

Themes in *King Lear*

Authority, Patriarch and the King

- KENT You have that in your countenance
 which I would fain call master.
- LEAR What's that?
- KENT Authority.
[I.iv.27-30]
- LEAR Take physic, pomp;
[III.iv.33-36] Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
 That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
 And show the heavens more just.
- LEAR Ay, every inch a king.
[IV.vi.107-109] When I do stare see how the subject quakes.
 I pardon that man's life.
- LEAR Come, come, I am a king; masters, know you that?
- GENTLEMAN You are a royal one, and we obey you.
[IV.vi.200-201]
- ALBANY For us, we will resign
[V.iii.296-298] During the life of this old majesty
 To him our absolute power.

Crowns

- FOOL When thou clovest thy crown i'the middle, and gavest away both
[I.IV.157-161] parts, thou borest thine ass on thy back o'er the dirt.
 Thou hadst little wit in thy bald crown when thou
 gavest thy golden one away.
- CORDELIA Alack, 'tis he! Why, he was met even now
[IV.iv.1-4] As mad as the vex'd sea, singing aloud,
 Crowned with rank fumiter and furrow-weeds,
 With hardokes, hemlock, nettles, cuckoo-flowers,

Inheritance

- LEAR To thee and thine hereditary ever
[I.i.79-80] Remain this ample third of our fair kingdom,
- EDMUND Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land.
[I.ii.16]
- LEAR I gave you all -
REGAN And in good time you gave it.
[II.iv.245]
- LEAR Didst thou give all to thy daughters? And art thou
[III.iv.47-] come to this?

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Legitimacy

EDMUND For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines
[I.ii.5-6] Lag of a brother? Why bastard? Wherefore base?

EDMUND Fine word, 'legitimate'!
[I.ii.18-22] Well, my 'legitimate', if this letter speed
And my invention thrive, Edmund the base
Shall top the legitimate. I grow. I prosper.
Now gods stand up for bastards!

EDGAR I am no less in blood than thou art, Edmund;
[V.iii.165-167] If more, the more th'hast wronged me.
My name is Edgar, and thy father's son.

Division

GLOUCESTER But now in the division of the kingdom it appears not which
[I.i.3-5] of the Dukes he values most

LEAR Meantime we shall express our darker purpose.
[I.i.36-38] Give me the map there. Know that we have divided
In three our kingdom;

CURAN Have you heard of no likely wars toward 'twixt
[II.i.10-11] the Dukes of Cornwall and Albany?

GONERILL I had rather lose the battle than that sister
[V.ii.18-19] Should loosen him and me.

Justice

LEAR Arraign her first. 'Tis Gonerill! I here take my oath
[III.vi.46-48] before this honourable assembly, she kicked the poor
King her father.

ALBANY This shows you are above,
[IV.ii.78-80] You justicers, that these our nether crimes
So speedily can venge!

EDGAR Draw thy sword,
[V.iii.124-126] That if my speech offend a noble heart
Thy arm may do thee justice.

Parents and Children

FOOL I have used it, nuncle, ever since thou madest thy
[I.iv.168-170] daughters thy mothers; for when thou gavest them the
rod and putttest down thine own breeches,

EDMUND Spoke with how manifold and strong a bond
[II.i.46-47] The child was bound to the father -

ALBANY What have you done,
[IV.ii.39-40] Tigers, not daughters, what have you performed?

LEAR Let copulation thrive; for Gloucester's bastard son
[IV.vi.114-116] Was kinder to his father than my daughters
 Got 'tween the lawful sheets.

Love: Self-love and False Love

LEAR Which of you shall we say doth love us most,
[I.i.51]

CORDELIA What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent.
[I.i.62]

CORDELIA Good my lord,
[I.i.95-100] You have begot me, bred me, loved me.
 I return those duties back as are right fit,
 Obey you, love you, and most honour you.
 Why have my sisters husbands, if they say
 They love you all?

