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## **Cordelia, Lear, and Forgiveness**

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## CORDELIA, LEAR, AND FORGIVENESS

Painful human interactions are often followed by urges to forgive, be forgiving, or seek forgiveness. The insight analysts develop into their transferences highlights their finding gratification in constantly reenacting painful interactions. Their new understanding can make forgiveness seem irrelevant; waiving the question of forgiveness might then seem the wiser course to follow. Also thrown into question is whether total forgiveness of self and others can ever be achieved. Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of King Lear* raises these questions. There we encounter, first, the painful interaction of Cordelia and Lear and, finally, Cordelia's response, "No cause, no cause," to a dying Lear's begging her forgiveness for having initially treated her cruelly. Cordelia's response seems to be waiving the question of guilt and forgiveness, but could it be wholehearted? In a search for answers, a reading of Cordelia's and Lear's lines is interwoven with interpretations of unconscious conflict that might be considered were one to encounter clinically a "Cordelia" abused by an aging and failing father at a turning point in her womanly development. Unconsciously, it is concluded, unforgiveness persists alongside the loving, insightful waiving of forgiveness made possible by higher-level ego functioning. Methodological reflections on reading and interpretation are included.

**A**cts of forgiveness can be deeply moving, even inspiring. In part this effect may depend on one's having to overcome formidable psychological obstacles to being forgiving, seeking forgiveness, or feeling forgiven. By blocking and disrupting forgiveness, these obstacles sometimes ruin intimate human relationships. Psychoanalysts are well positioned to observe these difficulties and their effects and to gain insight into them.

This is so particularly during the later phases of analysis. By then, analysts have worked through some of the many difficulties

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they encountered as they began to enter the depressive position—that is, a relatively mature, object-related, realistic mode of existence (Klein 1940).

Having come that far, the analytic couple have acquired a relatively rounded understanding of the fantasy-charged parts played by the major characters in the analysand's troubled development and present life situation. By then, many splittings of ambivalence have been undone, many projections withdrawn, and realistic perspectives on the self and significant others developed. Better understood too are the origins and consequences of the analysand's developmental crises, as well as some of those that have beset and shaped the psychology of parents, siblings, and significant others.

In this ego-strengthened position, analysands find it difficult to maintain unqualified self-righteous and self-condemning attitudes. Now better prepared to see the self and others as whole, complexly motivated persons with distinct life histories, they realize that what is at issue, at least in relation to their own past and present destructive feelings, fantasies, and actions, is not so much forgiveness as the need for reconciliation with their own life histories, some hard reparative work, and the need to keep a watchful eye on regressive moves toward persisting unconscious unforgiveness. That is the unforgiveness that surfaces in the bitter, often arbitrary, self- and other-directed recriminations that can erupt during the agitated interactions that occur in loving relationships.

With regard to enhanced self-understanding, it must be emphasized that, after first having presented themselves to their analysts mainly as passive, innocent victims of both circumstances and the hurtful, narcissistic intentions of others, as analysands often do, and also as unambivalently eager to recover from their damaged state, analysands slowly bring out their own histories of narcissistic and destructive behavior and fantasies—a development that, as we know, depends greatly on analysis of the transference, defenses, narcissistic postures of inviolability, and incompatible constructions of past and present events. Among other changes, much that analysands have associated with the good self, the suffering self, the child self, and the ideal self is understood by both analytic participants to include such troubling elements as enviousness, vengefulness, sadomasochistic strategies, personal myths (Kris 1956), and unacknowledged conflicting identifications (Freud 1923).

Consequently, the work that lies ahead for these analysands includes continuous reframing of their fixed, often fantastic conceptions of activity, damage, ideals, and responsibility. They cannot carry through this project without experiencing uncertainty, ambivalence, and distressing feelings of loss, though also much relief. After repeated wavering, they become better prepared to accept the part played by their attachment to, and manipulative uses of, their sufferings and fantastic conceptions of human affairs. They are better able to tolerate hitherto repressed, projected, or otherwise defended-against feelings of, on the one hand, shame, guilt, and fear of persecutory response, and, on the other, fantasies of omnipotence, insistence on control, and rejection of any and all dependency. These transformations in the internal world include revisions of those dominating and conflictual unconscious fantasies that, however much they may have been modified during the various fateful phases of development, remain the enduring carriers of infantile relational and bodily experience.

