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## A Deconstructive Interpretation on the Binary Opposition in *King Lear*

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### Abstract

*King Lear* is one of the four tragedies of the marvelous British playwright William Shakespeare. This article attempts to deconstruct the two traditional binary pairs of “speech/word”, “blessing/misfortune” from the angle of Derrida’s deconstruction theory through the analysis of the two clues of *King Lear* and Gloucester. Deconstruction of *King Lear* has certain significance for us to see things dialectically and re-recognize the world around us.

**Key words:** Deconstruction; Presence and absence; Blessing and misfortune

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Deconstruction is a critical theory in which an idea is separated from its connotations. Essentially, it is a purely objective analysis that disregards all context. Derrida’s philosophical thoughts reflect his basic view of deconstruction. In his book of *Grammatology*, Derrida creates a new concept: arch-writing. It is an important concept in Derrida’s deconstruction theory. Arch-writing is a process of trace, or différance. Jacques Derrida’s thought on arch-writing reflects his basic point of deconstruction. Derrida reinterprets the text and interpreted the text as the birthplace of the difference. He believes that there is

no clear binary opposition between speech and text and denied logos centrism.

Instead, he advocates the search for dynamic meaning in the chain of language signs, which provides us with a new strategy for text reading and a new perspective for academic research. Among Shakespeare’s four great tragedies, *King Lear* is the most outstanding one of Shakespeare’s works. The famous British literary critic A.C. Bradley (1950, p.54) once made the following comments on Shakespeare’s *King Lear* in his lecture that “*King Lear* has again and again been described as Shakespeare’s greatest work, the best of his plays, the tragedy in which he exhibits most fully his multitudinous powers.....”. Although *King Lear* was created in the Renaissance period in England, the thoughts reflected embedded in it are eternal, and they are similar to the Daoism of ancient China.

### 2. PRESENCE AND ABSENCE

Language has been used to directly communicate thoughts and depreciate the tradition of writing Since Plato in the West. Speech has been given priority, but text has become a representation of speech, and it is a derivative of speech.

#### 2.1 Absent Presence: Cordelia

When *King Lear* asked his three daughters to profess their love in words, the function of speech was obviously proved. The eldest daughter Goneril said she loves Lear more than loves her own eyes and loves Lear more than sight, world and freedom; while Reagan, the second daughter, said loving Lear is her supreme happiness. These obsequious words catered to the vanity of Lear and mistakenly believed the two daughters are filial. However, the third daughter, Cordelia, is unwilling to exchange her father’s lands and rights with hypocrisy. Therefore, she only said: “I love your Majesty/ According to my bond/ no more nor less.” (Shakespeare, 1994, p.35) *King Lear*, who is accustomed to adulterous words, can’t tolerate the truth

that his little daughter conveyed, instantly disclaiming his “parental care, propinquity and property of blood” (1994, p.36) and treated Cordelia “as a stranger” (1994, p.36) in his heart. Because Lear’s two daughters’ fraudulent words misled King Lear’s judgment and convinced him that his two elder daughters were filial and divided the land to them. While the youngest daughter’s straightforwardness made him irrational and deprived of her inheritance. This scene proves that speech is superior to written words. Not long after Goneril got the land, she began to complain that King Lear was old and grumpy. She also grumbled that King Lear was partial and had a preference of Cordelia. Goneril disclosed her discontent with Lear in complaining words, which was also the evidence of presence. By the third scene of the first act, Goneril asked her guards to ignore Lear. In the fourth scenes of the first act, Goneril and Lear had a collision. Goneril deliberately saying that Lear’s guards were arrogant, always causing troubles and cursing people, and made all kinds of illegal atrocities. Nevertheless, Regan is tougher than Goneril. She couldn’t tolerate King Lear’s numerous guards and said: “I entreat you /To bring but five-and-twenty: to no more/ Will I give place or notice.” (1994, p.75) In *King Lear*, Goneril and Regan were present most of the time. Existence is defined as presence, which refers to the fact that traditional metaphysics assumes that truth is beyond language. They are presented in front of the speaker and can be communicated in the speech. In other words, these truths are present in the process of character’s communication.

Logocentrism is actually a combination of “metaphysical presence” and “sound-centrism”. Goneril and Regan expressed all their ideas and attitudes in words. In the view of logocentrism, “a spoken word emitted from a living body appears to be closer to an originating thought than a written word.” (Selden, Widdowson, & Brooker, 1997, p.171) They hold that absence is impossible to express thoughts and words are the best way to express ideas. Cordelia was absent after she went to France and before Lear was expelled out of the house. Although Cordelia was absent, her honesty, kindness, and filial piety made the appearances of the hypocritical, treacherous, and ruthless faces of Goneril and Regan more obvious in the form of absence. Cordelia was absent because all the characters and scenes demonstrates us that she was not directly involved in activities.

