

The Creative Launcher

Journal URL: <https://www.thecreativelauncher.com/index.php/tcl>

ISSN: 2455-6580

Issue: Vol. 9 & Issue 3 (June, 2024)

Publisher: Perception Publishing


Published on: 30th June, 2024

Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access: Yes

Journal DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.53032/issn.2455-6580>

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Article History: Abstract Received on: 5th April 2024 | Full Article Received on: 4th May 2024 | Revision received on: 20th May 2024 | Plagiarism Checked on 28th May 2024 | Peer Review Completed on: 15th June 2024 | Article Accepted on 17th June 2024 | First Published on: 30th June 2024

Research Article



Bastardy, Betrayal & Ageing: A Gerontological Reading of *King Lear*

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 <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2024.9.3.01>

Pages: 1-9

Abstract

William Shakespeare's much celebrated play *King Lear* (1606) deals with socio-political themes revolving around the protagonist Lear who divided his fortunes between his daughters on the basis of their flattery. *King Lear* is a play which is political in nature and the politics of it lie not only on the kingly position of Lear but also on his role as a father. The play depicts the picture of a state where social, domestic, and filial order has fallen down. The daughters of the old man

Lear betray him. The reasons behind their betrayal are significant to explore. For Lear his two daughters' betrayal lies in their lack of consideration for their father and lust for his money which they have already got, making Lear just a useless man to them now. But on the other hand, Edmund's betrayal to his father raises questions on the hypocrisy of the social orders of the society which have kept him marginalized because of his status as an illegitimate child in the society. The paper attempts to explore the idea of social order being subverted by bringing forth two of the often-overlooked factors which are extremely crucial in driving the plot of the play. The study ventures into this field through the lenses of marginalized characters of Lear and Gloucester who are betrayed by their children and brings another perspective to this argument by bringing forth the conflicted position of Edmund who has been a victim of his father's wrong doings. The study primarily uses close reading and textual analysis and theoretically uses Gerontological studies in the socio-political background of Shakespeare's time and takes it further by examining its traces in the contemporary social scenarios.

Keywords: Bastardy, Elizabethan literature, Filial relationships, Gerontology, Illegitimate child, Marginalization, Natural order, Old age, Politics, Revenge, Social order, Stereotypes, Theatre, Tragedy

Introduction

This paper takes into account the idea of social order being subverted through two major aspects portrayed in the play which revolve around the mostly overlooked factors when it comes to the research being done on this play. The first aspect is centered around the old parental figures Lear and Gloucester and their children who betrayed them in their old age. The major part of this portion brings forth the stereotypical interpretations regarding old age and how it gets detrimental to the lives of the older people, affecting and reducing them to levels of marginalization. Emphasis would be laid on how this marginalization occurs. The play has old age, parent-child-sibling relationships and division of kingdom at its focus. The second aspect this paper will be focusing upon is the idea of bastardy. Bastardy is one of the important themes in *King Lear* that plays a major role in driving the plot of the play. This paper will talk about the idea of bastardy which goes beyond its literal meaning as an illegitimate child. The idea of Bastardy also includes the children who betray their old parents which eventually leads to the subversion of social order by the failure of filial relationships. The study concurs that these two factors drive the plot and result in the ultimate tragedy in the form of social order being turned downwards in the play. The paper situates these concerns in socio-political context of Shakespeare's times and draws parallel with their relevance in today's world, emphasizing on the timelessness of the tragedy and the portrayal of social and filial relationships embedded with the betrayal of one's own blood, highlighting the tragic nature of a strained parent-child relationship.

King Lear (1606) is a political play which deals with the politics of social and filial relationships. One of the focused areas of the play is how social orders are subverted in the play. Social order refers to social norms and conventions in terms of expected form of behaviour, especially when it comes to the relationship between parents and children. In society it is expected of the children to serve their parents in old age as an act of paying them back which is

