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Grace, Consequences, and Christianity in *King Lear*

JESSICA VANDEN BERG

“The play represents a dark vision of life devoid of Christian sanctions, neither questioning nor affirming those sanctions except by implication” (Elton 369). With the exception of a hand full of critics like Elton, the significance of Cordelia as Christ-figure in William Shakespeare’s *King Lear* is a generally recognized allusion. However, debate arises, when her allusion to Christ is then used to argue the Christian nature of the play itself. The final act of

King Lear and the subsequent death of Cordelia appears to be the key passage surrounding the dispute that the play’s essential theme is Christian or redemptive. Because Cordelia’s death casts such a dark shadow of irreversible doom on the play’s ending, critics refuse to accept her death as having any final redemptive purpose. Yet, by tracing Cordelia’s role as a Christ-figure and the important part it plays within the theme of sanctification, *King Lear* reveals itself to be a fundamentally Christian play.

Reuben A. Brower is among the many critics that acknowledge the Christian allusions Cordelia brings to the play. However, Brower doubts the overall Christian nature of *King Lear* in his book, *Hero and Saint*:

Similar biblical and Christian allusions qualify character and attitude at many points in *King Lear*, though the play is not an accurate ‘illustration’ of Christian doctrine. Lear is not ‘redeemed’ or ‘saved,’ and his death is too terrible, too unrelieved by any thought of

compensation in another life, for the critic to use these terms in anything but a watered-down and sentimental sense. (403)

Brower brings up the indisputably sad ending of *King Lear*. It may be difficult to understand how a story so dark and lamentable could possibly contain Christian themes. As we shall see, amidst the tragedy of both Cordelia's and Lear's deaths truth can still be extracted without compromising the grievous effect of the conclusion.

At first glance *King Lear* displays characteristics of an allegory. "Thou hast one daughter / Who redeems nature from the general curse" (IV.vi.209-210). The Gentleman's comment to Edgar blatantly suggests the role Cordelia plays in the allegory of salvation. However, major questions arise as to the validity of *King Lear* as an allegory when we see that Cordelia does not literally resurrect from the dead as her Christ image implies. Even some of Lear's final words express his hope that she still might come back to life: "she lives! If it be so, / It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows" (V.iii.265-266). Despite the failure of Cordelia's character to completely fulfill the role of Christ, the Christian theme of sanctification is not lost.

The story of *King Lear* does not follow perfectly the Christian allegory of salvation, and Shakespeare's decision not to carry the Christian allegory of sanctification through to the end of the play by no means denies the overwhelming Christian elements in it. Biblical truth still radiates from the tragedy even without the resurrection, of Cordelia. Herbert R. Coursen Jr. notes in his book, *Christian Ritual and the World of Shakespeare's Tragedies* the lack of Shakespeare's adherence to the basic Christian allegory, and uses the discrepancy of Cordelia not resurrecting to discount any Christian themes:

To make Cordelia a 'Christ-figure' would be to suggest that Shakespeare is oriented toward 'truth' - not a figure in an allegory... the murders of Cordelia and Desdemona participate in the archetypal killing of Christ. They are

not that, but they are to be felt within that context. (299)

Many critics have determined the essential Christian significance of a play lies within the Biblical allegory it presents. They claim that failures to follow the suit of other classic allegories, like *The Faerie Queene*, show us that the work was not meant to be read in the same Christian context.

This argument assumes that the allegory and the theme of salvation laid out in a work are its only Christian elements. *King Lear* does not strictly follow the Christian allegory or the theme of sanctification. It is obvious that the preceding standard was not one of Shakespeare's major considerations when writing the play. The flexible allegory he created served as a foundation for other Biblical truths and morals to expand upon.

So what purpose is served when Shakespeare stops short of resurrecting Cordelia and thereby leaves the Christian allegory incomplete? How can we make sense of her unsettling death? We are left feeling her death is unfair. She, in essence, died for the sins of her father. By leaving us with this sentiment of injustice, Shakespeare does not discount the theme of sanctification. Instead, he emphasizes the specific idea of grace within the theme of sanctification. Cordelia, the only character worthy enough to live, chose to die. She returned to England knowing she might die, in order to find and save her father. She was innocent, but her unconditional love prompted her to pay the cost of her father's sin. "For thee oppressed king, I am cast down" (V.iii.3-5). The parallels of her character with Christ make it clear why her death was a necessary element of the tragedy. It was not until Lear accepts her mercy that he receives his salvation. "I'll kneel down and ask of thee forgiveness" (V.iii.10-11).

