

# Loyalty and betrayal in king lear essay sample



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The theme of loyalty and betrayal in King Lear is quite ironic; when usually one who is cast out returns to seek revenge, in Shakespeare's masterpiece, those who are cast out remain fiercely loyal; whereas those who are treated well are those who turn their back on their fathers. In both the plot involving Lear and the subplot involving Edmund, this phenomenon is observed.

In Act One, Scene One, Shakespeare juxtaposes Gonerill and Regan's "large speeches ... and words of love" with Cordelia's response of "Nothing." Lear, in casting Cordelia out, fails in his filial duty and thereby betrays his youngest daughter. This is mirrored between Edgar and Gloucester, with Gloucester proclaiming death upon his son without first considering the treachery at hand from Edgar, with this action also failing in his role as a father. Gloucester proclaims "...treachery, and all ruinous disorders, follow us disquietly to our graves." This foreshadows the future betrayal that will take place between Lear and his family. Gloucester also states that "Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide, son against father, and father against child", ironically, Gloucester does not realize that the son he should be referring to is Edmund. However, Lear and Gloucester's actions may be excused, due to senility as well as their good intentions, yet both Edmund and Lear's daughters act completely in selfish desire. For example, in Act Two, Scene Three, Regan's line "what need one?" strips Lear of all his former power, as well as representing the ultimate betrayal by Lear's daughters. In the hovel, Lear realizes his mistake, commenting "Hast thou given all to thy two daughters? And art thou come to this?"

In contrast to the parallels between Lear's daughters and Edmund, Kent and Edgar represent, respectively, the loyal sides of the conflict. The contrast

between the silky words of the traitors, "...love you more than words can wield," and the plain-speaking of Kent, "What are you doing, old man?" fails to allow Lear to realize the emptiness of his daughter's words. Throughout the play, the loyal Kent and Edgar are mistreated, and both are forced to enter disguise. However, while one cannot say their loyalty is rewarded, "the wheel is come full circle," according to Edmund, thus ending Kent and Edgar's role at the bottom of the wheel of fortune.

Loyalty, as well as its antithesis betrayal, make up much of the plot of King Lear. Shakespeare uses this overarching theme to demonstrate that the loyal are rewarded and the treacherous, while they may enjoy temporary successes, once again finish at the "bottom of the wheel." The tragic nature of the conclusion of the play demonstrates that perhaps honest actions, uninfluenced by rash temper produce the best results.