“It is required you do awake your faith:” Classifying Male and Female Christ Figures in Shakespeare’s King Lear and The Winter’s Tale

Time is reckoned and history centered on the birth of one man. In the span of his life, Jesus Christ taught, healed, served, comforted, blessed, performed miracles, and redeemed all mankind. It is not uncommon for writers to transplant Christlike ideas and events onto their characters. Through her extensive analysis, Lucy Beckett determines that many western texts derive “their value—that is to say, their truthfulness, beauty, and goodness . . . from the absolute truth, beauty and goodness that are one in God and that are definitively revealed to the world in Christ” (1). As ever the authority on human nature portrayed through theatrics, William Shakespeare and his works are no exception.

Unfortunately, according to some critics, scholars have claimed so many allusions to Christ’s life, works, and person that one cannot cast a stone without hitting a Christ figure in Shakespeare’s plays. In his argument to restore Lear as the principal figure worth talking about in the play that bears his name, Nathan Lefler captures the spirit of this savior-seeking by commenting: “Why stop at Cordelia and Edgar? Surely Kent’s character and behaviour throughout the play have a significantly Christ-like quality about them as well? We might go on without too much hesitation to include the Fool in our growing list of Christ figures” (212). Like many, Lefler is frustrated by the trend of seeing Christ figures wherever one looks, in essence diminishing the value and resonance of those events and characters who truly acknowledge the
Savior. Eric Mallin goes so far as to call these figures “gratuitous” (48). Despite all of this, however, I am inclined to speak of Christ figures again by noting the difference between the representations of Christ as males and those as females.

The most frequent trope used to identify a potential Christ figure is that of rebirth or resurrection. Many characters in plays such as *Romeo and Juliet, The Tempest, Much Ado About Nothing, Cymbeline, Comedy of Errors*, and, of course, *King Lear* and *The Winter’s Tale* once believed to be dead or lost are risen or found again, if only for a brief time. The frequent use of this plot point is where I believe most scholars have erroneously identified Christ figures. Resurrection has developed too broad a definition. In actuality, as Sean Benson clarifies, “far from Christianizing his drama . . . Shakespeare’s quasi-resurrections have their ultimate roots in the world of classical (Greek) comedy and romance” (3). In many cases of these mislabeled Christ figures, Shakespeare is merely drawing on significant ideas found in the ancient, before-Christ sources of his plays. As a result, I concentrate my argument on alternative examples of allusions to Christ and his life; although, three of the four characters discussed also experience this resurrection/rebirth factor.

Though both set in primal, pagan times, *King Lear* and *The Winter’s Tale* are two of Shakespeare’s most theologically-stocked plays. Sacrifice and resurrection, lost children returning to the father, suffering and miracles are just some of the tropes present that nod to Christian concepts. William F. Lynch is a noted name in theological readings of literature. In his book, *Christ and Apollo*, he talks about how these two individuals and their respective traditions, both represent the desire of man to transcend this finite world and become infinite. In this context, Lynch presents the idea that “the belief of the reader need not duplicate that of the writer,” of which the same may be said of character and writer (254). In other words, it is
perfectly natural in literature for characters to call upon and pray to Apollo whilst representing
Christian motifs. Through a male and female character in each play—Edgar and Cordelia in the
first and Hermione and Antigonus in the second—I hope to showcase an added depth to
Shakespeare’s apparently excessive number of Christ figures. Specifically, that male Christ
figures in general exemplify Christ’s role as Miracle-worker and Sacrifice, but it is the female
representations who more closely resemble His true nature as Love and Grace.