We said that she was present because she existed between lines and she influenced the characters in the play and was always being mentioned. Thus, the power of language is not what we assumed in the past: it is language that determines existence. This dual sense of presence and absence is obtained through language. Deconstructionists believe that “language is what forms us and there is no way to get beyond it. There is no getting beyond language,

beyond the play of signifiers, because we exist - we think, we see, we feel - within the language into which we born. How we see and understand ourselves and the world is thus governed by the language which we are taught to see them.” (Tyson, 1999, p. 253) The complicated situation of presence and absence should not be intolerable. According to the deconstructed dualism, absence is not exactly the opposite of presence. This shows that the duality is not opposed, but interrelated, interdependent and intertwined.

## 2.2 Absent Presence: Edgar

Logocentrism believes that there is a natural and intrinsic direct relationship between speech and meaning. Language is the natural expression of speaker’s thoughts and a transparent symbol of his thinking at the moment. Written texts are traditionally regarded as the secondary place, which is a substitute for sound. Another reflection of speech being superior to written text that the speaker is present and can accurately explain his intention to avoid ambiguity. In contrast, written words are just a series of symbols, and because the speaker is absent, written words can easily lead to misunderstanding. Derrida has proposed active and effective methods of subversion and deconstruction in the various precepts against logocentrism. He claims that written text won’t break the prejudice of the traditional “phonetic center”, he tried to establish a “arch-writing” in order to highlight the superiority of words. This superiority is first expressed in its semiotic meaning of “iterability” - without considering the intention of the speaker. Derrida’s view is also confirmed in *King Lear*.

In the second scene of Act 1, Gloucester’s illegitimate son, Edmond, was determined to seize the inheritance of Edgar, so he imitated Edgar’s handwriting and wrote a letter to himself in the tone of Edgar. In the letter, “Edgar” expressed his dissatisfaction with patriarchy and the idea of inheriting his father’s property through the means of murder as early as possible. As a result, Gloucester misbelieved that Edgar was going to rebel and Edgar was forced to run away from home, changed his face, and became a ragged beggar. Gloucester finally paid a heavy price for his credulity. Even Edgar was not present, he still succeeded making Gloucester understand and accept Edgar’s rebellion normally through text symbols. And in the first act of the final fifth scene, Edgar asked Duke of Albany to read the letter first, and it’s the letter again that exposing Edmund’s conspiracy and letting his conspiracy fail. Two letters, one is for framing and the other is for revealing the truth. The two letters use text symbols to interpret the truth of the matter without main characters being present. The written texts in the letter expresses the main ideas, and they all play a vital role. Therefore, that Derrida believing written words excels speech is also reasonable. The symbol’s “iterability” and “regardless of the speakers’ intention” were fully demonstrated in *King Lear*.

### 3. DISGUISED BLESSING AND MISFORTUNE

As early as the Warring States period, our great philosopher Laozi noticed the problem of opposite things and their transformation, as he puts forward it: "misfortune might be a blessing in disguises." He believes that the opposing parties will transform each other. His philosophic thought is also greatly reflected in *King Lear*:

#### 3.1 The Disguised Blessing and Misfortune of King Lear

As the protagonist of the tragedy, King Lear's life is dramatic. At the beginning, King Lear was also a person who could not distinguish reality. He is self-respecting and pretentious, lacking clear discerning ability and wise judgment. In distinguishing between true and false, he is nothing more than a poor "blind man": he regards the sweet words of Goneril and Reagan as filial piety, but considering Cordelia's confession as unrelenting, and persuades the loyal Kent when. At that time, he was "eye-sighted and blind". Lear's self-worship blinded him and made him see the wrong person; Lear's willfulness led him into a self-destructive astray, lost his power and lost his country, and eventually fell into the wilderness. He ruled the whole of Britain and had everything the king should enjoy, power, status, dignity, luxury, etc. Due to the old age and the credulity of others, Lear divided the land to his three daughters to inherit through their responses to their love for him. He is quick to believe Goneril's and Reagan's claims of all-consuming love for their fathers. Only the younger daughter Cordelia saw the true features of the two sisters, and then confided the truth to her father: "You have begot me, bred me, loved me. I/ Return those duties back as are right fit, /Obey you, love you, and most honor you." (1994, p.35) Cordelia had told the truth, which made King Lear angry and stripped her of her right to inherit.

Since Lear divided the country into two parts and gave it to his eldest daughter and second daughter, his life went downhill. First of all, living in Goneril's house and being treated unfairly, he decided to go to Reagan's house. But Goneril and Reagan conspired against Lear in advance. Reagan refused to accept Lear. The two daughters demanded that the one hundred knights who followed him be reduced to fifty, then twenty-five, and in the end, no one was allowed. That made the elderly Lear nowhere to go. He was homeless on a stormy night, and resentment and remorse made him mentally disturbed. From having everything to nothing, Lear experienced such a transition from existence to nothing. As early as the Warring States period, our great philosopher Laozi noticed the problem of opposite things and their transformation, as he puts forward it: "misfortune might be a blessing in disguises." He believes that the opposing parties will transform each other. Therefore, whether such a turning point experienced

by Lear is a blessing or a disaster should be viewed dialectically. When King Lear had everything, he is an arrogant, conceited, partial-minded person who didn't care about the suffering of the lower classes; when he lost everything, he started to realize his mistakes and regrets expelling the youngest daughter Cordelia. The most important thing is that King Lear began to care about the lower people at such a moment and shouted:

Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,  
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,  
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,  
Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you  
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en  
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;  
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,  
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,  
And show the heavens more just.

