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# Presence in Absence in Shakespeare's King Lear

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## Presence in Absence in Shakespeare's *King Lear*

Driven by the religious turmoil in England, the parliament passed a piece of legislation in 1606 called the "Acte to restraine Abuses of Players." Which states that if any actor on stage "jestingly or profanely" speaks the name of God or Jesus Christ they must pay a fee of ten pounds (The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare). In extension, a playwright has to receive a special license from the Master of the Revels in order to perform a play that includes Christian theology. This act of censorship was designed to smother the religious wars, spreading through England, by regulating the theatre. Overall, this act significantly affected the creation of plays and the portrayals of characters during this time period. Specifically the plays and the characters created by William Shakespeare in the early 1600's.

Until this act, Shakespeare had the freedom to experiment with the inclusion of pagan themes in his scripts along with universal Christian themes. Within the lines of the text he infused references to Greek or Celtic mythology. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is especially noted for its references to mythological creatures like the fairy King Oberon, his Queen Titania, and the famous sprite Puck. Even in well known tragedies like *Romeo and Juliet*, Mercutio references the affects of "Queen Mab" over poor Romeo's dreams (I.iv.79). These early plays showed his experimentation with mythology and folklore while still referencing Biblical or Christian themes in the midst of the pagan rites. So while plays like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet* included elements of pagan references there was an equal balance of Christian themes or curses thrown between the characters. Despite the harmony there is one play that remains completely free from any mention of Christianity, *King Lear*, because it was written between 1603 and 1606, during the time this act was taking control of the London theaters. To its

core, *King Lear* is a pagan play, referencing only pagan gods and completely excluding the God of the Old and New Testament. It diverges from his previous works but aligns perfectly with the requirements of the parliamentary regulation.

While the play is completely free from Christian terminology there has been no end of scholarly interpretation arguing for a Christian reading of the text. Many scholars have referred to *King Lear* as Shakespeare's *Job* and Cordelia as the embodiment of Christ. These ideas have been disputed over time, but one thing remains true: we love to look at *King Lear* through a Christian lens, even though the text is fundamentally pagan. Why? I would argue that Shakespeare imbedded the play with hidden Christian themes, expressed through characters like Cordelia and the Fool, to show that salvation and redemption can only be obtained in a world with Christ. I would further argue that the audience recognizes the absence of Christian principles in the play and through our desire for Christianity it becomes a present theme. The theory of presence in absence becomes clearer when analyzing Cordelia and the Fool. Their characteristics mimic those of Christ which reminds the audience of his absence in the play. Throughout the play *King Lear* repeats the theory of "nothing from nothing" and by analyzing this theme through the work of Jaques Derrida, the compilation of the "nothings" in the play can create a desire for Christianity.

On its surface there is no mention of Christianity in *King Lear*, not only is the religion of the king and his court all pagan but there is a lack of colloquial exclamations which are normally present in other plays. This play perfectly follows the regulations of the "Act to Restrain the Abuses of the Players" because it omits any curses about God or Christ. In Act I, *King Lear* curses his youngest daughter with the pagan gods, primarily referencing the Greek god Apollo.

Each polytheistic curse conveys to the audience that this is a play without Christ. The noble lord Kent emphasizes this point by yelling at Lear, “Now by Apollo, King. Thou swears thy gods in vain” (I.i.290). The plurality of the statement states outright that this is not a play of one god but of many gods. Indeed when overcome by passion or emotion, Lear and his household never swear by Christ. In previous Shakespeare plays there is always mention of the “s’wounds” or “s’blood,” which is jargon for the wounds of Christ or the blood of Christ (Milward, 56). This is seventeenth century’s way of taking the Lords name in vain. The mixture of this type of colloquial irreverence and the tense religious atmosphere caused censorship to take hold in the theaters, spawning the creation of “The Acte to Restraine the Players.” Despite the exclusion of profanity, censorship worked contrary to its goal. While it stopped plays from using Gods name flippantly, it also stopped the representation of God altogether. Although the name was being used irreverently, it was at least being used. God and his divine son, Jesus Christ, were the unseen characters present in each bawdy exclamation.

Only through analysis of the characters, specifically Cordelia, does one begin to see the missing elements or traces of Christianity. Cordelia is King Lear’s youngest daughter and until he divides the kingdoms inheritance, she is his favorite. However when she honestly tells her father that she cannot love him completely once she is married, she loses her favor with him and is banished from the kingdom. After King Lear casts out Cordelia he is overthrown by his older daughters, Goneril and Regan. Once he realizes his folly, he goes completely mad and in Cordelia’s attempt to return her father to power, she and most of the court die in battle. The play concludes with no hope of redemption for either King Lear nor Cordelia, and the rest of the characters are left to piece together the shattered remains of the kingdom. It is interesting that so

much scholarship has taken place over a character who is only in a few of the acts. Technically Cordelia is only physically present in three scenes and only has a total of 116 lines, paltry numbers when considering her sisters combined score of 374 (Frye, 144). After Act I, Cordelia is only mentioned in the play and does not make another appearance until the end. Why is it that we notice and even crave the physical presence of a character who is only on stage for a brief moment? It is because the tragedy of the play increases with the physical absence of Cordelia. When she leaves the stage so do all representations of virtue, the stage fills with Goneriels and Regans whose self serving interest generates chaos, contempt, and eventually death.