every child's responsibility. Here in the play, it is found that this is not considered a norm which is seen in the treatment of Lear and Gloucester by their children. Even though both of them have dutiful children, Cordelia and Edgar respectively, the focus of this paper lies on the relationship between the two fathers and their children who betrayed them. *King Lear* being a political play portrays the center of this political power through the monarch Lear who, once a king, thriving in the glory of his position, falls to a tragic end when met by the betrayal of his own daughters. Another parental figure who meets a similar tragic end is Gloucester who is betrayed by his own son but in this case the feelings of avenging his father have emerged through the actions of Gloucester himself. This stands true for Lear as well because if the reason behind his position is traced, it goes back to the decisions he has taken in a whimsical play of flattery. There is a misconception that these reasons are falsely attributed to Lear's old age which in reality are a result of his love for excessive flattery. On the other hand, the position of Gloucester is caused by his own actions. Edmund, as a son, has always felt marginalized. He is referred to as "bastard" in the play which is a clear manifestation of his stigmatized position in society. Apart from facing the social marginalization the other major issue he goes through is the lack of access to his father's fortunes in terms of material and property benefits a son gets through his father. Edmund cannot be the heir of his father's property because of the illegitimacy of his being born out of wedlock. This creates vengefulness in his heart which is a result of trauma he has faced since his childhood caused by the reckless actions of his father. To this we will return later after a thorough look into the gerontological stereotypes that Shakespeare shows us in the play.

The Grand Betrayal & Gerontological Reading of *King Lear*

King Lear (1606) is one of the most important plays by William Shakespeare when studied under the concept of ageing. Old age as a major theme in the play has not been explored much and the present study is one attempt to add to it. Ageing holds prime importance in the play due to the characteristic stereotypes that have been associated with it. These stereotypes need to be exposed to gain a judicious insight into the mind of the aged king. There are many instances in the text where Lear is being described as an 'old man'. But nowhere is the playwright objectifying old age. Shakespeare was about forty-two when he wrote the play. It was an age of virulent diseases and at a time when life expectancy was so low, it is quite possible that Shakespeare might have considered himself as an old man. Hence, it is highly improbable that he is criticising the older people.

'Older' would be the correct term to refer to the aged population, as it seems to be the most unbiased and impartial term for the people who are in the latter part of their lives. According to Kate De Medeiros, the term 'Elderly' has negatively unconstructive undertones; 'Old' and 'Elder' has no plausible definition in terms of their constitution. According to Medeiros, the word 'Older' is the best possible way to refer to the people who are in the latter part of their lives as it is the most neutral and unbiased term. Medeiros says: "Although 'older' is not without its problems (e.g., older than what or who?), it maintains the relational aspect of age" (18). The play holds special significance with respect to ageing as the protagonist himself is a man who is more than eighty years old which is twice the age that Shakespeare wrote the play in. This makes the play even more significant when looked at from the standpoint of ageing.

And it is best to understand old age in a time-based sequential manner as Medeiros rightly says that age should be understood “predominantly by its temporal aspects” (17).

The old man Lear is himself in a mood of relinquishing his authority. Right at the beginning of the play Lear says that he intends “To shake all cares and business from our age, / Conferring them on younger strengths, while we / Unburthen’d crawl toward death” (1.1.38– 40). This wilful retirement on the part of the king and his decision to banish both Kent and Cordelia brings us very early to Shakespeare’s concept of old age. According to popular notion, these irrational decisions by Lear are a result of his old age and the infirmities it brings. The truth is that even in his young age, the king never had the habit of listening to anything that he didn’t want to. When the banished Kent comes back to serve Lear in disguise, which as S. Sen describes was “in common with the times that the halls of noblemen’s castles were always open to any man wishing to take service with the lord” (61), he uses flattery to obtain Lear’s favour. Kent learns his lesson and he is the first one to realise that Lear’s infirmities lie not in his old age but in his personality, his lust for flattery and his stubborn disposition. So, what is it that makes this play so significant when seen from the vantage point of ageing? It is Shakespeare’s dramatic use of words, actions, and situations to depict old age. It is Shakespeare’s intent to expose and uncover the stereotypes that have emerged regarding old age. He explores and examines the concept of ageing long before Gerontology emerged as a discipline in itself. Sara Munson Deats’ expresses a similar view: “long before contemporary gerontologists discovered the dialectics of ageing, Shakespeare, that most innovative and influential of literary artists, was exploring this dialectic” (Deats 24 – 25).

When Goneril says: “You see how full of changes his age is” (1.1.290), Regan replies that: “‘Tis the infirmity of his age” (1.1.294). They believe that Lear’s rash decisions were motivated by his old age. Such infirmities of old age have always been attributed to ageing. What these labels do is that they further marginalise the older people, deems them as a misfit, isolates them and makes them an ‘other’. The two daughters expect him to behave in a certain way which befits the older people. Kate Medeiros says that there should not be made “any claims that people of a certain age, say 75 and older, ‘behave’ in a certain way so as to make narrative gerontology somehow unique in that perspective. It is important not to make old age an ‘other’ category” (17). Lear’s impulsive act is considered inappropriate by Goneril and Regan in light of his social age, on which Medeiros comments that: “social age describes the attitudes considered ‘appropriate’ for a person’s chronological age” (19). Even this is a stereotype in itself.

