



"Speak again": life, love and language in *King Lear*

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Christian Coppa's paper opened up many illuminating questions for us. I would like in particular to draw our attention to the following two:

How might Shakespeare's theatre help us understand human life in the light of grace?

How might it do so even in its tragic mode?

In my presentation I would like to continue reflecting on these questions, with a particular focus on *King Lear*, and specifically, on how the play invites us to reflect on the relationship between language, life and love - or, in theological terms, between theatre and Resurrection. My aim in doing so is to continue exploring Shakespeare's theatre in ways that might, in the light of Christian's presentation, lead to fruitful conversation between all of us in the final part of our session. Indeed, with Christian, we have deliberately tried to structure our presentations precisely so as to facilitate all of us to come together in reflection on some of the profound questions that the experience of Shakespeare's theatre presents us with. My presentation will be slightly shorter than Christian's so as to allow as much time for general discussion as possible.

On a personal level, I should also say at the outset of my presentation that the primary influence behind it is, indeed, shared reflection on the profound questions that the experience of Shakespeare's theatre presents us with. In particular, my reading of *King Lear* has been shaped in conversation with the work and with the loving memory of John Hughes. John was a brilliant theologian and equally brilliant reader of Shakespeare. He was also a dear friend. We were undergraduate students in theology together, and it was at that time that I started learning from him just how much Shakespeare's wisdom can contribute to the theological task. The work John was undertaking at the time became in turn an excellent article published in *Modern Theology* 17:3 (2001), called "The Politics of Forgiveness: A Theological Exploration of *King Lear*" (the article now also appears in *Graced Life: The Writings of John Hughes*, edited by Matthew Bullimore, SCM, 2016). This work, and the insights received from conversation on Shakespeare with John, have been my main conversation partners in preparing this presentation, together with John's loving memory itself, to which I dedicate it.

As important as this dedication is for me on a personal level, it is also an integral part of my reading of *King Lear* itself. I have learned as much about the relationship between theatre and Resurrection in *King Lear* from reflecting on John's death in the light of his life than I have from literary and theological interpretation more conventionally conceived. In particular, I have learned from John about the importance for theology of community and conviviality –

not simply as desirable dimensions of our work but as the form our work ought to take if we wish for it to partake in the work of the Resurrection itself. I am thus particularly grateful for the opportunity of taking part in our present Shakespearean gathering – our being drawn together, communally and convivially, by Shakespeare's work.

The relationship between Shakespeare's work and Resurrection is indeed crucial. I was recently reminded of this also in reading Salley Vickers' inspiring sermon given at Stratford's Holy Trinity Church's Shakespeare Service in April of this year. Vickers' sermon ends with the fruitful suggestion that while certain characters in Shakespeare's works die, they in fact continue to live in Shakespeare's work itself, every time they are brought to life in reading and in performance, which in turn constitute Shakespeare's own continued life, his presence in the world. She ends by saying,

"The story of Christ's death and resurrection is there to assure that love is, or can be, stronger than death and survives it - a lesson that Shakespeare's astonishing works celebrate again and again and again.... for ever and ever."

On the invitation of these words, I would now like, with the help of John Hughes' work, to explore in more detail how this might be the case with *King Lear*. I do so not as an expert on Shakespeare's works – I can certainly claim no such thing; but simply as a scholar whose life has been transformed by encounter with Shakespeare, and who has the privilege of witnessing Shakespeare's transformative power on a regular basis in the classroom.

It is vital not to idealize such transformative power, or to overlook in its name the extraordinary complexity and challenging nature of Shakespeare's work. *King Lear* certainly demands we do not do this. Indeed, one of the possible ways of reading the end of this play is, precisely, as an uncompromising statement of the end brought on by death to all possible transformation.

Lear's appearance with his dead daughter Cordelia in his hands in the final scene of the play, just after their extraordinary reconciliation, is rightly considered one of the most paralyzing moments in all art. Language, life and love are challenged to breaking point. Indeed, Lear himself breaks at this point.

