"What We Ought to Say": Debating the Morality of Dishonesty and Equivocation in King Lear

Markelle Jensen
Brigham Young University, markelle.jensen@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion

Part of the Dramatic Literature, Criticism and Theory Commons, and the Literature in English, British Isles Commons

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol14/iss2/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
Paul Dean wrote that "the meanings of a Shakespearean play are not static but dynamic, subject to frequent change and modification; the plays do not reveal the nature of moral truth, they debate it" (128). King Lear, therefore, does not "reveal the nature" of honesty but provides a stage on which the morality of honesty can be debated. The play questions whether honesty is inherently moral at all, or if there are ways in which honesty can be considered harmful and even immoral. If so, there also must be forms of moral dishonesty. Paul Jorgenson and Jean MacIntyre have recognized this as well, and they convincingly point out the ways in which Kent’s and Edgar’s well-intentioned disguises and deceptions result in the only positive outcomes of the play. MacIntyre writes: “The relationship between telling the truth, telling lies, and inventing fictions—the ‘poesy’ of Kent and Edgar—shapes the play’s most important actions” (34). Jorgenson even claims that Kent represents the sixteenth-century trope of using Honesty as a personified character in plays. “Just as Honesty promptly fastens upon a flattering courtier as his natural victim, Kent loses no time in making life miserable for the sycophant Oswald” (Jorgenson 375). However, missing from the conversation are the ways in which Cordelia is the pillar
of moral goodness in the play, and how her own paradoxical honesty and dishonesty are what enabled Lear to “see better” and, ultimately, to be better (Shakespeare 1.1.156).

The debate about honesty and art during Shakespeare’s time lends important context to understanding honesty in King Lear. According to James Shapiro’s Year of Lear, the meaning of the word “equivocation” shifted abruptly in the first few years of the seventeenth century to mean “concealing the truth by saying one thing, while deceptively thinking another” (156). This shift in meaning was largely due to the discovery of a Jesuit pamphlet detailing the ways in which Catholics could morally lie under oath (157). As Catholics were an extremely targeted group at this time, they were often forced to bend the truth in order to protect themselves or their fellow Jesuits. According to the document, equivocating involved “deliberately choosing ambiguous words,” lying by omission, and most significantly, speaking one thing while thinking another privately (158). They believed that because God could hear your thoughts, as long as you thought of the truth in your head it was not a sin to lie. These ideas were looked upon with outrage by most English Protestants and served to reinforce anti-Catholic sentiment (157–58). Shakespeare takes the concept of equivocation to heart, and Shapiro notes that Shakespeare’s characters equivocate in various ways in many of his works, from Macbeth to “Sonnet 138” (169–170). He seems to portray equivocation in some of his characters as playful, while in others it is destructive. This inconsistency implies that Shakespeare believes equivocation—not quite dishonesty but an incomplete form of honesty—can be hurtful or damaging towards others.

A significant number of Shakespeare’s contemporaries viewed art (especially poetry and theater) as dishonest because it involves twisting reality and pretending. Shapiro writes, “What else, after all, did actors do for a living other than convincingly recite words they didn’t actually mean while at the same time suppressing their own thoughts?” (170). Acting, by definition, is a sort of equivocation. Like many Western ideas, the contempt for art had its beginnings in classical philosophy, and Plato was the first to articulate an antitheatrical prejudice. He understood the strong influence the theater had on playgoers, and argued that because “they [poets, playwrights] excite us in the very faculties which stand in most need of restraint,” men are influenced to follow their passions rather than their reason (Barish 9). Perhaps Plato was afraid that theater—a distortion of reality with an emphasis on
emotional exaggeration—aroused a passion in its viewers similar to the effects of flattery. Both theater and flattery cause people to disregard facts and reason in favor of feeling positive emotions, or to lose oneself in a rosier, imaginative world. This calls to mind Lear himself, whose “power to flattery bows,” precipitating his downfall (Shakespeare 1.1.146). According to Plato, art (like flattery) is dangerous because it equivocates. It is close to reality and to truth, but with distortions, exaggerations, and ulterior motives.

