

Joie Affleck

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Patrick Phillips

### The Structure of Shakespeare's *King Lear*: Diverging from the Traditional

For centuries, *King Lear* stands as one of Shakespeare's best tragedies. Centered on the characters' ruthless battle for power, *King Lear* closely follows the plot progression of a morality play: the character makes a mistake, grapples with the consequences, and ultimately changes. Shakespeare's *King Lear* invokes the structure of a morality play in order to emphasize the play's injustice; however, it subverts the traditional aspects in order to emphasize the complexity of human nature and the overall theme of injustice.

Similar to a morality play, *King Lear* begins with a fatal mistake. For King Lear, his hubris triggers the subsequent events of the play. In order to earn a share of the newly divided kingdom, Lear demands his daughters to flatter him. When his youngest daughter refuses to restate her apparent love, King Lear becomes enraged and banishes her: "How, nothing will come of nothing. Speak again" (1.1.90). This interaction exemplifies how Shakespeare originally adheres to the structure of the traditional, morality play as Lear's ego leads to his daughter's drastic banishment. Lear's power further fuels his ego as he exclaims in Act 1, "Come not between the dragon and his wrath" (1.1.124)! This quote best demonstrates Lear's high regard for himself and his selfishness. The struggle to gain or remain in power prompts many characters to conspire against each other. As for Edmund, his thirst for power drives him to plot against his family: "Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land. Our father's love is to the bastard Edmund/ As

to the legitimate... if this letter speed/ and my invention thrive, Edmund the base/ Shall top the legitimate” (1.2.16-21). This passage shows Edmund’s ruthless, machiavellian philosophy which will prove problematic throughout the play. Edmund’s fatal flaw is his overwhelming determination to rise from his base position as a bastard: “I grow, I prosper: Now gods, stand up for bastards” (1.2.21-22)! Edmund’s determination and ruthlessness coupled with King Lear’s ego trigger the subsequent events in the play. By following this structure, Shakespeare invokes the traditions of a morality play and plays on the audience’s expectations.

*King Lear* continues the plot progression of a morality play when King Lear and Edmund grapple with the consequences of their actions. In a traditional morality play, these scenes represent a pivotal moment of change. After Lear bestows power to his two eldest daughters, the two refuse to shelter him. Lear is left to brace the storm on the heath. On the heath, Lear realizes the extent of his privilege and dedicates himself to understand the common man:

“Poor naked wretches, wheresoe’er you are, That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm...

O, I have ta’en/ Too little care of this. Take physic, pomp, Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel, / That thou mayst shake the superflux to them...” (3.4.228-35).

This quote best exemplifies how King Lear’s character development closely reflects the traditional morality play as his wrongdoings have come full circle. His revelation on the heath suggests that he will drastically change. As for Edmund, his quest for power ends with his own death. However before he dies, he divulges the location of Cordelia and King Lear in order to save them: “I pant for life. So good I mean to do/ Despite of mine own nature” (5.3.241-242). This excerpt furthers the close comparison to the structure of a morality play. *King Lear* closely

models the principal parts of a morality play; therefore, the audience naturally expects a specific outcome. However, Shakespeare diverges from the structure in the final portion of *King Lear*.

Traditionally, a morality play would resolve with the main character realizing their mistake, drastically changing their personality, and then restoring the social order. Shakespeare introduces *King Lear* with elements of a standard structure of a morality play; however, he diverges from this plot progression in the final acts of *King Lear*. The characters, especially Lear and Edmund, fail to fully shed their past faults. While on the heath in Act 3, King Lear decides to shed his privilege and to empathize the common person; however when confronted with Poor Tom, the embodiment of poverty and misfortune, Lear retrogresses to his former mentality. Lear disregards and belittles Poor Tom by saying, “Alack, sir, he is mad” (4.1.48). This passage exemplifies how Shakespeare diverges from the traditional structure of the morality play.

Through *King Lear*’s retrogression, Shakespeare suggests that change is more complicated than that of morality plays. This is not to say that Lear does not genuinely try to change; but rather, that human nature is much more complex. Lear is unable to see outside of himself despite his genuine desire to empathize with the average person. He later says in Act 4, “No, they cannot touch me for coining. I am the King himself” (4.6.83-84). This quote complicates the idea of *King Lear* as a simple morality play because the audience sees the return of Lear’s prominent ego. Additionally, his selfishness reappears in the scene where Lear talks to a newly blinded Gloucester. While complaining about his ungrateful daughters, Lear says, “If thou wilt weep my fortunes, take my eyes” (4.6.167). This interaction best shows Lear’s retrogression to his former mentality; Lear selfishly complains to a blind man and states that he would rather have his eyes pulled out. Similarly, Edmund fails to truly change as he blames his negative qualities on nature:

“... and all that we are evil in by a divine thrusting on” (1.2.125-126). Through this quote, Edmund says that human nature is predetermined; therefore, change is impossible. This quote demonstrates Edmund’s complacency and his unwillingness to change. Furthermore, Edmund lacks remorse for his actions as shown by his death scene. Half bragging, Edmund says, “I was contracted to them both; all three/ Now marry in an instant” (5.3.227-228). This phrase distances *King Lear* from a morality play as Edmund openly expresses his contentment. In the traditional morality play, Edmund would have repented his actions and become a transformed man. However *King Lear* presents Edmund as a proud rebel: “Yet Edmund was beloved: The one the other poisoned for my sake, And after slew herself” (5.3.240). By diverging from the traditional structure of a morality play, Shakespeare suggests that true change is complicated.

Another fundamental component of a morality play is the restoration of social order. For the duration of the whole play, the audience witnesses characters try to destroy the existing social in order to replace it with their own ideals. In the final scene of the *King Lear*, dead bodies sprawl across the stage and the social structure has crumbled. At this point, Shakespeare heavily separates *King Lear* and a morality play in order to emphasize the overall theme of injustice and emptiness. In order to create such an impactful ending, Shakespeare had to mimic the traditional structure of a morality play and then subvert it. The audience was familiar with morality plays because of the prominent literature of the time, and Shakespeare plays on the audience’s expectations. It is natural to categorize *King Lear* as a morality play because of its similar structure; however, that would disregard Shakespeare’s intentional divergence from the traditional structure. The ending scene is so powerful because it leaves the audience with unfulfilled expectations and shock. Albany references the recent events as if there was a

traditional resolution: “Bear them from hence. Our present business/ Is general woe. [*To Kent and Edgar*] Friends of my soul, you twain/ Rule in the realm and the world state sustain”

(5.3.317-320). To the audience, Albany seems fantastical. The juxtaposition between the broken social state and Albany’s lines only further emphasize the lack of resolution in the final scene.

Albany claims that the state and order has been restored, yet bodies are scattered across the stage.

By ending the play in this fashion, Shakespeare criticizes the optimism of morality plays. *King Lear* shows life’s cruelty, lack of retribution, and bluntness: almost the opposite message than the morality plays. Shakespeare’s directly subverts the audience’s expectations by diverging from the traditional structure of morality plays in order to emphasize the feelings of injustice.

*King Lear* follows the plot progression of a traditional morality play with the characters’ desperate search for power and their tragic demise. A morality play would resolve with the main character realizing their mistake, drastically changing their personality, and then restoring the social order. Shakespeare’s *King Lear* ironically follows the pattern of a morality play; however, he diverges from the structure in order to emphasize the play’s injustice and the complexity of human nature.