Masks In King Lear Essay, Research Paper

The Role of the Mask in King Lear

What is a mask? The dictionary defines a mask as “anything that disguises or conceals.” Characters in King Lear use masks throughout the play. The masks are used for two main functions: to conceal one’s true plans and actions and to provide a protective disguise. Goneril, Regan, and Edmund, corrupt individuals in the play, all use masks to hide their evil and vicious intents. Goneril and Regan show their father a mask of love, while hiding their goal to obtain all of his land and power. Edmund wears many masks during the play. All of which are used to gain respect, power, and possibly love. Kent and Edgar, honorable characters in the play, also have to resort to using masks. Unlike their adversaries, however, their masks are only used to serve virtuous purposes. Kent wears a mask to keep his identity unknown so that he can serve, help and protect the King. Edgar wears different masks to protect himself and bring justice to the antagonists.

Although Goneril, Regan, and Edmund never wear an actual mask or disguise, they all hide behind metaphorical masks. Goneril is the first character in The Tragedy of King Lear to exercise this method of concealing her emotions. Her father, King Lear, is growing old and has decided to divide his land between Goneril and her two sisters. Before he hands out the land, he elects to give his daughters a test of love. He asks each of his daughters to tell him just how much they love him. Goneril quickly puts on her mask of love and tells her father she loves him more than anything in the world. Goneril says, “Sir, I love you . . . Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare, No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honor; As much as a child ev’r lov’d, or father found . . .” (1.1.54,58-9). Goneril uses her mask to disguise her true intents. She does not truly love her father. If she does possess any love for the King, it is no where close to the love she professes to him. She only wants to gain her fathers power and best land. Goneril is put onto a position where she has to use a mask. Not using her figurative mask of love would be devastating to her scheming plans. She would end up losing the entire dowry of land before she even acquired it.

Regan, the middle sister is not to be outdone by her older sister, Goneril. Regan uses an even greater mask of love and tells her father that her love is even greater than that of her sisters. She declares her love to King Lear saying, “I find she [Goneril] names my very deed of love. Only she comes to short, that I profess Myself an enemy to all other joys . . .” (1.1.71-3). Like Goneril, Regan has to use a love mask to hide her true feelings for her father because she wants to win King Lear’s best land for her dowry.

The two evil sisters’ masks of love work very favorably. Lear is overjoyed after hearing their confessions of love for him. When King Lear asks his youngest daughter, Cordelia, to describe her love for him, she refuses. She believes her father’s test of love is ridiculous and she does not want to take part in it. She tells her father, “I cannot heave my heart into my mouth. I love your Majesty According to my bond, no more no less” (1.1.91-3). Lear becomes enraged with her and disowns her. Goneril and Regan are very happy at the outcome of these events, for now they will be the sole heirs of the King’s land and occupy all of his power. Because of the sisters’ use of masks, the one daughter who truly loves the King is now disinherited and disowned. By gaining all of the King’s land and power, Goneril and Regan’s actions give lead to the tragedy of the play: King Lear losing his rightful place in his kingdom and the wrongful dishonor of Cordelia.

King Lear’s anger at Cordelia causes her also be fitted with a mask. Cordelia is the only honest and loving daughter of the King. She truly loves her father and cares for his well being. Her refusal to profess her love for King Lear leads to her wearing a mask through his eyes. Instead of Lear seeing the loving and charitable daughter he has, he sees an evil fiend. He says to Cordelia, “The barbarous Scythian, Or he that makes his generation messes To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom Be as well neighbor’d, pitied, and reliev’d As thou my sometimes daughter” (1.1.116-120). Cordelia is fitted with a mask by the King, and not by her choice. The King’s refusal to see his daughter for who she really is, and replacing her loving personality with a mask of hate, causes his tragic downfall.

