

Cordelia: The Interpretations That Turned a Minor Character into a Protagonist

King Lear is one of Shakespeare's most celebrated works and popular plays. Audiences witness the fatal effect power can have as they see King Lear fall from grace and build himself back up from nothing, and as they watch several brutal deaths at the hands of corruption. Next to Lear himself, the play's most celebrated character is arguably his youngest and favorite daughter, Cordelia. Her acclaim is astounding, considering her absence throughout the bulk of the play — after Act 1 Scene 1, she does not appear again until halfway through the fourth act. Until this resurfacing, an unfamiliar observer might even wonder what she was doing in the play at all, initially existing only to be scolded and banished right out of the central action. However, between her brave lines at the beginning of the play, her function as Lear's final source of stability, love, and healing, and her untimely death, she solidifies her role as one of the play's most influential characters. Interpreters of the *King Lear*'s meaning and purpose look to Cordelia to support their arguments, and many vastly different symbolisms have been assigned to her. The various theories of what Cordelia represents may say as much about the interpreter as the play itself.

Cordelia is most popularly interpreted as a Christ-figure. One reason is her value of truth above anything else, particularly money, power, or even her reputation among her family and potential suitors. She irrevocably proves her honesty where her sisters' fails, with her line "Why have my sisters husbands, if they say they love you all?" (1.1.97). Readers believing this symbolism see its strongest connection in Cordelia's death, a tragic loss of the play's most innocent character. In Lear's final days, Cordelia became a savior to him, a source of happiness and rejuvenation as the rest of his family waged war against him. She dies at the hands of a war caused by the evildoings and mistakes of the rest of the characters, and with this, seemingly dies for their sins as Jesus did. Her death is the final act in the long string of events humanizing and humbling Lear. Experiencing this tragedy, Lear is said to receive a final salvation in the last moments of his own life.

In addition to these biblical connotations, the play contains several generalizations about women. I have always thought people give Shakespeare too much credit when it comes to feminism. To examine a play's view on women, one must examine not only the female characters and their actions, but how these actions are received and the effect they have. I had previously heard of Cordelia as a feminist figure in *King Lear*, and she showed promise as such at the end of Act One— speaking out against her father; risking losing a stable future and her family to stand up to an act she deemed immoral; and becoming the queen of France. However, Cordelia's absence limits her influence as such an inspiration. Though of course she is keeping busy in France and rallies her own army, this is glossed over in favor of her evil sisters (who, in the ultimate anti-feminist ending, both die in the process of fighting over a man). Cordelia does not return until the end of the play, where she gives some sweet lines and serves as a healer, but is quickly killed off and forever silenced. An audience feels for her, as she is one of the most sympathetic characters in the play, but perhaps they also feel a sense of disappointment, as Cordelia did not have a full opportunity to make the statements she could have. Lear's youngest daughter carries one of Shakespeare's important feminist *moments*, however, it is up to the reader to determine whether this is enough to immortalize her as a true feminist character.

Margot Heinemann stresses the importance of examining King Lear's family not only as a family, but as a representation of the state. The play is not contained to its own characters: its statements have broader political implications. Goneril and Regan are examples of "contemporary flatterers", "who were being rewarded for their obsequiousness with land, monopolies, offices and gifts." Quite simply, they are corrupt politicians, or the careless upper class. With this, Cordelia speaks for the more underrepresented people of the state. She takes the risk of dismissing her father's contest because "... to join in the public competition of flattery and cadging would be to collude with the corruption of absolute power". As the play progresses and King Lear loses elements of his power one by one, he has revelations about how little he has done for the common people and the homeless in his nation. His favorite daughter was the first advocate of this, perhaps the first to bring light to his selfish and fraudulent nature. An audience will recognize the elements they despise most about their own government (which can be anywhere. *King Lear* has been set not only in England, but in 1920s America and Feudal Japan, for exam-

ple) and sympathize with Cordelia, suffering for speaking out while her immoral sisters who “play the game” of politics are rewarded.

With this view, a modern audience might recognize Cordelia either as an outspoken political commentator like a reporter, or as an underrepresented independent party. People love to celebrate strong women in Shakespeare plays, so Cordelia still remains a feminist figure to many. Additionally, there are an abundance of religious readings of the play that interpret Cordelia to be a deliberate representation of Christ. People may also see Cordelia as one of the play’s few heroes, and thus, identify with her. Personally, I saw Cordelia’s refusal to play into her father’s contest as an act of authenticity, and assumed she enjoyed art and literature, unlike her sisters who were only after beauty, popularity, and materialism. There is no backing for my assumptions on Cordelia’s outside interests, but I know my projection of myself onto Cordelia cannot be uncommon. What struck me about Cordelia’s character was that a character with so little stage time can make such an impact on some people; enough to guide their entire interpretation of the play. With her few, yet powerful, appearances, she resonates as Lear’s one good daughter, and each person projects onto her what they think this goodness represents. We have no statement from Shakespeare on her meaning or purpose, and yet, we made this brave young character into a hero expanding widely beyond the scope of her limited appearance, and immortalizing her acts of goodness in our culture forever. She shows the most beautiful aspect of art: that it is interpreted by the viewer, reader, or listener, and can impact each of us differently, while still resonating in us all.

Works Consulted:

Ian Hunter, "Lear, Cordelia & the Cross." *Convivium* v. 1 n. 3 (July/August, 2012): 22-27.

Vanden Berg, Jessica (2000) "Grace, Consequences, and Christianity in King Lear," *Italics*: Vol. 2000: Iss. 1, Article 3. Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/italics/vol2000/iss1/3>