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Abuse and Power in King Lear and Lear's Incestual Desires

Throughout many of Shakespeare's works, he has captivated audiences with his prolific ability in storytelling. Shakespeare's plays and poems manage to captivate readers today. His work is so impactful that his stories get adapted in many different mediums to this day. Although he lived over 400 years ago, the works of William Shakespeare have continued to persevere through the centuries and be the focus of many analyses. Even though Shakespeare lived and wrote in a time where there was religious persecution, witch hunts, and a highly uneducated populous, he managed to write in a way that appealed to all social classes by creating stories that had human characters with human flaws. His plays managed to captivate audiences throughout the centuries because many of the stories he wrote had a subtextual element to them that challenged societal roles and norms. For instance, it could be said that his play *Twelfth Night* is disguised as a gay romance between two of the protagonists. The gay element of *Twelfth Night* is debated even today and is just one example of the many Shakespearean plays that has a subtextual element that challenges societal roles. A play that could be looked closer and analyzed more is Shakespeare's *King Lear*. While the play at face value is about a king who unknowingly relinquishes his power to his cruel daughters, as well as the cause and effects and fallout of that decision, it could be subject to a deeper analysis. If one were to look deeper into the subtext of the play they may find that King Lear has an abusive relationship with his daughters and harbors incestuous feelings for them, much like different royal entities within

Europe. In response to this abuse of power, his daughters abuse their power over him and treat him cruelly later. His abusive action towards his daughters is his own downfall as they use the power he gave them to treat him cruelly. Shakespeare is using *King Lear* to showcase and criticize the cycle of abuse within familial relationships, showing how power can corrupt as it is inherently unnatural, while also criticizing European monarchies willingness to do anything to maintain power, including having incestual relationships.

The start of *King Lear* begins with Lear wanting to retire his power to his daughters, but he will only give them power if they profess their love to him. His two eldest daughters, Goneril and Regan, accept this request and are given power. However, his youngest and favorite daughter, Cordelia, refuses this request. She states that it is a strange and unusual request to profess her love to him. She scolds Lear by saying that Goneril and Regan professed their love to their father in a way that seems like they love him more than they do their own husbands. Cordelia refuses Lear's request to profess her love to him and says that she loves him a normal amount, the amount that a father and daughter should have for each other. However, Lear does not like hearing this. And although Cordelia is being reasonable, King Lear explodes on his daughter and banishes her.

Throughout the play, but especially early on, Shakespeare shows the many times that Lear abuses the power he has over his daughters. Lear's explosive reaction to his daughter suggests that there is something more than meets the eye with Lear's love test. The kingdom is then split in two and is presided over by Goneril and Regan. Lear's only request from his two eldest daughters is for one hundred soldiers to always be by his side while he splits his time living at Goneril and Regan's estates. At first, Goneril and Regan honor his request but soon he is talked down from one hundred knights, to then fifty, and then to twenty-five, and then finally

to having his entourage taken away from him entirely. The loss of his knights embody and showcases Lear's transition from a powerful ruler to a powerless father at the mercy of his daughters.

Lear relinquishes his power to his daughters who participated in the love test, only for it to be revealed that they don't actually love him. This lack of love and cruelty towards King Lear may stem from the love test itself. It is implied in the play that King Lear is using the test as a way to release his pent up incestual desire for his daughters. Mark Taylor writes that, "there is an element of incestuous feeling in King Lear's attitude towards his daughters need scarcely be argued . . . the love test that Lear demands Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia undergo is a necessary displacement of his own impulses. Because he is an old man, and because, moreover it is unacceptable that he reveals erotic feelings toward his daughters, Lear makes them compete for him." (Taylor 72-73) It is implied that Lear got a perverse and erotic satisfaction from having his daughters compete for power by showing him love. As stated earlier, Cordelia called out Lear for this and perhaps in a moment of impotent rage, Lear irrationally banishes his daughter.

This is not the actions of a man who is thinking reasonably. The irrational actions taken against Cordelia by Lear could be explained by the fact that Cordelia knowingly or unknowingly refused to play into Lear's sexual gratification. Lear's irrational behavior towards Cordelia could also be Lear trying to suppress anything and anyone who would expose his incestuous desire towards his children. Incest itself is vile and disgusting, and if it were to be revealed that Lear holds these feelings for his children it could hurt his reputation and subsequently cause him to lose his power over the people. This fear of exposure continues through his irrationality towards Kent. When Kent defends Cordelia by telling Lear that he is being irrational, Lear punishes Kent as well. "Cordelia and Kent trigger Lear's wrathful reaction because they opt out of the game of

ingratiation: they refuse to flatter him and they speak their minds instead for the sake of “truth” (1.1.109) and “plainness” (1.1.149). Lear interprets those plain speeches as a denial of allegiance to him, as a form of resistance” (Drouet 182) Lear is effectively silencing anyone who doesn’t follow his irrational actions.

