

When God's Not in the Quarrel: The Negative Irony in Lear's Politics of the Common

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ABSTRACT

Abstract: William Shakespeare's *King Lear* illustrates the importance of Christian ideals in Early Modern England by portraying a pagan kingdom in which those ideals do not exist. Heavily influenced by Christian scriptures (notably the Book of Acts), Shakespeare's first audiences understood *King Lear* as an exploration of a godless world which must eventually become dysfunctional. The play can be approached as a study in "negative irony," the device through which something (in this case, Christian morality) is celebrated through a portrayal of its antithesis (Hunt 30). The system of communal living, common ownership, and personal commonality described in Acts is not something that Shakespeare portrays as tenable in a non-Christian context. Through this lens, we see that *King Lear* juxtaposes the highly religious culture of Early Modern England with the imagined tragedy of a culture devoid of the same religion.

"My life I never held but as a pawn, / To wage against thine enemies; ne'er fear to lose it, / Thy safety being motive," says a devoted servant of *King Lear* (1.1.157-59). This singular attachment to a ruler crops up frequently throughout the play. Shakespeare's imagining of a mythical past kingdom exists in stark contrast to the kingdom of his own lifetime. The purpose of this depiction is best understood through comparison to his reality. Similarly, the imagining of devotion to a ruler is best understood through comparison to devotion in his own lived context, a devotion that rested heavily on an entwined tradition of monarchism and Christian theology.

The biblical Book of Acts was one of the roots of commons politics in 16th Century England. The apostolic community in Acts operates on the principle that fidelity to the head (Jesus) and fidelity to the

commons (community that holds things in common) are entwined and dependent on each other. In a society where ideals of rule and relationship were contextualized by Christian tradition, the paganism of *King Lear* draws attention to what is lacking in the lives of the characters: a Christian faith that dictates a holier, less destructive way of life. Maurice Hunt refers to this as 'negative irony', a device used by Shakespeare to highlight the importance of Christianity (and, as argued in the text, a biblically informed politics of the common) through its conspicuous absence in his "pagan plays" (Hunt 30). Within Lear's court and kingdom, fidelity to the head necessitates estrangement from others (for example, Lear's demand that Cordelia love him above all) (Lear 1.1), in stark contrast to the apostolic politics of the common (in which the love of the other is a sign of love for the head) (NRSV Matthew 25:40). By reading Lear in conjunction with the scriptural tradition that

would have informed the play's first audiences, we gain a vital new perspective of the story. This research will contribute to an understanding of Shakespeare's work at the intersection of literary device, cultural significance, and religion. Throughout this paper, I will demonstrate how Lear's politics of the commons (or lack thereof) juxtapose sharply with the Apostolic Community's. This paper will demonstrate how Lear's politics of the commons (or lack thereof) juxtapose with those of the Apostolic Community; the play therefore displays Hunt's theory of negative irony. This is most clearly illustrated in the relationships between Lear and his daughters, as Lear's demands for sacrifice and the differing responses of those around him destabilize the very opportunity for community.

The Book of Acts details the birth of Christianity, following the death and resurrection of Jesus. Attributed to the same author as the Gospel of Luke, Acts describes the founding of the Christian Church, the life of its community, its missionary activity, and the spread of the faith outward into the wider world. The intensity of these early years of the faith tradition sets a precedent for its later developments. The description of the early Christian community, its organization, and its beliefs resonated far beyond the limits of that community, itself. Expanding further from what was described in Acts, Christianity would become the dominant religion in Europe, first arriving in Britain in the 2nd-Century CE. By the time William Shakespeare was born in 1564, England had been a predominantly Christian country for hundreds of years, with its laws, media, and ideals drawing heavily from Christian history and scripture (Brown et al). Religious devotion had been linked with the very structure of the state, a devotion reflected in Shakespeare's work. In his historical play *Richard II*, for example, he explores the relationship between divinity and monarchy through the idea that a nation's ruler ought to be the earthly representative of God: someone who acts on God's behalf for the good of the country, and should be expected to put his own desires to the side for the sake of executing this duty. This belief (that a king's relationship to God is a vital part of his legitimacy as a ruler) imparts great moral and spiritual weight to the

monarchy, making the monarch into the arbiter of the entire kingdom's cosmic standing. *Richard II* portrays a king who fails in his job as God's representative, and as a result, loses everything.

