

Poetic Injustice in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *The Tempest**

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Shakespeare does not consider it imperative to distribute earthly rewards and punishments to the characters in proportion to their respective merits. In fact, so little does he observe “poetic justice” that Samuel Johnson in the “Preface” to his Shakespeare edition expressed his bewilderment by stating that “he seems to write without any moral purpose” (71). While some “good” characters, like the youthful lovers in most of the comedies, are rewarded by a happy ending, and villains like Richard III and Macbeth clearly receive the punishment they deserve, there are quite a few striking instances in which the outcome does not correspond to the characters’ merits. In this article I propose to investigate two prime instances of this lack of correspondence, which occur in *King Lear* and *The Tempest*.¹

1. The Death of Cordelia

To most spectators and critics, Cordelia’s death in *King Lear* does not just violate their sense of justice but appears to be devoid of any ulterior meaning.² The violent end of this epitome of virtue and filial affection can be considered an obvious instance of what Bradley called the “waste of good”, which in the tragedies precedes the restoration of the natural order (28). The fact that her father is still alive to witness his daughter’s meaningless death renders her fate, and his, all the more terrible. Actually, the play, unlike *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*,

*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debkullmann0252.htm>>.

does not even attempt to dramatize the restoration of a natural order. When Albany, the heir to the kingdom, pronounces that “all friends shall taste / The wages of their virtue and all foes / The cup of their deservings” (5.3.303-05) his words are rendered absurd by the subsequent entrance of Lear with Cordelia’s dead body. As Jonathan Kertzer points out, “poetic justice [...] is exposed within the play as a feeble etiquette—a mere poetical decency” (12). After Lear’s and Cordelia’s deaths the only consolation Albany and Edgar can provide is that their own lives will be shorter than Lear’s, i.e. less exposed to the extremities of grief which inescapably beset this valley of tears which is life or, as Kent will put it, “the rack of this tough world” (5.3.315)³:

The oldest hath borne most; we that are young
Shall never see so much, nor live so long. (5.3.526-27)

After Lear has gone through the process of repentance, atonement and reconciliation with Cordelia, and Cordelia has demonstrated her moral perfection by absolving her father from blame, the ensuing tragedy is bound to violate any human sense of justice. The injustice of the play’s ending strikes the spectator all the more forcefully as he or she has been alerted to the notion of poetic justice before: Edgar’s speech to the effect that “The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices / Make instruments to plague us” (5.3.171-72) certainly serves to establish the pattern of poetic justice as a foil to the injustice which will follow, and so does Albany’s reference to Goneril’s and Regan’s deaths as “this judgment of the heavens” (5.3.232). In the pagan universe of *King Lear*, Edgar and Albany consider it the gods’ job to dispense justice⁴: If we follow Stephen Greenblatt’s argumentation (see 119-28), the play’s manifold instances of injustice, which take place in spite of the characters’ theatrical expressions of hope or pleadings with the gods, clearly demonstrate that these gods do not exist, and that it is man’s responsibility alone to bring about a just world.⁵ This ties in with the statement, made by Kenneth Muir in a discussion at

the World Shakespeare Congress at Berlin in 1986, that the message of *King Lear* is that "the gods have to learn from men."

This line of interpretation, however, fails to take into account a certain spiritual dimension which, to an audience steeped in Biblical texts and Christian doctrine, will have been inescapable. In 4.6, a gentleman addresses Lear, who is still suffering from insanity, reminding him of his daughter Cordelia:

Thou hast one daughter
Who redeems nature from the general curse
Which twain have brought her to. (4.6.205-07)

Virtuous Cordelia is set against her two vicious sisters. In accordance with the concept of analogies prevalent in what used to be called the Elizabethan World Picture, what happened to Lear in some sense also happened to nature as a whole, and Cordelia in restoring Lear also sets right nature. So far so good. But if you speak of a general curse brought about by two people, can you possibly avoid thinking of the two people who in the Bible are held responsible for all our misfortunes? Twentieth-century literary criticism, informed by the doctrine of concentrating on texts rather than contexts, often stated that you can and should. In his Arden edition of 1952 Kenneth Muir provides the following footnote:

twain not Adam and Eve, as Danby fancifully suggests (*op. cit.*, p. 125), but Goneril and Regan. (*King Lear*, ed. Kenneth Muir, 5.3.204n)

