

Portrayal of Parent/Child and Other Familial Relationships in Lear

Dysfunctional familial relationships are a key theme throughout the play; Shakespeare explores and subverts traditional roles through Lear and his daughters/Gloucester and his sons.

Lear/daughters in Act 1

- Lear's hubris creates rifts within the family (Lear: "Which of you shall we say doth love most?" / "that we our largest bounty may extend").
- Abdication presents as a reliance on children which subverts gender norms ("To shake all cares and business from our age, Conferring them on younger strengths.") - Lear giving his throne up, rather than die as ruler, to his daughters, and his daughter's readiness to manipulate and control him; could be simplified to a parent (Goneril and Regan) taking a child's (Lear) toy away when they can't control it.
- Goneril and Regan's manipulation of Lear, exercising power over their father; i.e hyperbolic sentiments, irony, dishonesty; the unhealthy nature of this relationship. Goneril acting as parent and Lear as child (Goneril: "as much as a child e'er did love", insincerity and understanding giving her the power; her flattery like a wearied parent appeasing a child to avoid a tantrum) Regan's role falls into sibling rivalry with Goneril, (Regan: "[Goneril] names my very deed of to be only she comes too short", her quickness to flatter (lie to) her father showing her low moral standard and her comparing herself to her sister an attempt to place herself as superior in her father's mind)
- Cordelia and her loyalty to her father; notable in her honesty, a healthy and natural love for one's father ("I love your majesty according to my bond, no more, no less"). She shows refusal to appease him and stroke his ego like her sisters. She shares sub-burnness with Lear, and her rebuttals become disrespectful and mocking, and she is banished.

Gloucester/sons in Act 1

- Equality between sons parallels Lear dividing kingdom, both fathers believing to be acting fairly (oxymoronic - there is nothing fair about dividing a kingdom UNEQUALLY between heirs), how favouritism is reversed when they believe the favourite child has betrayed them
- Gloucester has one legitimate son (Edgar), one illegitimate (Edmund) though treated in Gloucester's mind as equal - an unorthodox stance for familial position and historical context; most would hide the illegitimate son away. However his actions and his perception differ - Edmund is still an embarrassment to him ("His breeding, Sir, hath been at my charge: I have so often blushed to acknowledge him, that now I am braced to it."), though it is implied Edmund is the more favourably treated son to make up for this.

Mirroring/Parallel Plots:

- Edmund acts as a mirror for Goneril and Regan - blames situation on brother and father but is willing to manipulate them as the sisters manipulate their father for their own means ("Than death, within a dull, stale, tired bed, go to creating a whole tribe of fops"... "The curiosity of nations deprive me...why bastard?")