll strike, and quickly too. He's dead and rotten./

Kent: No, my good lord; I am the very man-/

Lear: I'll see that straight./

Kent: That from your first of difference and decay/Have followed your sad steps./

Lear: You are welcome hither. (V, iii, 282-289)

It is something of a reassurance that someone Lear has learned to put faith in, this same Caius, is one and the same as Kent. This goes with the fact that Kent has never strayed from Lear's side, has always remained completely faithful. It is noted that there is no long drawn out apology from Lear, as even now the distinction between societal levels must still be maintained. When he says " you are welcome hither" it speaks volumes. That is the apology, the forgiveness, the recognition that Lear was the one who had

made the mistake, and that he was trying to make up for it. It is also a wonderful surprise to Lear, and a renewal of faith in fellow man, to hear that Kent had never given up on him, had been there supporting him throughout all his trials. It shows that this truly was a big misunderstanding, that they do have a great bond, a remarkable bond considering societal circumstances. From this, it can be said that it was only the unfounded, hasty judgements of King Lear that presented their bond in such an unfavourable light.

One's disillusioned state causes irrational judgements about the true meaning of love. Love is something that can be professed again and again, and still have no true meaning. It is something that has to be felt, and proven with actions, instead of words. In the case of King Lear, at one point he associated love with the responsibilities of his kingdom. Rather, he associated love with the freedom from his responsibilities. A lot of the time, one does not wish to have the responsibilities one has; yet it is their cast lot. This causes a kind of rebellion, without thinking about the people it could affect. This is the case with King Lear. He has gotten old, he is more than eighty years old, and feels he has lived a long and healthy life. He has grown tired of the necessary everyday tasks of being King, and decides to divide up the kingdom, without thinking about how it would affect his kingdom, or his family, or even himself. More than anything, he wishes for relief, if only for a short time before he dies, a security in being passed from one daughter to another, without having to make any real decisions himself:

Meantime we shall express our darker purpose./Give me the map there.

Know that we have divided/In three our kingdom, and 'tis our fast intent/To

shake all cares and business from our age,/Conferring them on younger strengths while we/Unburdened crawl toward death. Our son of Cornwall,/And you, our no less loving son of Albany,/We have this hour a constant will to publish/Our daughters' several dowers, that future strife/ May be prevented now. The princes, France and Burgundy,/Great rivals in our youngest daughter's love,/Long in our court have made their amorous sojourn/and here will be answered. Tell me, my daughters/(Since now we divest us both of rule,/Interest of territory, cares of state)/Which of you shall we say doth love us most?/That we our largest bounty may extend/Where nature doth with merit challenge. (I, i, 37-54)

Looking at this, one can see something is terribly wrong. Lear's definition of love is terribly distorted. His version of love is completely superficial. It has nothing to do with truth; it is nothing more than professed emotions. The fact that Lear is giving away his kingdom; dividing his power based on words describing how much they unrealistically love him, reflects negatively on him. One can see how earnest he is in these endeavours, and how strongly he believes in this method to truly know how each of his daughters feel about him. From this, he almost seems deserving of the betrayal that is to come from his daughters. Through banishing Cordelia, he has committed one of the biggest wrongs it is possible to commit. He abandoned someone, and even more so, the daughter who was loyal. In contrast, for him to shower his unloyal daughters with land is completely inexcusable. For now, he is completely ignorant and oblivious to what he has done wrong, seeing it as something wrong done towards himself instead. His conception of love has to change, or be changed.

The time after Cordelia is banished brings nothing but torture, through deceit and self-inflicted pain. Shortly after Cordelia is banished, with her words of “nothing”, King Lear sees just what love really is not. The superficial love he requested has turned against him. Goneril and Regan were both more than happy to offer him words of endearment, but it did not make them any truer. Their main concern is for the control of Lear now that he has given up the rights of his kingdom:

Goneril: The best and soundest of his tiem hath been but/rash; then must we look from his age to receive, not;/alone the imperfections of long-engraffed condition, but therewithal the unruly waywardness that infirm and/choleric years bring with them.

Regan: Such unconstant starts are we like to have from him/as this of Kent's banishment.

