

# Speech, Truth and Power in *King Lear*

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*“Truth’s a dog must to kennel; he must be whipped...”*

– The Fool in *King Lear*

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## **Gwyneth Evans**

While Shakespeare’s mighty play *King Lear* speaks to a great many aspects of the human condition, any observer of our own time must feel an additional chill in reading or watching the opening scene as the King laps up flattery and drives away from him the two characters who speak to him frankly and truthfully.

Speaking truth to power has dire consequences in this play, as Lear’s willfulness and refusal to take good advice breaks his country into warring factions and leads to the violent death of most of the main players. Like Shakespeare’s other major tragedies, *Lear* does not offer easy solutions to the familial, social and political conflicts it presents, but it explores them with an unmatched depth of understanding and feeling.

The theme of speech and truthfulness underlies the plot of *King Lear*: it shows us through a dramatic story the way that the words of the powerful, and those addressed to the powerful, may distort and conceal, bringing social and personal catastrophe – or, in the mouths of a courageous few, lead to understanding and reconciliation.

The first casualty we see in the play is truth. Because Lear wields absolute power in his ancient British kingdom, he can speak freely, as he likes, and in old age he indulges himself and speaks impulsively and rashly. No one in the court feels free to respond frankly to him, and he reacts violently to implied or direct criticism. When he sweeps into court announcing that he will immediately divide the kingdom among his daughters, giving the largest share to whichever of them can speak most fulsomely of her love for him, everyone is astounded but no one can contradict him.

Goneril and Regan utter almost ludicrously exaggerated protestations of how they adore their father, and are rewarded. Cordelia, who will not play the game of flattery, and Kent, who tries to stop Lear from disinheriting her, are the only two who respond honestly and bravely to Lear about what he is doing. Cordelia’s measured and sincere answer, reflecting critically upon the blandishments of her sisters, provokes Lear to denounce her and leave her penniless. *Thy truth then be thy dower.*

Kent attempts to make Lear see reason, excusing his plain speaking by the seriousness of the situation.



*King Lear banishes his daughter Cordelia.*

For his rash intervention, Kent is banished, but will not be silent:

...whilst I can vent clamour from my throat  
I'll tell thee thou dost evil.

Others in the court recognize that Lear is making a huge mistake, but are afraid to speak up. As the rest of the court leaves the stage at the end of that dramatic opening scene, Goneril and Regan linger and, revealing that their flattery was indeed false, begin at once to plan how they will subjugate and humiliate their supposedly beloved father. By the end of the first scene of the play we have seen the exercise of power reducing most citizens to cowed silence, driving any vocal opposition away from the court, and rewarding the dishonest and self-serving.

The Fool appears somewhat later, but promptly begins his barbed teasing. The role of the fool, in Shakespeare's plays as in Renaissance courts, is to use humour and foolery to amuse and sometimes offer oblique criticism to the prince or authority who employs him. The fool is by custom "licensed" to speak the truth that others may see but are too fear-

ful of their own positions or safety to point out. Threatened with the whip for his glancing references to Lear's having given the kingdom to his two false-speaking daughters and cut the honest Cordelia off with nothing, the Fool observes that Truth in the kingdom now must be kennelled and whipped, while flattery, "the Lady Brach," may "stand by the fire and stink."

Jokes often express harsh truths, obliquely or even directly, and the comedian may present in jest what would be considered libelous or outrageous if stated seriously. That Lear is not altogether a tyrant is shown in his tolerance and fondness of the Fool, which allows him to glimpse what he is not yet ready to acknowledge: that he himself has been a fool, gulled by his rapacious daughters.

The opening scene of Lear's division of his kingdom is followed directly by another scene of a father and a brother deceived by false words, as the charming schemer Edmund first persuades his father that his older brother Edgar is planning to take their father's life, and then convinces the trusting Edgar that their father has developed an irrational rage against him, and he should flee at once – his flight then con-

**Lear:** *Dost thou call me fool, boy?*

**Fool:** *All thy other titles thou hast given away: that thou wast born with. . . I marvel what kin thou and thy daughters are. They'll have me whipp'd for speaking true; thou'lt have me whipped for lying; and sometimes I am whipp'd for holding my peace. I had rather be any kind o' thing than a fool! And yet I would not be thee, nuncle. Thou has pared thy wit o' both sides and left nothing i' th' middle. Here comes one o' the parings.*

*Enter Goneril*

vincing the father of Edgar's guilt. The father, the Earl of Gloucester, is a powerful nobleman: that two of the chief authorities in England can be so deceived by the lies of their own children is alarming, but not unbelievable. The powerful seem far from immune to self-deception and flattery, and the amoral Edmund congratulates himself on how successfully he has been able to prey on those set above him.

A credulous father! And a brother noble,  
Whose nature is so far from doing harms  
That he suspects none; on whose foolish honesty  
My practices ride easy! I see the business.  
Let me, if not by birth, have lands by wit;  
All with me's meet that I can fashion fit.