FRANCE Love's not love
[I.i.238-240] When it is mingled with regards that stands
 Aloof from th'entire point.

CORDELIA No blown ambition doth our arms incite
[IV.iv.27-28] But love, dear love, and our aged father's right.

LEAR I know you do not love me, for your sisters
 Have, as I do remember, done me wrong.
 You have some cause; they have not.

CORDELIA No cause, no cause.
[IV.vii.74-76]

REGAN Tell me but truly - but then speak the truth -
 Do you not love my sister?

EDMUND In honoured love.

REGAN But have you never found my brother's way
 To the forefended place?

[V.i.8-11]

EDMUND To both these sisters have I sworn my love;
[V.i.55]

Age and Youth

LEAR and 'tis our fast intent
[I.i.38-41] To shake all cares and business from our age,
 Conferring them on younger strengths, while we
 Unburdened crawl toward death.

GONERILL Idle old man, That still would manage those authorities That he hath given
[I.iii.17-21] away! Now, by my life, Old fools are babes again, and must be used With
checks, as flatteries, when they are seen abused.

FOOL Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst
[I.iv.41-42] been wise.

LEAR Here I stand, your slave,
[III.ii.19-20] A poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man.

EDGAR The weight of this sad time we must obey;
[V.iii.321- Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
324] The oldest hath borne most; we that are young
Shall never see so much nor live so long.

Ingratitude of Children

LEAR Better thou
[I.i.233-234] Hadst not been born than not t'have pleased me better.

LEAR How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
[I.iv.285-286] To have a thankless child!

GLOUCESTER Canst thou blame him? -
[III.iv.155-156] His daughters seek his death.

Loyalty

CORNWALL If you see Vengeance -
FIRST Hold your hand, my lord! I have served you ever since I was a child; But
SERVANT better service have I never done you Than now to bid you hold.
[III.vii.71-74]

CORDELIA For thee, oppressed King, I am cast down;
[V.iii.5]

EDGAR Kent, sir, the banished Kent, who, in disguise,
[V.iii.217- Followed his enemy king and did him service
219] Improper for a slave.

KENT I have a journey, sir, shortly to go.
[V.iii.319- My master calls me, I must not say no.
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Hospitality

LEAR I have perceived a most faint neglect of late,
[I.iv.67]

GLOUCESTER What mean your graces? Good my friends, consider
[III.vii.30-31] You are my guests. Do me no foul play, friends.

Eyes and Sight

- LEAR Out of my sight!
- KENT See better, Lear, and let me still remain The true blank of thine eye.
[I.i.157-159]
- LEAR Old fond eyes,
[I.iv.298-299] Beweep this cause again, I'll pluck ye out
- GLOUCESTER Because I would not see thy cruel nails
[III.vii.55-56] Pluck out his poor old eyes;
- GLOUCESTER I have no way and therefore want no eyes;
[IV.i.18]

Madness and Sanity

- KENT Be Kent unmannerly
[I.i.145-146] When Lear is mad. What wouldst thou do, old man?
- LEAR I prithee, daughter, do not make me mad.
[II.iv.213]
- LEAR My wits begin to turn.
[III.ii.67]
- EDGAR Why I do trifle thus with his despair
[IV.vi.33-34] Is done to cure it.

Politics

- CORDELIA I yet beseech your majesty—
[I.i.223-225] If for I want that glib and oily art
To speak and purpose not,
- LEAR Get thee glass eyes,
[IV.vi.171-173] And like a scurvy politician seem
To see the things thou dost not.

Civil Disorder

- LEAR We have this hour a constant will to publish
[I.ii.43-45] Our daughters' several dowers, that future strife
May be prevented now.
- GLOUCESTER In cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the
[I.ii.107-109] bond
cracked 'twixt son and father.
- REGAN If, sir, perchance,
[II.iv.137-140] She have restrained the riots of your followers,
'Tis on such ground and to such wholesome end
As clears her from all blame.
- REGAN I dare avouch it, sir. What, fifty followers?
[II.iv.232-235] Is it not well? What should you need of more?