Shakespeare's "pagan plays" (such as *King Lear*) take place in settings that are not similar to the England of his lifetime. In these plays, Christianity is not even known to the characters; they worship different deities than the one worshipped by Christians, and do not measure each other according to Christian values. The titular character of *King Lear* is the leader of a non-Christian kingdom, meaning that he is not considered to be God's earthly representative. In a sense, because he is not 'backed' by God, Lear is a false king from a Christian point of view, as no divine Being legitimizes his rule. His court also does not operate within the standards of a Christian community, such as the one exemplified in the Book of Acts. The play follows Lear as he steps down from active leadership, dividing his kingdom amongst his three daughters (Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia) and their respective husbands. He proposes to spend his remaining years being taken care of by his youngest daughter, Cordelia. This plan goes awry in two ways: first, Cordelia disappoints him and loses her portion of the kingdom. When Kent, Lear's loyal servant, attempts to defend Cordelia, he is also banished. Second, Lear's plan comes when his other two daughters resent and undermine him so much that he appears to lose his sanity, and becomes a vagabond. Kent in disguise still serves the king. Goneril and Regan, meanwhile, both become romantically entangled with Edmund, the illegitimate son of a nobleman, who is antagonistic to Lear's cause. As others fight to take over Lear's kingdom, the banished Cordelia returns to fight on her father's behalf. All three of his daughters die in the turmoil, and Lear then dies of grief. Lear's kingdom is a harsh contrast to the ideal Christian community. Since Lear is an illegitimate figurehead, his community is ultimately unsustainable.

In terms of the scale of the demand and the consequences of failing to meet it, Lear's kingdom can be compared to the Apostolic Community as described in the Book of Acts, a group that also

demanded total love and total sacrifice with dire ramifications. While Kent defends Cordelia at the time of her banishment, he concisely illustrates both his devotion to the king, and what service to the king demands of him: "My life I never held but as a pawn, / To wage against thine enemies; ne'er fear to lose it, / Thy safety being motive" (1.1.157-59). From the first scene of the play, the audience knows what Lear demands, and the cost of failing him: here is a king who wants the total love of his subjects and will punish them for failing to express their love adequately. As Kent is devoted to Lear, out of love as well as obligation, so early Christians were devoted to Jesus, with one biblical author proclaiming that "it is no longer [they] who live, but it is Christ who lives in [them]. And the life [they] now live in the flesh [they] live by faith in the Son of God, who loved [them] and gave Himself for [them]" (NRSV Galatians 2:20). In their treatment of the commons, however, the two groups (Lear's court and the Apostolic Community) diverge. The Apostolic Community as laid out in Acts orients itself towards commons ideals, as the lord of the group (Jesus) is believed to be found in a commons, whereas Lear's demands for total love remove him from the commons and estrange his subjects from each other. *King Lear* illustrates a world effectively lacking in a commons, contrasting sharply with Christian ideals of community. The nonexistence of Christian morality in the characters' lives is "negatively ironic," intended to highlight the importance of "the possibility of spiritual redemption" by emphasizing the consequences of its absence (Hunt 3). Within the wider scope of the history and ideals that informed the original audiences, *King Lear* is a story about what the setting lacks: God or the Church. One of the negative consequences of this 'absence' is that there is no possibility of a commons, nor a standard for a commons-oriented lord—at least, not from the point of view of an audience for whom the concept of a commons was intimately tied to the Christian faith. The Apostolic Community is a commons founded on God; Lear, like a god, is to be loved above all else and sacrificed for, but the love of Lear does not equate unity, as the love of God does for the Apostolic Community.