When Goneril says:

The best and soundest of his time hath been but
rash; then must we look to receive from his age not
alone the imperfections of long-engrafted condition,
but herewithal the unruly waywardness that infirm
and choleric years bring with them (1.1.296-300).

we can conclude that in his young age too, Lear had been reckless and impetuous. Terming old age as “choleric” gives the impression of disease, death and suffering. This tends to further marginalise the older people. Goneril says: “Now by my life, / Old fools are babes again; and must be used / with cheques as flatteries,—when they are seen abused” (1.3.20-21). Again, Shakespeare brings to the fore one of the blatant stereotypes of old age as the second childhood.

However, this is not true. It is indeed a debilitating and a reductive stereotype and to say so would surely do injustice to the older people.

One more stereotype attributed to older people comes through the words of Goneril when she says: "As you are old and reverend, you should be wise" (1.4.231). What is problematic here is the general notion that wisdom arrives with old age. What is ignored largely is that there are people who are young and wise. Also, there are people who are old yet foolish. What must be remembered is that Lear might be old and foolish but he is not foolish because of old age. Very soon the fool says to Lear that: "Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst / been wise" (1.5.41-42). The fool's words means that to become old, there is a necessity for having wisdom. But that is not always true. Wisdom is a rare quality. Wisdom is as William Randall correctly puts it: "not a thing, not a body of knowledge, but a process" (31). Lear never experienced this "process" of gaining wisdom. Being in old age does not mean being wise. He never had the wisdom to foresee the dangers which originated ahead in his reckless decision to divide the entire kingdom and hand it over to his daughters. Citing Abigail Van Buren, the famous US columnist: "Wisdom doesn't automatically come with old age. Nothing does - except wrinkles. It's true some wines improve with age. But only if the grapes were good in the first place" (AZQuotes.com), one gets the sense that wisdom is not synonymous with old age. The quote perfectly sums up Lear's condition. The grapes were never good in the first place.

The fears of the "choleric age" that Goneril earlier associated Lear with recurs again when Lear curses his daughter. He says: "Let it stamp wrinkles in her brow of youth" (1.4.276). The very image of wrinkles (which comes with old age) is reduced to a frightful entity here. The infirmities – notably physical infirmities that come with old age seems to be choleric for the youthful ones. Having wrinkles on the forehead of a young person is nothing less than an abuse, a curse which no one would wish to come true. But that is how older people are generally referred to – wrinkled, stooped, weak, and childish and many more. The discrimination against older people remains hidden at multiple levels. A common sight is the sign boards on roads, metro railways and public places which generalise all older people as weak and bent. Baroness Julia Neuberger's comments would suffice the point: "Older people are depicted on road signs, leaning on sticks. Despite the fact that some older people are bent and/or may use a walking stick, the caricature is a cruel one. Older people are seen as a cost to society" (102). And when something is seen as a cost to society then it tends to get marginalised. This is what happens with the older people.

When the fool sings a song, it reminds us of the ill treatment meted out towards the older people in their vulnerable age. He sings:

Fathers that wear rags
Do make their children blind;
But fathers that bear bags
Shall see their children kind (2.2.238-241).

The fool means to say that children become blind to poverty-stricken parents. While at the same time, they become kind when their parents are full of riches. Now, after giving away all his property to them, Lear is a poor old man and hence his daughters turn blind towards him. This is particularly seen in old age when older people, when they are divested of their physical

strength, wealth, decision making powers and authority bear the brunt of the younger generation. They become marginalised in much the same way as Lear gets.

Criticising the father Lear, Regan says:

O, sir, you are old:

Nature in you stands on the very verge

Of her confine: you should be ruled and led

By some discretion that discerns your state

Better than you yourself. (2.2.335-339)

And later Edmund also says: “The younger rises when the old doth fall” (3.3.24). It is this discretion that Regan speaks of which according to Edmund can be found in younger ones. For them old age is a drawback and older people should be ruled by the younger ones. However, the most universal plight of an old man who can now no longer support his own food, clothes and bed is depicted by Shakespeare when the dejected and the rejected Lear kneels down to Regan and says: “Dear daughter, I confess that I am old;/ Age is unnecessary: on my knees I beg/ That you’ll vouchsafe me raiment, bed, and food (2.2.343-345). His earlier wish for retaining his followers gets finally reduced to the basic amenities needed for mere subsistence which are “raiment, bed and food”. Lear’s words here show what it means to be old in a society where the older people are marginalised. Old age is something that everyone, one day or the other has to face. Baroness Julia Neuberger argues that this inevitability of old age:

makes age discrimination different in kind from the prejudices against people on the basis of ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation – we may or may not share the ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation, but we cannot escape our birth date. In the case of age, we will surely get there ourselves, and our lack of capacity to envisage our own older age is one of the factors that makes this particular form of discrimination so distressing (105).