In King Lear, Shakespeare reinvents the tale of the firstborn son, loving and beloved by
the father, who is up against his younger brother’s ambitions of ruling in their father’s place. The
younger brother’s whisperings cause the firstborn to be separated from the father and undertake
an arduous journey back to his presence, ultimately defeating the brother and saving the kingdom
from eventual and final destruction. Edgar’s role as savior in connection with Edmund’s actions
is clear. Aside from broad implications, Edgar’s singular actions proclaim him as a type of Christ
as well: he is a purveyor of miracles. In effect, he raises his father, Gloucester, from the dead.
Upon arriving at the cliffs of Dover, Gloucester asks to be placed by the edge so that he can end
his life by falling over the precipice. Once he has fallen forward (onto safe ground) Edgar rushes
forward, presumably changes his disguised voice, and addresses his father: “Ten masts at each
make not the altitude / Which thou hast perpendicularly fell: / Thy life's a miracle” (Lear 4.6.53-
55). When Gloucester questions him, Edgar asserts that the old man did indeed fall yet survived.
This is as much a miracle to Gloucester as any Lazarus experienced. In Christ’s own life, there
was misunderstanding about the miracles He performed, why He performed them, and why He
did not perform others. In the hours leading up to his crucifixion, Christ was taken before Herod
who “was desirous to see him of a long season because he . . . hoped to have seen some miracle
of him” (King James, Luke 23:8). After Christ refuses to even speak to Herod, let alone perform
a miracle, Herod dismisses the claim that He is any type of Savior or even anyone of importance. As Mallin colorfully asserts, “miracles . . . make a dreadful recipe for belief” because “when proof must bolster faith, what exactly pulses belief through the blood?” (65). While Christ did in reality perform miracles, this is not what makes Him who He is. Considering this, it seems Edgar's role as an imitation of Christ only extends as far as his circumstantial actions.

Cordelia, on the other hand, receives her Christlike status from her very nature. Most often Cordelia is identified as a Christ figure in light of her symbolic restoration to Britain and role in the redemption of Lear (Lefler). More importantly, however, she portrays true Christlike love through her incorruptibility and charity. The exchange between Lear and Cordelia in the opening scene bears strong resemblance to Christ’s encounter with Satan at the beginning of his ministry. Lear asks her three times to engage in his temptation of flattery and status-grabbing: “what can you say to draw / A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak;” “Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again;” and “Mend your speech a little, / Lest you may mar your fortunes” (Lear 1.1.85-86, 90, 94-95). To each one respectively the princess responds with frank simplicity, then with a citation from her tradition—“I love your Majesty / According to my bond, no more nor less”—and finally a dismissal (Lear 1.1.92-93). This pattern is also found in Matthew 4 (King James).

Cordelia also demonstrates affinity with Christ in the very words she speaks. Her lamentations over Lear are akin to Christ’s over Jerusalem. Upon reuniting with her father, Cordelia alludes to reports she has heard about Lear’s exposure to the elements saying, “Mine enemy's dog, / Though he had bit me, should have stood that night / Against my fire” (Lear 4.7.37-39). Thus, showing how much and how deeply she would have cared for her father had she been allowed to. This kind of charity is clearly reminiscent of Christ’s pleading language for
His people who have rejected Him: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, . . . how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!” (King James, Matt. 23.37). Additionally, when Lear is still off-stage yet to reunite with his daughter, Cordelia devotedly comments: “O dear father, / It is thy business that I go about” (Lear 4.4.23-24). It is not difficult to see that this phrase strongly matches Christ’s own declaration to Mary and Joseph when He is found in the temple in his adolescence (King James, Luke 2:49). These remarks show the unconditional love, shown through compassion and obedience, inherent in Cordelia which serves to point the way to Christ. In Edgar’s case, he can only perform the miracle after Gloucester acts, but Cordelia’s words and actions are procured from no other source but herself, leading her to be a more intrinsic Christ figure.

Continuing forward, Antigonus in The Winter’s Tale may be one of the more obscure Christ figures, but he is no less pertinent. In the course of the first few scenes, the suspicion of Hermione’s adultery is named, she is arrested, and the unfortunate babe born. After Paulina’s pleadings for the child meet Leontes’ deaf ears, Antigonus rises into the image of Christ as he states, “I’ll pawn the little blood which I have left / To save the innocent” (Winter’s 2.3.166-167). Leontes then charges him with the disposal of the supposed-bastard child. Upon the shores of Bohemia, with child in hand, Antigonus laments his bitter cup and prays that somehow, he will be able to drink it. Perhaps to spare him the shame of leaving the helpless Perdita by choice, Shakespeare issues forth a hungry bear to cause Antigonus to sacrifice his own life in an attempt to save the babe’s (Winter’s 3.3.64). Readers and audiences may laugh at the unfortunate and rather absurd fate of Antigonus, but Thomas Rand notes a key connection to the Bible in this instance: Amos 5:19 describes the great and terrible day of the Lord “as if a man did flee from a lion, and a bear met him” (qtd. in Rand 269). Antigonus’ arrival on the shores of Bohemia
(“fleeing” so to speak from Leontes) is amidst a great and terrible storm. Here he comes as the judgement-giver to Perdita (the fallen of mankind because of the transgression of a parent). By the end of the scene, he becomes an inverted Christ figure as he is driven off-stage to die without hope of resurrection. Still, he represents both the atoning sacrifice of Christ and his role as judge of both quick and dead. Again, however, his similarities to Christ remain in the external frame as he reacts to his circumstances.