The first scene of *King Lear* sees Lear's three daughters before the king as he divides up authority over his land, in anticipation of forfeiting his kingship in all but name. Having cut the country into unequal thirds, Lear expects to give the largest part to his youngest daughter, Cordelia, and to live with her into his old age. To determine which daughter receives which part, Lear tests them by asking which of them loves him most. Goneril and Regan both claim to love him completely. Cordelia does not. In what we see of Lear's kingdom, subjects cannot relate to him solely politically: the individual is called upon to make a deeply personal testament of their fidelity. Throughout the play, this usually takes the form of a sacrifice undergone for Lear's sake. Cordelia refuses to lie to Lear, to speak of her love disingenuously; while this is displeasing to her father, it is also, in Cordelia's view, doing right by him. By doing right by him, she sacrifices the largest part of the kingdom, and potentially both of her chances at marriage. Her marital prospects are reduced to the one out of her two suitors who is willing to marry her without gaining any property, completely removing any privilege she might have had of preferring one suitor over another. Had the King of France not been willing to marry her as a dowryless woman, Cordelia could have been entirely without means or protection, disgraced as a cast-off daughter and reduced to nothing. Cordelia is potentially sacrificing her life by hurting Lear, which she does at least in part for Lear's sake. Similarly, Kent displeases Lear to save Lear when he begs for Cordelia's casting-off to be reconsidered. It is during this scene that he declares his life to be nothing more than a "pawn / to wage against [Lear's] enemies" (1.1.157-58). The author of Galatians' statement, "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" does not seem completely dissimilar to Kent's proclamation of devotion. The difference is that in the Christless *King Lear*, the king has not sacrificed himself for Kent as Jesus did for the author of Galatians, and Lear does not allow Kent's individual love to contribute to a commons.

The Book of Acts' starting-point for conceptualizing the commons is also intertwined with personal sacrifice for a personal lord (defined, in the context of

this paper, as a special person with whom one exists in a relationship). Acts records that the early Christian community required the individual to sell what they privately owned, and for goods to be distributed according to need rather than ownership, something that was considered to be for Jesus' sake (NRSV Acts 2:44-4, 4:32). Similarly to the incredibly high stakes of personal sacrifice in *King Lear*, there are extreme consequences for a member of the Apostolic Community failing to sacrifice their personal wealth; Acts describes a man named Ananias who keeps some of the proceeds from his sold property, only to be accused of lying to God and consequently dying immediately (NRSV Acts 5:1-5). Lear's court and the Apostolic Community are, in these respects (the sacrifice of love, the consequences for not doing so), comparable. However, there are several major differences between the two that secure the negative irony of the play. The sacrifices undertaken by the Apostolic Community are reciprocal, their entrance into the community is voluntary, and their sacrifices are aimed at the good of the commons. By contrast, the sacrifice undertaken by Cordelia is not in response to a corresponding sacrifice by Lear, the king's subjects did not choose to become the king's subjects, and the commons' interests are not reflected in the relationship between the subjects and Lear. While the Apostolic Community, equal in its severe demands on the individual, requires a commons, Lear's demands make a commons impossible.

The reciprocity of the Apostolic Community is a key component of its commons-oriented politics. The Apostolic Community understands the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus to have been done for them, a sacrifice both universal (for the benefit of everybody) and personal (for the benefit of the individual) (NRSV John 3:16, Romans 5:8). The sacrifices of the Apostolic Community are likewise made for both the commons and for personal love, centred on reciprocal self-giving. The extent to which the Apostolic Community sacrifices their private possessions for each other and the extent to which they live in common is the same extent to which they sacrifice for and live in common with Jesus. This is

according to Jesus' own statement in Matthew 25, that whatever is done to the "least" of the "members of [His] family" is done to Him (NRSV Matthew 25:40). By comparison, what one does for the least-important members of Lear's family you do against Lear. This is when Kent's attempt to save Cordelia is rewarded with banishment; as soon as he attempts to speak on behalf of Lear's family member, Lear tells him to "Come not between the dragon and his wrath" (1.1.123).