Keeping in mind the parallels between flattery and theater, we move on to artists’ refutation of this criticism. The most potent rebuttal was written by Sir Philip Sidney in *A Defense of Poesie*, published in 1595. He famously wrote, “Now for the poet, he nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth; for, as I take it, to lie is to affirm that to be true which is false.” Sidney, and I would argue Shakespeare as well, believed that art is not dishonest because it does not claim to be honest. Shakespeare would not have thought it problematic to represent honesty and dishonesty ambiguously in *King Lear*; it was a means to explore societal values, which is art’s prerogative. Sidney also wrote that poets are “not labouring to tell you what is or is not, but what should or should not be.” Likewise, Paul Dean writes, “Shakespeare’s tragedies are not true but they are explorations of what it means to be true—to oneself, to other people, to beliefs and values” (130). Shakespeare wrote plays—the very nature of which involves a certain dishonesty and equivocation—to question otherwise-codified social norms. The paradoxical notions of morality, honesty, and dishonesty involved in playwriting manifest in the paradoxes of moral dishonesty and immoral honesty in *King Lear*.

Just as art and theater can paint a rosier world in which love and passion triumph all, flattery can enhance one’s perception of oneself in a more positive and possibly unrealistic light. Of course, Shakespeare’s tragedies, especially *Lear*, contradict that notion, as they do not paint a world anyone would want to escape to. Shakespeare is rejecting what Plato and his own contemporary antitheatrical critics accuse him of while simultaneously representing the ideas they clung to within his plays. He transplants the idea that theater equivocates—that it represents an almost-truth—into his equivocating characters, the most obvious of whom are Goneril and Regan. Their exaggerated professions of love for Lear are indisputable equivocation and flattery. Do they truly love Lear “More than word can wield the matter, / Dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty” (1.1.53–54)? It is possible, maybe even likely, that they did love their father with such depth at least at some
point in their lives. In a way, they are speaking a sort of honesty—they are not outrightly lying but speaking a deceptive truth through flattery. Internally, they are motivated by the power they stand to inherit if they convey their love emphatically enough. Despite their love for their father—“as much as child e’er loved”—they plan to manipulate Lear for their own gain (1.1.57). They equivocate, and this equivocation turns out to be more destructive in everyone’s lives than the pure dishonesty that is performed by other characters.

Equivocation is not always detrimental in King Lear and is also performed by its most moral characters. Just as Goneril and Regan’s equivocating flattery represents immoral honesty, Cordelia performs a type of moral dishonesty. The idea that dishonesty can be moral at times is not newly introduced by Shakespeare. One of the earliest portrayals of moral dishonesty is found in Virgil’s Aeneid, which is especially significant considering that King Lear is set in a pagan, Greco-Roman world. In his famous speech, Aeneas encourages the weary and disheartened refugees of Troy to not lose hope:

Friends and companions,
Have we not known hard hours before this?
My men who have endured still greater dangers,
God will grant us an end to these as well . . .
Some day, perhaps, remembering even this
Will be a pleasure. . . .
Troy’s kingdom shall rise again. . . .
So ran the speech. Burdened and sick at heart,
He feigned hope in his look, and inwardly
Contained his anguish (1.270–86)

In this scene, Aeneas is equivocating, but not in the destructive way in which Goneril and Regan did. He is performing a sort of dishonesty by enthusiastically encouraging his people, while he inwardly does not believe there is any hope to be had. Despite his dishonesty, Aeneas is one of the most morally upright characters in classical literature. He is willing to conceal his true feelings in order to help others.