Yea, or so many, sith that both charge and danger
Speak 'gainst so great a number?

GLOUCESTER [III.iii.10-13] These injuries the king now bears will be revenged home. There is part of a power already footed. We must incline to the King.

KENT Why the King of France is so suddenly gone back know you the reason?

GENTLEMAN [IV.iii.1-6] Something he left imperfect in the state, which since his coming forth is thought of; which imports to the kingdom so much fear and danger that his personal return was most required and necessary.

REGAN [IV.v.9-11] It was great ignorance, Gloucester's eyes being out, To let him live. Where he arrives he moves All hearts against us.

REGAN [IV.v.16-17] Our troops set forth tomorrow; stay with us. The ways are dangerous.

GENTLEMAN They say Edgar, his banished son, is with the Earl of Kent in Germany.

KENT Report is changeable. 'Tis time to look about. The powers of the kingdom approach apace.

GENTLEMAN [IV.vii.90-94] The arbitrament is like to be bloody.

Religion

EDGAR [III.iv.77-79] Take heed o' the foul fiend, obey thy parents, keep thy word's justice, swear not, commit not with man's sworn spouse, set not thy sweet heart on proud array.

GENTLEMAN [IV.iii.29-30] There she shook The holy water from her heavenly eyes,

LEAR [IV.vi.127-130] Beneath is all the fiends' - There's hell, there's darkness, there is the sulphurous pit - burning, scalding, stench, consumption! Fie, fie, fie! Pah, pah!

CORDELIA [IV.vii.57-58] O look upon me, sir, And hold your hand in benediction o'er me

EDGAR [V.iii.193-194] I asked his blessing, and from first to last Told him my pilgrimage;

KENT Is this the promised end?

EDGAR [V.iii.261-262] Or image of that horror?

Nothing

CORDELIA Nothing, my lord.
 LEAR Nothing?
 CORDELIA Nothing.
 LEAR Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.
 [I.i.87-90]

LEAR Nothing! I have sworn; I am firm.
 [I.i.244]

GLOUCESTER No? What needed then that terrible dis- patch of it into your pocket?
 [I.ii.33-36] The quality of nothing hath not such need to hide itself. Let's see!
 Come! If it be nothing I shall not need spectacles.

KENT This is nothing, Fool.
 FOOL Then 'tis like the breath of an unfee'd lawyer: you
 gave me nothing for 't. Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle?

LEAR Why, no, boy. Nothing can be made out of nothing.
 [I.iv.127-131]

EDGAR Edgar I nothing am.
 [II.iii.21]

The Poor and Poverty

EDGAR Whiles I may 'scape
 [II.iii.5-9] I will preserve myself; and am bethought
 To take the basest and most poorest shape
 That ever penury, in contempt of man,
 Brought near to beast.

FOOL Fathers that wear rags
 [II.iv.46-47] Do make their children blind,

LEAR Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,
 [III.iv.28-33] That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
 How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
 Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you
 From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
 Too little care of this!

CORDELIA and wast thou fain, poor father,
 [IV.vii.38-40] To hovel thee with swine and rogues forlorn
 In short and musty straw? Alack, alack!

The Elements

GLOUCESTER These late eclipses in the sun and moon
 [I.ii.103-104] portend no good to us.

EDMUND This is the excellent foppery of the world, that
 [I.ii.118-121] when we are sick in fortune - often the surfeit of our
 own behaviour - we make guilty of our disasters the sun,

the moon, and stars
 KENT Where's the king?
 GENTLEMAN Contending with the fretful elements:
 [III.i.3-5] Bids the wind blow the earth into the sea,
 LEAR Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!
 [III.ii.1]
 KENT It is the stars,
 [IV.iii.32-33] The stars above us govern our conditions.