On the basis of these changes, analysands are in a better position to continue to take on not only the burden of making reparation but of trying to maintain perspective both on their ever present urges to forgive, seek forgiveness, and be forgiven, and on their hopes to stifle them. Inevitably, this transformation toward maturity is complex, erratic, and extended in time. One must reckon on continuous flux between mature, depressive-position modes of function and the primitive and turbulent modes of the paranoid-schizoid position that is a regular though quantitatively variable feature of human existence (Klein 1946).

Considering their analysts in this one respect, it seems safe to say that to a significant extent the effective conclusion of their work depends on their clearly understanding and inwardly accepting the difficulties and ambiguities that surround the various aspects of forgiveness, its frequent inappropriate appearance, and the many major contexts in which issues of forgiveness subtly play an influential part. Their integration of that understanding will be evident in how they deal with relevant transferences, defenses, and ambivalences. Functioning in that analytic way is, of course, drastically limited by countertransferences that express acute and persisting difficulties with forgiveness. For example, analysts are known sometimes to develop judgmental countertransferences concerning the conflictual relationships, past and present, that they have been analyzing. Thus, an excess of “empathy”—more exactly, sympathy or pity—is probably based

on the analyst's projective identification of victimhood or righteousness or both.

### PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS OF METHOD

I will be taking up only certain aspects of *King Lear*, setting aside others, even though they could be shown to bear on my theme, as is the case, for instance, with the Gloucester-Edgar-Edmund triad. In the main, I will be arguing that Shakespeare is making sure to highlight the poignancy of forgiveness and the difficulty of understanding in depth both forgiveness and its being waived. In my estimation, noted critics have not made enough of these aspects of *King Lear*.

I decided to review the dialogue in the opening scene for cues that would help me understand and reconcile Cordelia's initial "nothing" and her final "no cause." To begin this project, it seemed best to read as closely as I could the lines Shakespeare gives to the early and late interactions between Cordelia and Lear. In this respect, I approached Shakespeare not as though he were a patient I am analyzing, but rather as a working playwright. How does he present his conception of Cordelia and Lear in these lines? What effect on his audience might he be seeking by having this father and this daughter speak to each other as they do?

I realize that I am not just reading what is unambiguously there in the lines Shakespeare gives his characters. Inevitably, reading these lines means interpreting them and so constantly running the risk of finding only what I want Shakespeare to have been intending, consciously or otherwise. However, in this respect, am I not running the risk run by every reader, every member of Shakespeare's audiences, and every critic? Is there any escaping this risk? More to the point for analysts, am I not doing what analysts regularly do when they engage in close listening? For close listening does not mean that there is only one true way to understand an analysand's words or intentions. The analytic listener's preferred point of view exerts control over the questions that get to be considered, the mode of intervention that will be employed, and the deeper, conflictual meanings that will be formulated, explored, weighed, and integrated to the extent possible. Thus, point of view determines much of what *can* be found and what *will* be found. One might say that point of view creates as it discovers. Not that favored questions, methods, and interpretations fully determine what

will be turned up, for the creative side of understanding can play a strong hand in this respect. Thus, like clinical analysis, reading a play's lines closely is engaging in a transformative interaction. In both, there is always room for surprise and change of relationship.

To avoid confusion, I will tag those times when I do venture beyond my interpretive reading of Shakespeare's lines and introduce clinically based inferences concerning latent motives and conflicts—that is, when I reason as though, in my practice, I was encountering a “Cordelia” coping with a “Lear” under similar circumstances. Although not quite the same order of interpretation as reading the lines of the play, and yet not altogether independent of those lines, these clinical excursions helped me return to Shakespeare's text better prepared to deepen my understanding of Cordelia's “nothing” and her “no cause.”

As a bonus, this method of exploration better prepared me to understand Cordelia's powerful emotional impact on the play's audience. That impact would be hard to understand were one to settle for the flat, uninteresting “good girl” characterization of Cordelia that many critics have favored. Once having succumbed to the aesthetic illusion (Kris 1952), the audience is, as I indicated earlier, collaborating with Shakespeare in completing the characterizations and imbuing the lines with additional conscious and unconscious meaning. On this basis, the play belongs to each of us as well as to Shakespeare. That being so, the richness of myriad unconscious fantasies inevitably pervades every scene.

