Danielle Gorman

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Analysis Paper #1

True Loyalty and the Appearance of Devotion in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*

In Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, the dynamics of royal family life are presented in diverse ways. The play begins with a royal family meeting between King Lear, his royal advisors, his three daughters, and the two suitors for his youngest daughter, Cordelia. The meeting quickly spirals out of control, due to Lear’s ever-present madness, and Cordelia is thrown out of court, forced to seek refuge with the King of France who had offered for her hand. Her leaving gives room for Cordelia’s sisters, Goneril and Regan, to exercise power over their father with the help of the scheming bastard-son of King Lear’s advisor Gloucester, Edmund. When King Lear nears the end of his life, Cordelia comes back to help her father fight her sisters. It is here that King Lear discovers that the embodiment of familial love comes from loyalty and honesty, not from flowery words and the false appearance of devotion.

The false appearance of devotion and overuse of flowery words is evident in the conversation between King Lear and his three daughters. King Lear’s first daughter, Goneril, answers his question of love, saying

Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter;

Dearer than eye-sight, space, and liberty;

Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare;

No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honour;

As much as child e'er loved, or father found;

A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable;

Beyond all manner of so much I love you. (1.1.55-61)

Her sister Regan responds similarly, saying “Sir, I am made / Of the self-same metal that my sister is” (1.1.69-70). Although Lear’s older daughters profess to love him more than their life, their actions represent their true feelings. Goneril and Regan plot from the beginning to overthrow their father, citing his oncoming madness as a potent, political strike against him (1.1.313-331).

In contrast, Cordelia, King Lear’s favorite daughter, feels that it is her place to be honest with her father. When he asks her to express her love to him, she struggles. She tells her father “Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth: I love your majesty / According to my bond; nor more nor less” (1.1.93-95). She does love him, but she is also realistic. She knows that to wax eloquent and long like her sisters would be dishonest. As she listens to Goneril, her thought is to “Love, and be silent” (1.1.62); After Regan, she thinks “…poor Cordelia! / And yet not so; since, I am sure, my love’s / More richer than my tongue” (1.1.79-80). Additionally, when King Lear is betrayed by Goneril and Regan, Cordelia immediately comes over from France to help him regain his kingdom and power.

Cordelia’s relationship with her father reminds me of Jane Austen’s characters Emma Woodhouse and Mr. Knightly. Mr. Knightly tells Emma “If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about it more.” While Mr. Knightly and Emma’s relationship is one of romantic love, not familial love, at the end of the day love is love. People who love each other, no matter what type of love, still exercise loyalty and honesty and they recognize that one doesn’t need to be able to give a lengthy speech about how their love is more vast than anything in the world to truly love somebody.