Brandon Schock

Dr. Kilpatrick

ENG 464

1 September 2015

“When the Old Doth Fall”: Family Responsibilities in *King Lear*

Social stability often owes a lot to the family structure. In Judeo-Christian tradition in particular, there is a strong emphasis on honoring one’s mother and father. In Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, the destruction of family loyalties leads to a great destruction of stability in a divided estate. Lear’s relationship with Goneril and Regan and the betrayal of the Count of Gloucester by his son Edmund portray how abuses in the family can be devastating, whereas Lear’s relationship with Cordelia and Gloucester’s relationship with Edgar provide an example for how children should relate to their parents.

*King Lear* begins with an abuse of family loyalty on the part of Lear himself. When Lear asks his daughters how much they love him, he delights in the answers of Goneril and Regan, who flatter him and go clearly beyond the loyalty a child would normally have to his or her parent. When Cordelia refuses to lie, Lear severs his bond with her. Within the opening of the play, Shakespeare introduces a perversion of the father-daughter relationship, as displayed through the first two daughters. Cordelia represents a Christian conception of family loyalty when she agrees to love her father as her father and nothing more, saying, “Sure I shall never marry like my sisters, / To love my father all” (1.1.105-106). Goneril and Regan imply that they will love and be more loyal to their father than to their husbands, and when Cordelia refuses to make such an oath, Lear ceases to consider her his daughter.

Lear’s initial distortion of the father-daughter relationship costs him dearly. As the Fool tells him, Lear “mad’st thy daughters thy mothers” (1.4.1760177). Once Goneril and Regan have power, they use it against a father they have deemed senile. Goneril says, “You see how full of changes his age is,” and Regan joins her in lessening their father’s authority throughout the play (1.1.290). Goneril’s attitude reaches through her servants, as exemplified through Oswald identifying Lear as “My lady’s father” instead of as the king (1.4.81). Now that Goneril and Regan have everything they had wanted from him, his power and authority, they are indifferent to his cause, similar to how “Fathers that wear rags / Do make their children blind” (2.4.47-48).

Goneril and Regan’s betrayal parallels Edmund’s betrayal. It is Edmund who most clearly embodies the dissolution of family loyalty. In a letter he writes and then claims is by Edgar, Edmund writes, “This policy of reverence of age makes the world bitter to the best of our times; keeps our fortunes from us till our oldness cannot relish them” (1.2.48-50). Edmund writes this letter to condemn his brother, but these words also appear to represent Edmund’s own philosophy. Through Edmund, Shakespeare shows how impatience for inheritance and rejection of authority can manifest in parricide. Edmund claims he heard Edgar say that “fathers should be as ward to the son” when the sons are old enough and the father is becoming old (1.2.76-79). Again, it can be presumed that Edmund is putting his own thoughts in Edgar’s mouth. Edmund represents a departure from the accepted social order and hierarchy of the family.

Edmund ironically predicts his own downfall, when he says that the gods get revenge against those who kill their own parents, because of the strong natural bond between father and child (2.1.47-49). Edmund speaks through Edgar’s supposed heresies and suggests that the current family hierarchy is both artificial and inadequate, yet at the same time, he appears to deeply acknowledge there it is a natural bond and a natural order. Edmund proclaims, “The younger rises when the old doth fall,” but Shakespeare shows in *King Lear* how the destruction of the family hierarchy kills not only the parents, but also the children (3.3.24-26). No one benefits from the treachery, for those who betray this natural loyalty are also destined to die.

In contrast to Goneril, Regan, and Edmund, Cordelia and Edgar represent an ideal in how children should respect their parents. Cordelia summarizes proper loyalty when she says to her father, “You have begot me, bred me, loved me. I / Return those duties back as are right fit, / Obey you, love you, and most honor you” (1.1.98-100). When Lear ceases to be in “perfect mind” and can hardly recognize his own daughter, Cordelia remains by his side, just as Edgar leads his father even when his father has been stripped of his power and dignity and has been blinded (4.7.61-69).

*King Lear* draws a parallel between the destruction of the family and the destruction of social stability. Lear allows himself to be flattered by Goneril and Regan, and as a result, Cordelia—who has the proper the loyalty to her father—is disowned. Once Goneril and Regan have the control they sought, they have no reason to entertain their father’s company. Goneril and Regan use flattery to distort love for the same reason Edmund distorts truth: to gain power. While the three disloyal children believe that their betrayal will lead to authority being where it properly belongs, in the hands of sound-minded young people, the result is the destruction of the family line and widespread social stability. Cordelia and Edgar, in their support for Lear and Gloucester respectfully, provide Shakespeare’s audience with an ideal. *King Lear* serves both as a warning against family disloyalty and also, in the two good children, provides a hopeful model of good parent-child relations to be replicated by the play’s Elizabethan audience.