(1994, p. 84)

When ruler's image represents the extreme pain of Lear and is on the verge of despair, he thinks not only of personal honor and disgrace, but of caring for the entire human life, which is a dramatic improvement of the ideological realm, and it also allows us to see hope. In the end, King Lear's realm of life reached a detachment when he and Cordelia were caught by the enemy and sent to prison, he said:

Come, let's away to prison:  
We two alone will sing like birds i'th' cage;  
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down  
And ask of thee forgiveness. So we'll live,  
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh  
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues  
Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too-  
Who loves and who wins, who's in, who's out-  
And take upon's the mystery of things,  
As if we were God's spies; and we'll wear out,  
In a walled prison, packs and sects of great ones  
That ebb and flow by th'moon.

(1994, p. 121)

After a severe life calamity, King Lear profoundly raised the issues that humans have been thinking from ancient times to the present, that is, the problems of material pursuit and spiritual pursuit, the loss of human nature and the sublimation of personality, and how to correctly view personal gains and losses problem.

#### 3.2 The Disguised Blessing and Misfortune of Gloucester

The secondary plot in *King Lear* is based on Gloucester's family disputes as a clue. His illegitimate son, Edmond, wanted to seize the inheritance of the legal son, Edgar. He forged a letter so that Gloucester believed that Edgar wanted to rebel. As a result, Edgar was compelled to disguise as a beggar. Later Gloucester privately helped Lear but was disclosed by Edmund, and his eyes were taken out. But it is at that moment that he recognized the nature of Edmund's selfishness, ambition and cruelty. Ironically, it is when Gloucester's eyes were removed that

he came to realize the truth of the whole thing completely.  
As he mentioned:

I have no way, and therefore want no eyes;  
I stumbled when I saw. Full oft'tis seen  
Our means secure us, and our mere defects  
Prove our commodities. 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.

(1994, p. 96)

It was when Gloucester's eyes were blind and abandoned by everyone, he got the sincere and meticulous love of his son Edgar who came to his side, acted as his guide, took him away, begged for him and saved him from despair. When Gloucester finally knew that the person beside him was his son Edgar, he died in great joy and sorrow. Gloucester's experience is similar to that of King Lear. In the final analysis, it is the con opposition and transformation between blessing and misfortune, good and evil, right and wrong. What King Lear wanted was respect, love, leisure and comfort, but his decision brought him endless humiliation and torture, even terrible destruction. Gloucester wanted to punish the so-called Edgar, but the ending was bitten by the real Edmund. Wrong self-estimation, contempt for truth and reality condemned their tragedies, which is a warning for the world to create conditions to promote the transformation of things as good as possible.

### 3.2 The Disguised Blessing and Misfortune of Cordelia

If King Lear and Gloucester are both from disaster to blessing, then Cordelia is from disaster to blessing. King Lear's preference for Cordelia caused the envy of Goneril and Reagan. Cordelia, who seems to have the partiality of King Lear, is actually in danger. Because she is honest, righteous, kind, she didn't imitate her sisters to deceive her father at the risking the loss of inherited property. When her father asked her to express her sincere words, she said "nothing". However, it was this sincere word that deprived her of King Lear's favor. She had nothing but an honest heart. This caused Lear to deprive her of her inheritance and asked her to marry one of the Duke of Burgundy without any dowry. As the Duke of Burgundy favored reputation, status, and money, so he took the initiative to quit. Only the King of France really admired her character and personality, he said to Cordelia:

Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich, being poor;  
Most choice, forsaken; and most loved, despised;  
Thee an thy virtues here I seize upon.  
Be it lawful I take up what's cast away.  
Gods, gods! 'Tis strange that from their cold'st neglect.  
My love should kindle to inflamed respect.

(Shakespeare, 1994, p.40)

Although Cordelia suffered the hurt of a close family, she got her true love. Through the analysis of the two mains plots in *King Lear*, Shakespeare deconstructed the traditional binary opposition between "blessing and misfortune" and reached an inseparable state instead of opposite one. He completed his rebellion against the mainstream social discourse in a unique way. Therefore, blessing and misfortune are not opposite, but they are interdependent and can be transformed into each other.

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## CONCLUSION

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Thus, whether can people acquire true cognition of the world only based on speech or written text? In Shakespeare's tragedy this is undoubtedly negative. So how can people truly know the people? In what attitude should we treat things? The deconstruction of the binary opposition of the two groups above is nothing more than a method of artistic expression. It is through them that Shakespeare's profound insight into human nature is connected to society and the whole world, which is full of philosophy. The masterpiece *King Lear* been greatly extended in both breadth and depth, and it is worth pondering and studying for future generations.

As a literary master in the Renaissance, Shakespeare made the most use of the dualistic structural principle as the subject of humanistic care, providing a brilliant artistic structure, dynamic, shaping the image of people and things, and truly reflecting the social reality at that time. In fact, it strengthened his humanist theme. The binary opposition he used in *King Lear* makes its tragic effect shock the human heart and make our spirits truly cultivated.

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