

## **Straight Talk in King Lear**

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Literature Tutorial

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On first reading King Lear, I was most puzzled and even put off by the whole first scene. What kind of ridiculous contest is this? What father would line up his children in a public or political setting and ask them to compete with one another, for cash prizes so to speak, on the basis of “which of you...doth love us most”? And, unlikely and outrageous as the contest may be, why won't Cordelia play along at all? After all, her sisters gave answers that could be described as poetic hyperbole, merely saying, “I love you more than anything else in the world.” This may be smarmy, and a little ridiculous, but there certainly seems to be no harm in it, and it would even seem to be the *de rigueur* answer for daughters under these circumstances. At first, Cordelia refuses to play, answering “Nothing”, and when pressed her answer seems pedantic and prosaic, entirely missing the spirit of the occasion. She does not disavow love for Lear, but merely says hers is the kind of love a daughter ought to have for her father, no more and no less.

Lear's response seems likewise inappropriate. By disavowing and disinheriting Cordelia he elevates this silly staged love-fest to the level of an affair of state, publicly humiliating his favorite daughter and even undermining the stability of his kingdom, insofar as Cordelia's dowered marriage was meant to solidify alliances with either Burgundy or France. He exiles his loyal Earl of Kent for remonstrating with him. What's going on here?

This scene became more understandable when I considered that one of the main concerns of the play is the integrity of speech itself. This integrity requires not only truthful content but also the intention either to serve truth itself or to serve others. In Lear, the characters can be seen as exhibiting their own personal integrity through the integrity of their speech.

Let us consider three types of speakers in this play: Flatterers, Straight-talkers, and Oracles, which for the purpose of this discussion we shall define as follows. The speech of Flatterers is motivated by self-interest, which consideration is of utmost importance and overrides any issues of

objective truth or responsibility to others. The speech of Straight-talkers is concerned primarily with truth-content, secondarily with benefiting others, and actually shows an aversion to self-serving. Straight-talkers aim at simplicity and eschew duplicity. The speech of Oracles is likewise directed toward truth content, but always with some element of enigma or disguise, either in the speech itself or in the speaker. As a mixture of truth and falsehood, the speech of Oracles is therefore something like that of Flatterers, except that the falsehood in the Oracles serves the delivery of the truthful content, while that in the Flatterers serves the personal interest of the Flatterer.

One possible description of the plot of this play is that King Lear begins as a Flatterer in conflict with two of his most loyal Straight-talkers, is undone by the duplicity of fellow Flatterers, falls into the care of a few Oracles and briefly becomes an Oracle himself as he changes, ultimately but too late, into a Straight-talker. The subplot about Edmund likewise involves a Flatterer becoming a Straight-talker, but too late.

In the opening scene we see only Flatterers and Straight-talkers. Gonoril and Regan are Flatterers. Though their speeches in this first scene might be understood as merely flowery and hyperbolic expressions of love for their father, we discover more of their character as the play progresses and understand, retrospectively, that these speeches were only self-serving flattery. By contrast, Kent, France and Cordelia are Straight-talkers, not only guileless but with a frank aversion to flattery and guile. Lear himself is a Flatterer insofar as the type of speech he understands and approves subordinates truth content to personal interest and appearance. He prefers disingenuous political speech to sincere, direct and Straight-talking speech.

Straight-talking Cordelia sees the conflict coming as soon as she hears Gonoril's flattering and false attestation of love for Lear. She understands what is going on, and despises it. "What shall Cordelia do? Love and be silent." She has such an aversion to all such speech that she cannot even

bear to appear to be engaging in it. Her father has proposed an explicit connection between the expressions of love for him and the size of each inheritance, making any expression of love at this venue explicitly self-serving. She will have none of it. Hence, when Lear asks her what she can say “to win a third more opulent than your sisters” she answers, “Nothing”. In the exchange that follows, Lear continues to urge her to speak on the basis of self-interest: “Go to and mend your speech a little, Lest it may mar your fortunes.” In so doing, he perpetuates a setting in which a Straight-talker cannot use hyperbole, because any such speech under these circumstances will be inherently and apparently self-serving. Cordelia can only express the bare facts; she loves Lear as much as any child should.

At this point, Lear is so attuned to speech as appearance that he cannot value straight talk. By the end of the scene, everyone who has spoken to him sincerely and even in his own objective best interest has been banished. In the following scenes, Gonoril, Regan and Cornwall, all Flatterers, always using speech that appears proper but is duplicitous, move inexorably to isolate the king.