In my final section, I will move beyond Shakespeare's play and argue that we analysts would be going against our foundational beliefs to think that, except in trivial instances of abuse, it is ever possible to be totally forgiving or to waive entirely the question of forgiveness. At stake in answering these questions is how we are to think about the fantasies in which unconscious mental processes are embodied and the relationship of these unconscious fantasies to conscious and pre-conscious thought and feeling. In this, we would inevitably be drawing on contemporary understanding of relatively stable ego functions and their accomplishments.

## QUESTIONS AND POSSIBLE ANSWERS

Initially I had been left wondering, as the play neared its heartbreaking conclusion, what to make of Cordelia's responding “No cause, no

cause" (IV.vii.75) after Lear acknowledges his guilt for having wronged her so savagely in the play's opening scene and goes on to suggest that she punish him by poisoning him, thereby also opening the question of forgiveness. Cordelia's "no cause" seems to be a sign that she does not consider forgiveness an appropriate option to consider. Of course, she could be merely consoling him in his distressed state, as if to say considerately, "Now is not the time to go into that." Alternatively, her response could be construed as that of a symbolic "good girl" bypassing the issues of guilt, punishment, and forgiveness by automatically absolving the offender of responsibility. Many critics have leaned toward that interpretation and used it to support their contention that, as a character, she is uninteresting. They do not seem to have been considering that Shakespeare has her say "no cause" to show that she is waiving the question of forgiveness.

It is, of course, quite possible that, by having the estranged father and daughter, allegedly so beloved of one another, harmoniously reunited in act IV, Shakespeare the dramatist is bringing the audience to a less defended position in order to heighten the shocking effect of Lear and Cordelia being abruptly parted once more, this time by death—an ending so shocking and painful that eighteenth-century critics refused to accept or condone it. Yet it seems to me that Shakespeare is doing more than that: without putting it explicitly into Cordelia's lines, he is leaving it up to us, his implied audience, to make sense of Cordelia's conciliatory response.

I suggest that Cordelia's "no cause" seems to show that she has come to understand how dynamically complex and interlocked were Lear's early, cruel attack on her and her first, limited response to his demands on her. In arriving at this reading, I drew support from several sources: my clinical understanding, Shakespeare's picture of Cordelia's strong and reserved character, and perhaps his having included the fortifying influence of her now being a queen. I inferred that, on these accounts, she could well have undergone a developmental advance of the kind that would enable a daughter to transcend issues of guilt, punishment, and forgiveness in relation to a father who had been dangerously hurtful. Still, I knew I was left with the question of what had gone into Cordelia's initial response, so startling and limited: "Nothing, my lord" (I.i.87). What was she doing? And what, in the end, has become of her initial enraging refusal of her father? What was it she had yet to understand, and how far could that understanding

go in bringing about her waiving the issue of forgiveness? Much remains to be understood in this regard.

### FURTHER INTO THE PLAY

I begin by emphasizing that Cordelia speaks and, in her reserved way, speaks eloquently and with depth of understanding; for many critics have characterized Cordelia as “silent” or “not apt of speech” (see, e.g., Granville-Barker 1946). It is as though they have not been listening to her in I.i, perhaps because they have been too influenced by what other characters say of her or have missed Shakespeare’s point in having Cordelia not deliver herself all at once and at length about the initial stand she takes against her father, but rather has her unfold herself over the course of the scene. I believe Shakespeare intends to show both Cordelia’s self-acknowledged personal reserve and her being in great emotional pain in I.i and in pain again, as the play is ending, when she is confronting the ruins of the father she loves, the very ruins for which she may bear some responsibility. It seems to me to seriously distort Shakespeare’s dramatic design to characterize Cordelia as both relatively mute and rigidly good.

As I mentioned, the issue of punishment or forgiveness is raised as the play is ending. Finally reunited with Cordelia while still struggling to regain his sanity, Lear looks at her and asks,

Be your tears wet? Yes, faith, I pray, weep not.  
If you have poison for me, I will drink it.  
I know you do not love me; for your sisters  
Have, as I do remember, done me wrong:  
You have some cause, they have not [IV.vii.70–75].

To which Cordelia replies, “No cause, no cause” (IV, vii.75).

