

ENGL 120D Paper 1: The Character of King Lear

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September 29, 2011

Word Count: 997

As the title denotes, King Lear is the central character in this Shakespearean play. Lear was sane at the start of this play, but he died mad. Much of Lear's madness can be traced to incidents of anger, and this anger is what defined him as a character. Madness is defined for the purposes of this paper as just the sanity of a character, not the reasoning of the character, which is also tied to madness in reality. I intend to examine this thesis by using passages from the text to support my analysis. I'm not exploring the play chronologically because Shakespeare makes the separations between sane and mad hard to unravel if you're looking at the play chronologically.

In the first scene Lear tells us of his intention to split his kingdom by saying "Know that we have divided; In three our kingdom: and 'tis our fast intent; To shake all cares and business from our age" (1.1.39-41). What sort of king would split his domain? But Lear is tired of being king, he's old, and his heirs deserve domains of their own. So from one perspective, dividing his kingdom could be a sane move.

Lear's age leads us to another example of his madness (and one could argue age is the sole cause). When we first start tracing Lear in this play he has 100 knights. This number is diminished to 50, 25, 10, and finally 0 as his daughters use his count of knights as a way to regulate his authority. When asked why he is upset by this Lear responds saying "Life and death! I am ashamed; That thou hast power to shake my manhood thus" (1.4.311-312).

By the time Lear reunites with Gloucester he appears mad when he says "No, they cannot touch me for coining; I am the king himself" (4.6.102-103). He goes on to mistake Gloucester for his daughter Goneril and joke about his serious status by

saying “Ay, every inch a king; When I do stare, see how the subject quakes” (4.6.127-128). This scene occurs over halfway through the play though, so are there earlier encounters with Lear where we might see that he is drifting into madness?

Seriously measuring love is one of those things one just doesn’t do. Except evidently Lear does just that. I have a few examples I’ll go through but first let me explain the reasoning behind me using this as a sign of Lear’s madness. To seriously measure love is to not understand love. Seriously measuring love is the same thing as considering it a commodity, something that can be bought or sold and traded with no hard feelings. Lear’s serious measuring of love is a major theme in this play that ties into his increasing madness, and one I can trace throughout as it helps define him.

“Nothing”. It is with this word that Lear first measures love, and it is through this word that we get our earliest glimpses of a mad king. In the first scene Cordelia responds “Nothing, my lord” (1.1.96) when asked by her father to speak (about what?). When she proposes “nothing” as an answer Lear revokes her dowry. It may seem incidental here, but this word comes back to haunt us again and again in Lear’s dialogue throughout the remainder of the play.

Kent’s situation is another example of a mad king measuring love. In the midst of his outrage at Cordelia, Lear banishes Kent by saying “turn thy hated back; Upon our kingdom” (1.1.199-200). Kent is so in love with Lear, who if he were sane would be accepting of such love, that he has to disguise himself in order to serve his king. Thankfully Lear hires Kent by saying, “thou shalt serve me”(1.4.41), but he just as easily could have had him thrown out of sight. You’d have to be mad to exile

someone you love in a tantrum, but madder still to hire that same person back into your service without sincere apology.

No sane king would allow himself to fall into a tantrum, even amongst his own children and not apologize afterwards. So when Lear comes upon his daughters to ask both for permission to stay with them, and about the nature of Kent being stocked, his temper is a sign of his madness. Another sign of madness here is that Lear constantly shifts to the second topic whenever he hits a cement wall on the first, and vice-versa. This scene ends with him angrily marching off into an approaching storm (that could be interpreted as a sign of his madness).

Each of Lear's final lines is in response to the death all around them, and each shows his madness in their repetitive nature. An example is when Lear is holding Cordelia's body he says "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life; And thou no breath at all?" (1.5.370-371). This shows a Lear who is understandably sad, but still acts with what some call madness in his final moments.

This all shows that Lear's character is an unstable one. Throughout the play he is on edge and not always sensible in his decisions, and thus we'd call him mad. Anger is the icing on top of this that drives lots of Lear's behavior and leads to much of the evidence I've discussed above. The cause of this anger is deeply rooted, I believe, in Lear's history.

Ultimately we've determined that though Lear was sane at the start of this play he died mad. Much of Lear's madness can be traced to incidents of anger, and this anger is what defined him as a character. Lear gradually went insane, and we can see this in how his anger increasingly leads him to act in ways that hurt him and

those around him. However, as with any interpretation of any play we have no way of being sure about Lear's sanity, and Shakespeare's conflict of opinion on the matter doesn't help.