Cordelia's death alone is not what leaves the conclusion of *King Lear* so tragically unsettling. It is the Christian concept of grace that brings the true element of tragedy to her death. The idea that an innocent person should die for a guilty person is fundamentally unfair. Yet, this is the foun-

dition of the Christian belief system. All have sinned and all deserve death. However, Christ came to find us and save us, just as Cordelia came to find and save Lear. Christ stepped forward and took our place as we faced death, just as Lear was facing his own death. This idea of grace, as unjust as it may seem, brings new meaning and appreciation to the intense sorrow surrounding Cordelia's death.

Lear's reconciliation in the play falls short of complete, but we can still draw the Biblical truth of grace from the tragedy. The lesson of grace that Shakespeare presents expands from the basic theme of sanctification. Grace emphasizes our utter despair as sinners and our innate unworthiness of salvation. Contrary to Brower's prediction that an attempt to Christianize the ending of *King Lear* would, "destroy the play and its tragic effect." The emphasis of grace at the conclusion delivers and balances a tragic ending along with a redeeming and edifying Christian truth.

Cordelia's role as a Christ-figure was not fixed. She shifted from a literal daughter to a symbolic Christ throughout the play. This may have weakened the strength of the allegory, causing inconsistencies, and leaving room for criticism, but it also allowed for a dual interpretation of Cordelia's death. As a symbolic Christ-figure she personified grace. Though completely innocent, she willingly died the death her father deserved. Yet, at the same time, in her literal and dual role as Lear's youngest daughter, her death had entirely different ramifications. Shakespeare uses her actual death as a lesson of the reality of sin and its consequences.

"If Lear achieves a Christian insight, he is unable to perpetuate it. His atonement for the mistake of the man does not absolve him of the king's error" (Coursen 297). On the symbolic or allegorical level, King Lear is forgiven by Cordelia as she represents Christ. He is redeemed and saved in the eternal sense by her sacrifice. However, on the literal level, Cordelia's death is simply a consequence of his sin. Despite his salvation and forgiveness from the eternal effects of sin, Lear still suffers from the earthly consequences of his sin. John Lawlor discusses this issue

in his book, *The Tragic Sense in Shakespeare*. He states, "Lear, most would say, has been redeemed... He has indeed learned; he is certainly forgiven... But what is that to the process he has set in motion?" (166-167). The salvation Lear received spiritually from Cordelia, the representative Christ, did not alter or stop the earthly or mortal effects of the evil he committed. And so, in the Biblical and allegorical sense Cordelia's death was of a redemptive quality, but in the literal and earthly sense her death was the final earthly consequence of Lear's own sin, and ultimately the cause of his own death. Even though he was forgiven by Cordelia for disinheriting her, Lear was still punished for his sin when Cordelia was killed by her sisters. "The world is as Lear made it: he opened the gate that let this folly in" (Lawlor 168).

Beyond the Biblical allusions represented in *King Lear*, the utter sadness surrounding the death of Cordelia finds its explanations within the theme of sanctification and the concepts of "grace" and the "consequences of sin." These Christian truths offer meaningful reasons for an otherwise meaningless death. Whether Cordelia's death was a necessary element of grace for King Lear's redemption, or whether it served only as a punishment to Lear, both themes draw us into the essentially Christian nature of the play.

Even if the persistent linkage of Cordelia with aspects of Christ's mission were somehow 'accidental' or 'unintentional',

Even if we maintain that Lear's 'sovereign shame' is not evidence of the man's repentance... and even if we reject what seem to be clear tendencies in the play thus far, the reconciliation scene alone would convince us that Lear's journey has been toward a Christian revelation. (Coursen 287)

Coursen's statement clarifies the undeniable Christian elements of *King Lear*. Though critics like Schlegel make their claims that, "There is no redemptive scheme in the play" (Schlegel 161). The function of Cordelia's character

as grace and the consequence of sin make explicit the ultimately Christian interpretation and implications of *King Lear*.

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