The reader's fancy which may have strayed from the text at hand is redirected to this text as the only thing which counts in interpretation. I would like to suggest that Muir's note is indicative of a fanciful disregard of those contexts which must have been immediately present to the Jacobean theatre-goer. Reginald Foakes's note in the Arden 3 edition is certainly more pertinent:

202-3 **general ... to** The universal curse of original sin was brought on human nature by Adam and Eve, the first twain, who lie behind the more immediate pair, Goneril and Regan. (*King Lear*, ed. Reginald Foakes, 4.6.202-03n)

The gentleman's choice of words reveals a spiritual analogy, in the tradition of Christian historiography: Goneril and Regan reenact the Fall of Man.

But if this is so, who is Cordelia? On this question John Danby, who made the "fanciful" suggestion concerning Adam and Eve in his book on *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature* (1949), actually appears to be blind to the obvious. Danby quotes from Dante, Chaucer, Malory, Hooker, and the marriage service to point out:

Cordelia is the other Nature Edmund, Goneril, and Regan ignore. In our view she is a figure comparable with that of Griselde or Beatrice: literally a woman; allegorically the root of individual and social sanity; tropologically Charity "that suffereth long and is kind"; anagogically the redemptive principle itself. (124-25)

First and foremost, according to Danby, Cordelia is "Nature" (125). For all his learning, however, Danby leaves out the central text of western culture, the New Testament, and becomes guilty of inaccurate reading: Cordelia is not Nature, she *redeems* Nature. According to St. Paul, the only Redeemer of the fallen world is, of course, Jesus Christ; so inasmuch as Goneril and Regan are Adam and Eve, Cordelia is Christ⁶: "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Cor 15:22). In this context her death actually makes sense, as it repeats Christ's crucifixion. This analogy ties in with Helen Gardner's comparison of Lear carrying the dead Cordelia in his arms with the Pietà setting, i.e. the Virgin Mary carrying Christ's dead body (see 27-28).

But does any redemption take place in *King Lear*? Are we not to believe in Lear's agonizing exclamation that Cordelia will "come no more, / Never, never, never, never, never" (5.3.308-09)? In the Quarto version, Lear then passes away upon a conventional dying groan. The revised version provided by the Folio, however, adds two lines:

Do you see this? Look on her! Look her lips,
Look there, look there! *He dies.* (5.3.311-12)

As Bradley noted (see 241), Lear dies of joy, believing Cordelia to be alive. To the bystanders, as well as to modern spectators, this delusion of Lear's only adds to the pain they feel. Cordelia's death has been compared to the "promis'd end" (5.3.264), i.e. doomsday, or at least an "image of that horror" (5.3.265) by Kent and Edgar, and now Kent exclaims: "Break, heart, I prithee, break" (5.3.313). Actually, it is left to Lear to express hope: Lear had called for a looking-glass to trace Cordelia's breathing (5.3.262-64) and applied a feather to her mouth and nose:

This feather stirs, she lives! If it be so,
It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows
That ever I have felt. (5.3.266-68)

If Cordelia were alive, she could, according to Lear, fulfil the role of redeemer, just as Christ by his resurrection redeems the world. In connection with the previous reference to Cordelia as the one who redeems nature from the general curse, the analogy established by Lear's (inadvertent) religious phraseology seems to me inescapable. As St. Paul points out in 1 Cor 15, Christian salvation solely depends on whether Christ has risen from the dead or not. If he has, it is indeed a chance which does redeem all sorrows that we, as human beings, have ever felt.