Lear’s idea of cause seems to be this: In I.i he had demanded that Cordelia do as her two married sisters had just done, that is, profess supreme love for him. By complying, she could ensure that she would get the best third of the kingdom he was about to divide among his daughters. When it was Cordelia’s turn and Lear had asked what she had to say to be so handsomely rewarded, Cordelia had initially uttered only these few fateful words, “Nothing, my lord.” This “nothing” response had so disappointed and enraged Lear, and perhaps humiliated him as well, that soon afterward he denounced, disowned, and



banished Cordelia, in effect abandoning her to her fate—disgrace and destitution adding up to the virtual death of a princess.

Cordelia had tried to intervene by explaining and justifying her initial response. She had said that she loved him, honored him, and obeyed him, but her efforts seemed to enrage Lear all the more. Perhaps the key is her using the word *bond* to subsume her feelings for him. *Bond* is not the most winning choice of word, even when immediately explained by Cordelia as a way of referring to felt loving, honoring, and obedient filial obligation. Her response does not accord well with Shakespeare's having made it plain that she has a good daughterly record to stand on. (Here might be a first sign of other feelings: disappointment? defiance? retaliation?) Lear had brushed aside Cordelia's good record immediately and asked incredulously, "But goes thy heart with this?" (I.i.105). Here I take Shakespeare to be showing Lear to have become incapable of listening to his favorite daughter or remembering her as such. Her "nothing" had become everything to him. He was locked into the position of exploding punitively. His initial request for a public and extravagant declaration of love could not have been that of a foolish old man, as some indulgent critics have contended.

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Note that Shakespeare renders this interchange painfully consequential by having it take place at the time when two royal suitors are waiting in the wings, each prepared to claim Cordelia's hand. Had there then been "no cause" in all this virtual murder of a loving and beloved daughter? On first encounter, Shakespeare's lines seemed to me to suggest otherwise.

I also take Shakespeare to be emphasizing that Cordelia had been *choosing* her initial minimal response and her subsequent ones, too, and that these responses were intended to convey both considerable depth of concern for Lear and fidelity to herself. Her responses are not those of a barren and inarticulate girl. Similarly, when Shakespeare later has Cordelia respond to Lear's acknowledgment of guilt with "No cause, no cause," he is not portraying her as linguistically disadvantaged. Nor is he, as some Shakespearean critics say, simply utilizing a flat, mythic, or symbolic characterization of Cordelia, as being so pure in her goodness and so much her sisters' opposite that she is incapable of any other response. Instead, Shakespeare wants to show Cordelia as having realized subsequently and probably with much distress, that, in spite of all, there is nothing to forgive—or, more exactly, that she has no warrant to be forgiving. Her achieving this level of understanding

certifies her major role in this drama, and I consider it a major ingredient of the intensely dramatic moment of her reunion with Lear, followed soon by their final separation.

To better understand how this is so we must return once more to the first scene. As she waits her turn to speak, Shakespeare has Cordelia react despondently to Goneril's extravagant declaration of love and loyalty and Lear's responding as though he is accepting Goneril's words at face value. Cordelia mutters to herself her idea of how little is being left for her to profess sincerely: "What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent" (I.i.62). Then, after the second sister, Regan, extravagantly declares her total love and loyalty and Lear responds similarly, Cordelia, now even more despondent, adds to her initial subvocal response, "Then poor Cordelia!" but immediately, as if buoying herself up, she goes right on to say, "And yet, not so, since I am sure my love's / More ponderous than my tongue" (I.i.77–79). I believe that Shakespeare's giving her these few words shows that he is preparing us to realize that Cordelia, in addition to being painfully aware of her sisters' insincerity, is resolving to remain true to herself while salvaging what she can of a bad situation. She will not stoop, as her sisters have, to the virtual whoredom of insincere flattery for personal gain. Remaining true to herself, she will also remain true to the loving relationship between her and her father, for that is part of her self. And so, when Lear immediately challenges her refusal, her "nothing," by asking, "But goes they heart with this?" she is internally prepared to answer straightaway that it does. Harshly, Lear continues, "So young, and so untender?"—to which Cordelia, standing her ground, readily and eloquently replies, "So young, my lord, and true" (I.i.105–107).