Nature and Nurture

EDMUND Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law
 [I.ii.1-2] My services are bound.
 EDMUND A credulous father and a brother noble,
 [I.ii.175-177] Whose nature is so far from doing harms
 That he suspects none;
 CORNWALL For you, Edmund,
 [II.i.111-114] Whose virtue and obedience doth this instant
 So much commend itself, you shall be ours.
 Natures of such deep trust we shall much need;
 LEAR we are not ourselves
 [II.iv.102-104] When nature, being oppressed, commands the mind
 To suffer with the body.
 GLOUCESTER Alack, alack, Edmund, I like not this unnatural dealing.
 [III.iii.1-2]

Corruption of Servants

CORNWALL Why art thou angry?
 KENT That such a slave as this should wear a sword
 [II.ii.69-71] Who wears no honesty.
 EDGAR I know thee well: a serviceable villain,
 [IV.vi.252-254] As duteous to the vices of thy mistress
 As badness would desire.

Sin

LEAR I am a man
 [III.ii.59-60] More sinned against than sinning.
 LEAR Robes and furred gowns hide all. Plate sins with gold,
 [IV.vi.166-167] And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks;

Truth

CORDELIA So young, my lord, and true.
 LEAR Thy truth then be thy dower!

[I.i.107-8]

CORDELIA The jewels of our father, with wash'd eyes
 [I.i.268-271] Cordelia leaves you. I know you what you are;
 And, like a sister, am most loath to call
 Your faults as they are named.

FOOL Truth's a dog must to kennel; he must be whipped
 [I.iv.110-112] out when the Lady Brach may stand by the fire and stink.

CORNWALL An honest mind and plain - he must speak truth!
 [II.ii.97]

Guilt

LEAR I did her wrong.
 [I.v.24]

GLOUCESTER O my follies! Then Edgar was abused.
 [III.vii.90-91] Kind gods, forgive me that and prosper him.

EDMUND I pant for life; some good I mean to do
 [V.iii.241-242] Despite of mine own nature.

Identity

KENT I do profess to be no less than I seem;
 [I.iv.12]

LEAR I know thee well enough; thy name is Gloucester.
 [IV.vi.178]

LEAR Methinks I should know you, and know this man
 [IV.vii.64]

HERALD What are you?
 Your name, your quality, and why you answer
 This present summons?

EDGAR Know, my name is lost
 [V.iii.117-119]

Fortune

KENT Fortune, good night; smile once more; turn thy wheel.
 [I.ii.171]

GLOUCESTER As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods;
 [IV.i.36-37] They kill us for their sport.

EDMUND The wheel is come full circle; I am here.
 [V.iii.172]

Warmth and Cold

FRANCE Gods, gods! 'Tis strange that from their cold'st neglect

[I.i.254-255] My love should kindle to inflamed respect.
 LEAR If only to go warm were gorgeous,
 [II.iv.263-265] Why, nature needs not what thou gorgeous wear'st,
 Which scarcely keeps thee warm.
 LEAR Come on, my boy. How dost, my boy? Art cold?
 [III.ii.68-69] I am cold myself.
 FOOL This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen.
 [III.iv.75-76]
 GLOUCESTER Yet have I ventured to come seek you out
 [III.iv.145-146] And bring you where both fire and food is ready.
 EDGAR Tom's a-cold.
 GLOUCESTER In, fellow, there, into th' hovel; keep thee warm.
 [III.iv.166-168]

Worst

LEAR Those wicked creatures yet do look well-favoured
 [II.iv.251-253] When others are more wicked. Not being the worst
 Stands in some rank of praise.
 EDGAR The worst is not,
 [IV.i.27-28] So long as we can say 'This is the worst'.
 CORDELIA Be better suited
 [IV.vii.6-7] These weeds are memories of those worser hours.

<http://www.rsc.org.uk/lear/learning/themes.html>