

*King Lear's* Cordelia as a Christ-Like Figure

Of all the characters in Shakespeare's tragedy *King Lear*, Cordelia is without a doubt one of the purest at heart. Her loyalty to her father the king is matched only by Edgar's allegiance to Gloucester. Though she only appears in the play's beginning and ending Acts, her love for her father, despite his unprovoked mistreatment of her is evident throughout the story, as is the unwavering compassion that compels her to start a war in his defense and to grant him forgiveness that he does not deserve. However, when one takes into account Cordelia's appearance, functions, motivations and death, it is apparent that despite Vandenberg's assertion that she ushers in King Lear's redemption and salvation, Cordelia is not a Christ-like figure.

One of Cordelia's defining characteristics is her physical beauty. In Act 4, Scene 3, a gentleman describes her as "Sunshine and rain at once—her smiles and tears / Were like a better way" (*King Lear* 4.3.18-19). He also speaks of her "ripe lip" (4.3.20) and pearly eyes that cry tears of holy water from heaven. He sums up his explanation of her allure by claiming that "Sorrow would be a rarity most beloved / If all could so become it" (4.3.23-24). Cordelia, then, is presented as the ideal representation of an attractive woman. When coupled with her good looks, her inward virtue appears to elevate her to a level of reverence that no other character in the play achieves. However, the Bible is abundantly clear that Christ possessed no such pulchritude. In the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah, rather plainly, describes Jesus as unattractive: "He has no form or comeliness; and when we see him, there is no beauty that we should desire in him" (*King James Version*, Isaiah 53:2). In contrast to Cordelia, Christ is known for his homeliness. Thus, considering the fundamental importance of Cordelia's appearance to her overall character, she cannot be a Christ-like figure from a physical standpoint.

Much in the same way that Cordelia does not parallel Christ in terms of physical attraction, she does not parallel him in terms of function or motivation. In Christian ideology, Jesus submits to death upon the cross out of obedience to God the Father. In the Garden of Gethsemane, before he is betrayed by Judas and arrested, he sweats blood as he asks God to save him from what is to come while simultaneously resigning himself to the Father's divine will: "O, My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as Thou wilt" (Matthew 26:39). This theme of the Father sacrificing the child for the greater good of mankind is also echoed in the oft-quoted New Testament scripture John 3:16 (emphasis mine): "For God so loved the world that *He gave* his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." Therefore, Christ's martyrdom is the result of the Father's sovereign will. Cordelia, on the other hand, operates within her own free will, not at the behest of the Father who chooses her but on behalf of a father who rejects her. Motivated by "love, dear love, and our aged father's right" (4.4.28), she plays a decisive and active role in the orchestration of France's invasion of England. In the end, then, Christ is given as a sacrifice *by* the Father. Cordelia, though she proves to be a loving and forgiving daughter, never serves as such a deliberate offering. She acts not out of obedience to another, but out of a personal sense of right and wrong. Ultimately, she is merely a casualty of others' greed and ambition. As a result, her death brings neither redemption nor salvation.

Most notably, Christ and Cordelia are differentiated by the former's resurrection. In fact, Christ's resurrection is central to Christian doctrine. The belief that Christ was crucified and resurrected on the third day is what, in essence, separates Christianity from all other religions. Without the resurrection, there is no Messiah. Without the resurrection, Christ is not the Son of God but, instead, just a prophet as is espoused in other faiths, including Judaism and Islam.

Cordelia dies but does not resurrect. Carrying her limp body, King Lear, announces, “She’s gone forever. / I know when one is dead and when one lives; / She’s as dead as the cold ground” (5.3.264-265). For a brief moment, while in the throes of madness, he thinks he sees Cordelia move and exclaims, “The feather stirs; she lives” (5.3.270)! But Cordelia is gone, murdered upon Edmund’s command. A truly Christ-like figure must in some way defeat death, a feat conspicuously unachieved by Cordelia.

As for King Lear, I found him to be a truly sympathetic character. He is not defined by the arrogance and cruelty he displays in the first Act but by the transformation he experiences thereafter. He is a fundamentally different person by the play’s end. Once an all-powerful monarch, he is reduced by his conniving daughters to a homeless madman in a hovel. Though his descent is a sad and precipitous, it produces within him unprecedented compassion for others. In Act 3, Scene 4, after he and his knights have been kicked out of both Goneril and Regan’s homes, he finds himself outdoors with nowhere to turn, exposed to the elements during a fierce storm. Rather than rant angrily or wallow in self-pity, he expresses empathy for the less fortunate and prays for them. “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?” (3.4.28-32). He also acknowledges the wrongs he committed when he was king. “Oh, I have ta’en / Too little care of this” (3.4.32-33). Therefore, while he begins as a man who demands flattery, he comes to realize the sheer uselessness of such empty words. “They flattered me / like a dog /... / To say ay and no to everything that I said ay and no to was no good / divinity. / ... / They told me I was everything. ‘Tis a lie. I am not ague- / proof” (4.6.96-105). In the end, he wholeheartedly understands that whether one wears “tattered clothes [through which] small vices do appear” (4.6.164) or “robes

and furred gowns that hide all” (4.6.165), underneath both are merely men, imperfect and fallible. Recognizing his wrong, King Lear hides from Cordelia, too ashamed to face her. When they are finally reunited face to face, he confesses that he knows she has cause not to love him. Still, he begs for her forgiveness. “Pray you now, forget and forgive. / I am old and foolish” (4.7.89-90). King Lear’s journey to self-awareness coupled with the humility it produces makes him a tragic hero worth rooting for.

Works Cited

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