When it comes to the overall attitude to the commons outside of just reciprocal sacrifice, the Apostolic Community and Lear's court remain fundamentally different. Socrates is paraphrased in the Adages, "to the gods... belong all things; good men are friends of the gods; and among friends all possessions are in common" (Erasmus 29). The Apostolic Community's politics of the commons could be described similarly, as everything belongs to God. The community consists of people who are friends with God, and so all that they have must be in common with God and each other. Members of the Apostolic Community become stewards or "overseers" of property (and the community itself) rather than owners or masters (NRSV Acts 20:28). This principle of God's friends being stewards rather than owners play a major role in Richard II, as well, where we see it within a specifically Christian framework. Richard as a king is not only God's follower, but His special 'deputy'. When describing kingship, the character John of Gaunt remarks that "God's in the quarrel;" nothing that concerns King Richard only concerns King Richard, but God as well (Richard II 1.2.37). Richard's failures as a king are in his failures to be this special deputy; to properly embody the commons-oriented God of Acts; to be equally common with his subjects, and to shepherd the flock obtained by Christ's blood (NRSV Acts 20:28). Gaunt, having described Richard's status as God's 'substitute' likewise describes Richard's failure to carry out his duties specifically in relation to Richard's attitude of ownership, rather than stewardship, towards his kingdom: "Landlord of England art thou now, not king" (Richard II 2.1.113). The Apostolic politics of the commons provides a metric for criticizing Richard's politics of the

commons. Lear, on the other hand, is a pagan king, and cannot be understood to be a representative of God in the same way as Christian kings of England. Lear is thus exempt from embodying the Apostolic Community's ideal of the commons, removing the comparison point that Christian kings (like Richard II) would be subject to. Hunt's 'negative irony' is present in the play as Christian grounds for criticizing Lear's politics simply do not exist in *King Lear's* setting.

Finally, the play and Acts provide dramatically different approaches to consent. While the Apostolic Community is something one enters at will, being subject to Lear is something one is born into. The only point at which one can choose it is if, like Cordelia and Kent, one has been banished at Lear's will and elects to still serve him afterward. The play begins with Lear asking his daughters to effectively prove their love for him, and his two eldest daughters try. Goneril and Regan may not actually love their father as much as they claim to, as they are aware that their lives and livelihoods depend on their willingness to offer him proof of their love, whether or not that love exists. The non-reciprocal self-sacrificing relationship they have to their father is not something they chose. Once again, the separate demanding contracts of the Apostolic Community and Lear's court diverge in that the first is entered into willingly, while the second was imposed on Lear's daughters by fault of their proximity to him. The 'proof of total love' they offer their father is required of them, simultaneously laying life-and-death importance on their personal relationship to their father, and extinguishing the possibility of genuinely loving him in the first place (1.3.3-5, 1.3.14-15).

Cordelia is the only one of Lear's children who will not claim that her love is isolated to her father. She says that her responsibility as a wife would be to love her husband as much as her father, refusing to participate in the 'worship' of Lear by claiming that she must love at least one other person (1.1.100-102). Cordelia may represent a more commons-oriented attitude to love than her father's, one that could potentially function in the Apostolic Community. In

the Apostolic Community, the totality of love demanded by Christianity results in the good of others. Jesus is the recipient of the love, but not the isolated recipient; in fact, loving Him requires loving and caring for others. For the Apostolic Community, loving Jesus totally strengthens the commons. Lear, however, is an isolated recipient of total love. Cordelia is later proven to have been the daughter who loved Lear the most, while Regan and Goneril, who claimed to be "alone felicitate in [their father's] love," die estranged from Lear (1.1.75-76). When he finds himself, having been the isolated recipient of total love, as unloved as he is separate, Lear remarks, "They told me I was everything" (4.6.104). What Lear had thought was that he was not only deserving of total love, but entitled to it, and capable of commanding it; what he discovers is that he is, in fact, alone in the world—and that he is not uniquely owed total love, unlike (the Christian audience might argue) Jesus. Through portraying Cordelia's non-isolated love as a truer love than her sisters', Shakespeare asserts a commons-oriented, Christian idea of love as better than that of this fictionalized non-Christian kingdom.