And my poor fool is hanged. No, no, no life?
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life
And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never.
Pray you, undo this button. Thank you, sir.
Do you see this? Look on her! Look, her lips.
Look there, look there.

He dies.

(5.3.304-309)

Cordelia dies. Lear dies. There seems nowhere to go from here, nothing that can be said, in affirming love over death. Cordelia's love had offered the possibility of genuine

transformation for her father, who in responding to her love had sought and obtained, in his fraught frailty, reconciliation with her. But the play ends with the uncompromising death of both – and no apparent glimpse of grace, of hope of further life for either.

Indeed, Lear's last words offer no possibility of escape, nowhere to go, from the bleakness of the scene. His dismay becomes our own: "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life / And thou no breath at all?"

Such is the power of Shakespeare's theatre. We are drawn into the bleakness of the scene without possibility of escape. His world becomes our world. Indeed, Lear's dying words – in their hopelessly hopeful invitation to look on Cordelia's lips - insist on this. Not only have we nowhere to go, we are piercingly invited to draw further in.

And yet, there is something in this invitation that, precisely in its uncompromising nature, might be theologically fruitful. This is where I draw from the work and memory of John Hughes. As he crucially points out in his article, to say that there is nothing redemptive in Cordelia's death is not to say that there is nothing redemptive in her love. Precisely because we are left with nowhere to go at the end of the play, we are thereby invited to think of Resurrection in the only way that is genuinely consistent with our human condition. If we think that Resurrection can somehow offer an escape from the bleakness of our condition displayed at the end of the play, Shakespeare uncompromisingly invites us to think again.

This does not mean, however, that Shakespeare does not also invite us to recognize in the unfolding of the play the redemptive possibilities of love over death. As Hughes compellingly argues, we find embodied in Cordelia, as also in Edgar and Kent, an understanding of the human condition that only makes full sense within the "theological horizon" of Resurrection, of human participation, through love and forgiveness, in divinity itself.

In this respect it is crucial, I think, to note the meta-theatrical dimension of Lear's dying words: "Do you see this? Look on her! Look, her lips. / Look there, look there." It would certainly be foolish to think that in looking on Cordelia's lips we could find anything but death. And yet, if we look close enough on Cordelia's lips on stage we would in fact see breath – the actor's life. Beyond Cordelia's death is the life of the theatre, and Shakespeare's penetrating love and understanding of humanity, without which Cordelia's death has no being. As uncompromising as the end of *King Lear* is, it can only be so as the expression of life and love, of humanity's capacity to become compassionately conscious of itself in and as theatre. In this sense, theatre can certainly and powerfully inhabit the "theological horizon" of Resurrection, in which not only does death not have the last word, but any word which death might have only has meaning in the context of life and of love.

That this kind of meta-theatrical reflection is actually one of the play's main concerns is all but explicitly suggested earlier in the play, when disguised Edgar leads his blind father Gloucester to what Gloucester believes is his suicide. As Hughes points out, this is a "bizarre" scene "which has so annoyed many critics with its implausibility upon the stage". The scene is indeed bizarre. Edgar tricks Gloucester into thinking he is leading him to the

edge of the cliffs of Dover. Gloucester throws himself forward, falls only a short distance, but believes Edgar – now playing the part of a fisherman on the beach – when he tells him he has in fact fallen the full drop. The scene is clearly implausible. As such, I think, it is clearly meta-theatrical. Gloucester believes disguised Edgar like we believe the theatre: what matters is not so much the plausibility of the worlds we are led to, but the transformation that might derive therefrom.

What matters most is language – that by which, in theatre as in life, the worlds are made in which we live. This is indicated by the words with which Edgar tries to convince his father he has indeed fallen the full drop:

Hadst thou been aught but goassamer, feathers, air
So many fathom down precipitating,
Thou'dst shivered like an egg; but thou dost breathe,
Hast heave substance, bleed'st not, speak'st, art sound.
Ten masts at each make not the altitude
Which thou hast perpendicularly fell.
Thy life's a miracle. Speak yet again.

