

# William shakespeare's play the tragedy

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William Shakespeare's play *The Tragedy of King Lear* is a dark tale of betrayal whose popularity is seen in its many productions and adaptations. The play itself not completely original, in fact, as the main plot and characters are Shakespeare's versions of the British cleric Geoffrey of Monmouth's recounting of the story in *History of the Kings of Britain*. Shakespeare does, however, add other characters to his play that are not in Geoffrey's version of the story, like Edmund and Edgar who have no direct equivalent in *History*, but Geoffrey's influence on these characters are clear..

In the play, there is no mention of Cordelia's nephews, Margan and Cunedagius, but the roles they fulfill in *History* match the roles of the Edmund and Edgar. One adaptation of the play, *King Lear* directed by Richard Eyre, supports the significance of how Edmund and Edgar's roles in the play correspond to the roles of Cordelia's nephews. Through the staging of the brothers, how the film chooses to modify and deliver their lines, and how they interact with other characters exaggerates Edmund and Edgar's influences in the tragedies of the play. The staging of the film *King Lear* places most of the audience's focus on the acting and plot of the story, rather than highlighting a specific time or place. It appears that two large rooms are used for all the indoor scenes and minimal, simple props signal a change in scene or location (*King Lear*).

In addition to this, the film uses the original language of the play but shortens or removes entirely many of the long speeches given by characters (*King Lear*). These modifications drive the plot forward, as many of the speeches explain the motives of characters' actions which can sometimes dilute the impact of the actions they are speaking about. The combination of

simplistic staging and altered lines leaves the portrayal of the characters the focus of the film, which offers more direct points of analysis between the play and its film adaptation. First, Shakespeare's Edmund and Edgar have clear connections to Geoffrey's Margan and Cunedagius. Both pairs are marked by a desire for power beyond what they have.

Cordelia's nephews feel that because she is a woman, she should not rule, and so they believe they should rule instead of her (Geoffrey 33). Similarly, Edmund is offended that his legitimacy and age cause him to be unworthy of an inheritance, which he believes he is entitled to, though Edgar will receive one because he is legitimate and the firstborn (Shakespeare 1. 2. 1-23). To gain power, Margan and Cunedagius imprison Cordelia, where she commits suicide (33). While Cordelia does not kill herself in Shakespeare's play, Edmund does imprison her and stages her murder as a suicide (5. 3. 303-6). There is also a parallel in the demise of Margan and Edmund. In History, Margan no longer wants to rule with his cousin, so he attacks Cunedagius claiming his right to the throne as the eldest of the two (Geoffrey 34). Cunedagius then bests Margan's army and kills his cousin himself (Geoffrey 34).

This conflict between the cousins is a story of the victim to the hero for Cunedagius. It is seen in the play when Edmund also attempts to gain control over Edgar, and when Edgar discovers this, he challenges his brother and bests Edmund in a duel in which he dies (Shakespeare 5. 3. 358). Again, while there is no explicit connection between Shakespeare's Edmund and Edgar and Cordelia's nephews in History, there are many parallels. The film

emphasizes this important connection. The most noticeable way the film exaggerates Edmund and Edgar's roles is how they stage these characters. Both brothers are on screen or placed in a scene where they are not specifically noted as being on stage in the play. One example is of the first scene of the play, in which Gloucester, Kent, and Edmund are the first characters to enter (Shakespeare 1. 1). The film, however, shows Edgar on screen first, writing in a notebook, while Edmund looks at Edgar from behind with a devious smile, as if he is thinking about his plot against Edgar (King Lear).

By introducing the brothers first, the film suggests that their story is a focus of the play, rather than a secondary story to Lear's. Their introduction also foreshadows Edmund's actions against his brother and presents Edgar as an innocent victim. Additionally, the brothers were staged separately in the film in surprising ways, like Edmund noticeably eavesdropping on a conversation when he enters a scene too early at the end of Act 1 in the film. In the play, Goneril and Regan are discussing what they will do with Lear, and when they exit, Edmund enters at the start of Scene 2 (Shakespeare 1. 1. 329-355).