The motif and image of the house, property or residence remains all pervasive and keeps on recurring. After all, Lear divides his own kingdom and thereafter does not even get a place to live in. The entire idea behind old-age homes is to provide respite to older people devoid of an abode. Homelessness in the play hence, becomes highly significant. The entire concept of a home holds a central position in the lives of older people. After years of earning, hardships and toiling, older individuals would at least crave for a roof over their head under which they can peacefully spend the rest of their lives. Lear was denied this basic need too. He goes out of the palace braving the violent weather along with Kent and the fool. The heath where they homelessly wander through the night then becomes his abode.

Lear goes through what William L. Randall describes as the “late life crisis” (24). Randall says that: “while not a crisis of identity per se perhaps, later life can certainly confront us with a crisis of self-understanding” (24). This lack of self-understanding does not allow Lear to find meaning in his life. Neither could he comprehend the meaning of “nothing” which Cordelia spoke of. Randall comments that: “the problem – the tragedy perhaps – is that many older adults enter the final phase of life with too meagre a sense of meaning at their disposal” (24). Lear had no understanding of the self. He had no wisdom either and in the words of Randall “wisdom is inseparable from the process of self-understanding” (25).

There has to be a shift in society from making stereotypes and jokes about older people towards a more humane treatment of them. Another way of marginalizing the older people is

through jokes on them. On this issue, Bryan Appleyard says: “TV sitcoms cannot make jokes based on the shortcomings of blacks, Jews, women or people with disabilities, but they are always making jokes about the failings of the older generation” (130). And the failings that are made fun of are mostly physical weaknesses. To this Margaret Cruikshank writes: “One mark of the social construction of ageing is overemphasis on bodily decline. The entire meaning of old age then becomes physical loss. When old people are reduced to deteriorating bodies (which change in infinitely varied ways), they can easily be marginalized” (35). Old age is certainly much more than wrinkling skins and weak bodies.

Betrayal & Bastardy: Edmund’s Case

The conflict of filial relationship represents the subversion of social order as children betray their old parents. While this is portrayed through the cruel behaviour of Lear’s daughters, this idea is further exemplified through the character of Edmund with much more intensity and how this lot of children who betray their parents emerge as an act of bastardy. The idea of bastardy is commonly associated with the character of Edmund in the play but it is not limited to him. It includes the characters of Goneril and Regan as well. Firstly, it is important to understand what the term bastardy in this paper means. Considering its literal meaning, it refers to an illegitimate child who is born outside of wedlock, the result of an illegitimate sexual affair. Now it is very important to understand the criticality of this term, which lies in the fact that the term ‘bastard’ is immediately associated with the illegitimate child. Incidentally, the term has more to do with the father, who being an adult committed an offence of extra-marital affair and ruined the child’s life, setting him to face violation of his rights as a son, a lifetime of stigma around his birth and identity as a “whoreson” (1.1.21). This is a crucial reason behind this study being critical of Gloucester and his actions.

In *King Lear* the idea of bastardy is introduced by the character of Edmund. He is an illegitimate child, born out of wedlock. This is an issue that sets forth the whole problem of the subplot of the play. Because of his birth out of the wedlock Edmund cannot claim any right over his father’s property. The social stigma around bastardy deprives one of their rights and makes them the subject of mockery. This is what generates hatred in Edmund because of which he goes on to avenge his father, Gloucester. Claude J. Summers writes “Edmund’s bastardy is not in itself the source of his evil and Gloucester should not be taxed for the treatment of his illegitimate son. But bastardy manifestly is a dreadful stigma which Edmund is forced to bear, a condition from which he can never escape” (Summers 227). At the beginning of the play, the way Gloucester introduced Edmund to Kent is nothing more than a mockery. Gloucester calls Edmund “whoreson” and “there was good sport at his making” (Lear 1.1.21-22). These words by Gloucester induce contempt for Edmund. It speaks loudly of the stigma that centres around bastardy. This critical understanding of the reasons and psyche behind these actions in no way justifies his act of avenging his father cruelly but it definitely does induce a sense of sympathy towards Edmund in the audience’s hearts. It is helpful when it comes to understanding the marginalized position of illegitimate children who face the wrath of society and are forced to live a life of deprivation because of their illegitimate birth - the result of adults’ reckless behaviour they had no control over. And on the other hand, the father, Gloucester goes on to live a normal social life while constantly making fun of and shamelessly calling his own son a bastard (1.1.20).