Not only does Lear fear exposure, but he also can’t stand the fact that anyone would disobey him. Although Cordelia may not have had bad intentions speaking to Lear “plainly” and “truthfully” about the strangeness of the love test, she openly calls out Lear. In response, he banishes his favorite daughter and gives the kingdom to his two daughters that would play a part in his downfall. Kevin Lindberg writes that, “Regan and Goneril’s speeches would be incestuous if they really meant them” (Lindberg 581) Whether his daughters wanted to participate in the love test or not, Lear held his power over their heads to get what he wants. Although Cordelia was supposed to be the last one to participate in the love test and refuses after her sisters participated, she is the example to the other daughters as to what would happen if they don’t obey him.

This could also explain Goneril and Regan’s lack of love and cruelty towards their father once they have power later in the play. Jacob C. Berger states “Lear’s peculiar love test seems like a sublimation of sexual desire for his own offspring. A possible offstage encounter—indicated in how Lear announces his love test, ‘Meantime we shall express our darker purpose’ (1.1.35)—could explain his two elder daughters’ contempt toward him. Here, “darker” suggests his intent is clouded or unknown. At the same time, his words might also involve a sinister objective.” (Berger 4) The line the quote is referring to, in context to the play, is that Lear is attending to his kingly duties with his advisors. When his daughters arrive, he quickly ends the conversations with his advisors so he can speak with his daughters. This could also show his

excitement to start the love test with his daughters. Berger is saying that the “darker purpose” line has a double meaning. At face value this line is suggesting that Lear wants to discuss the unknown future of the country. But it could also be Lear slyly showing his true intentions with his daughters. Goneril and Regan could have knowingly used Lear’s perverted love for them to their advantage to obtain power. The using of Lear to obtain power idea is also stated by Berger in his journal: “Cordelia recognizes the incestuous undertones of the love test and sees her father’s actions as a small way to cross boundary lines. Thus, Cordelia conspicuously specifies a biological love, not a sexual one . . . Goneril and Regan detect the incestuous implications of their father’s request and feed into this incest to acquire what they want. If Cordelia sees the perverted connotations, she nonetheless refuses to engage with them.” (Berger 4)

Lear is abusive in nature to his daughters in the way that he expects his daughters to obey everything he commands them to do even if he no longer holds power over them. As stated earlier, King Lear’s entourage of knights is eventually taken away from him. Initially, Goneril wanted to reduce Lear’s entourage to fifty men as the knights were rowdy and uncontrollable and didn’t really do much other than drink, eat, and party. This angers Lear, as by now it is already established that he hates when he is not obeyed. Lear angrily goes to Regan over the matter of his knights but is shut down by Regan who has returned from travelling and uses it as an excuse to not listen to Lear’s complaint. Regan tells Lear that he is old and probably treated Goneril unfairly and should apologize. Goneril surprises Lear by showing up at Regan’s estate where the sisters then talk down Lear from his anger. Lear wants to have his one hundred knights with him at Regan’s estate, but she reduced the number to twenty-five. Upon hearing this, Lear turns to Goneril to try and compromise with fifty men, but she takes that offer off the table. The knights are all taken away from Lear. The difference in this encounter and the love test encounter, is that

Lear no longer holds power over his daughters. Goneril and Regan treat Lear cruelly by not allowing him the one thing that he requested after he would step down as king. King Lear is now powerless and is being abused by his daughters just as he abused them. He wants his daughters to obey him, but he is now powerless to them as they were once powerless to him.

Goneril and Regan may look like the villains in the play, and in many cases, they are. Goneril and Regan become the villains because they are power hungry. But being power hungry isn't necessarily an evil thing. It's how they use their power that makes them evil. Goneril and Regan are women that were shaped by their father by his abuse and his (most likely real) incestual desires for them. They became the villains of the play in response to their father's abuse to them. Whether or not they knew they were being abused, they were still being abused nonetheless. They saw how Lear used his power to scheme and abuse them so when he gave away his power to them, they did the same thing right back. Under the guise of taking care of him, like how he 'took care of his daughters' in the beginning, they pretend to care for Lear at first. But eventually they treat Lear with contempt which is similar to how he was gracious enough to gift control of the kingdom to his daughters if they satisfy him but banishes Cordelia when she wouldn't give him the satisfaction he wanted. Goneril and Regan continue the cycle of abuse by abusing Lear right back. He is responsible for his own abuse as he was the one to use his daughters to play a perverted game to satisfy his sexual desires while punishing the one daughter that refused to play into his perverted scheme. But instead of ending the cycle of abuse with Lear, they move on to use their power to conspire against each other and those close to them.