In the film, Edmund enters while the sisters are still talking, and, thus, makes his first impressions on Goneril and Regan (King Lear). While he does not talk in this part of the film, the way he looks at them is with obvious flirtation, and the film is planting the seed of competition between the sisters early on. Edgar's unexpected placement is seen less throughout the film, but he is depicted holding Lear as the king dies (King Lear). The film is drawing on the relationship Edgar and Lear fostered while out in the storm together to make

their connection stronger than that between Lear and Kent or Lear and Albany, who are both witnessing Lear's death as well (King Lear).

This connection also suggests a familial bond, which reinforces that if Edgar was Cordelia's nephew, he would be Lear's grandson. Even without the connection to Histry, Edmund and Edgar are prioritized through their placement in the film. As mentioned, the film changes the original lines of the play for primarily functional purposes. There are also modifications of lines that reveal insights about the characters motivations, especially for Edmund and Edgar. One way the film does this is by voicing over soliloquies, treating them as thoughts, rather than the actors voicing them allowed on stage as in the play. An important occurrence of this change is at the beginning of the film when Edmund is talking to Gloucester and Kent.

In the first scene of Act 2 in the play, Edmund expresses his resentment about not inheriting from his father because he is illegitimate and that he will overcome it (Shakespeare 1. 21-23). The film places a part of this soliloquy into his conversation with Kent and Gloucester as thoughts (King Lear). The effect of introducing Edmund's intentions early in the film puts a focus on his character as being the villain of the brothers. Similarly, Edgar's soliloquy is also voiced over as thoughts in the film when he is leaving the shelter to help take Lear to Dover (King Lear). However, his thoughts contrast Edmund's because he is recognizing that his grief does not compare to Lear's [w]hen that which makes me bend makes the King / bow and so comes to a selfless conclusion (Shakespeare 3. 6. 118-9). Presenting the brothers as opposites in the film by paralleling their soliloquies gives the

audience a further reason to think of Edmund as a villain. This prompts their fight at the end of the film and play and supports the rift between Margan and Cunedagius in History.

The way the film portrays the interactions between Edmund and Edgar and other characters also maintains the brothers' importance to the plot. Further support for the concept that Edmund is evil while Edgar is innocent can be seen in their first interactions and their clothing. Though it is stated that Edgar is some year elder than [Edmund] in the play (Shakespeare 1. 1. 20), the film makes no such explicit distinction, though Edmund behaves as if he is older (King Lear). This show of age difference is seen in Edmund's pretend concern for his brother when he warns Edgar about their father's anger at him as if he is playing a protective, brotherly role (Shakespeare 1. 2. 166-9). In this scene, Edmund is wearing dark clothes and has short, dark hair which heavily contrasts with Edgar's loose, white shirt and long hair (King Lear). The audience can see visually how different the two are on the outside which corresponds to their motives and actions in the whole film.

Aside from the actions with each other, Edmund and Edgar's interactions with other characters seem to be prioritized in the film. One important instance of this is toward the end of the film, what is the end of Act 4 and the beginning of Act 5 in the play. In the last scene of Act 4, Cordelia and Lear reunite for the first time after her moving to France (Shakespeare 4. 7). The scene before is Edgar killing Oswald and discovering the plot to kill Albany (4. 6). However, the film skips the scene with Lear after Edmund's scene and

goes directly into the first scene of Act 5 in which Edmund promises his love to Regan (Shakespeare 5. 1. 9-20).

This second occurrence of Edmund and Edgar's story being placed before Lear's story is further evidence of the importance the film places on the brothers' story. The audience is shown that Edmund and Edgar are not only important but just as important as the title character, King Lear. Overall, the film makes deliberate changes to situate Edmund and Edgar's story as one of the main focal points of the movie.

The influence of Cordelia's nephews in History on the brothers in the play is also clear. Shakespeare's integration of the brothers into the story of King Lear, as opposed to placing them at the end like Geoffrey's Margan and Cunedagius, adds another dimension of betrayal and tragedy to the play. In the end, the film and play both point to Edmund's final confession: What you have charged me with, that have I done, / And more, much more (Shakespeare 5. 3. 195-6). Thus, the audience is to believe that Edmund has done more harm than the characters know, and more than the audience knows themselves.