Edmund manipulates or "fashions" every situation to suit his own purposes, and has no conscience about his lies: anything he can get away with is fine, or "meet." Talking freely to himself, and the audience, he justifies any practice that serves his own interests. The con man who can speak frankly about his practices, when it suits him, has a kind of pernicious charm, as

a number of contemporary politicians have certainly demonstrated.

Not all the deceptive practices in *King Lear*, however, are undertaken from self-serving or evil motives. Kent, banished for his attempt to speak truth to power, disguises himself so that he can continue to serve King Lear in a humbler capacity. Clothing is an easy disguise, but Kent thinks how he must also change his voice and words:

If... I other accents borrow,  
That can my speech defuse, my good intent  
May carry through...

Though disguised in appearance and voice, he remains the honest, loyal follower who tried to restrain Lear's folly and now sticks with him during his misfortunes. His words are still blunt, even rash, but always truthful despite what they cost him, as when Regan has him put in the stocks. *Lear* is a grim but not a nihilistic play; Kent is reunited with Lear in the final scene. Loyal to the end, he speaks some of the most moving lines of the play when another follower tries to call back the dying Lear:

Vex not his ghost. O, let him pass! He hates him  
That would on the rack of this tough world  
Stretch him out longer.

Kent himself hears another, imagined, call:

I have a journey, sir, shortly to go.  
My master calls me; I must not say no.

Kent's is a distinctive voice in the play, whether disguised or not: as he promises, he "can keep counsel...and deliver a plain message bluntly." He is a touchstone in the play for honest speech; he speaks the truth as he sees it, and bears the consequences willingly.

Disguised speech is used also for good purposes by Edgar. Beguiled by his other son, Edmund, Gloucester has outlawed Edgar and driven him to hide in the disguise of a naked madman, Poor Tom, who speaks in disjointed cries and snatches of old verses. The ruthless and self-serving Edmund eventually helps Regan

put out Gloucester's eyes and turn him out into the storm. Wandering helpless, Gloucester cannot see his loyal son, and does not recognize his altered voice. Edgar is able to accompany and protect his father, while pretending to be several different people by assuming other voices. Under his care, Gloucester recovers himself to the extent that he notices something different about Tom:

Methinks thy voice is alter'd, and thou speaks't  
In better phrase and matter than thou dids't.

In one of the play's most poignant scenes, Gloucester asks his guide to lead him to a cliff's edge and then leave him; Edgar describes the dangerous height to which they have supposedly come, and when the old man steps, as he thinks, over the edge and falls, Edgar in another voice describes his remarkable fall and amazing recovery. It is a moving piece of theatre, and a striking demonstration of how language skillfully used

can manipulate reality and convince us against the evidence of our senses and our reason.

In a time of national crisis and family crisis such as we see in *King Lear*, Shakespeare shows us many ways in which speaking freely and speaking falsely can both lead to disaster. The final lines of the play are spoken by the honest Duke of Albany, who has opposed his wife, Goneril, in her cruelty to her father. He urges the survivors to abandon all attempts at political expediency in the face of the devastation of both kingdom and royal family:

Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.

Policy has failed almost everywhere, and the only possible response remaining is to speak the truth of compassionate feeling. •

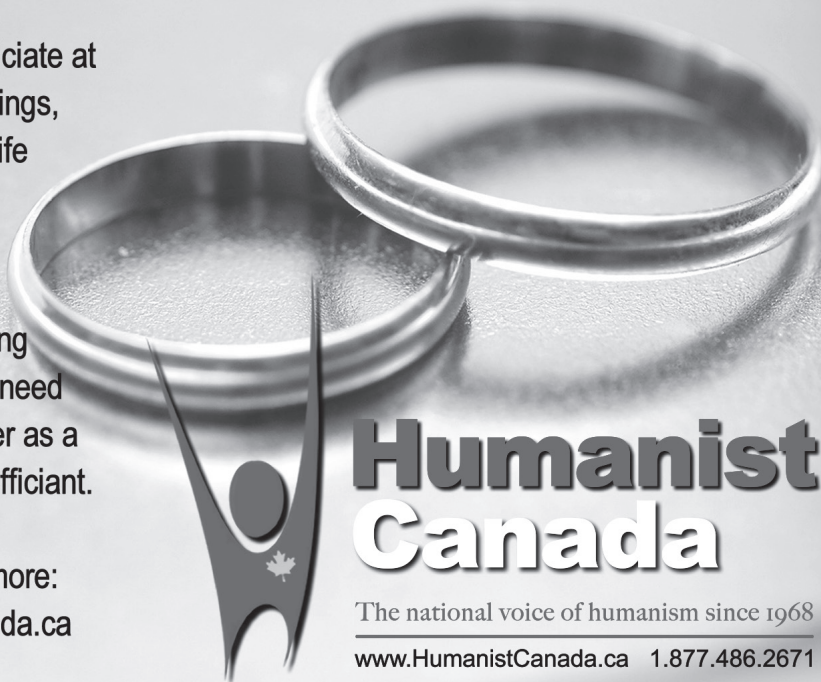
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