Withholding in Shakespeare: An Analysis of King Lear and As You Like It

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Hide-and-seek is a pastime that is almost instinctual to young people all around the world. As people age, the original game of hide-and-seek takes on a new form, shifting from the temporary hiding of their physical selves to a prolonged inclination to conceal themselves (or parts of themselves) from others. Shakespeare seems not only to recognize this tendency, but to embrace it in his works, often “[leading] his audience to expect a masquerade, and . . . anticipate it in detail” (Kreider 167). In King Lear, the concept of concealment is evident during the division of Lear’s kingdom, which division is dependent on the verbal expressions of love given to him by his daughters. While two of the three daughters cooperate, flattering Lear with ostentatious praise, Cordelia says to herself “love, and be silent.” (1.1.68). In As You Like It, Rosalind is banished to the Forest of Arden where she disguises herself as a young shepherd boy, Ganymede. She then conceals her identity from her love Orlando for 11 scenes—half the play!—though this isn’t as surprising when one notes, as critic P.V. Kreider does, that some of Shakespeare’s disguises “continue practically throughout the entire action” (167).

So the infamous childhood game of hide-and-seek transforms into a much different, much more complex practice: withholding. At first glance, it
seems that these plays would be much happier (though much shorter) if the characters did not hide parts of themselves from their loved ones. One could understandably ask why these characters (and so many others) withhold their thoughts and feelings when showing it would bring about good things—but is it that simple? Is withholding a villain in Shakespeare’s works, or is it a stepping-stone to necessary character and relationship development? More nerve-racking still, is it simply a part of life that we all must accept and learn to employ? The exploration of these questions will expand our understanding of the potential benefits and drawbacks of withholding.

Withholding is commonly defined as “refraining from granting, giving, or allowing; to hold back from action” (Merriam-Webster, “withhold”). Randi Gunther, a psychologist specializing in relational communication, claims that withholding is when one person “knowingly and willfully disconnects, shuts down, and essentially exiles the other” (Gunther). In summary, to withhold is to repress a piece of yourself, to hold back truth, or to allow disconnection from others. Shakespeare’s withholding, like much of today’s, is a smorgasbord of all three; there are main courses of withholding in the characters Lear, Cordelia, and Rosalind, and side dishes of it in Edgar, Kent, Regan, and Goneril. Withholding, in its broadest sense, is not confined to keeping verbal communication to oneself, but hiding any version of truth from others, whether it be one’s appearance, emotions, time, talents, or the like.

When Cordelia withholds words of affirmation from her father, she gives Lear a basis (a small one, but a basis nonetheless) to assume the worst—that she doesn’t love him. It is upon this foundation that the play’s most extreme act of withholding is built. Lear publicly mourns the seemingly impossible future he had envisioned for them as he exclaims, “I loved her most and thought to set my rest / On her kind nursery” (1.1.137–138). What then occurs elicits the same emotions in readers as a car accident does to rubbernecking strangers—Lear gives a detrimental return on Cordelia’s silence, withholding his representations of love by denying her an inheritance, a dowry, and a father—and we can’t help but read and reread the scene, examining the wreckage and asking if there will be any survivors.

Some might say it is Cordelia’s act of withholding that causes the play’s conflict—there is some truth to this. It even seems she knows her behavior will bring about bad ends as she cries “then poor Cordelia!” amidst her sisters’ monologues of affection (1.1.85). If she had simply stated her love
for her father, the subsequent mess of rejections and betrayals would never come to be. Others would argue that the conflict’s origin is the moment King Lear “knowingly and willfully disconnects, shuts down, and essentially exiles” Cordelia (Gunther). This is not to say that Cordelia is free of blame—on the contrary, it is her actions that begin a chain of events headed for destruction—but it is in Lear’s response to her unembellished expression of “right fit” love (1.1.107) that the theoretical divide becomes concrete. Were he better able to control his emotions, perhaps he and Cordelia may have split off for a sidebar where both could openly express their thoughts, avoiding the fallout and allowing readers to witness Lear live out his final years under her care. I believe that each reader that has endeavored to understand King Lear harbors a soft-spoken desire for this ending—but would that King Lear be as masterfully multidimensional? Doubtful. For it is in the chaos of lies, disguise, regret, and unexpected resolution that we see and connect with a reflection of the contradictory state that we ourselves endure.