As he gradually realizes the rejection by his oldest daughters, Lear finds himself increasingly in the company of the Oracles: the Fool, Kent disguised, and Edgar as Tom o’ Bedlam. From his first appearance in the play until the very end, the Fool is able to speak uncomfortable truths to Lear and even be critical of his actions, without suffering banishment like Kent and Cordelia. The king even seeks out the Fool despite the fact that the Fool is unfailingly critical of almost everything he has done. He appears to *like* the Fool. Kent disguised becomes Lear’s right-hand-man and confidante. The king is immediately intrigued with crazy and possibly possessed Tom upon meeting him in the hovel, and takes him aside for conversation. Why is this?

The characters I have called Oracles all have an element of disconnection from the sphere of Lear’s normal life. By virtue either of their perceived stations in life, or of the peculiar nature of

their words, their speech contains a certain ambivalence that allows the hearer a choice of interpretation or reaction. Both the disconnection and the ambivalence allow these characters to speak the truth to the king in such a way that he can receive it without offense, because he can choose to dismiss it. The Fool is expected to be outrageous, his sayings exaggerated and comical. If his criticism cuts too sharply, one is not compelled to accept it, because after all, he is a Fool, he might have meant something else, he might have just been joking. Likewise with Tom o' Bedlam; he is mad and possibly possessed. Anything he says can be attributed to madness if the hearer desires. He can sink no lower in life, and will certainly climb no higher. There is no need to worry about appearances here, because the Fool and Tom have no standing and nothing to gain or lose by their words. The truth comes in "under the radar" of the hearer's pride, so to speak. Flatterers like Lear expect flattery and disingenuous speech from those whose standing can be improved by currying favor.

I include Kent-disguised as an Oracle, though his role is somewhat different from the Fool's and Poor Tom's. He speaks frankly and directly, like the Straight-talker he is, but like Edgar/Tom he has regained the ability to speak at all only by disguising his identity and thereby disconnecting himself from his own and Lear's past. His speech is therefore deceptive in a way, but the deceit is in service of the truth and of other's, not his own, well-being. The fact that he has disconnected himself from Lear allows him to talk with Lear, just as Edgar's disconnecting himself from Gloucester allows him to speak with Gloucester and care for him.

Lear himself spends time as an Oracle on his way to becoming a Straight-talker. Though he speaks of madness on several occasions prior to the storm, it is only upon meeting Poor Tom in the hovel that he begins to manifest that disconnection and ambivalence that is madness. He identifies almost immediately with Tom, imagining that Tom must also have ungrateful daughters who drove

him to misery. He seems perhaps attracted to the freedom offered by complete disconnection and abandonment of concern for appearances. This may be seen when he contemplates Tom's near nakedness and begins to strip himself:

Thou owest the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Here's three on's are sophisticated; thou art the thing itself. Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! Come on, be true.

While disconnected thus in his madness, from his own past, from his need for courtly appearance and the respect of men, Lear begins to be free to speak the truth to himself. This is especially seen in his meeting with the blind Gloucester at Dover, during which he observes:

What? Art mad? A man may see how the world goes with no eyes; look with thy ears....  
Through tattered rags small vices do appear;  
Robes and furred gowns hide all. Get thee glass eyes,  
And, like a scurvy politician, seem  
To see the things thou dost not...

To which Edgar observes, "O, matter and impertinency mixed—Reason in madness!"

It is only through this intermediate stage of oracular madness that Lear finally arrives at his final state, a Straight-talker like Cordelia and Kent. On awakening from his drugged sleep into the presence of Cordelia, he is at first uncertain of reality, but immediately upon being convinced of her reality he tries to kneel before her, and declares himself "a very foolish, fond old man". He speaks frankly of his own age, his own feelings of guilt and love for Cordelia. He is a changed man. I believe this is best seen in his attempt to cheer Cordelia as they are taken to prison.

Come, let's away to prison. We two alone will sing like birds in the cage.  
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down  
And ask of thee forgiveness; so we'll live,  
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales...  
...and hear poor rogues  
Talk of court news, and we'll talk with them too—  
Who loses and who wins, who's in, who's out...

I think Lear is here celebrating frank speech, non-political speech, speech that is genuine and not driven by considerations of reputation or advancement or appearance. He is not resigned to it, but embraces it as a type of freedom that he did not enjoy before. He has himself become a Straight-talker.