(4.6.49-55)

The importance of language is suggested, first, in the possible ambiguity of "art sound" at the end of line 52. It is suggested more clearly in the final injunction of the passage: "Thy life's a miracle. / Speak yet again."

By speaking we affirm the miracle of life, by forming our breath into words we give meaning to life, as also to death. In speaking, we live and love "yet again", we affirm life as something we share, across space and time, against the meaninglessness of death. Implausible though this scene might be, that very implausibility foregrounds language as that by which we fashion the reality in which we move and commune. In this sense, there is little distinction between theatre and life, world and stage; and once again theatre can help us become compassionately conscious of our human condition.

Theologically, we can relate all this to the mystery of Creation, the mystery as which life and love are, out of nothing. This too seems to be one of the play's primary concerns. We see this in the first conversation between Lear and Cordelia, at the beginning of the play, when Lear publicly wishes to divide his kingdom between his three daughters.

LEAR [to Cordelia] What can you say to draw
 A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.

CORDELIA Nothing, my lord.

LEAR Nothing?

CORDELIA Nothing.

LEAR Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.

(1.1.80-85)

In responding to Cordelia's silence, Lear expresses a materialist vision of reality, in which existence is merely taken for granted and in which meaning and power are thus seen to coincide: meaning is materialistically measured and controlled by the king. Love and genuine reciprocity in communication do not enter the picture. Provided language outwardly conforms to the material order willed for reality by the king, harmony is maintained. Any lack of such conformity is seen as a threat.

Cordelia's silence is one such threat. Cordelia refuses to use language as nothing other than genuine expression of love. Not wishing to resort to flattery like her sisters, she is initially silent. More precisely, she responds to her father's question with the word "nothing", which she then repeats again in response to her father's second question. The word "nothing", almost like the word "never" in Lear's dying words, is repeated five times in very close succession. Such repetition, here, highlights how Lear's incomprehension of his daughter seems to stem, precisely, from his commodification of language, and of reality as a whole. He treats nothing as something and as such is incapable of recognizing love. His invitation to Cordelia to "speak again" is thus diametrically opposed to that made by Edgar to Gloucester in the scene we considered earlier, "speak yet again". It is an affirmation more of his life than of Cordelia's, an assertion of power rather than love.

Meta-theatrically, we are presented here with language as oppression, language as the making and imposition of a reality that curtails life rather than opening up possibilities for it to flourish. At the same time, through its negation, these lines seem deliberately to invite us to think of speech as relating to the mystery of creation out of nothing. It is only on the "theological horizon" of such mystery, according to Hughes, that the actions of Cordelia and of Edgar, as also of Kent, ultimately make sense: the free giving of oneself as love and not as the expression of materialist dynamics.

It is certainly significant, from this point of view, that the characters who most clearly perform such love in the play are those whose actions come closest to resembling those of the theatre itself. Both Edgar and Kent are characters who perform their love by disguising themselves – by acting, we might say. And, perhaps even more significantly, it would not have been unlikely in Shakespeare's time for Cordelia to be played by the same actor as was also playing the Fool – a practice which the first words in the first passage we considered would perhaps seem to suggest: "And my poor fool is hanged." Time does not allow us to explore possible connections – especially Christological – between Cordelia and the Fool. The point I would like to suggest now, by way also of drawing to a conclusion so as to open up to general discussion, is simply that it certainly seems significant that the characters in the play who most genuinely perform love – Cordelia, Edgar, Kent – are also those who might be perceived by the audience as somehow 'performing', in the sense of acting as more than just themselves. This aspect of the play, too, could thus be seen to suggest that the play might have been consciously crafted by Shakespeare so as to invite us to reflect meta-theatrically on the possible relationship between love and the theatre – that is, on theatre's capacity to transform us in a deep spiritual sense, by drawing our attention to the continuities between

stage and world, foregrounding through the life of the theatre some of the crucial, divine structures of meaning, and meaning-making, in life more generally.