

Characters' Secrets Unveiled by Language in *the Tragedy of King Lear*

Language is a mirror reflecting the speaker's mind, attitude, personalities, background, social status, and inner changes. One person's way of speech might reveal his/her true thoughts and feelings. Reading carefully through and beyond the sentences, readers might find out the implications exquisitely woven in the words. *The Tragedy of King Lear*, like William Shakespeare's many other plays, is well-structured in a combination of verse and prose. In this play, *The Tragedy of King Lear*, on the one hand, most characters, especially the nobles, are inclined to talk in "unrhymed iambic pentameter," or "blank verse," for instance, King Lear in Act 1 Scene 1 Line 111-113 claims:

Peace, Kent!  
Come not between the dragon and his wrath.  
I loved her most, and thought to set my rest  
On her kind nursery. Hence, and avoid my sight!

Iambic pentameter can be found in the line "On her kind nursery—Hence, and avoid my sight!" (I.i.113). However, on the other hand, blank verse, or Iambic pentameter, is regarded as an elegant and high-class way of speaking. Therefore, in Shakespeare's play, characters on the lower social scale do not tend to talk in a special poetic rhythm; instead, they just talk. In brief, in this essay, the spotlight will be shed on the language style of three major characters in *The Tragedy of King Lear* and connect their features of speech with their own personalities, statuses, and inner changes.

To begin with, King Lear is the protagonist. As above mentioned, on the one hand, blank verse is typically reserved for the nobility since it is deemed as a formal style of speech. In the first half of the play, King Lear predominantly speaks in blank verse, which befits his social status. For instance, in Act I, Lear's every sentence demonstrates his exalted state as a king:

Know that we have divided  
In three our kingdom; and 'tis our fast intent  
To shake all cares and business from our age;  
Conferring them on younger strengths, while we  
Unburthen'd crawl toward death. (I.i.35-40)

King Lear, in the above paragraph, proposes his own plan but refers to himself in the plural as "we" in line 39 instead of "I." Such way of speaking is often found in the formal royal speech. Kings or the royal family tend to use "we" rather than "I" because they mostly are not speaking for themselves only. Their voices represent their country and people. In short, Lear evidently stands well in the position of royalty in the opening scene. However, King Lear's notorious for valuing appearances above

reality, and this concept eventually leads to the tragic ending. For example, King Lear asks his daughter “which of you shall we say doth love us most?” (I.i.49) instead of “which of you doth love us most?” Lear’s test in his daughters’ love towards him discloses that he puts much emphasis on a demagogic public display of love rather than on real love emerging from the bottom of one’s heart. In addition, metaphors and similes are frequently seen throughout the play. For instance,

Lear: If she must teem,  
Create her child of spleen, that it may live  
And be a thwart disnatur'd torment to her!  
Let it stamp wrinkles in her brow of youth,  
With cadent tears fret channels in her cheeks,  
Turn all her mother's pains and benefits  
To laughter and contempt, that she may feel  
How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is  
To have a thankless child! (I.iv.243-252)

King Lear vividly depicts a monstrous infant stamping wrinkles in Goneril's brow, and burning her cheeks with its "cadent" (falling) tears while Goneril precludes to disbanding Lear’s miniature army. Her ingratitude to Lear is described as "sharper than a serpent's tooth." He demands that Nature render Goneril infertile, or if his daughter must "teem" (give birth, like an animal) then her child be a "thwart disnatur'd" (unnatural and perverse) torment to her, as she is to him. Later, Lear makes complaints to Regan against Goneril about her "Sharp-tooth'd unkindness" and her "serpent-like" tongue (Act2, scene 4). Besides, Lear considers his two daughters, Regan and Goneril, snakelike, and the image of snakes stands for savageness of all women, such as,

Lear: Down from the waist they are centaurs,  
Though women all above;  
But to the girdle do the gods inherit,  
Beneath is all the fiends': there's hell, there's darkness,  
There is the sulphurous pit, burning, scalding,  
Stench, consumption. (IV. vi. 124-129).