If we were measuring the importance of Cordelia's role by line count and stage time, she would be considered a small part; however, Cordelia has come to represent more than a blighted daughter or a representation of missing virtue, rather she has become an icon of the absent Christ figure. Beatrice Groves a professor of Renaissance Literature at the University of Oxford states that Cordelia is a representation of the Christ figure. This theory has been disputed between a number of different scholars over time, but the parallels between Cordelia and Christ cannot be overlooked. Groves further explains that while in the court of her father, Cordelia represents unity and truth, boldly declaring to her father that her love had to be divided between him and her husband. She loves him but cannot "love [him] all." (I.i.105) The emphasis on love in this quote creates a similitude between Cordelia and Christ for she is the representation of Christ's love. Once banished from the kingdom she is married to the King of France who describes her as "most rich being poor, most choice forsaken, and most loved despised." (I.ii.259) This quote draws a parallel between the description of Christ in Isaiah 53:3. Similarly, Christ was "despised and rejected of men." Both characters are sent out by their fathers which never decreases the love

that they have for them and each character is jilted and abandoned by those whom they love. Once cast out, Cordelia is absent from the play, but never forgotten by the characters because she represents the missing link to their happiness, Christ. Some would argue that creating a parallel between the script and the Bible is a stretch because it relies on the knowledge of the audience. Only an educated viewer can grasp the hidden content of the play. Peter Milward, a professor of English Literature at Sophie University, addressed this issue in his book *Shakespeare's Religious Background*. He argues that inventions like the printing press and the circulation of the Geneva Bible made the late 16th century a biblical culture (9). I ascertain that comparisons between Christ and Cordelia are intentional because of the biblical knowledge of both the playwright and the audience.

Not only does Cordelia's rejection create a parallel between her and Christ, but also her efforts to help her father regain his kingdom from her sisters. Upon hearing of King Lear's expulsion from the kingdom, she seeks to reinstate him by going to war with her sisters. This act seems violent for a Christ figure, but she justifies her actions by stating, "O, dear father/It is thy business that I go about" (IV.iii.23-4). This verse again echoes a line from the Bible when a young Christ asks his bewildered parents, "knew ye not that it behooves me to go about my father's business?" (Luke 2:49) Cordelia, like Christ, works purely for her father's benefit. Even after she has been rejected and banished, she still returns to fight for him. This contrasts to her older sisters who overthrow their father for political and personal gain. Rather than going to war for her inheritance, Cordelia only takes violent measures for the benefit of her father. So not only does Cordelia represent Christ's virtue and purity, but she also works for her father's purposes in a way akin to Christ's. It is evident that Shakespeare intended for his audiences to view Cordelia

as a version of Christ by alluding to the biblical text in his poetry.

Yet despite the abundance of these examples, there is disputation among theorists that Christ-like characters are a fallacy of interpretation because there can be no true representation of Christ's perfection (Lawrence, 35). The metaphor of Cordelia as Christ does break down in the final act when Lear enters the stage holding her dead body. He begs the gods to "undo this button," but this is not a play of redemption it is a play of death and the pagan gods "kill for sport" (V.iii.301). Unlike Christ's passion, there is no resurrection and what's done cannot be undone here. It is for this reason that critics call this one of Shakespeare's most tragic tales. The death of both Lear and Cordelia is so difficult to witness that in the 18th century Nahum Tate rewrote the play to create a "happy-ending." (Arthur and Marotti, 128) It is hard to view because Shakespeare paints Cordelia as our Christ, but in the end we watch her die and never resurrect. He gives us a false hope of redemption and then withdraws it from us. William Elton, author of "King Lear and the Gods," writes that there is no redemption in Lear and therefore there is no Christianity because Christian doctrine fundamentally believes that there will be a time for resurrection and reconciliation (72). Despite the parallelism of Christ and Cordelia, she cannot ever truly represent Christ's role as Savior because she does not save either herself or her father from death. While his point is well founded, I would disagree with Elton because the play is paradoxically, deeply Christian by being thoroughly pagan. He fails to remember that the reaction and the intercession of the audience brings the desire and the presence of Christianity into the play. So while Cordelia cannot become the Christ we wish for, but our overall wish for Christ makes Christianity the center of our minds and the center of this play.

