

Ellb3 king lear theme of power

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Explore the ways in which Shakespeare presents attitudes to power in this passage. In your answer you must consider how the playwright uses literary, linguistic and rhetorical devices and conventions to create specific dramatic effects. The theme of power is explored extensively in the play and in this first scene the theme is already established. This scene takes place after Kent and Gloucester's conversation about Gloucester's illegitimate son Edmund, the dark subplot within the play draws out the theme of power in the main plot, for example the power Gloucester asserts as a father is parallel to the power King Lear has.

Power is an important theme within the play because many of the characters abuse their power and use power as a tool for manipulation and control, other characters on the other hand, desire power and authority but ultimately power corrupts all. This scene is set in the king's court and this extract is an example of family talk which at times is intimate but it is also an example of public talk, the language in this passage is purely for regulatory and performative purposes.

This highly formal public context creates tension and the speech itself opens with an important topic, the audience know that king Lear intends to divide his power and kingdom among his three daughters but demands they publicly profess their love for him. "Conferring them on younger strengths, while we unburdened crawl toward death", the imagery in the opening of the scene here is of a feeble old man indicating King Lear's retirement and the loss of his power suggesting he is weak and vulnerable like an infant.

Due to the public context the register throughout this passage is formal and the king's speech appears to be rehearsed. In this passage the king is the

primary speaker because he establishes the topic of conversation and sets the agenda, “ meanwhile we should express our darkest purpose, give me the map there”. As we would expect his is the character with the most status and authority and his role as King allows him to open his speech with this imperative sentence. Furthermore, the modes of address used by the characters on stage also reveal more about the theme of power.

Lear’s daughters address him as “ Sir”, “ your majesty” and “ your dear highness” suggesting he is not only asserting his power as a king but as a father. We have character revelation here as Shakespeare reveals Lear's hamartia, by having his daughter quantify their love for him indicates that he is arrogant and hubristic. Lear takes the most turns and his utterances are generally longer than the other characters as he speaks for the longest amount of time. His short response to Cordelia “ nothing, nothing will come of nothing” indicates that the he is trying to maintain control over the conversation.

The adjacency pairs here are broken because “ nothing” is a non-expected response, this suggests that this is an unsuccessful conversation and reveals more about their relationship. In this conversation the adjacency pair is subverted by Cordelia creating tension on stage: Lear and Cordelia are both flouting Grice's maxim of quantity as Lear says too much and Cordelia says too little which is further evidence of their conversation being unsuccessful. Goneril and Regan clearly abuse their father’s power as they try to deceive him.

The declarations of love made by the two daughters have been crafted to flatter Lear, they are exaggerated and the insincerity of this is shown

through Shakespeare's use of poetry. A good example of this is, "sir I love you more than word can wield, the matter dearer than eyesight, space and liberty." In other words, the substance of Goneril's love is too great or weighty to be expressed. Similarly, the phrase, "a love that makes breath poor and speech unable" is hyperbolic as Goneril again tries to make her love seem priceless.

Regan's declarations are even more exaggerated than her sisters', "I am made to that self mettle as my sister and price me at her worth". She tells her father that her own pleasure lies solely in the enjoyment of his love but her sister's love is only a means to an end. The synthetic language used here to manipulate Lear's vulnerability reveals that Regan desires to gain more power and control. It is clear that both their speeches are insincere and this creates tension because the audience can see that when the daughters declare their love for their father, they are in fact declaring their greed.

This is then juxtaposed by Cordelia's simple and minimal responses; "I love your majesty according to my bond, no more nor less" showing that she speaks of her love more honestly. Cordelia's asides allow her to build a relationship with the audience. These asides may appear spontaneous but Shakespeare has carefully crafted them for her speech to appear sincere and honest. When Cordelia is asked to express her love towards her father, she answers with "nothing". Lear's interrogative reply "nothing?" suggests her simple answer has come as a shock to him and the court, this response instantly changes both the mood and the tone within the scene. The short exchanges between Cordelia and Lear and the caesura in this line disrupts the iambic pentameter and the regularity of the blank verse creating

dramatic tension on the stage. Lear orders Cordelia to "speak again", this imperative reveals frustration and anger at which point his volume would increase. Cordelia delays her speech as she refuses to take part in Lear's ceremonial 'love test' suggesting that she has some degree of power.

Her long pause creates an awkward silence on the stage and adding further to the tension between the characters and creating suspense. Lear's attitude to power is clearly one of pride and arrogance which prevents him from seeing the true nature of Goneril and Regan's appearances and their hypocrisy. He foolishly believes their excessively sweet and sentimental declarations and this is what makes this passage so dramatic. The power he asserts in this passage blinds him as he rejects the truthful Cordelia who he has banished from the kingdom.