

A Hegelian Reading of Shakespeare's *King Lear*

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Considered one of Shakespeare's greatest plays, *King Lear* begins with the aging king of Britain dividing his monarchical power between his three daughters; the story then revolves around the power struggle and political conflicts in the monarchical system, which culminate in bloodshed and tragedy. Written during a period of political tumult and social change, *King Lear* is not only a fictional play, but also a historical narrative that reflects the debates on politics during Shakespeare's time. *King Lear*'s historical dimension invites a Hegelian reading of the play: according to Hegel, tragedy is a process in which history unfolds itself. A Hegelian tragedy means the inevitable collision between two justified yet opposing positions, both of which fail to recognize the other's validity. The tragic hero advances one side and simultaneously violates the opposite side, falling prey to a one-sidedness that invites destruction. Tragedy always contains a gesture of synthesis, when two contrasting positions reconcile and synthesize into a higher principle. The entire human history, according to Hegel, progresses dialectically through such collisions and syntheses toward a more comprehensive and rational goal. Viewed through the lens of Hegelian theory of tragedy, Shakespeare's tragedy *King Lear* portrays the dialectical collision between love and power; a series of conflicts and struggles culminate in a synthesis of both that prefigures future political society. The admirable complexity of *King Lear* invites a deeper contemplation on Hegel's philosophy, while the Hegelian perspective reveals the rich characterization and structural meaning in this modern drama.

A Hegelian Reading of Shakespeare's *King Lear*

Lear, Gloucester, and Cordelia embody the ethical dimension of love to varying degrees. Lear craves love but does not understand it. At the opening, Lear mistakenly equates flattery to love and is seduced by Goneril and Regan's hollow rhetoric; ironically, he scorns Cordelia's silent expression of true love. Lear's ignorance, nevertheless, does not deny his devotion to love. When abandoned by his two daughters, Lear goes mad not because he loses authority over the kingdom – which is disastrous, to be sure – but because “these daughters' hearts [are] against their father” (59). The loss of love outweighs the loss of power. On the heath, the deprivation of love strips Lear of all royal pretensions, reduces him to bare humanity, and makes him realize that love is his only necessity. Gloucester, an intentional parallel to Lear, also imperfectly embodies love. Besides his extraordinary love for Edgar and Edmund, his loyalty to Lear constitutes another aspect of love. Tragically, Gloucester's credulity deprives him of love and makes him suffer; his noble love breeds misery that climaxes with attempted suicide.

Lear and Gloucester's imperfection in representing an ideal love marks the play's modernity. Adopting the principle of subjectivity, modern tragedy contains tragic characters who, according to Hegel, are no longer “purely individual [embodiments] of ethical powers” (1223). Unlike Antigone and Creon, who completely identify with and exemplify abstract ethical ideals, Lear and Gloucester uphold love but fail in their understanding and operating of it. This complexity offers a potential junction for Hegelian and Aristotelian tragedies. According to Aristotle, a salient feature of tragedy as a dramatic form is *hamartia*, a fatal flaw leading to the downfall of the tragic hero. *King Lear* contains moments of the Aristotelian tragic flaws, such as Lear's shallowness and Gloucester's credulity, causing disturbances within one Hegelian side (which, in this case, is love) without inciting collisions between two opposing positions. *King*

A Hegelian Reading of Shakespeare's *King Lear*

Lear is not a simple matter of love versus power; there are also multiple struggles to define and understand what true love is.

Cordelia is the full embodiment of love and fulfills the Hegelian category of classical tragic hero. In an age of “machinations, hollowness, treachery” (19), Cordelia exemplifies goodwill, honesty, and loyalty. She embodies the ideal form of love that Lear and Gloucester believe in but are too ignorant to recognize. Cordelia courageously asserts her position and fiercely rejects the opposing side, power. A catalyst of the story, Cordelia sparks a conflict of values and triggers real-life collisions. For instance, the French troops invading Britain is a realistic symbol of the metaphysical collision between love and power. In asserting one substantial position, according to Hegel, the tragic hero simultaneously violates the contrary position and falls prey to a one-sidedness that transgresses the absolute. In *King Lear*, Cordelia's failure to recognize the validity of power brings destruction to herself and the position she defends. Her noble gesture of love paradoxically indulges her sisters' appetite for power; she leaves Lear, the person she deeply loves, at the mercy of those who are tactical and ruthless. Without an appreciation of power, the ideal love represented by Cordelia's side appears almost utopian; its honorable simplicity and fragility ensure its defeat by the political, cold-blooded Machiavellian position.