There is, of course, another option: recognizing the plot as a collection of problematic depictions of withholding, rather than confining the downfall to a singular act. Regan and Goneril engage in withholding when they deny Lear shelter to demonstrate their power over him. Kent refrains from sharing his identity to maintain his support of Lear. Edmund withholds his true intentions from those around him as he spreads false messages between parties. Edgar disguises himself to survive and, later, to serve his father. We can agree that some of these behaviors are worse than others—King Lear’s inexplicable outburst towards Cordelia is much less justifiable than Edgar’s self-preservation, and Regan and Goneril’s prideful withholding of assistance is much more corrupt than Kent’s hidden support. Are these withholdings then more responsible for the eventual demise of the majority of the characters? It might seem superfluous to consider what the point of no return was in the play, but by identifying the “worst” act of withholding, we can begin to understand the varying levels of wrongness (or rightness) that it amounts to.

When is withholding love and communication from those around us acceptable? One answer is when it is for the benefit of others. Kent’s decision to disguise himself after his exile and continue serving Lear is a prime example of this cause. Following Kent’s attempts to soothe the king during his outburst, Lear says, “turn thy hated back / Upon our kingdom” and threatens death for any delay in his departure from the land (1.1.199–203). We
sorrow over this scene and share in Gloucester’s shock when he says, “true-hearted Kent banished! His offense, honesty!” (King Lear, 1.2.123). Instead of obeying the king’s demands, however, Kent considers Lear’s actual needs and puts himself right back in the path of the royal convoy, offering that same support from an unrecognized face. Withholding gives Kent greater power to serve, and he wouldn’t have been as effective without it.

If there were an educational panel on withholding for the benefit of others, Edgar and Rosalind could potentially find themselves seated on it alongside the virtuous Kent. There is, however, a compelling debate to be had about if they would truly belong in those chairs. I find a fair comparison between Rosalind and Edgar—these two crown gems of Shakespeare’s character-development archetype harbor melting pots of mixed intentions to justify their withholding, engaging in it for outward causes as well as personal gain, and both promote in-depth analysis as to whether or not their withholding was honorable.

Edgar’s initial withholding brings to light a second acceptable purpose of withholding: self-preservation. In the words of Shakespeare critic Kay Stanton, sometimes characters “must disguise . . . in order to survive” (296). After he “heard [himself] proclaimed” and “escaped the hunt” of his family, Edgar repressed all recognizable pieces of himself until he had created his crazed alter ego, Poor Tom (2.3.1, 3, 20). Withholding becomes Edgar’s only shelter from the storm of lies and threats that his brother Edmund stirs up, and Poor Tom his only ally. His decision to withhold becomes tangible as he declares “Edgar I nothing am” (2.3.20–21). Later, however, the tables turn as Edgar finds himself the sole caretaker of his blind father. This is the tipping point at which his purpose in withholding changes. Now recognizing that he and his father had both been deceived by Edmund, he commits to helping Gloucester, using his withholding to benefit others for the remainder of Gloucester’s life. Explaining his choice to continue keeping his identity and relationship to Gloucester a secret, Edgar says, “Why I do trifle thus with his despair / Is done to cure it” (4.6.42–43). Granted, there is cause for speculation as to the effectiveness of his effort given that Gloucester dies when he learns that the assistance he has received has been from an unexpected source—but all things considered, it is fair to say that dear Edgar and his dual-purpose withholding would indeed find a place on the panel of honorable users of the practice.
In *As You Like It*, we see a happy ending painted over Rosalind—the ice cream portion of the delectable sundae that is the play (being the majority of its substance)—and her similarly double-sided restraint of truth. What starts off as a survival-based disguise (a notable reflection of the similarities she and Edgar share) becomes a method of puppeteering those around her as she withholds her gender, name, feelings, and intentions from them. The birth of Rosalind’s alter-ego Ganymede is a self-preservation tactic and “a direct result of Duke Frederick’s banishment of Rosalind” (Stanton 299). Stanton also claims that it is Rosalind who “exploits the potentials of disguises most fully” (302). Through her suppression of self, Rosalind succeeds in sustaining her own life as well as assisting Phebe, Silvius, Orlando, and herself to be married. The prolonged length of her traveling act also allowed for both Oliver and Duke Frederick to experience changes in heart, resulting in Celia and Oliver’s union, Duke Frederick’s return of the throne to Duke Senior, and the effective end of Rosalind’s exile. Even Touchstone, having followed Rosalind on her venture to the Forest of Arden, finds a wife in Audrey the shepherdess. But is her involvement in the relationships of other characters purely for them, or is it prompted by her personal enjoyment of the role she has taken on? I find myself wondering what would have occurred if Rosalind had been open about her identity throughout the play. Would she and Orlando have had a quicker happy ending, or did withholding provide an important opportunity for Rosalind to verify the depth and authenticity of Orlando’s feelings? Would her father, Duke Senior, have been able to help her, or would that aid have further complicated he and his brother’s contentious relationship? These dichotomies bring to life the words of the witches from Macbeth. “Fair is foul, and foul is fair”—and Rosalind’s efforts are a mix of the pair (1.1.12).

