

MADNESS AND KING LEAR

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Abstract

*Shakespeare's **King Lear** is well-known for many great qualities as a work of literature. One of the unique features of the play, as this paper argues, is the phenomenon of madness. Madness is used as a means not only of expression of trauma for King Lear, but also as a means of educating the old man in hard lessons of life. The patriarch with royal power, who has enjoyed life as an unchallenged ruler, when faced with betrayal by his own two elder daughters, loses his sanity and becomes mad. In the state of madness, Lear understands the vanity of human wishes and the value of unconditional love. Thus madness is used by Shakespeare as an agency of truth.*

Key words: Madness, patriarch, agency, transformation

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William Shakespeare's plays still evoke strong critical responses from both readers and critics. The way he handles human emotions and reveals the darker aspects of human nature is unparalleled in the history of literature. The titular hero, King Lear, in the play King Lear (1605) is a case in point. He is subjected to extremes of passion ranging from love to hatred ultimately resulting in his madness.

King Lear's story is the story of an old man, aged 80, who has spent his life in discharging his royal duties. His long rule, by and large, appears unchallenged and without political turbulence. He must have been a good and just king, though there are scant references as to the nature of his rule in the text of the play. Quite a number of courtiers love him and are ready to do anything for him. All these point to the fact that Lear is an absolutely normal person. At 80, he wishes to retire and live his last years in peace in the company of his three beloved daughters.

However, Lear is presented in the play as wilful, impulsive, wrathful and credulous. For many readers, his impending madness appears to be premised on these negative qualities. For others, the 'infirmities' of old age cause his madness. For some, it is the betrayal by his daughters and ill-treatment by his two elder daughters- Goneril and Reagan- cause his madness. With due respect to these popular perceptions, this paper argues that Shakespeare has used madness as an agency, ironically, to convey the truth of life. Madness is presented as a structural necessity too. Generally, Man lives in the world of illusion. King Lear, who lives in the feudal society of the Middle Ages, lives

under the illusion that he is the ruler and the others are his subjects, and after his death, the kingdom will be passed on to his three daughters. He is also under the illusion that his daughters love him as per 'the filial bond' and are grateful to him for the kingdom they would inherit from him. He is also under the illusion that the norms, cultural practices and conventions of the feudal society are unchangeable and would secure his interests. In short, his delusion is that his top position in the political, social and familial hierarchy is ensured. He is a monarch and a patriarch and anything less than this is unacceptable to him. This becomes his nemesis and Shakespeare exposes his delusion and makes the truth of the world and of human nature dawn upon him in the state of his madness. So Lear's madness is used by Shakespeare not only as a structural necessity, but as a profound agency with life-transforming and life-enhancing potential.

At the beginning of the play, King Lear makes an impressive entry on the stage along with his three daughters and two sons-in-law. He had assembled the court that day in order to make public his wish to divide his kingdom among his daughters and retire from stately duties. Keeping the map of his kingdom in front of him, he orders his daughters to profess their love for him. The two elder daughters, knowing the outcome of their profession of love, express themselves eloquently. The youngest daughter, Cordelia just says: 'I love you as per my bond...nothing more, nothing less'(p.42 King Lear:1963 Hereafter all references to the text are from this edition). As a patriarch, who expects more indulgence from his most beloved daughter, he receives a curt reply two more times even after his repeated appeal and threat. Cordelia's repeated cold response infuriates him as he regards her behaviour an affront to his person. Instantly, he severs filial ties with her and disinherits her. Seeing his irrational behaviour, the Earl of Kent intervenes on her behalf. Lear silences him by saying 'Come not between the dragon and his wrath' (p.44). Lear's wrath compels the Earl of Kent to make the prophetic statement: 'Be Kent unmannerly, when Lear is **mad**?'(p.44) Later in the same scene, Goneril and Reagan, refer to the 'infirmities of age', Reagan adds, 'he hath ever but slenderly known

himself' (p.50). Goneril speaks of 'imperfections of long-engrafted conditions' (p.51). Swayed by his emotions, Lear commits an act of monumental folly, viz., giving away his kingdom to his two elder daughters assuming they will, by natural law and patriarchal convention, look after him until his death. Lear is clearly ignorant about harsh realities of human life.

King Lear begins his new life with the eldest daughter, Goneril. Knowing his hot temper, she begins to first ignore, and later, to humiliate him in subtle ways. At this juncture, the wise Fool is introduced to awaken the foolish King with his worldly-wise statements: 'I am better than thou art now: I am a Fool, thou art nothing'(67), 'Thou art Lear's shadow' (68). He comes to his second daughter to learn that both have joined hands to humiliate him. This moment of realization is too much for him to bear: 'I will forget my nature...O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven!' (p.75). He begs before Regan: 'I prithee, daughter, do not make me mad' (99). Lear tries to fight madness by venting his anger and cursing his wicked daughters. And cries: 'I'll weep, O Fool, I shall go mad'. (p.101).

On the heath at the stormy midnight, Lear calls to the natural elements and wonders about the foul human nature. He tries valiantly to fight madness knowing fully that he is at wit's end. Soon he loses his senses and tears off his clothes in the hovel while muttering the Mother of Truth to Poor Tom: 'Thou art the Thing itself;...a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art'(p.115). Cordelia meets him on the plains and exclaims:'...As mad as the vexed sea' (142). She finds him wearing a crown of leaves, weeds and cuckoo flowers and sings songs. In this state of mind when the Earl of Gloucester requests him to shake hands with him, Lear says, '... it smells of mortality' (p. 151); '...a man may see how this world goes with no eyes' (152); 'When we are born, we cry that we are come to this great stage of fools' (p.153).

Restoration of the king takes place by the wronged daughter, Cordelia, whose love for him is absolute and unconditional. She brings her husband's, King of France's, army to

avenge the wrongs done to her father by her sisters. She cries and suffers for the indignities of her father. Her doctor makes all out efforts to cure Lear of his madness. What really restores him is the kiss of love on his forehead by Cordelia. She fervently prays for his speedy recovery. She succeeds, and after a little confusion, he recognizes his little angel and straight away asks for her forgiveness: 'I pray, weep not. If you have poison for me, I will drink it...Forget and forgive. I am old and foolish'(p.161-2). King Lear now accepts that he has been foolish for which he had punished others before (Earl of Kent, for example). He has mellowed and matured through the bout of madness. Edgar's words, 'Ripeness is all' (p.167) apply to the present mental condition of Lear. He understands his past vanities and the truth of human life that worldliness cannot buy love and that true love is intrinsically a matter of soul. Hence, though Lear and Cordelia are put in prison, he says: 'We too alone will sing like birds in the cage' (p.167). He becomes an incarnation of childlike innocence, purged of all sins of arrogance, whims and impulsiveness. His heart is purified and discovers his true self as a human being sans delusions. When Cordelia is killed by orders of Edmund, Lear could not bear it. He dies trying to restore her to life. The harsh realities of life claim the reformed man and the angelic daughter

Thus, madness is used as a means of purification of human soul, by allowing the unconscious mind of Lear perceive the truth of life as he was adamant to understand and accept the same in the state of sanity. The tension in the play appears not as much between Lear and his daughters as within his own soul between rational and irrational minds, between reason and madness. Madness cures 'madness' as in Kent's words. Shakespeare achieves this great subtlety.

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