Much like how Lear wanted his daughters to compete and show their love to him, Goneril and Regan find themselves competing over Edmund, a character with a similar rise to power as

the power-hungry sisters. Edmund also rose to power through lying and betraying his family members. He is power hungry which, again, isn't a necessarily evil trait. Unlike the relationships between Goneril and Regan, Edmund wasn't mistreated by his father to the point where he should be as bad as Goneril and Regan. He is the illegitimate son of the Earl of Gloucester but wasn't treated much differently than his older (and legitimate) brother. But that doesn't stop Edmund from betraying the Earl and his brother Edgar to obtain power. Driven by the fact that Gloucester treats him differently than his older brother Edgar, he conspires against his brother and father in the pursuit of power. Edmund lies to his father, telling him that Edgar is plotting their father's murder. Despite not being true, the Earl believes Edmund as he believes Edmund is loyal to Gloucester. Due to the Earl's banishment of Edgar, Edmund will rise to power. His lying, betrayal, and deceit to his family, is what makes Edmund evil.

Goneril and Regan's rise to power and Edmund's rise to power are very similar to one another. Both groups lie to their fathers, albeit lying about different things, resulting in an obtained power from their parenthood. Both groups mistreat and hurt their respective families to obtain the power they are reaching for. Eventually, Regan falls in love with Edmund after her own husband, the Duke of Cornwall, is killed by his own servant after seeing the horrific torture of Gloucester. Gloucester was betrayed by his son, Edmund, who gave Gloucester to Cornwall in return for Edmund's rise to power as the new Earl of Gloucester. So now that Cornwall is out of the picture, Regan notices Edmund and falls in love with him. Goneril, is also attracted to Edmund because he is her subordinate but is also a strong-willed character. Albany, Goneril's husband, is one of the only inherently good characters in the play, but he is weak willed, and despite being infuriated over the mistreatment of Lear by Goneril and Regan, does little to stop his wife from abusing Lear. Because Goneril is unsatisfied with how weak Albany is and the

lack of love in their relationship, she conspires with Edmund to kill Albany so that she can marry Edmund and open a seat of power for Edmund to obtain.

The relationships between Goneril, Regan, and Edmund are all driven by abuse. They all want power, but they all are trying to gain said power through abuse of those who are supposed to be closest to them. Edmund wasn't treated wonderfully by his father, but that doesn't entirely excuse his betrayal which results in his father's horrific torture. Edmund's upbringing, while not perfect, doesn't constitute his betrayal of his father and brother. While Gloucester isn't wholly the greatest father to his son, Edmund is the real perpetrator of abuse within his family. With Goneril and Regan, it could be explained that they are abusive to those closest to them because that was how King Lear treated them. Lear is the perpetrator of abuse in his family leading to why the daughters mistreat others. The daughters abuse of others is what leads to Edmund's own rise to power. Because Edmund betrayed his father, it led to the accidental death of Cornwall and later he gained the attention of the now widowed Regan. Because Goneril mistreats her own husband, she finds that she is in a loveless marriage and goes to Edmund to help kill her own husband so they can be married.

Despite thinking that they love Edmund, Goneril and Regan are so power hungry that they are incapable of knowing what love actually is because of how they were shaped by their father's abuse. Although Lear was perverted and saw his daughters in an erotic and sexual way, Cordelia was the only one who really did love her father despite Lear's abuse. Cordelia was the only one of the three that didn't express her love to him, but this was because it is shown that she is a strong and kind character, and that she didn't give Lear what he wanted despite him holding power over her head. Because of Cordelia's unyielding to Lear's demands, she is banished

despite being the only one who truly loves Lear. Because of Lear's abuse of power and his hurt ego, Cordelia's banishment allowed his other daughters to have unrestricted access to power.

Because of Lear's want for sexual gratification from his daughters, it put in motion the cycle of abuse within the play. If King Lear hadn't made his daughters compete for him for satisfy his own perverted attraction to his children, then the tragedy that ends the play wouldn't have happened. Goneril and Regan end up conspiring to kill one another because they are chasing what they think is love. But it doesn't seem like they truly love Edmund. Goneril and Regan only love power and Edmund is just a tool for them to gain more power and to help Goneril and Regan satisfy their own wants and desires. In return, Edmund is also using Goneril and Regan for his own personal gain. All three of them prop each other up and use each other to further their own motives.