I read Shakespeare as showing us that, as far as it goes, Cordelia knows her heart, that is, her truth, her values, her exacting ideal self, and that she is standing up for them in a situation that is severely testing a loving daughter-father relationship. He is portraying her as resolved to remain the person she aspires to be. She must refuse Lear. Note too that in his fury Lear soon acknowledges that he has been counting on Cordelia specifically for care during his declining years—that is, to have his daughter mother him. He seems here to be portrayed as experiencing maternal rejection, in addition to his other feelings.

I propose that Shakespeare wants us to think of Cordelia as the daughter who proves her love and her worth by how she lives her life and, as we soon see, goes on with a life sufficiently her own. Artificial

declarations of love dished up on demand are not for her. Why else would Shakespeare have her explain, “I cannot heave my / heart into my mouth” (I.i.91–92), and also have her deliver this challenging account of herself after her two suitors are called in to declare their intentions?

I yet beseech your Majesty,  
 If for I want that glib and oily art  
 To speak and purpose not since what I well intend  
 I'll do't before I speak, that you make known  
 It is no vicious blot, murder, or foulness,  
 No unchaste action or dishonorèd step,  
 That hath deprived me of your grace and favor;  
 But even for want of that for which I am richer—  
 A still-soliciting eye, and such a tongue  
 That I am glad I have not, though not to have it  
 Hath lost me in your liking [I.i.224–233].

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—why, if not to present her as much more than a symbolic version of Good against Bad and certainly much more than virtually mute? Also showing Cordelia as a complex figure is this: At first, Shakespeare seems inclined to have us suppose that she is counting on this “ponderous” record of sincere deeds of love and her ideals to count for more than her soon-to-be-uttered minimal response to Lear. Yet he also shows us that, even as she tries to reassure herself, she knows that her situation is hopeless and is counting on a bit of manic denial to carry her through; for he also has her express her despair when, while listening to her sisters and observing her father’s reactions, she refers to herself as “poor Cordelia.”

There is, however, a lot more implied in these two words than I have yet expressed. I believe that Shakespeare is also indicating that we are to understand Cordelia as having already developed a sound diagnostic sense of Lear’s condition and her endangered situation. This understanding will bear heavily on the final questions surrounding forgiveness as the tragedy plays itself out.

What diagnosis has she arrived at? I think Shakespeare is indicating her recognition that Lear was responding with desperation to his advancing age, personal decline, and the nothingness that lay ahead, an expectation that could only have been intensified by his giving up his crown after a long reign. He felt he was “crawling toward death,” as he put it in his opening declaration that he intended to abdicate (I.i.41).

Embodied in an aged frame, he was already shifting into a second infancy and seeking omnipotent security in a dependent state—in Cordelia’s “kind nursery” (I.i.124), he said (see Schwartz and Kahn 1980). That state contains its own illusory omnipotence (Freud 1915). Lear repeatedly emphasized his age and frailty, and Cordelia recognized from all he said and showed in his wrongheadedness that he could no longer bear to confront much reality. The pathetic scene he had already played out with Goneril and Regan indicated that his way of seeking reassurance verged on madness.

Thus, Cordelia’s diagnostic insight seems to imply “poor father” as well as “poor Cordelia.” I believe that a clinician should expect that Cordelia’s having this much insight could protect her against being utterly devastated by Lear’s tirade and rejection. In the play, Shakespeare, by having her maintain her poise throughout this painful scene, shows that she did feel at least somewhat protected. For example, she threw in Lear’s face how readily he had been taken in by her sisters’ insincere declarations of love and loyalty; also, right on the heels of Lear’s having been so abusive, she was prepared to admonish her sisters to take good care of him; additionally, she saw to it that it was made clear to her suitors that she was not in disgrace in any of the conventional senses of that word; and finally, with noteworthy self-awareness, she explained herself as a deed-oriented person. Shakespeare portrays her as having known just what she was doing and as having arrived at an understanding of Lear’s rage and cruelty. Far from having been crushed, she remained determined to maintain her integrity. Shakespeare works against our thinking that, like a symbol (Fraser 1998, pp. lxxi–lxxii), Cordelia lacks an inner life. Even Stanley Cavell (1987) seems to lapse from his otherwise keen understanding of Cordelia’s inner turbulence when, referring to her response to Lear, he says that “to love is all she knows how to do” (p. 6), an attribution that fits neither all her responses to Lear and her sisters nor Cavell’s recognition of her complex character.