On the other hand, when King Lear is falling into insanity, he lacks of ability in speaking blank verse; instead, he is inclined to talk in prose and quickly switches back into eloquent blank verse. Therefore, the speech in prose might be viewed as a sign of madness in this play. Take three examples to illustrate this point. First, in Act IV, Scene vi, King Lear switches into the prose speech, which is considered a kind of language use reserved in Shakespeare's plays for low-born characters, casual conversation and characters in insanity.

Lear: Look with thine ears. See how yond justice rails upon yond simple thief. Hark, in thine ear. Change places, and handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief? (IV.vi. 142-145)

Second, in some scenes where King Lear is losing his mind, he is still talking in verse, which is seen as jumbled and illogical though, displaying Lear's confused and mad state of mind, such as,

Now, now, now, now,

Pull off my boots. Harder, harder. So. (IV.vi. 166-168)

Third, at the end of the play, Lear speaks to Cordelia in verse, which is considered less pomp and contains more lyrical imagery. For instance,

We two alone will sing like birds i'the cage.

When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,

And ask of thee forgiveness.

The above text is deemed as a reflection of what Lear has gained from his own life journey. In a nutshell, throughout the play, King Lear's language, including the use of blank verse, prose, or metaphors, might reveal not only his state of mind but also his social status, true feelings towards others, and inner changes.

Next, Cordelia, who is regarded as the symbol of devotion, kindness, and honesty, talks in a plain fashion. In contrast to her sisters, Cordelia is far inferior in expressing herself pompously, for instance, "And yet not so, since I am sure my love's/ More ponderous than my tongue." (I.i.78-79) Responding Lear's love test by saying, "what shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent," (I.i.62) Cordelia is considered a repository of virtue. Moreover, nihilism is found in the play, from Cordelia's first refusal to say anything but "nothing," to Lear's final cry of grief that Cordelia is passing away, shouting "Never, never, never, never, never." In short, Cordelia is viewed as a daughter, who genuinely loves her father but is poor in expressing herself orally; therefore, her language tends to be plain.

Last, this play, *the Tragedy of King Lear*, is filled with irony and humor. The fool clearly is the model of taking good advantage in using irony. Typically, fool is considered an ignorant comic figure to entertain the king; however, King Lear's Fool holds wisdom. Instead of giving advice directly, the fool usually creates a humorous atmosphere and proposes his observations in a satirical expression to the king. Although the Fool has sharp remarks upon events occurred around, but he is still a courtier to King Lear. If he points out King Lear's faults straightforwardly, Lear might ignore the Fool's opinions and will even execute the one who defames the King. Besides, the Fool, who is able to indicate Lear's faults, might be deemed as Lear's conscience. The Fool makes good use of irony, sarcasm, and humor to unveil the truth and moderate Lear's twisted concepts. For instance, here is a sarcastic metaphor on an

animal offered by the Fool to Lear: "Truth's a dog must to kennel; he must be whipped out when the Lady's Brach may stand by th'fire and stink." (I, iv, 110-112) The Fool, in fact, describes Lear's two elder daughters as the Lady's Brach, a hound bitch associated with flattery. The Fool implies that the two elder daughters are indeed flattering Lear instead of truly loving him as their father. In brief, the Fool's suggestions are frequently wrapped with irony and humor for King Lear to listen to and bear in mind.

In conclusion, generally speaking, the lines in *the Tragedy of King Lear*, are written in iambic pentameter, or blank verse, unless the characters are not the loyal or are in the state of insanity. However, each character has his/her own features of speech corresponding to his/her position in the play. Readers might discover not only the characters' social statuses and backgrounds but also their changes of thoughts and states of mind through the words spoken by the characters.

Works Cited

Primary Source

Shakespeare, William. "King Lear." *King Lear: A Norton Critical Edition*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Grace Ioppolo et al eds. New York: Norton, 2007.

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