While the actions of Edmund emerge from the atrocities, he has faced can provide a layer of understanding to his character in understanding his character and position better for the audience, this relief of redemption and understanding is not extended to the characters of Goneril and Regan. They fail as daughters when it comes to serving their father back and fulfilling their responsibility. Now Goneril and Regan also emerge as children who are illegitimate in their actions. The cruelty showcased by them makes them inhabit the role of actual 'bastards' in the play who instead of paying back to their older father have become greedy for money. Edmund in his soliloquy talks about his position and identity that is rooted in his illegitimate birth. "Natural children" was a term often used for illegitimate children. His soliloquy represents his idea of bastardy and how it is interlinked with nature. He speaks "Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law my services are bound" (Lear 1.2.1-2). In his soliloquy he announces his plan of taking over land inherited by Edgar, he says "the base shall to th' legitimate. I grow, I prosper. Now gods, stand up for bastards!" (1.2. 20-22). In his soliloquy it is clear that Edmund's idea of nature that he stands by is different than the socially accepted idea of nature. Social order and its collapse are two of the major issues *King Lear* raises. Gloucester is a firm believer of social order while on the other hand Edmund's views are contrasting. Edmund's perspective on nature shows that according to him nature is separated from the society and these two cannot mix with each other. To him, nature is not restricted with social orders. Its flow is free. Edmund rejects the idea that children are supposed to be loyal to their fathers as something natural. It marks the difference that Edmund sees between nature and society.

According to John F. Danby "Lear's criticism of corrupt custom from his stand in the ground of Nature is a convenient point at which to leave the benevolent and orthodox Nature and look at that Nature in the play which opposes it" (Danby 31). He placed these two ideas of nature that contrast each other in the historical context of the time the text was written in. People at that time such as Richard Hooker and Francis Bacon, believed that there is a connection between nature, customs, and reasons as well as religion and he talks about how Edmund "worships a goddess of whom neither Hooker nor Bacon would approve" (Danby 31). There is a contrast between the idea of nature as mentioned above and the idea of nature whose force is brutal. This division is shown by the children of Lear and Gloucester. The respect and love for their fathers is depicted through the characters of Cordelia and Edgar, the nature that is maligned is shown through the characters of Goneril, Regan and Edmund. The idea of bastardy is not limited to Edmund alone. Gloucester and Lear both have an obsession for their children being bastards allegedly or in reality.

In the socio-political context the bastardy causes the issue of recognizing bastard child's rights and position in legal terms. There is no doubt that like the legitimate child illegitimate children also have longing for their parent's love but firstly they have a desire for recognition in legal terms. But this is what they were deprived of. This idea of bastardy and stereotypes revolving around old age work as the two major driving factors of social orders being subverted. Edmund's villainy also raises sympathy in the audience's mind as being deprived of one's official recognition because of a matter they had no control over and how their birth in itself is seen as a crime and is looked down upon by the society. Shakespeare in *King Lear* explores the idea of

bastardy in its socio-political context and poses it as one of the major causes of the issues that the subplot centers around.

Conclusion:

A great number of critics have looked at *King Lear* (1606) and *The Tempest* (1611) within the purview of ageing. To understand how Shakespeare looks at ageing, the two plays are indeed indispensable. The dramatist however, differs in the way he shows the ageing body and mind in both the plays. In *The Tempest*, we see Prospero ageing gracefully. In *King Lear* it is the exact opposite. It is wise on the part of Prospero that he relinquishes his power when his retirement is assured while Lear takes a foolish decision to give up his powers before actually securing his retirement. Prospero gains back everything that was once taken from him. Lear loses everything that he had in the beginning. Prospero is old and wise. Lear is old and foolish. It has to be recalled that through the stereotypes put up against the older people, Shakespeare is in fact giving voice to the marginalised in society. Old age as a sort of a marginalisation is not a new form of discrimination and keeping in view the ill treatment meted out towards the older population, *King Lear* becomes all the more enigmatic, timeless and relatable. The plays portrayal of these marginalized concerns of old age and illegitimate children put it in a position that it stands out for its themes being socially relevant and emphasizing on the importance of upholding social orders which are subverted in the play on the basis of parent child relationship which is a crucial point where the politics of the play lie.

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