Goneril and Regan end up dying because they conspired against each other for Edmund's love. Regan is poisoned by Goneril, and Goneril ends up killing herself when it is revealed that she conspired with Edmund to kill Albany. Edmund's demise happens when he is challenged to a duel by his brother Edgar who kills him for treachery and betrayal. At this point towards the end of the play, Edmund has Cordelia and Lear imprisoned with the intention of having them killed. But before Cordelia dies Goneril and Regan end up killing each other over Edmund, with Edmund himself being killed by his own brother.

In the end, Lear is happy to once again be with his daughter Cordelia. He finally acknowledges Cordelia as his real daughter. He finally knows that Cordelia is the only one of the three that truly loves him. But that is only after being abused by the evil that he himself created through his abuse towards his daughters and inadvertently setting in motion the deaths of multiple people. Goldberg writes, "Lear now 'sees' or 'recognizes' Cordelia as his true

daughter...” (Goldberg 35). If King Lear had seen how he was treating his children at the beginning of the play, and how abusing them and forcing them to profess their love to him would turn his daughters away from him, he might have repressed his incestual feelings towards his daughters and instead treated them fairly and provided them with the ability to have a healthy and happy life. King Lear is the catalyst in the cycle of abuse in the play. “Putting it in this way tends to blunt the vital point of the drama, which is not to show him overlooking 'facts' and the moral implication of 'facts' there is never any question about and which he has only to have his eyes opened to 'see', but to make us question how the facts come to be facts: to question, that is, what Lear and Cordelia could acknowledge the relationship to consist in earlier and what they can now; and why; and whether her being a true daughter and his ability to acknowledge it do not, in the end, depend on each other.” (Goldberg 35) Lear knew from the start that Cordelia loved him but was impacted by his incestual desires to act rationally towards his children. His abuse led to his demise, and the demise of all his children. Regan and Goneril, shaped by how they were treated by their father, die chasing power and what they think is love. Lear, the perpetrator of abuse, eventually loses everything he loves and dies. The same happens to Edmund. Edmund is exposed for his treachery, finds out that the women he supposedly loves are dead, and is killed by his own brother. Edmund also loses everything he loves.

When Lear is finally with Cordelia at the end of the play, he is so distracted by the fact that she has returned for him that he ignores the imminent danger of the situation that they are in. While Lear’s and Cordelia’s reconciliation shows King Lear finally seeing how his negative action towards Cordelia resulted in tragedy, he is also being blinded by his love for his daughter. Cordelia finally expresses her love to Lear by returning to take care of her mistreated father. But it is possible that despite learning how his actions had terrible consequences, it could be said that

Lear didn't learn anything at all. Lear and Cordelia's reconciliation could be seen as Lear learning that he shouldn't have scorned his daughter for refusing to participate in his love test, but also being blinded by Cordelia's unspoken love seen by her returning. It is possible that he sees Cordelia's return as a profession of incestual love, fulfilling his wish to have her profess her love to him at the beginning of the play despite Cordelia returning because of her familial love for her father negating what he learns throughout the play, still holding onto the incestual love he has for his daughter. Lear wishes to stay with Cordelia forever without ever seeing his other daughters ever again. However, Cordelia is hanged by orders given by Edmund and King Lear dies from the agony of losing his daughter.

While Lear's supposed incestual love for his daughters resulted in tragedy, it's also the continued perpetration of abuse and violence to loved ones that creates the tragedy at the end of play. While not being as extreme as everybody dying with the amount of death in *King Lear*, Shakespeare is showing the audience that you shouldn't abuse your family in real life. Shakespeare is showing how abuse can have far reaching effects with *King Lear* showing how the mistreatment of those you love can result in a branching effect where people who are abused end up abusing others. Many of the characters used in the play use each other for their own personal desires. The power that Lear holds is how he can make his daughters fulfill his sexual desires. Shakespeare is showing how abuse and power can be terrible. Combining both, abuse of power is a major theme in the play. Power in this play is turned brother against brother, sister against sister, daughters against fathers, and son against father. Shakespeare is showing how power is unnatural and may be criticizing European royalty at the time by saying that power is unnatural and spawn's unnatural practices like incest as well as conspiring to kill family members for power (For example, the Habsburg dynasty). Incest for Lear wasn't to consolidate

and maintain his power but was just a tool for his own amusement. Without power, Lear couldn't fulfill his desires. It is without power that Lear realizes that he should not have used his power to abuse his children. Abuse of power is prevalent as none of the characters in this play are completely good. The most powerful characters in the play are the ones who are the worst people. Shakespeare manages to show the multitude of ways that power can corrupt and turn people to treat others cruelly. The characters in the play who abuse power are those who are trying to use it to fulfill their own desires, but eventually leads to their own downfall. Shakespeare is showing that power can be all corrupting and can be the catalyst for disaster as it is unnatural for somebody to hold so much power over others.

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