Likewise, Cordelia represents moral dishonesty in Lear. When asked how much she loves her father, she responds that she has nothing to say. “I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth. I love your majesty / According to
The weight of this sad time
Speaks what we feel.
Not what we ought to say.
- Glenn Kenny
my bond, no more, no less” (1.1.89–91). It is dishonest for Cordelia to claim she has so little love for her father, as the play later demonstrates. Cordelia is withholding the full truth, but not in order to gain something for herself. She recognizes the manipulative flattery of her sisters and wishes to make Lear aware of it so he will not fall victim to its destructiveness. Cordelia later defends herself:

I yet beseech your majesty—  
If for I want that glib and oily art,  
To speak and purpose not, since what I well intend  
I’ll do’t before I speak . . . (1.1.222–25)

In this passage, Cordelia identifies exactly what it is she abhors in her sisters: “that glib and oily art” of speaking one thing while intending another. She believes that genuine honesty is demonstrated through action, not flattering words; she is supported by the Book of Proverbs, which states: “Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who act faithfully are his delight” (English Standard Bible, Prov. 12:22; emphasis added). However, Matthew states: “Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil” (Matt. 5:37). In answering the question ‘do you love me?’ Goneril and Regan go far beyond a simple ‘yes,’ whereas Cordelia initially gives forth a single phrase: “Nothing, my lord” (1.1.85). If she truly doesn’t love Lear, her actions indeed would align with the biblical expectation that she reply “simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’” However, it is clear that she does love him. Cordelia’s dishonest words to Lear are more virtuous according to the Greco-Roman definition of morality that Aeneas exemplifies. Her words are moral in that they intend to provoke Lear to “see better” (1.1.156). Indeed, her temporarily hurtful dishonesty at the beginning of the play sets off a chain of events through which Lear becomes acquainted with his own foolishness and blindness. By the end of the play, Lear has become a more morally upright man with a renewed ability to be honest with himself. By portraying Cordelia’s dishonesty in this way, Shakespeare insinuates that some forms of manipulative honesty are immoral, while some forms of well-intentioned dishonesty are benevolent.

Another form of immoral honesty is performed again by Goneril and Regan and serves to be so destructive that it drives Lear into the climax of his madness. Lear comes to his only remaining daughter seeking a kind
reception, and Regan repeatedly and cruelly points out the truth that Lear is aging and nearing death:

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 yourself (2.4.142–45)

The one truth that Lear seems to be quite aware of about himself is his age, as that was the reason he relinquished his kingdom to his daughters in the first place. The fact that Regan feels the need to repeatedly point out his age, weakness, and dependency is cruel and unnecessary, despite being true. Regan proceeds to argue that her household is not yet ready to accept Lear, and that he should return with Goneril: “I looked not for you yet, nor am provided / For your fit welcome” (2.4.28–29). This may or may not be true, but it is cruel nonetheless. Then, again from Regan, comes the truth that created the argument in the first place:

What, fifty followers?
Is it not well? What should you need of more?
. . . How in one house
Should many people under two commands
Hold amity? ‘Tis hard, almost impossible. (2.4.233–37)

Which is followed by Goneril:

What need you five and twenty? Ten? Or five?
To follow in a house where twice so many
Have a command to tend you?
What need one? (2.4.257–59)

Goneril and Regan are truthfully correct—Lear has no real need of any servants while living with his daughters. Despite the truth of their statements, they are not acting in a morally upright manner. Lear responds to his daughters, “I gave you all” (2.4.246). In his old age, Lear did give his daughters all. Now, all he asks is to be welcomed into their homes and not to be stripped of the dignity his retinue affords him. Lear expects them to uphold “the offices of nature, bond of childhood, effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude” owed to him, but they fail him in their cruel honesty (2.4.173–74). It is after this
encounter with Goneril and Regan that Lear finally enters into madness: “O fool, I shall go mad” (2.4.281). While the ultimate intention of Cordelia’s purposeful dishonesty is to move Lear to “see better” (1.1.156), Goneril and Regan’s cruel honesty destroys their father’s sanity and eventually leads to their own downfalls.

In contrast to her sisters’ cruel honesty, Cordelia again acts benevolently dishonest in order to protect her father in his weakened state of mind. Her generous lies echo Aeneas’ selfless dishonesty and are told toward the close of the play, after Lear is recovering from his madness in the storm. Lear, in his misery, says to Cordelia:

If you have poison for me, I will drink it.
I know you do not love me; for your sisters
Have, as I do remember, done me wrong.
You have some cause; they have not. (5.1.74–77)

To which Cordelia responds, “No cause, no cause,” (78). Does she not have cause? Because she refused to lavish her father with flattery and praise in return for her inheritance, her father not only revoked her inheritance and dowry, but he completely disowned and publicly shamed her. To some degree, Cordelia is being dishonest, but it is done with kindness and love in her heart rather than selfishness and deception. Her benevolent dishonesty is what begins to bring Lear back from the brink of madness.

