

Justice



King Lear

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Different Types of Justice

- ❖ We see three different types of justice in *King Lear*
- ❖ Human
- ❖ Social
- ❖ Divine



Human Justice

- ❖ Characters are constantly judging one another
- ❖ Lear and Gloucester misjudge their children and administer swift, harsh and unfair punishments as a result
- ❖ Cordelia, Goneril and Regan and Edmund are all good judges of character but do not all use this power for good



Trials

- ❖ The Love Test is a mockery of justice and no way to judge the worth of the three sisters
- ❖ Lear abuses justice even further when he banishes Kent and Cordelia as he has no legal right to do so, having given away his power
- ❖ It leads to disaster
- ❖ Cornwall and Regan try Kent for fighting with Oswald and speaking plainly to them and he is punished unfairly, leading to not only his suffering but also to a deterioration in Lear's mental state



- ❖ Lear conducts a mock trial of Goneril and Regan and it shows the audience just how preposterous and unfair the other 'trials' in the play have been. Before he has even begun his trial, he has fixed on a punishment for Goneril and Regan who are thus bound to be found guilty
- ❖ Lear is a madman, attended by a Fool and a fake Bedlam Beggar
- ❖ The absurdity is clear and a parody of the Love Test

Gloucester

- ❖ Gloucester is tried and found guilty by Regan and Cornwall and in one of the most horrific scenes in the play, has his eyes gouged out by the vicious pair
- ❖ Like Lear's mock trial, this trial is deeply unjust. Cornwall tells Edmund that he will punish Gloucester in ways that 'are not fit for your beholding'
- ❖ Gloucester pays dearly for his sin and, because it was a physical sin and his eyes led him to lust after Edmund's mother, he is punished by being blinded
- ❖ Edgar appears to believe this is just, telling Edmund 'The dark and vicious place where thee he got / Cost him his eyes'



Just Deaths

- ❖ Cornwall is killed by a servant who is appalled by his torturing Gloucester
- ❖ Both Goneril and Regan are punished for their lustful ways: one is poisoned and the other kills herself
- ❖ Even Oswald, the servant who so disrespected Lear earlier in the play dies and who wanted to kill Gloucester, dies at Edgar's hands



Edmund and Edgar

- ❖ Trial by combat
- ❖ Biblical tradition
- ❖ Battle between good and evil
- ❖ The ending is fitting:
Edmund deserves to die
- ❖ Justice seems to be served,
until Lear enters with
Cordelia's body



Cordelia

- ❖ Cordelia's suffering and death is the most problematic aspect of justice in the play
- ❖ Lear and Gloucester could be said to have brought about their own suffering by misjudging their children, but Cordelia did nothing to deserve her fate



Social Justice

- ❖ Through their suffering, Lear and Gloucester come to see that there is great inequality in the kingdom
- ❖ Gloucester, before he attempts suicide, gives Edgar his purse of money, believing him to be a poor man.



❖ ‘Here, take this purse, thou whom the heavens’
plagues
Have humbled to all strokes. That I am wretched
Makes thee the happier. Heavens, deal so still.
Let the superfluous and lust-dieted man,
That slaves your ordinance, that will not see
Because he doth not feel, feel your power quickly.
So distribution should undo excess,
And each man have enough.’

❖ *Gloucester - Act 4 Scene 1*

- ❖ Lear also wishes to help the ‘Poor naked wretches’ whose plight he never considered until he shared it.
- ❖ In conversation with Gloucester in Act 4 Scene 6, Lear remarks bitterly that the world is unfair and that justice does not exist. Those in power make judgements, but that does not mean they are correct. A judge may berate a thief, but if they switched places it would not be possible to tell one from the other. He believes the judicial and political systems are corrupt in that they rely on power only, saying bitterly ‘a dog’s obeyed in office’. Those who are wealthy can buy their way out of trouble, while the poor men are punished to the full extent of the law. This is a deeply bitter and pessimistic view of justice.

Concept of Divine Justice

- ❖ Elizabethans were told by religious leaders that God was just and good would triumph over evil
- ❖ Certainly, the evil suffer and die in the play, but so does the pure and good Cordelia



- ❖ A wide variety of viewpoints on this topic are seen in the play
- ❖ Gloucester prays to the gods to let him die in Act 4 Scene 6, and seems to view them as benevolent:
‘You ever-gentle gods, take my breath from me:
Let not my worser spirit tempt me again
To die before you please!’
- ❖ Yet in his despair, Gloucester also sees the gods as malevolent: ‘As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods. / They kill us for their sport’.

- ❖ Edgar views the gods as dispensers of justice, telling Gloucester that they have saved him from suicide:
‘thou happy father,
Think that the clearest gods, who make them
honours
Of men’s impossibilities, have preserved thee.’ (Act 4
Scene 6)
- ❖ He tells Edmund that Gloucester was punished for having a son outside of wedlock:
‘The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
Make instruments to plague us:
The dark and vicious place where thee he got Cost
him his eyes.

Lear and the gods

- ❖ Time and again he calls on the gods to help him, but they never do.
- ❖ He sees the suffering of the poor as an indictment by the gods
- ❖ ‘Oh, 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
And show the heavens more
just.’ (Act 3 Scene 4)



- ❖ The gods seem indifferent to man's suffering
- ❖ Shakespeare almost seems to mock the idea of divine justice
- ❖ When characters call for help or believe that some sort of divine justice is on the horizon, their hopes are dashed.
- ❖ Lear's prays to the heavens when his daughters strip him of his retinue: 'You see me here, you gods, a poor old man, / As full of grief as age, wretched in both'. The only answer from the heavens is a violent storm.

- ❖ In Act 4 Scene 1, Edgar believes he has hit rock bottom and that things can only improve: The lamentable change is from the best; / The worst returns to laughter'.
- ❖ At that moment, he sees the blinded Gloucester for the first time, led by a peasant.
- ❖ Edgar is ever-hopeful that the gods will be just and urges Gloucester to 'pray that the right may thrive' when Cordelia's French army faces the English. However, he soon returns with the news that the just end he wished for has not occurred but that Lear and Cordelia have lost and been taken prisoner.

The Deaths of Lear and Cordelia

- ❖ Lear suffers greatly and is brought as low as he could possibly be
- ❖ However, that is not enough; he must see his beloved Cordelia hanged before dying of grief himself
- ❖ There is no evidence of divine justice in Cordelia's death



*“Shakespeare has suffered the virtue of Cordelia to perish in
a just cause contrary to the natural ideas of justice”*

SAMUEL JOHNSON

Preface to Shakespeare - King Lear 1765

Final Impression

- ❖ There is no easy answer
- ❖ Certainly, evildoers are punished, but so are the good characters
- ❖ Ultimately, it seems that great evil and abnormal behaviour cause untold suffering and hardship and that justice can only be restored when the evildoers are no longer in power.

