

# Gloucester's character dynamics

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King Lear is one of the most tragic parables ever brought forth in literature, dealing with betrayal, familial deception, madness and violence. In presenting such tragic themes and ideas in his work Shakespeare uses a subplot to mirror the main action which therefore increases the effect of the parable's lessons. In both stories, parents are deceived and betrayed by their own children, one of the most abhorrant crimes in Shakespeare's time. It is this mistreatment by children that lead both Lear and Gloucester to madness and then death. But they are not completely innocent victims who have fallen to their children's ill intentions. Both have made critical and constant errors in judgment that caused their downfall, and they both must realize their errors before their deaths.

In the first scene in the first act, we are presented with Lear's misguided dependence on artifice and flattery that catapults the action of the play and leads to both his positive transformation and sadly, his death. Before dividing up his kingdom among his three daughters Lear asks " which of you shall we say doth love us most,/That we our largest bounty may extend" (King Lear I. i. 51-52). From the beginning it is obvious that Lear equates quality with quantity, as he so blatantly states that whoever says they love him most will receive the most. He does not realize that inflated praise and flattery are not the same as love and honest affection, something that Lear will have to learn very painfully. The responses of his daughters Goneril, Regan and lastly, Cordelia show further Lear's lack of understanding. Goneril and Regan both make inflated and obviously dishonest claims of love. For example, Goneril describes her love as " a love that makes breath poor, and speech unable" (King Lear I. i. 60), quite amazing considering she is in fact speaking at that

moment. When Lear's one loving and honest daughter Cordelia explains to Lear that her sisters are lying to him, " why have my sisters husbands if they say/They love you all?" (King Lear I. i. 99-100), and that she loves him too much to lie and flatter him and will therefore say nothing, he quite sorely misses the point. This opening scene clearly presents the reader with Lear's chief error in judgment that he will have to overcome by the end of the play.

While Lear so heavily depends on words and flattery Gloucester trusts what his eyes see too much, and therefore falls prey to Edmunds cunning and deception. In the second scene Edmund begins his plot to discredit Edgar in Gloucester's eyes so that he, the illegitimate son, will get everything, including property, title and material wealth. Whereas Goneril and Regan use words to illicit the response they desire from Lear, Edmund plays off of Gloucester's trust of appearance and his own eyes to trick him. He pretends to have a letter from Edgar that he is trying to hide from him when in fact he knows that Gloucester will demand to see the letter. Gloucester alludes to this dependence on sight and appearances himself when asking for the letter from Edmund in his use of vocabulary. He says " let's see. Come, if it/Be nothing, I shall not need spectacles...Let's see, let's see" (King Lear I. ii. 35-44). Because he has read these words himself, Gloucester does not even for a moment truly doubt their validity and immediately is put in a violent rage against his son without even questioning the situation. As he says moments after reading the letter, " O villain, villain! His very opinion in the/Letter. Abhorred villain, unnatural, detested, brutish villain;/Worse than brutish! Go, sirrah, seek him. I'll apprehend him. Abominable villain!" (King Lear I. ii. 77-

80). Just like Lear, Gloucester is easily led into the trap that his child devises by his own fault.

It is not until Lear is presented with Tom the beggar, a character completely stripped of artifice, that he can see the errors of his values and judgments. After speaking with Tom and spending time in the cave Lear makes his transformation into a man who cares not for artifice or flattery, but rather honesty and truth. As he says to Tom, "Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton here" (King Lear III. iv. 107-109). By trying to literally undress himself, Lear is trying to shed himself of all of his artifice and unnaturalness. By the time he sees Cordelia again he realizes the error in his judgments, saying "if you have poison for me, I will drink it./I know you do not love me...You have some cause" (King Lear IV. vii. 75-78) and looks forward to passing the time in prison to "pray, and sing, and tell old tales" (King Lear V. iii. 12).

As king, Lear has lived his life with the comfort of always being flattered and treated with the utmost respect and importance. Once he has given up his power and authority to Goneril and Regan, he is faced with a situation in which he is not treated with such respect. All of Goneril and Regan's elevated prose of their false love for Lear is replaced with a forthright lack of respect and love. When Lear begs Regan to take care of him in his old age she simply replies, "Good sir, no more. These are unsightly tricks./Return you to my sister." (King Lear II. iv. 155-156). This change in his position is more than the weary old king can bear and he must reach madness from this

ingratitude and hypocrisy before he can realize his faults of equating flattery and materialism with happiness and love.

Just as Lear must suffer such great disrespect and harshness of words and actions to learn not to depend on them, Gloucester must lose his vision before he can depend on his mind and heart to judge situations instead of depending on what he thinks he sees. While Lear may be slow to transform, Gloucester quickly realizes the error of his ways, saying to Tom the beggar, "I have no way, and therefore want no eyes;/I stumbled when I saw. Full oft 'tis seen/our means secure us, and our mere defects/prove our commodities" (King Lear IV. i. 18-21). He realizes that when he could see he was overconfident and did not judge situations carefully, but now that he is blind he has learned to not depend on his eyes to show him the truth.

While both of these characters have in many ways made a positive transformation, both recognizing and attempting to change their flaws that caused so much harm, Shakespeare's work is still a tragedy. By the end of the play, after both characters fully realize their mistakes, they both die from a combination of shock and old age. Lear realizes his mistakes in the way he quantified the love of his daughter, culminating in his excitement to pass time in prison with Cordelia, but she is killed and the shock of her death kills him. Like Lear, Gloucester realizes he misjudged Edgar's character and is deeply repentative. But it is too late, and he dies from the shock of discovering Tom's true identity, that of his son. King Lear ends sadly, but also with a sense of a positive future. Though it may have been too late for these characters to realize their mistakes and change their lives, the

message their stories give is that of working to change what is wrong in one's character.