While none of the consequences of Rosalind’s withholding were explicitly bad, one could argue that they were also not definitively good. First, consider the marital relationships affected by Rosalind’s withholding. According to Lisa Firestone, a couples’ relations researcher with a PhD in clinical psychology, “[the] ability to be open and truthful with a partner is a sign of trust and security in the relationship.” From its first moments, Orlando and Rosalind’s marriage lacked such trust and security as Orlando was not privy to the same understanding of the situation as Rosalind. Similarly, Phebe resigned herself to Silvius after Ganymede, her true romantic interest, was revealed to be Rosalind, which does not set her and Silvius up for a strong future. I can
picture poor, doting Silvius coming home in the evenings, making dinner, and handling the chores while Phebe gossips with a neighboring wife about how he’s beneath her—they’d have to hand out tissue boxes for every audience member in attendance on the misguided husband’s behalf. And I do pity young Audrey, for her happy ending will come to a close the second Touchstone’s lust for her subsides.

There is so much charm interwoven in Rosalind’s complex character, and to ignore the beauty therein would be to miss out on the full experience of *As You Like It*. Perhaps her withholding was more good than bad, or perhaps it was entirely self-serving and all the happy endings were mere side effects of the disguise of Ganymede. In either case, it may be in readers’ best interest, for both entertainment and sanity, to follow the wisdom of Harrold Goddard and “instead of questioning the psychology” of Rosalind’s withholding, “accept it meekly and merely observe inwardly that the magic of the Forest of Arden is evidently even more potent than we had supposed” (281–282).

Dissecting Cordelia’s true intentions is an equally complicated task. On one hand, her decision to withhold flattery from Lear can be considered an attempt to give him due respect. On the other, her withholding serves herself by maintaining her integrity. It may be that her reasoning contained a combination of both. If her goal (or a piece of her goal) was to honor Lear, it is a pursuit that can reasonably fall under the respectable withholding category of benefiting others. While the prioritization of one’s authenticity does not directly fall under this same qualifier, it is still an admirable cause on multiple counts—though our actions do not always reflect it, humanity values morality. It is commendable to see Cordelia confront such lofty dangers to preserve this virtue, but her commitment to authenticity led to a significant divide between her and her father. It would provide a sense of solace to us to have been able to whisper to her, “Your virtues, gentle [Cordelia], / Are sanctified and holy traitors to you” and to have prepared her, in some small measure, for what was to come (*As You Like It*, 2.3.12–13). Perhaps she would have changed her course, perhaps she wouldn’t have—that is for Shakespeare to know, and us readers to only imagine. In either case, herein lies the discovery of a third justification of the use of withholding: standing for what you believe in.