Goneril: There is further compliment of leave-taking between/France and him. Pray you let's hit together. If our/father carry authority with such disposition as he bears,/ this last surrender of his will but offend us./ (I, I, 296-306)

Eventually, Lear learns the true meaning of betrayal, and the false meaning of love. This leads to the decline of his mental health, his condition in general. He becomes bitter and loses all faith in the world around him:

Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! Spout, rain!/Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire are my daughters./I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness./I never gave you kingdom, called you children,/You owe me no subscription. Then let

fall/Your horrible pleasure. Here I stand your slave,/A poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man./But yet I call you servile ministers,/That will with two pernicious daughters join/Your high-engendered battles ' gainst a head/So old and white as this! O, ho! ' Tis foul! (III, ii, 14-24)

The betrayals he feels from both Goneril and Regan, after he gave them all the land they could possibly desire, he cannot comprehend. This is how he thought love should work, the words are spoken, there is some token gift to prove it, and then everyone is happy. Unfortunately he did not take into account their character, their manipulative, scheming, controlling manner. This causes them to try and take complete control of Lear and his life, attempting to make him give up any sense of individuality, of freedom. As freedom is his only other wish in life at this point, he cannot accept this, and cannot fathom why they would try to bring him to such a low. He suffers greatly due to the treacherous nature of their actions, while they stay content, or become happier with the newfound wealth. With Lear out of the way, either meek in their control, or outside completely mad, there is nobody to stop them from plotting their evil plots. The fact that they could do this at the cost of their father's happiness, and even more, his sanity, shows that it truly is not love. Lear notes even more how unhappy he is without Cordelia, who was his favourite to begin with.

Sooner, rather than later, Lear sees, early on in the game that he had made a terrible mistake. He feels guilty over it, and works towards some kind of recovery. Lear's health steadily declines as time passes. Feeling unloved by all, and betrayed by everyone, it is not hard to sink into a madness that is

impossible to get out of. Even worse, he starts to feel more and more guilt-ridden for the terrible injustice he has done her. As time passes, the guilt he feels in itself seems more than he can bear. No longer is he thinking so much of Goneril and Regan, he never cared as much about them anyways. The fact that he could dismiss someone he cares about so greatly so easily hurts him deeply, to the point where he feels he cannot face Cordelia:

The poor distressed Lear's I' the town;/Who sometime, in his better tune,
remembers/What we are come about, and by no means/Will yield to see his
daughter./Why, good sir?/A sovereign shame so elbows him; his own
unkindness,/That stripped her from his benediction, turned her/To foreign
casualties, gave her dear rights/To his dog-hearted daughters-these things
sting/His mind so venomously that burning shame/Detains him from
Cordelia. (IV, iii, 42-47)

The pain, the shame that his actions bring him, cause him to become more reclusive. It is possible, in fact probable that it is his grief over Cordelia that finally completely pushes him over the edge. He feels he has abandoned her, pushed her into the arms of France, into a foreign country, all by herself. He questions what kind of father he must be to do something like that; he questions how she could still care for him. All of these things are thoughts crossing his mind constantly. It is only understandable that it would be absolutely unbearable to think about. He realizes his mistake so thoroughly that it is a constant pain. It is easy to see that he repents his actions wholeheartedly, that he has known for quite some time the terrible thing he has done, and how wrong it was. The problem is that he feels so badly over it

that he will never be able to forgive himself. In his mind, he cannot forgive himself for something he has done, so she would not be able to either. It is too much to bear to think about, and so he decides he cannot ever speak to her, for fear that she does hate him, that she will never be able to forgive him. The other reason is that he does not feel he deserves to be forgiven. A silly mistake in judgement and a father and daughter are separated, indeterminably.

When one is irrational in deciding where the allegiance of others lie, it leads to betrayal and ultimately suffering, until one understands the error made, and works to redeem oneself. Characters within King Lear make this mistake in three ways. They are unreasonable in their decisions of loyalty in their offspring. They are also susceptible to erroneous mistakes in thoughts of loyalty within their kingdom. Lastly, They misconstrue loyalty in terms of their definition of love. Misconception has become an art among humans. Society has perfected it, to the point where people can misunderstand just about anything. If one were to leave their mind clear, and think without the clouded judgement of emotions, almost all of this folly could be avoided. By taking a more thorough look, and staying open to all of the options, instead of making assumptions, so much pain could be avoided.