Kent’s and Edgar’s falsehoods are also well-intentioned and greatly benefit Lear and Gloucester. However, there comes a point at which both of them could reveal their identities and ceased their deceptions but do not. After being blinded, Gloucester wanders into the vicinity of Edgar, disguised as Poor Tom. Gloucester laments:

O dear son Edgar,
The food of thy abused father’s wrath,
Might I but live to see thee in my touch,
I’d say I had eyes again (4.1.22–25)

In this moment, it is clear that Gloucester is no longer angry with Edgar and that he wishes desperately to see him. Edgar, however, chooses not to reveal himself and instead continues his charade. Had he revealed his true identity, the scene in which Gloucester attempts suicide might have been avoided altogether. Edgar later admits his mistake in not revealing himself to his
father until right before his death: “Never—O fault!—revealed myself to him / Until some half hour past, when I was armed” (5.3.193–94). Likewise, upon arriving in Dover, Kent could have done away with his disguise but chooses not to do so. To Cordelia, he insists, “My boon I make it that you know me not / Till time and I think meet” (4.7.10–11). When he finally does reveal himself in the final scene, Lear responds, “This is a dull sight. Are you not Kent?” (5.3.282). It is an especially anticlimactic moment as it is Cordelia’s—and soon to be Lear’s—death scene. If Kent had chosen to reveal himself when they had safely arrived in Dover, his reappearance may have been much more happily received by Lear. Despite the obvious good that came out of Kent’s and Edgar’s dishonesty, there was a point at which they went too far. They became caught up in their own falsehoods. At this point, their dishonesty was no longer serving its purpose and became pointless, thus losing its moral status. Kent’s and Edgar’s dishonesty wasn’t necessarily as harmful as Goneril and Regan’s harsh honesty was, but deceiving without a valid motive to deceive is immoral. In contrast, Cordelia’s moral dishonesty was never used to deceive in the same way as Kent and Edgar. She only ever equivocated or lied when necessary to help Lear obtain a more realistic self-image and grasp on reality.

If Kent is Honesty personified, as Jorgenson claimed, then Cordelia is Morality personified. Her actions align with both Greco-Roman and Christian ideals of moral uprightness. She is certainly an Aeneas figure, willing to put aside her own well-being in favor of helping others and fulfilling her duties. However, she is also a Christlike figure, forsaken for her commitment to truth but still endeavoring to help Lear in his time of need. Indeed, Cordelia immediately forgives him once they are reunited. Her death seals her role as Lear’s personal savior. Of course, the numerous deaths in the closing scene mark the play, to most, as a tragedy. Perhaps if Cordelia had professed her love to Lear in the opening scene as expected, those deaths could have been avoided altogether. But then, Lear would have remained blind to the truth about his relationships, about his own self, and about the world around him. Cordelia’s words may have been harsh, but they were an attempt to fulfill the “bond of childhood” (2.4.173), and indeed prompted Lear to “see better” (1.1.156). He obtained a more realistic sense of self, along with a healthy dose of humility:

Pray do not mock me.
I am a very foolish, fond old man,
Fourscore and upward,
Not an hour more, nor less,
And to deal plainly,
I fear I am not in my perfect mind. (5.1.60–65)

He became more empathetic, as seen in his prayer for the homeless: “Poor naked wretches, wheresoe’er you are / . . . O I have ta’en / Too little care of this” (3.4.28, 32–33). And he realized he could find joy even in captivity, simply in the company of Cordelia, who he now knows loves him: “Come, let’s away to prison. / We two alone will sing like birds i’th’cage” (5.3.8 9).

All this change was precipitated by Cordelia’s words in the opening scene, in which she adhered to Edgar’s closing admonition: “The weight of this sad time we must obey, / Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say” (5.3.325–26).
Works Cited