But is there a chance for Cordelia to be alive? Commentators, almost unanimously,⁷ agree with Kent, Edgar, and Albany that there is not (e.g. Greenblatt 123-25; Holloway 90-95; Lennard 57), in spite of some contradictory evidence. The actor whose body Lear carries on stage was alive, and spectators standing close enough to the stage might actually have noticed the stain on the looking glass or the stirring of the feather. Another consideration, however, may carry more weight: Jacobean audiences, I would like to suggest, were not in the habit of relegating the world of the theatre to a plane completely remote from "real life," and the notions of real life entertained by the majority of the audience would have included the basic Christian tenets. It would thus seem strange that spectators who every Sunday professed their faith in life everlasting should unquestioningly have accepted the

bleak ending of this tragedy. This does not mean that contemporary audiences could not distinguish between fiction and real life, or between churchgoing and theatre-going and the respective “discourses”. My suggestion is simply that they were not used to switching off their Christian world view when leaving the church or switching on the tragic world view of pagan antiquity when entering the theatre as automatically as eighteenth- or nineteenth-century audiences might have done, but would naturally be looking for a connection between the fictional play on stage and the discourses and practices prevalent outside the theatre.⁸

The plot, to be sure, is set in pre-Christian times, at about 800 BC. if we follow the chronology of the British kings established by Geoffrey of Monmouth. The characters cannot be expected to believe in Christ and salvation, although Kent and Edgar are (anachronistically) aware of the end “promised” in *Revelation*. No wonder their attitude with regard to the tragic events is one of despair. Intellectual audiences from the late seventeenth century onwards have unquestioningly accepted and shared this attitude, so much so, indeed, that Nahum Tate in 1681 felt bound to rewrite the play’s ending to provide Cordelia and Edgar with the “earthly” rewards they deserve. A Jacobean spectator, however, will have wondered if Cordelia should not have had a chance to be alive, in heaven (like Christ, whom she typifies), and if Kent’s and Edgar’s despair is at all warranted. The extent of this wondering will have been dependent on the strength of this spectator’s Christian faith.

My suggestion is that Shakespeare, by making Lear believe that Cordelia is alive, reaches out of the boundaries of theatrical discourse. Those spectators who firmly believe in the resurrection of Christ and life everlasting are invited to share Lear’s hope and trust in Cordelia’s survival. By contrast, those who are beginning to doubt these tenets of faith may find confirmation of their attitude in Cordelia’s tragic and gratuitous death: If Lear is deluded in the belief that Cordelia is not dead, one option open to the audience is to construe that eternal life is also a delusion.⁹

My argument thus does not imply that *King Lear* is a Christian play; I should rather like to suggest that the play dramatizes agnosticism. In this the play could be compared to a poem by Thomas Hardy in which an old thrush in the midst of winter bursts out into song:

So little cause for carolings
 Of such ecstatic sound
 Was written on terrestrial things
 Afar or nigh around
 That I could think there trembled through
 His happy good night air
 Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
 And I was unaware.
 ("The Darkling Thrush," st. 4; Hardy 219)

Like the unwarranted bird-song, Lear's belief that Cordelia is alive may—or may not—indicate a spiritual knowledge out of reach of the bystanders.

2. Forgiveness in *The Tempest*

A similar reaching-out to extra-theatrical Christian discourse can be observed at the end of *The Tempest*. While Prospero receives poetic justice when he returns to Italy and is reinvested as Duke of Milan, and Miranda's and Ferdinand's innocent devotion to one another logically results in their happiness ever after, many spectators are bewildered by the fact that a happy ending is also accorded to characters who, by any ethical or judicial standard, clearly do not deserve it. If Prospero can return to his former dignities, so can Alonso, Sebastian, and Antonio, in spite of the fact that Antonio is unrepentant, and that he and Sebastian attempted murdering Alonso just an hour before (2.1.199-296 and 3.3.11-17). The Italian villains who ousted Prospero from his dukedom and, as far as we know, are prepared to continue their villainous careers are allowed to go home scot-free.