Counter to Antigonus is a female who, like Cordelia, determines her circumstances by her actions and which actions stem from her innate Christian character. Hermione, the virtuous and falsely accused queen of Sicilia, is perhaps one of the more widely-accepted Christ figures in Shakespearean scholarship. Many acknowledge this status on account of her miraculous resurrection in the last scene of the play. More than this event though, Hermione represents the silent and active grace of Christ first as she is tormented by accusers and then as she frankly forgives her husband, Leontes, for his wrongful judgement and actions. Tiffany Grace calls it “a ‘holy’ instinct [that] grants Hermione the grace to forgive” (436). Christ was notably silent through the scornful trials He endured except once to concede that He was in fact King of the Jews (*King James*, Matt. 27:11). He said nothing else. Hermione, in effect, does the same and only speaks to give eloquence to her sorrows, not to address the accusations. Shakespeare perhaps gives voice to Christ’s inner thoughts and reasonings when Hermione begins her answer to Leontes’ accusations:

> Since what I am to say must be but that
> Which contradicts my accusation and
> The testimony on my part no other
> But what comes from myself, it shall scarce boot me
To say ‘not guilty:’ mine integrity

Being counted falsehood, shall, as I express it,

Be so received. (Winter’s 3.2. 22-28)

Nothing she can say will change his mind since her integrity is in question. Just as Christ did, she accepts that this suffering must happen in order for Leontes to be redeemed of his mistake (King James, Matt. 26:54). Some authors, like Lysbeth Benkert, initially think of Hermione as a type of the Virgin Mary: an intermediary. However, even Benkert ultimately concludes that, by the end of the play, the queen “breaks the constraints genre would place on her, and becomes the source of both forgiveness and grace” (47). Christlike grace is shown in Hermione’s silence and in her actions.

Perhaps even more than her clemency in the trial, it is Hermione’s grace of forgiveness that paints her as a Christ figure. More than once, Christ’s first address to someone who comes seeking Him is some variation of “thy sins be forgiven thee” (King James, Mark 2:5). The fact that Hermione’s forgiveness of Leontes is her first act is in direct correlation with Christ’s life. Tiffany also mentions Erasmus’ teachings about “our need for both ‘uplifting grace, consoling grace’ and ‘healing grace,’” all of which Hermione demonstrates (436). Uplifting grace in the simple fact that she consents to come down from her pedestal and thus evokes imagery of the condescension of God to exalt mankind (Winter’s 5.3.103-105); Consoling grace as it is reported “she embraces him [Leontes]” and “hangs about his neck” (5.3.112-113); And healing grace as her presence prompts Leontes to call himself with his wife and daughter a family “dissevered” (5.3.157). These demonstrations of grace are purely associated with Hermione’s attributes. She truly embodies the forgiving, compassionate nature of Christ with “healing in his wings” (King James, Mal. 4:2).
While all Christ figures in literature have discrepancies and various prominent aspects, it seems especially valuable to consider male and female Christ figures in comparison with one another. Some critics may still claim Shakespeare’s pandering to his audience is the reasoning behind his inclusion of so many potential Christ figures while others see their pervasive presence as a fluke or wishful thinking on the side of scholars. However, it seems clear that Shakespeare did include many intentional Christ figures and characterized them with impeccable detail so as to capture a variety of Christ’s qualities and attributes. The evidence in this paper is meant to suggest two categories of Christ figures that Shakespeare creates: Innate and Circumstantial. The male characters discussed here, as well as those in other plays, are examples of circumstantial figures because the Christlike things attached to them are products of their circumstances or surroundings. Many female examples in Shakespeare’s works, represented here by Cordelia and Hermione, portray the innate virtues of Christ because their natures specifically cause the events that result in their similarities with Him. By qualifying Christ figures in this way, scholars may stay true to Shakespeare’s intentional inclusions while still noting all allusions to the Son of God.
Works Cited