Like King Lear, Gloucester is also destined for a tragic downfall due to the masks his bastard son, Edmund wears. Gloucester is the father of two sons, Edgar and Edmund. Edgar is his legitimate son, while Edgar si his misbegotten son. Edmund is jealous of his father love for his brother. He schemes against his brother, Edgar, so that he will be the heir of his father’s wealth and gain his love and respect. Edmund says, “Well then, Legitimate Edgar, I must have you land . . . Edmund the base Shall [top] th’ legitimate. I grow, I prosper: Now, gods, stand up for bastards” (1.2.15-6,20-2). Edmund hides his deceit behind a metaphorical mask of loyalty. He writes a letter that will make his father, Gloucester, believe that the good brother, Edgar, is planning to murder him. Edmund the shows the false letter to his father who becomes enraged and tells Edmund to seek out his brother and bring him to him. Edmund then uses his mask of loyalty on his brother and warns him of his father’s rage. Edgar becomes alarmed and decides to leave and avoid his father. Edgar’s leaving induces Gloucester to believe that Edgar is indeed guilty of a murderous plot.

By using his mask, Edmund has successfully destroyed his father’s true and love for Edgar. Gloucester now believes that Edmund is his best son. Edmund has to use this mask of loyalty because he is trapped under the label of an illegitimate son. The only way he can be respected and have power is to discredit the legal son, Edgar, who his father really loves. Simultaneously, he must show this mask to Edgar. Using this mask, he must make Edgar fear his father’s rage so that he will run away and hide from his father. Edgar’s departing is critical to Edmund’s plan because without Edgar around, there is no one to contradict the truth of the letter.

Later in the play, Edmund’s mask is quickly discarded. He becomes even more selfish and betrays his father to Cornwall for daring to help King Lear. Cornwall becomes very angry at Gloucester for helping Lear and promises revenge. Edmund dons his mask and acts horrified by his father’s treachery. He is secretly overjoyed, and because of his father’s treachery, Cornwall bestows the title Duke of Gloucester upon Edmund. This fulfills Edmund’s dreams of having power and respect. His handling of masks has proved very beneficial. By pretending to be an honest and trustworthy person, he has striped his father and brother of all their wealth and power.

After all of the uses of masks for villainous purposes, we now see the development of a new type of mask: a mask that has to be used for personal protection. The Earl of Kent is the first character in King Lear to use a mask for this intention. When King Lear becomes furious at Cordelia for not declaring her love for him, and disowns her, Kent stands up for Cordelia and tells the King to, “Reserve thy sate, And in thy best consideration check This hideous rashness” (1.1.149-50). Lear becomes infuriated with Kent for interfering with his affairs. He tells Kent to vacate his kingdom within ten days or he will be killed. Kent, however, has no such plans. He loves the King as his father and does not want any injury to come to him. He also thinks there may be trouble coming speedily for the King. Kent decides to disguise himself as Caius and attempt to enter the King’s service. Unlike the protagonists of the play, Kent has no option except to use a mask. He is concerned for the future of the King and yearns to be by his side. The mask Kent wears allows for his service of the King, whereas he could not serve the King as himself. As A. C. Bradley Explains, “In acting the part of a blunt and eccentric servingman Kent retains much of his natural character” (255). Kent’s use of a mask makes him even more upstanding because he did not have to remain in the Kingdom and help the King. He chooses to stay merely because he is a faithful person. Kent admits that he has loved Lear”. . . as my father . . . “(1.1.140), which is ironic because Kent becomes a father figure to Lear. There is not much Kent can do to assist the King, however, he watches over Lear as a parent watches over a child. Kent watching over Lear makes him, Kent, an even more respectable person because he seeks no personal gain from it, unlike Goneril and Regan. Kent is unquestionably a benevolent and loyal person.

Edgar, the honest son of Gloucester, is also forced to use masks for person protection and to help his comrades. Being charged with a conspiracy to commit murder, he is frightened that if he is found, he will be killed. Edgar evokes the use of different masks in the play. The first of these masks is the disguise of Tom O’Bedlam. The name is very fitting for it “is taken from the name of a hospital in London . . . dedicated to the treatment of the mentally ill” (Events 8). Edgar disguises himself by covering his face with dirt, messing up his hair, and discarding his fine clothing. When found by Kent, Lear, and the Fool, Edgar makes his disguise even more believable by claiming he is being chased by the devil and is inhabited by fiends. He tell the newcomers, “Frateretto calls me, and tells me Nero is an angler in the lake of darkness. Pray, innocent, and beware the foul fiend” (III.VI.6-8). The role Edgar plays as Tom O’Bedlam is indeed very believable. Edgar’s depiction of Tom is described perfectly by Adelman when she writes, “Shakespeare frequently reminds us that Poor Tom is Edgar; but Poor Tom’s ability to absorb us into his madness and misery mean that we greet each reappearance of Edgar with slight surprise” (12).