The plot, in fact, precludes an ending in which justice is done to the Italian courtly villains. To leave his island and return to Milan, Pros-

pero has to be reconciled to his enemies, and the only man fit for Miranda's hand in marriage happens to be the son of one of them. The plot thus allows Prospero to demonstrate first his humanity and then his moral superiority over those who deprived him of his dukedom by force. Informed by Ariel he pities the villains who are now in his power:

Hast thou, which art but air, a touch, a feeling
Of their afflictions, and shall not myself,
One of their kind, that relish all as sharply,
Passion as they, be kindlier mov'd than thou art? (5.1.21-24)

Prospero then refers to his own superior mind: "The rarer action is / In virtue than in vengeance" (5.1.27-28). Virtue and Prospero's "nobler reason" (5.1.26) suggest forgiveness, as opposed to his "fury" (5.1.26) which would suggest vengeance. To the audience, the reference to the Christian doctrine of forgiveness will have been evident, the more so as Prospero proclaims that he is satisfied of his enemies' penitence (see 5.1.28). Prospero later on also promises his pardon to Caliban, who, in turn, announces his intention to "be wise hereafter, / And seek for grace" (295-96), a statement which, in its blunt simplicity, may remind us of promises made by misbehaving children and thus almost amounts to a parody of the Christian nexus of penitence and forgiveness.

The injustice implied in the happy ending accorded to the villains goes even further. As has often been noted, Antonio, the chief of them, does not express any regret as to what he has done (e. g. Kermode, Introduction lxii; Willis 328-29; Griffiths 78)¹⁰; Prospero has no means to be sure of his penitence, even less so as he is aware of Antonio's and Sebastian's recent plot against Alonso; still he expresses forgiveness:

For you, most wicked sir, whom to call brother
Would even infect my mouth, I do forgive
Thy rankest fault—all of them; and require
My dukedom of thee, which perforce, I know
Thou must restore. (5.1.130-34).

Commenting on Antonio's failure to be "moved" by Prospero's forgiveness, Frank Kermode (quoted from Graff and Phelan 223) states that "Shakespeare is not here interested in a high harmony such as he renders in *Pericles* [...]." I should like to contend that Shakespeare deliberately leaves the issue of the forgiveness accorded to Antonio unresolved (cf. Orgel 26). Audiences are invited to go on wondering about the efficacy of Prospero's forgiveness and the likelihood of Antonio's reformation, and to compare Prospero's words with their own attitudes with regard to forgiveness and reconciliation, attitudes which are bound to be related to the nature and quality of their Christian faith.

Another degree of forgiveness is reached with regard to Alonso: When the King of Naples, after discovering his son's love for Miranda, asks Ferdinand forgiveness for having conspired to banish his future father-in-law, Prospero cuts him short by suggesting not to "burthen our remembrance with / A heaviness that's gone" (5.1.199-200). The past is swept away to render the present and the future less heavy; penitence need not be given expression.

It is left to Miranda, however, to top the injustice implied in the villainous courtiers' undeserved happy ending. Her amazement at seeing the courtiers can well be quoted as an instance of utter naivety (cf. e.g., Griffiths 81; Lyne 110):

O wonder!
How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world
That has such people in't! (5.1.181-84)

Actually, it is her attitude which provides the most explicit hope for a happy future. Miranda's undeserved admiration not only allows the courtiers to continue life with a clean slate but even provides a store of goodwill given in advance. The villains' faults are not only forgiven and forgotten, but, from the point of view of the future Queen of Naples, are considered never to have taken place. While, on the one hand, Miranda's words may indeed testify to the naivety of an adoles-

cent girl, she, on the other hand, becomes the instrument of the supreme form of forgiveness.

