

# Language in king lear

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



“ There is a cliff, whose high and bending head  
Looks fearfull in the confin’d  
deep. Bring me but to the very brim of it..... From that place I shall no  
leading need.”(IV. i. 73)It is often difficult to gain entry into a work of such  
complete and dazzling genius as King Lear—reading Shakespeare can  
sometimes feel like trying to get a good long look at the sun on a cloudless  
day. And yet there are moments when one comes across passages that, by  
the sheer force of their lyrical, poetic beauty, leap off the page and resonate  
so strongly within one’s mind that they become a kind of distillation of the  
entire play. One can read this play again and again, and still be struck anew  
by Shakespeare’s utter mastery over language; surely there is no other  
writer who had so full a sense of, and who used to such merciless ends, the  
power of words. In a genre that denies the novelist’s luxury of narrative  
explication, language in its barest, purest form, becomes Shakespeare’s  
precision instrument, and he wields it with a perpetually astonishing  
combination of force, subtlety and exactitude. The introductory quoted lines,  
when brought out of their immediate textual surroundings, form for this  
reader the kind of distilled illumination suggested in the preceding  
paragraph. These are the words of the sightless and stumbling Gloucester,  
as he begs a passing stranger, (who, unbeknownst to him is the son he so  
belatedly recognizes as faithful), to help him to his own death; by the end of  
the play, this passage becomes a central paradigm. Despite the afore-  
mentioned obstacle (an obstacle the surmounting of which yields so much  
pleasure and insight) to readerly intercourse with Shakespeare, one can  
often recognize and trace logical devices he employed in order the more  
effectively and precisely to communicate his message. The parallel plot of

Gloucester and his two sons is one such device. It is a simplified, politicized, but explicitly correspondent rendition of Lear's more spiritually basic story; by placing the two story lines, Gloucester's and Lear's, in such close juxtaposition, Shakespeare sets the reader up for a more immediate and complete understanding of the latter, while also lending any moral to be gleaned from the play the non-specificity necessary to the universal human relevance of truly great works of literature. Having recognized this, the reader is free to enter into the heart of this transcendent tragedy. We are introduced to Gloucester and his parallel plot line before we are introduced to Lear. In Act One, Scene One, we find Gloucester professing the equal love he bears his two sons, the one legitimate, the other "got between unlawful sheets". The moral code that informs King Lear dictates that illegitimacy, the 'unnatural' son who is anything but, bodes nothing but detriment to the harmony of intrinsic order; within the terms of the play, Gloucester's 'equal love' is a fatal flaw of judgment. The reader, paying close attention to language, is able to perceive Gloucester's unwitting mistake from Edmund's very first appearance; in a world where the individual vocabulary of each character is a loaded expression of their position on the axis of good and evil, the reader cannot help but notice that Edmund's "... I shall study deserving..." (I. i. 30) is a foreboding of the duplicity and greed that will stain him throughout the play. Lear's introduction into the play is similar to Gloucester's in that, through close analysis of the dialogue between the King and his daughters, the reader gains awful knowledge of the unintentional arrogance and benign ignorance that will soon become his downfall, (and ultimately his perversely bittersweet salvation). From his very first words,

Lear is established in all his fateful childish pomposity. The drama of his first speech is at all points excessive—here, the reader discerns, is a man long accustomed to being listened to and indulged in every way. In a moral system transcribed from that of the ancients, this self-importance is Lear's godless hubris, his pride before the fall. (The reader would like to modify this 'pride' though; Lear's pride seems strangely not to originate within himself, rather it seems forced upon him by the behavior of those around him; he is in a sense the casualty of years of blind and empty worship). As first Goneril and then Regan make their declarations of love, the reader cringes at Lear's oblivion to their screaming falsity. At Goneril's "Sir, I love you more than word can wield the matter..." (I. i. 55), the reader wishes she were able to point out to Lear that if even this, her very first piece of dialogue, were true, then there could not follow six lines of the hollowest flattery; and there is an eerie chill in Regan's "... In my true heart I find she names my very deed of love; only she comes too short..." (I. i. 70), when the reader glimpses that the depth of these sisters' evil is such that they will even turn on and try to outdo each other in the effort to achieve their sordid ends. Cordelia's textual introduction, especially in light of her older sisters', is just as portentous to the reader. To us, her comparative reticence signifies the purity and honesty she embodies; that Lear reads her humble replies as stubborn pride is his greatest transgression against truth, and by association, nature. This moment is the first and foremost tragedy of the play— the reader realizes that the King is so conditioned by years of clattering sycophancy that he is utterly immune to the quieter, truer tones of honest filial love. His very identity is completely bound up in "... all the large effects that troop with