It would be hard, if not impossible, to ignore religion’s arguments as we grapple with the morality of withholding (though religion’s claims will mostly be to our benefit, rather than a means by which we can judge
Shakespeare’s characters). In Proverbs we are told, “Withhold not good from them to whom it is due, when it is in the power of thine hand to do it” (King James Bible, 3.27). This idea of “withholding not good” (Prov. 3.27) immediately calls into question why Cordelia would withhold an expression of love—a good thing—back from her father when it was both due and in her power to give it. But what can be considered good? Certainly, Kent’s service to Lear was good, and had he not disguised himself and withheld his identity, he would have essentially been withholding his efforts in sharing that good. The Quran builds on this by saying that “whoever withholds is withholding against his own soul” (Itani 47.38). Rosalind and Edgar likely feel a reflection of this concept as their identities become somewhat intertwined with their disguises—though Stanton would argue that in Rosalind’s case, her disguise “allows her to be what she is naturally” or even “more fully what she is by nature” (299). Both of these well-known and authoritative religious texts seem to advise against withholding, but they neglect to expound on the fact that withholding is a much broader concept than simply holding back truth. Especially in modern times, the “good” we endeavor to promote can be much more convoluted than even the most analytical critic can make Shakespeare. Acknowledging this general objection to withholding suggests that there are perhaps better ways to manage the plethora of challenges we face, and some may choose to allow that guidance to direct their behaviors.

The question then becomes how to know when to withhold versus when to communicate. Edgar might have used such an answer as he navigated the waters of leading his father—maybe then Gloucester would have survived the surprising finale of his son’s identity-based hide-and-seek. William Hazlitt writes that “interest arises more out of . . . sentiments and characters than out of the actions or situations. It is not what is done, but what is said, that claims our attention” (par. 1). The same could be said about real-world communication. These days, one well-spoken (or misspoken) line can become a decorated centerpiece in media coverage while the situation or background of the line may be ignored. King Lear illustrates this well for us—we pay much more attention to the spoken wisdom of the infamous line “ripeness is all” than we do to the surrounding blur of castles and war zones (5.2.12). If this is the case, wouldn’t it be better if we fully communicated all the time, even to the point of letting our actions and behaviors falter?

Where, then, does the concept of “actions speak louder than words” fit in? During the French Revolution, the US government signed a treaty with
France agreeing to support them in their war. When the time came to act on that promise, the states went back on their word and acted in a different manner than anticipated by staying out of the conflict. Which behavior did France care more about—the fact that the nation said it would be there, or the fact that it wasn’t? In *King Lear*, Goneril claims her love for her father is “dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty” (1.1.62). Less than two scenes later, a timeline of a few days at most, she denies him both space and liberty. While Lear may have relished in the affirmative words in the first scene, the whiplash of the third forced him to see the reality that words can be just as empty as Cordelia’s hypothetical nursery. Our actions often represent our intentions more than our decorated dialogue.

One must consider both the actions and the words of others to fully understand a situation. British mathematician and philosopher Alfred Whitehead developed process psychology, which centers on the idea that “reality consists of processes rather than material objects, and that processes are best defined by their relations with other processes,” contradicting the theory that reality is made up of bits of matter that exist independently (Mesle). His wife Evelyn describes the unique thought process that brought him to this discovery as a prism. “It must be seen not from one side alone but from all sides, then from underneath and overhead. So seen, as one moves around it, the prism is full of changing lights and colours. To have seen it from one side only is not to have seen it” (Whitehead). What a riveting concept! Each mind, each individual piece of art, each moment of literature can likewise be compared to this prismatic phenomenon of originality. *King Lear* is full of blatant claims about the human condition—but they all can be refuted by other processes in the play. *As You Like It* boasts a fantastically bright heroine, but when that heroine is placed in front of a mirror in bright light, we might (against her wishes) notice a slew of imperfections. At some angles, Edgar’s withholding is perfectly admirable—in others, it is his prolonged withholding that causes the death of his father. In the wise words of Evelyn, “there are no whole truths. All truths are half-truths. It is trying to treat them as whole truths that plays the devil” (Whitehead).

While our three just causes of withholding—surviving, benefiting others, and standing up for beliefs—are perhaps permissible, it is likely we are only scratching the surface of the iceberg of complexity that the practice entails. Sometimes withholding brings about good ends, allowing old men to be cared for by their sons and lovers to understand their counterpart. Other
times it impedes personal and relational development, tearing families and even kingdoms apart. In short, it’s not that simple. Withholding is both a villain and a necessary stepping stone, a foe and a friend, an if and a when. It is a part of life, and like any part of life, it can be a danger to us if we are ignorant to it and a power to us if we learn how to use it properly.
Works Cited