We are also alerted to the notion that the happy ending is part of a providential plan: The seas are “merciful” (5.1.178), and Ferdinand can call Miranda his own “by immortal Providence” (5.1.189), just as Prospero himself ascribes his and Miranda’s salvation to “Providence divine” (1.2.159). It should be noted that, while the Christian term of providence is used, it clearly does not refer to the Calvinist doctrine of salvation and damnation but to the restoration of the natural order: Prospero and Miranda do not enjoy the status of being among the “elect” but will (like the others) resume their proper positions in the universe, divinely ordered as it is. Within this framework, the villainy done to Prospero becomes a “fortunate fall,” as Gonzalo discovers:

Was Milan thrust from Milan, that his issue
Should become kings of Naples? (5.1.205-06)

We should also note that the ending of *The Tempest* would have been rather gruesome if everybody got what he deserved: “[...] use every man after his desert, and who shall scape whipping?,” as Hamlet points out (2.2.529-30), or, as Isabella remarks in *Measure for Measure*:

Could great men thunder
As Jove himself does, Jove would never be quiet,
For every pelting, petty officer
Would use his heaven for thunder,
Nothing but thunder! (2.2.110-14)

In *The Tempest*, at any rate, poetic justice could only amount to an orgy of whipping or thundering. We may note that if we accept the Christian doctrine that “in the course of justice none of us / Should see salvation” (*Merchant of Venice* 4.1.196-97) any poetic justice which involves a happy ending can only be a temporal illusion.

The forgiveness accorded to the characters of *The Tempest* does not imply, though, that they will indeed, like Caliban, “be wise hereafter” and partake of temporal and eternal happiness. Whether we should

share Gonzalo's assessment that "all of us [have found] ourselves" (5.1.212), i.e. our proper places in the framework of society and the natural order, is entirely up to the spectator's faith, both his faith in Gonzalo's and Prospero's prognostications and his Christian faith in the efficacy of penitence and forgiveness.¹¹ We may be as doubtful of this issue as the actor of Prospero is about getting the audience's applause, now that his "charms are all o'erthrown" (Epilogue 1). The epilogue rather bluntly couches a conventional appeal for applause in Christian terminology, thus reaching out from the world of the theatre to that of the audience¹²:

As you from crimes will pardon'd be,
Let your indulgence set me free. (19-20)

"And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matt 6:12; cf. 6:14-15). It is up to us, to the individual spectator, if he or she will follow this appeal.

Summing up we should note that the Christian concepts of grace and forgiveness are embedded in a series of explanations by which the concept of justice is transcended:

First of all, forgiveness and reconciliation are expedient to Prospero, because without a reconciliation he could not leave the island. Justice is bypassed in favour of utility and expediency.

Secondly, forgiveness is the result of pity, based on a sense of shared humanity.

Thirdly, justice is relegated to the concept of vengeance, which is introduced as the opposite of virtue. It is human virtue or perfection which makes Prospero forgo the justice implied in being avenged on his enemies.

Fourthly, forgiveness is the result of "reason," the "nobler" part of man's mind as opposed to basic passions or, as we would say, instincts, such as "fury."

Fifthly, Miranda's innocence appears to embody a spiritual and redemptive dimension.

The plot and the words chosen by Prospero thus deconstruct the concept of justice, and, on the level of *The Tempest* as a literary composition, of poetic justice, from various angles, relating to a wide range of fields of Renaissance *episteme*. Like the conclusions of many other plays, the ending of *The Tempest* appears indicative of the natural (and divine) order of things, but, while in a play like *Cymbeline* pagan deities make sure that justice is done,¹³ *The Tempest* transcends justice by foregrounding the Christian concepts of mercy and forgiveness. Poetic justice has been superseded by poetic faith, poetic hope and poetic charity: rather than having the good end happily, the bad unhappily (“That is what Fiction means,” as Miss Prism points out in Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* 275), Shakespeare invites us to put faith in the reformation of the Italian villains, to hope for Miranda and Ferdinand (and, on the political level, Milan and Naples) to live happily ever after, and to share Prospero’s and Miranda’s charitable feelings with regard to their erring compatriots.

3. Concluding Remarks

In both *King Lear* and *The Tempest* central issues are left unresolved. While Lear’s belief in Cordelia’s survival can easily be ascribed to his despair and his senility, it could also be traced to some transcendental knowledge of which Kent and Edgar are not aware. Similarly, Miranda’s praise of the Italian courtiers can be accounted for by her juvenile innocence and naivety, but, on another level, to some kind of faith in human potential of which more experienced people are no longer capable. Both senility and innocence may—or may not—be the containers of some spiritual truth.