Edmund, along with Cordelia's two sisters, endorses a realistic, modern-minded politics that worships power with no regard to love. The famous political treatise *The Prince* was published by the Italian diplomat Niccolò Machiavelli in the 16th century, one century before Shakespeare's time. This treatise, endorsing power politics while abandoning traditional moral values, is sometimes regarded as one of the first works of modern political philosophy. In *King Lear*, Edmund is the epitome of this Machiavellianism, as he thoroughly understands the

mechanism of power. Practicing hypocrisy and opportunism, Edmund is a synthesis of Celimene and Tartuffe: to gain trust from Gloucester, Edmund makes hypocritical attempts to defend Edgar; to take advantage of the royal family, he ingratiates himself with Cornwall, in whose love Edmund “shalt find a [new] dear father” (74). The side of power also falls prey to one-sidedness and causes self-destruction. Goneril and Regan’s jealousy over each other leads to their wretched deaths; their political alliance, without the bond of love, immediately turns into enmity when their interests clash. Their conflict mirrors the interest-driven nature of Machiavellian politics: politics without love and justice gains self-destructive momentum. Oswald, a negative antitype of Kent, worships power with no sense of loyalty. A servant and a master of tactics, Oswald wavers between Goneril and Regan, always ready to turn against one or the other. This minor character symbolizes the self-destructive characteristic of political power and predicts its inevitable collapse. Edmund, in a sense, also destroys himself. He schemes to banish Edgar, who, returned from exile, takes revenge by killing him.¹ As Hegel suggests, the absolute realizes itself by negating extremes and destroying one-sided positions; the eternal justice restores “the unity of ethical life with the downfall of the individual who has disturbed its peace” (1197). Edmund on his deathbed gains recognition of the eternal justice but mistakenly interprets it as fortune: “the wheel is come full circle” (115).

King Lear portrays a divergence between two generations. People from the old aristocratic tradition of the Middle Ages – Lear and Gloucester – are upholders of love and fidelity; those of the young generation – Edmund, Goneril, and Regan – are devotees of modern Machiavellian politics. Thus, *King Lear* is an allegory, in which the older medieval society is

¹ The *King Lear* played by Actions From the London Stage better expresses the idea of self-destruction. On the stage, Edmund and Edgar are played by the same actor. In their fight, Edmund being stabbed by Edgar appears as a person killing himself.

threatened by modern Machiavellianism. Cordelia, the tragic hero, transcends this categorization by age and identifies herself with traditional values. Her nobleness lies in her transcendency that makes decisions in light of the normative plane. According to Hegel, tragic heroes often emerge in advance of their time, introduce new ideas, and incite conflicts between their transgressive positions and old values. *King Lear* shows another possibility of Hegel's theory: instead of launching an advanced new position, the tragic hero leads a resurrection of old values to judge and correct the society now infused with modern ideals. Cordelia's side confronts the emerging Machiavellianism with a traditional endorsement of love. The tragic hero in *King Lear* has twofold layers: Cordelia (and arguably Lear) is not only a self-sacrificing hero who collides with the status quo, but also a stubborn hero who refuses to identify with the new norm. Shakespeare presents a skeptical evaluation of the utopian love by showcasing its rashness, weakness, and credulity, which lead to its destruction. Nevertheless, Cordelia's side bears the greatness of tragedy. In Hegel's dialectical view, Cordelia, Lear, and Gloucester's flaws are intrinsic to their nobleness. Compared with the simple, noble characters of the old tradition, the modern statesmen appear complex, deceptive, and nihilistic. Shakespeare would without a doubt prefer the simple upholders of love to the ruthless politicians.