Christianity manifests itself through the interaction of the plays text and the audience's

interpretation. Unlike other art forms, theatre is intended to bring the audience and the players into simultaneous catharsis. Plato, a strong advocate of tragedy, argued that catharsis separated the soul from the body and opened the audience up into a temporary imaginative realm. Even though *King Lear* is a realm without redemption, salvation, and Christ, the audience enters into it with a knowledge of biblical themes and a desire for Christianity. As previously argued, there is enough symbolism hidden beneath the text of the play to make both scholars and viewers aware of the absence of this religion. In the closing scene as King Lear brings out his daughter's body and begs the pagan gods for redemption, the audience is reminded that resurrection can occur through Christianity. When his prayers go unheard, as an audience we look for and desire the redemption as much as King Lear. By excluding Christianity from the text Shakespeare draws greater attention to it. King Lear repeats the phrase "Never, never, never, never, never" to express the impossibility of a resurrection without Christ. Audience members must fill in the gaps of the play with their own beliefs. Christianity is alluded to and evoked, but only present because of the audience desires it. The more pagan the play becomes the more Christian the audience wants it to be. We notice that there is no reconciliation between Lear and Cordelia in a purely pagan interpretation of the play. Elements of Christianity, while teased and joked at in many of Shakespeare's plays, is something that offers hope to both the characters and the audience. It is an essential element to the happiness of the characters and its absence in the play makes this one of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies.

The presence of Christianity is created by the audience due to its literal absence in the play; similarly, the desire for presence through a physical absence can also be emphasized through the Fool and Cordelia. As with other characters the Fool is physically missing from Act I

and only appears onstage when Cordelia is off stage. Beatrice Groves states that there is a correlation between the presence of the Fool and the absence of Cordelia. Some adaptations will use the same actress for both Cordelia and the Fool. Each representing the other. Lear further emphasizes this point when he brings out Cordelia's body at the end of the play and refers to her as his "fool" (V.iii.270). This again drives the point that even in her physical absence Cordelia is not far from the heart or mind of the characters and audience. Shakespeare constantly reminds his audience of her presence and her work to return her father to the throne. Right after Cordelia is cast out by her father, the Fool comes to the stage. Although he too is not always present, the audience and the characters still note when he is missing. Shakespeare uses the Fool and Cordelia to draw audience attention to missing elements. The audience looks for the "nothings" because it desires these missing elements of religion. The inverse placement of the Fool and Cordelia emphasize the "nothings" or the missing elements of the play.

This is not the first time the idea of meaning in absence is experimented with. Different discourses on "nothingness" are used by Dada artists like Marcel Duchamp, Nietzsche's nihilism, and is part of Derrida's deconstructionist theory. To focus primarily on the later, Jacques Derrida discusses the issue of language in his three part volume *Speech and Phenomenon* specifically mentioning the issue of absence in language in the book *Of Grammatology*. Although this theory is used primarily in the discussion of language, I shall apply it to the missing Christian elements of *King Lear*.

The breakdown of King Lear's language and his philosophy that only presence can create meaning dissents from the deconstructionist theories of Jaques Derrida. According to Derrida writing is only a derivative form of speech because we have fallen from a "full presence" of speech. To salvage the problem of communication, he creates a new form of grammatology to explain

language and how it should be conveyed. As part of his deconstructive method, he invents a theory of “differance” which has been defined as a bridge between the metaphysical meaning of a word and the outer meaning. Which follows the idea of presence in absence. In every word there is also a “trace” or an “original lack,” essentially what’s left of a words meaning. So even when defining something as “nothing” there is a trace of an absent word that defines the meaning (103). King Lear has fallen from a presence of speech. While he still speaks throughout the play his words are a muddle of misunderstandings. This is not the full breakdown of speech that Derrida describes, yet it is interesting to note the change from the stiff and formal poetry that Lear takes on in Act I to the babbling nonsense used after battling through the storm. The word “nothing” is used so often in this play and represents this idea of trace. For it is the leftover intent that has yet to be used or interpreted. It is the representation of Christianity in this pagan world. It is the original intent that cannot be censured or erased by any government restrictions. That part that the audience maintains. So while Derrida uses his theories to describe the deconstruction of language and the breakdown of form. Lear’s inability to adequately communicate and the use of the word “nothing” continually throughout the work show the breakdown of language and the missing Christian themes.

By the end of the play King Lear’s original comment to Cordelia that, “nothing comes from nothing” remains false. The nothings have piled up in this play to reveal to the audience the futility of a world without Christianity. If the world is a stage then the stage is a microcosm of the world and Shakespeare shows us the despair of life without Christianity. Death without resurrection or reconciliation. *King Lear* cries out against the “Acte to Restraine the Abuses of the Players” that if you want a world without Christ then I can give it to you but it will haunt

you. For a world without Christ means nothing. Even though this is a cautionary tale against the elimination of Christianity from the theatre it also speaks for the hidden or missing elements of the play. As an audience we place those elements on the stage because of our inherent desire for honesty, virtue, and other Christ-like attributes. The active participation of the audience creates the desire for resurrection so that while even in a play without Christ we still search for him amongst the crowd.

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