I should like to argue that the endings of *King Lear* and *The Tempest*, “unsatisfactory” from the point of view of poetic justice, are in fact open endings: audiences are warned not to have done with the play but to go on looking for some other kind of justice which cannot be found in the theatre and in the worlds it represents, be it the pagan

world of pre-Christian Britain or the godless world of Italian courtly intrigue, or indeed any other environment which is marked by meaningless suffering and undeserved prosperity. Spectators are invited to continue speculating on the issue of justice on the basis of extra-theatrical, Christian discourse. The plays' endings thus reach out to the discursive world outside the theatre; in *The Tempest* this process of reaching-out is made explicit in the epilogue, which directly reminds the spectator of his or her Christian faith ("As you from crimes would pardon'd be [...]"). If the tenets of Christianity are true, maybe there *is* a chance for Cordelia to be alive and partake of the felicity of the Christian heaven, and maybe Christian mercy *can* extend to Italian courtly villains even before they openly announce their repentance.

These interpretations go beyond the kind of justice a human judge, a poet or a pagan god can dispense. Shakespeare follows theatrical conventions in avoiding preaching, but he does not fit his plays into any closed or conventional system of dispensing poetic justice. He rather establishes links to other fields of discursive experience which may or may not be followed by the individual spectator or reader. The knowledge of these links, however, appears indispensable not just to cultural historians but to all those who wish to appreciate Shakespeare's dramatic achievement.

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NOTES

¹See also the article by Maurice Charney on "Poetic Justice and the Disguises of Edgar in *King Lear*" in this issue.

²Cf., e.g., Bradley 269-73; Grene 188-89; Johnson, "Notes" 2-3; Knight 204; Levin 162; Stampfer 205-09.

³Quotations from Shakespeare are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans.

⁴"Edgar's assessment of the gods' justice is breathtakingly harsh in the way it understands Gloucester's story [...] and as theology it emphasizes judgment where Cordelia emphasizes grace" (Cox 91).

⁵Greenblatt's implication that in *King Lear* not only pagan but also Christian rituals and beliefs are "emptied out" (119) was countered by Gary Taylor (see 21).

⁶On the specifically Christian character of Cordelia's virtues and on the various Biblical echoes in lines spoken by, or referring to, Cordelia, cf. Cox 88-89.

⁷The exception to the rule appears to be Matthews: "[...] Lear dies in joy because of the faith that his treasure by its very nature transcends mortality. In this world, or in another, he believes Cordelia lives. On the words 'Look there, look there', his eyes are not necessarily on her face. Perhaps it is outside her body that he sees her waiting for him" (160).

⁸On the theatre as a place of "mental experiments, explorations and boundary-crossings"; cf. Kullmann "Pagan Mysteries and Metaphysical Ironies" (2013).

⁹I thank one of the anonymous readers of this paper for emphasizing this point.

¹⁰Cf. also W. H. Auden's poem, "The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*" (1944), esp. 136-37.

¹¹In emphasizing the doctrines of penitence, forgiveness, and charity, Shakespeare assumes an anti-Puritan stance and firmly positions himself on the Catholic or Church of England side of the theological debates of his time. The official Homily "Of Charity" as published in 1547 to be read in churches (First Book of the Homilies, Homily 6) sets particular store on Christ's command to love one's enemies; cf. also the Homily "Of Repentance and True Reconciliation unto God" (Second Book, Homily 21), *The Two Books of the Homilies* 66-72 and 525-49. Cf. also Kullmann, "Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*" (328-29); and Kullmann, *William Shakespeare* (114-23).

¹²Cf., e.g., Kermode's note on the Epilogue in his Arden edition of *The Tempest* (134); and Zimbardo's assessment: "Only in a world of art, an enchanted island, or the play itself, does order arrest mutability and control disaster; but art must at last be abandoned, and then nothing is left mankind but to sue for grace" (243).

¹³On Shakespeare's dramatization of paganism in *Cymbeline*; cf. Kullmann, "Pagan Mysteries" (44-46).

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