However, Shakespeare presents a progressive alternative to this either-or. The collision of love and power almost annihilates the two generations, but it paves the way for a Hegelian synthesis to take place. From the ashes of the medieval-Machiavellianism dichotomy rises Edgar, the new king of England, who represents a vision of a new political ideal that synthesizes love and power. Motivated by love, Edgar saves Gloucester from his suicidal attempt and persuades him to continue his life. In the fight between the two brothers, Edgar surpasses Edmund in physical strength, a mirror of political power, and executes Edmund for treachery. Playing by the

A Hegelian Reading of Shakespeare's *King Lear*

rule of power, Edgar avenges himself upon Edmund and ascends to the kingship. Edgar also balances the dynamic between deception and honesty: he disguises himself as a beggar to avoid harm, but honestly reveals himself to reclaim Gloucester's love. Edgar's identity as an Odysseus-like beggar king signifies a synthesis: having experienced lowliness and grace, Edgar returns with a knowledge of both that generates deep wisdom. Edgar's development leads to gestures of reconciliation at the end of the tragedy: he reconciles with Gloucester by revealing his identity and reconciles with Edmund by "[exchanging] charity" (115). Reconciling with characters from the opposing sides suggests Edgar's ability to navigate through both power and love. Being able to synthesize, Edgar survives the political turmoil and reestablishes the ethical order. The synthesized figure ascending to the throne prefigures a new political environment that combines love and power; the conflicts and sufferings culminate in a progressive gesture towards a bright future.

The complexity of *King Lear* incorporates other positions that fall into different situations in Hegel's theory. In the play, Kent also demonstrates his ability to synthesize love and power, but the ending suggests a twist. To follow and protect Lear, Kent learns flattery to please him: "you have [authority] in your countenance which I would fain call master" (23). Kent's flattery, however, is based on truth and motivated by love. Kent also tactically disguises himself, a deception oriented towards love instead of power. As a result, Kent also survives the collision. The ending, however, leaves the audience with a suicidal implication: "I have a journey, sir, shortly to go: My master calls me, I must not say no" (121). The "calling" of Lear, who is dead, reflects Kent's inner wish to follow Lear's steps to death. Loyalty alone constitutes Kent's purpose of life; Lear's death, as well as Kent's failed reconciliation with him, contribute to Kent's desperation. Even though Kent has understood the validity of power, his tremendous love

(loyalty) for Lear reduces him to a self-destructive one-sidedness. Cordelia and Lear further reveal the complexity of this play by displaying a delayed gesture of synthesis. Cordelia, no longer naïve in politics, practices power by commanding the French troops. Lear, gaining wisdom during his exile, comprehends the dynamics of love with respect to power. Their recognition of the validity of the opposing position, however, comes too late. The diegetic time, instantiating historical development and being a crucial factor in Hegelian tragedy, disregards their late efforts. Their deaths not only contribute to the tragic dimension, but also reveals the cerebral complexity that beckons a gesture towards philosophy.

From a Hegelian perspective, *King Lear* portrays the dialectical opposition of love and power, which culminates in a synthesis represented by the new king Edgar. The complex universe of *King Lear* offers diverse positions, which reveal the complexity and rich characterization of modern drama. The conflict takes place in a society divided by two ideals: the medieval aristocracy that values fidelity, community, and ethics, and the emerging Machiavellian politics that stresses competition, individualism, and a separation of power and morality. The synthesis of the two gives rise to a new political principle that combines power and love. It shows a gesture of modernity that upholds social justice by the spirit of law – a modern manifestation of the love-power synthesis. This synthesis can also be found, for example, in the Just War Theory, which was propounded by St. Augustine, developed through time, and became a primary basis for debate about military actions in contemporary world. *King Lear* reflects the dialectical development of history that negates one-sided principles and attains syntheses. Lear, Cordelia, and Edmund's limitations converge as Edgar opens up an advanced possibility. The tragedy of *King Lear* symbolizes the larger historical process discussed by Hegel, in which

A Hegelian Reading of Shakespeare's *King Lear*

reason manifests itself through constant collisions and reconciliations – a progression toward true human freedom.

A Hegelian Reading of Shakespeare's *King Lear*

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