

**Conflict between Kingship and Fatherhood in William Shakespeare's *King Lear***

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Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.

–William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 5.3. 324

Yet better thus, and known to be contemn'd,  
Than still contemn'd and flatter'd.

–William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 4.1. 1-2

Through tatter'd clothes small vices do appear;  
Robes and furr'd gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold,  
And the strong lance of justice hurtles breaks;  
Arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw does pierce it.

–William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 4. 6. 168

A king could ask for anything from anyone unconditionally, but a father asking the daughters to present their love to contest for territory will be too sovereign. Lear, as both the monarch and the paternal figure, is being confused. He regards it as a request out of familial love; but rather, it is out of dictatorial violence. Resulted from the so-called daughterly disobedience, Lear “descends into madness from the consequences of foolishly disposing of his estate between two of his three daughters based on their flattery” (Wikipedia 1). The father bows to flattery and stoops to folly, being perplexed and bewildered by the chronic addiction to the kingly pleasure, sycophancy.

This paper is going to treat Lear as a subject to demonstrate the conflict and

contradiction between kingship and fatherhood implied in William Shakespeare's *King Lear*. In dealing with the scenes of family issues, I plan to focus on Lear's implicit kingly attitude, and the daughters' response in different perspectives. In addition, I will examine how the king reinforces patriarchal domination in his authoritarian demand, which brings about ensuing tragedies in the play. Through the statements of the other characters, like Kent, Fool and Edgar, even of Lear himself, Lear gradually realizes what he has done to his dearest daughter, and how much he has been blinded by flattery. His royal dignity is forfeited and then recovered in the end, but "with all his three daughters dead, Lear can never again regain his fatherhood" (Szabó).

Kingship, the dignity of a king, is something that Lear holds onto and will not let go. As a king, Lear is proud and autocratic. "King Lear has a fierce ego that he allows to run out of control. He bullies his daughters in a most brutal manner" (Maulucci 1). He demands obedience from his daughters, and no defiance is allowed. "The king was the god's voice on earth, and any attempt to wrest the throne from him would lead to turmoil" (Casey 58-9). Therefore, when Cordelia decides to give an honest answer that she has nothing to say, Lear is infuriated, like a king:

How, how, Cordelia! mend your speech a little,  
Lest it may mar your fortunes. (1.1. 96-97)

However, when being rejected by Goneril and Regan, Lear turns to fatherly authority,

but curses his daughters as cruelly as a tyrant:

But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter;  
Or rather a disease that's in my flesh,  
Which I must needs call mine: thou art a boil,  
A plague-sore, an embossed carbuncle,  
In my corrupted blood. (2.4. 224-228)

“Competition, by their very nature, results in winners and losers. Cordelia loses when she refuses to play the game, but Lear also loses when he ‘retires’ and abdicates his kingly role” (Metzger 102).

According to Harold Bloom, the renowned literary scholar, *King Lear* explores patriarchal behavior in the father (85). Lear fails to love each child equally as a father should. In contrast with his strong kingship, his poor fatherhood results in his inappropriate treatment toward the relationship with his daughters: “His method of determining inheritance shows that he cares more for his ego than for his children’s welfare” (Hill 5). “Lear’s abdication scene provides a paradigm of [the] danger. He offers money and property in exchange of words of love” (Bloom 86):

Which of you shall we say doth love us most,  
That we our largest bounty may extend  
Where nature doth with merit challenge. (1.1.51-53)

He is highly pleased when being flattered by Goneril and Regan, who are asked to present their daughterly love. “[P]art of problem with the contest is that it takes words of love as an adequate equivalent of love itself. But this is not just the problem with words; any means of expressing love may be used deceptively” (Bloom 86) and turns

into treachery. The truth is, “Lear has been met for so long with sycophancy that he can no longer distinguish between sincerity and falsehood” (Casey 59). Moreover, Lear himself does not recognize that it is a kingly habit which he has been addicted to for a long time. In other words, he treats his daughters like his subordinates whose responsibility is to please the king through sycophancy. Whenever Lear claims himself as a father, his implicit kingly attitude appears:

The king would speak with Cornwall; the dear father  
Would with his daughter speak, commands her service.  
Are they inform'd of this? My breath and blood! (2.4.102-103)

Lear is subject to madness that leads him to commit snobbish and foolish acts, misjudging the sincerity of his daughters’ words, which bring about his own destruction. Later, in his mad wanderings through the wilderness, Lear says he is a “man more sinned against than sinning” (3.2. 58), indicating that at this point in the play he still does not see the cause of his problems as his own failure as a father” (Hill 4). Through the statements of the others, Lear gradually realizes how much he has been blinded by flattery. Even Fool knows that what is seen, heard, or smell might not be true: “Why, to keep one’s eyes of either side’s nose; that what a man cannot smell out, he may spy into” (1.5. 22). From Kent, we are informed that Lear is too shameful to bring himself to Cordelia, and that could be out of his kingly pride as well:

His mind so venomously, that burning shame  
Detains him from Cordelia. (4.3. 47-48)

“Frequently, Shakespeare shows a man’s attempt to get, preserve, or control a

relationship with a woman resulting in disaster because he abuses his power” (Bloom 93). The world of *King Lear* is a world of patriarchy. Attempting to control the relationship with his daughters, as a king will, Lear falls into identity crisis, which brings about ensuing tragedies in the play. He is the father figure to the kingdom, who is too controlling and despotic to tell apart the role as a king and a father. With completely stripped sovereignty and scrambled sense of fatherhood, Lear finally loses his sanity (Mellinger 1). Overall, it is his masculinity that is being questioned, both kingly and fatherly. The conflict between kingship and fatherhood is resolved through reconciliation between Lear and his daughters, and Lear’s royal dignity is recovered by Duke of Albany; however, “with all his three daughters dead, Lear can never again regain his fatherhood” (Szabó).

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