majesty...”(I. i. 131); part of the cutting irony of the title of this play derives from the fact that Lear’s fatal error is identifying himself as much by ‘King’ as by ‘Lear’. When he is stripped suddenly of the outward manifestations of his sovereignty by his monstrous daughters, the floor falls out from under him; bereft of any sense of himself, he descends into the ‘madness’ that will ultimately be his redemption.”... O fool, I shall go mad!”(II. iv. 281)In analyzing Lear’s madness, it is again useful to look to Gloucester for a more rational and complete understanding of its function in the play. Whereas Lear is dispossessed of everything that has come to signify his self-worth and identity, Gloucester is robbed of his sight. Having realized his grievous misjudgment of his two sons, he wanders sightless, crippled by miserable guilt and regret for his faithful son, hoping only for death. Unwittingly he encounters Edgar who, (like Cordelia, his counterpart in the main plot), remains unswerving in his adherence to filial love and duty, despite his wrongful and violent disavowal. In an act that resonates to the very core of the play, Edgar fools his father into thinking he has been brought to the edge of the “... cliff, whose high and bending head looks fearfull in the confinid deep...”(IV. i. 72)- youth misleads old age in order to truly lead, away from self-murder and the ‘confinid deep’ of suffering and despair. Gloucester’s stumbling passage across the heath is literal- Lear’s is figurative. Naked of the attributes of his majesty, he is left with the vacuum of his humanity and the resulting dirth of resources upon which to fall back in this time of extreme bewilderment; it is the reader’s suggestive elaboration that although he mentions death in his opening speech (“... while we unburdened crawl towards death...” (I. i. 40)), this time on the heath is the first occasion

for Lear to look fearful in the confin'd deep' of his own mortality. He is as the newborn child, wawling and crying'(IV. vi. 177) with boundless, aimless sorrow at a world whose pure and unchecked evil has struck him dumb. And as Gloucester is led to some bidding' (IV. vi. 220) by his incorrigibly faithful son, so Lear is led to the comfort of his daughter's genuine love by the forces of good that surround him, those angels of persevering and ingenuous love, Kent and the Fool. Gloucester: O, let me kiss that hand. Lear: Let me wipe it first; it smells of mortality. Lear's return to his castle marks the end of his wrestle with the heretofore opposing forces of nature; tragically late, he has discovered his own humanity. Lear " has learned a new language" , and it is through this so evident vocal transformation that the reader detects the other, wholly internal one. The man who could not distinguish honesty from deception now knows that "... a man may see how this world goes with no eyes...", and should "... look with [his] ears..."(IV. vi. 147). The reader does not quite know how to feel about this change; just as Lear dies between the joy of believing Cordelia still alive and the wretched sorrow of knowing her to be dead, the reader's emotions are flung between happiness at Lear's enlightenment and a kind of mortification at its tragic belatedness. It is a defining weirdness of King Lear that it is set in a Pagan world and therefore seems to have no established moral code; in the absence of any kind of Christian reference, the reader must work harder to discern and decipher this code from the narrative. But herein lies one of the brilliances of the play- in obscuring morality within the narrative confines of a God-less universe, Shakespeare frees himself to address this morality with more honesty and ultimately present it as all the more powerful in its non-denomination. The

reader cannot deny the presence throughout the play of an over-arching force of benevolence, primarily manifested in the determined and completely genuine goodness of a small core of characters. (If this goodness was not so quietly forceful one would be tempted to label it martyr-like.) By the end of the play, all the attempted evil has been thwarted as we see that Regan and Goneril's cruel treatment of their father has indirectly led to his final stage of realization; the survival of Kent and Edgar, (who, in a figurative sense, are now left to re-populate the devastated world), indicates the ultimate prevalence of the forces of good. It is at no small cost, but a new peace has been achieved. Thus the reader feels that the scope of the play's spirituality is vast enough that the forces that have wreaked such destruction extend beyond the earthly lives of its victims; consequently, Lear's enlightenment serves a higher purpose—it seems, in fact, to right the universe.