Like the Apostolic Community, Lear's court is ordered according to relationships that are contingent on sacrifice, and their sacrifices impact the rest of the group. However, the group that makes up Lear's immediate circle is not a commons. Returning to the Adages, if what is common is what is shared by friends, and friendship is equality and oneness, it is impossible for Lear's court to be a commons (Erasmus 29, 31). Lear's kingdom is essentially uncommon. From the first, there is no equality or oneness between his daughters: they are to receive separate parcels of land, one of which is especially big, and must compete for this land through their shows of affection. They are necessarily estranged by the inequality imposed on them by their father. Lear's circle is also made unequal in one sense by rank, and yet, his power as king initially serves as an equalizer; he has as much power to debase Cordelia as he does the Fool. The king's power to equalize is an inversion of the equality of the commons, both in the Adages and the Apostolic Community. The Socratic notion of all things being

common to good men as friends of the gods finds a new interpretation in Acts, in which all things are common to those who are commonly friends of Jesus; both equalize everyone who is in the favour of the Divine (NRSV Galatians 3:28). 'Equality' under Lear is, rather, the deadliness of Lear's hatred. As all things are common to the friends of the gods, debasement is common to the enemies of the king, at least while he retains the fullness of his power. In casting off Cordelia, Lear declares that she is no better and no more loved than someone who eats their own children (1.1.117-121). This shows the audience a king who is a negative substitute for God, not only less powerful as a human being who will age and die, but as a poor god-figure who does not uplift nor have sympathy for others. It is only after Lear himself is debased that he sympathizes with Poor Tom, and then only because he is convinced that Poor Tom is, like him, a formerly dignified person whose dignity was stolen by unloving daughters (3.4.50). Lear is only in common with anyone when he is no longer functionally king. While Richard II was a king believed to have been granted special dignity by God, which he then misused, Lear is presented as a king whose power was never holy in the first place. To an audience operating under the belief that a king's authority was divine in its origin, Lear's paganism is not negligible in determining his claim to love and sacrifice, his value as a king, or the rightness of his character.

Lear's lack of Christian spiritual greatness in the eyes of the audience is paired with Lear's own view of himself as great. As there is nothing to impart godliness to the pagan king, there is also nothing that can restrain him. Christian England had a "hierarchical view that the political bodies had a purely functional character within the world community of the corpus mysticum Christi," but Lear's kingdom does not exist within the bounds of such a body (Kantorowicz 194). Lear and his kingdom are isolated. When Regan and Goneril are asked to prove their love for him, they claim that their love is isolated to him, in spite of each other, Cordelia, their husbands, and anyone else they might love. Near the end of the play, we return to the idea of having to prove love. Edmund has little to say about

the deaths of Goneril and Regan, only musing, "Yet Edmund was beloved" (5.3.245). Goneril and Regan have offered more extreme proof of their total love for an isolated subject, but it is not their father. Their love of Edmund is no more edifying than their love of Lear, in the end. While the ironic return to the opening scene showcases the sisters' betrayal of their father and the dishonesty they have defined themselves by, their obsession with Edmund is not a great departure from the type of relationship promoted by Lear. Both Lear and Edmund are isolated recipients, and are not oriented towards the commons. The love of Lear and the love of Edmund are both isolating and estranging; the beloved do not reciprocate the adoration, the care, or the sacrifice that they receive, and the worship they require precludes the worshipper from loving anyone else. This mode of relating is in clear opposition to Acts' tradition of marrying total love and sacrifice for One with total love and sacrifice for all.

Lear's kingdom is lacking any commons in which "[t]he individual's relationship with society is transposed to the higher plane of man's relationship with God, and it is inconceivable that the individual should claim rights and privileges of his own at the expense of society" (Wilks qtd. in Yerby 17). There cannot be this kind of commons because God is not known to these people. To Lear, self-sacrifice is only non-reciprocal, and can only be offered to him and never by him. In addition to the other inequalities between the characters, there exists this great inequality of sacrifices made. Sacrifices are the proof of love, whether Lear is commanding Cordelia to sacrifice all other love, or Edmund is affirmed by Goneril's and Regan's deaths rather than heartbroken. Thus, while love is given or at least performed for the king, the king, as a non-sacrificial being, loves no one. He is the head, but he cannot be the head of a functional commons, because he will not care for the body.

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