Later in the play, Tom, Edgar is disguise, meets with his father, Gloucester, who has been blinded. Still scared, Edgar cannot bring himself to reveal himself to his father. His mask is still being used for personal protection. Gloucester asks Tom to lead him to the high cliffs of Dover, where we later find out he wants to commit suicide. This turn of event leads to Edgar fabricating another essential mask. Not able to watch his father die, Edgar deceives Gloucester into believing he has jumped off the cliffs and has been saved by the gods. To do this, Edgar has to take on another mask. With Gloucester blind, this is an easy task, which Edgar does easily. He disguises himself an a peasant and informs his father, “It was some fiend; therefore happy father, Think that the clearest gods, who make them honors Of men’s impossibilities, have preserved thee” (IV.VI.72-4). Gloucester believes the peasant, Edgar, and decides to give up his suicide mission. Edgar’s use of the peasant mask was entirely necessary. If Edgar had not thought of this clever plan, his father would have perished. In using the mask, he has saved his father’s life. Edgar thus establishes himself also to be an admirable person by interrupting his father’s plans for suicide. “Edgar’s cure of his father at Dover Cliff is miraculous, no matter how imperfectly achieved, because in it his love for his father triumphs over any remaining anger or desire for revenge” (Adelman 20). Edgar proves himself as a righteous person who does not employ deceit for his own profit.

Edgar uses the disguise of an ordinary peasant again to deliver letters to Albany, Goneril’s husband, who is becoming angry at the cruel treatment of King Lear. Edgar obtained the letters when he and Gloucester cross paths with Oswald, who is also a villain and a steward of Goneril’s. Edgar and Oswald have words and then begin to fight. The despicable Oswald is wounded and gives Edgar some letters he was carrying. Exposed in the letters is a plot between Edmund and Goneril to murder Goneril’s husband, Albany. Edgar must disguise himself to turn the letter over to Albany, because he is still being sought after. He fears that Albany will not listen to him if he visits him as himself. He calls on Albany disguised as a peasant and tells Albany, “. . . ope [open] this letter . . . Wretched though I seem, I can produce a champion that will prove What is avouched there” (V.I.40, 42-4). This “champion” will be Edgar in yet another disguise.

Later in Scene III, Albany calls for a man to confirm Edmund as a traitor and Edgar shows up disguised as a type of knight. He is there to avenge his father. Edgar must still use a mask, as he has not yet confirmed Edmund as a rogue. If he had not been disguised, he might have been taken captive without the truth ever being known. After Edgar’s story of Edmund’s deceit and villainous actions, Edmund and Edgar battle. Edmund is wounded and has a change of heart. He confesses to his actions saying, “What you have charg’d me with, that have I done, And more, much more, the time will bring it on” (V.III.162-4).

Edgar’s capability to appropriately use masks proves to be very valuable. The masks succeed in protecting Edgar, saving his father, and revealing Edmund’s treachery. Edgar makes honorable uses of masks and as a result he has become a heroic person. Without the knowledge of masks and the ability to use them, Edgar could never accomplish what he does. Masks play a very important role in the Tragedy of King Lear. The use of masks is essential to both the righteous character and the corrupted characters. Kent and Edgar only use masks when necessary. When they do resort to using masks, it is only for a noble purpose. Unlike the noble characters of the play, Goneril, Regan, and Edmund use masks for wrongful deception, hiding true feelings, and for their personal gain. The events that transpire in the Tragedy of King Lear would not be possible without the use of both literal and metaphorical masks.

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