Let us return to act I., where Lear’s response to Kent’s remonstrations, that he will let nothing come “between the Dragon and his wrath” (I.i.122), shows that in his rage Lear cannot be brought back to reality. Instead, he not only brushes aside the protests of his trusty aide; he banishes him, too, Kent’s true “fault” being only his persistence in trying to protect Lear from himself. In this way, too, Lear continues to violate his previously loving and appreciative relationships. In contrast,

Cordelia, by holding her ground against her father's violent assault on her identity, past, present, and future—one might say her very existence—gives no outward sign of withdrawing from Lear or feeling deserving of blame or shame or of being crushed by being deprived of the material wealth, power, and status that were to be her share of his estate. Cordelia had tried to reassure Lear a bit earlier in the scene that, true to her bond, half her heart would always remain with him (I.i.100–102), and as this scene goes on she shows that she meant it. But to no avail; Lear is too far regressed into self-destructive dragonhood.

Thus far in my analysis of I.i, I see Shakespeare as intent both on shocking us with the spectacle of Lear's desperate destructiveness and exhibiting Cordelia's fidelity, strength, resiliency, personal eloquence, and sense both of herself and of Lear's condition. I also view him as preparing us for a crucial balance in the play, that between Cordelia's evil sisters and her own complex mix of virtues and heartfelt responsiveness. Further, I read him as cuing us to the idea that after I.i blame, guilt, and forgiveness should seem not quite the right terms in which to consider Cordelia's final response to Lear. He is moving us past the point where these terms will do. We should no longer be ready to settle for the complacency of de Stael's maxim that to understand all is to forgive all. "No cause" is more pregnant with meaning than that. As I have suggested, it is not even clear that Cordelia's "no cause" is to be taken as forgiveness; a symbolic, implicitly depersonified portrayal of benevolence; or a triumph of understanding over feeling. I believe its meaning can be deepened by next taking into account Cordelia's developmental position, a position that Shakespeare is at pains to make clear in the opening scene, and a position that could be a source of the negativity suggested by her "nothing" response.

### **CORDELIA'S AMBIVALENCE**

Cordelia's lines imply great depth of understanding of her relationship to Lear. Yet Cordelia's part may be still more complex than what has been brought up this far. In their analyses of this play, Coleridge (cited in Fraser 1998, pp. lxxi–lxxii) and Bradley (1904) may have been onto something when they characterized Cordelia as a bit too proud and petulant. They may have been doing more than condescending to Cordelia and chiding her for not being more of a "good girl" and compliantly fitting herself into Lear's design. For we are considering a situ-

ation in I.i that in life could only have deeply disappointed and hurt a loving daughter. As an analyst, I would begin to think that Cordelia's final "no cause" is a sign that, notwithstanding her poise and understanding, she did not know her heart well enough and so was not expressing herself fully. It is time to turn to the question of just how disappointed, betrayed, hurt, and angry she would have had to feel were she a daughter emerging into womanhood in the material world. That clinical excursion ought to help bridge the gap between her "nothing" and her "no cause."

### **CORDELIA'S TRANSITION TO WOMANHOOD**

Shakespeare is also showing in I.i that Cordelia is steadily keeping her eye fixed on her future. In spite of all, she remains focused on what she is emotionally ready to become: a woman desired by, and loving toward, another lord, be it Burgundy or Paris. Shakespeare shows her to be standing up for her emancipation from the confinement of daughterliness—daughterliness with what, for the analyst, is its implied positive and negative oedipal grip on preparedness for sexual autonomy and fulfillment. Lear cannot recognize that, in her several speeches, Cordelia is sharing with him her insight into what is to amount to a major change in his life, as well as hers. She has already tried to reassure him that a good part of her heart will remain with him, and the way she behaves throughout the play shows that she feels that this is as it should be—that is, once a daughter, always a daughter, whatever else one becomes and however else one feels. Being a father's daughter is an ineradicable part of a woman's identity.

Lear, however, in his frightened and crazed state, remains fixed on retaining total possession; in this respect, his seeming to be involved in divestiture counts for nothing. He is depicted as unable to tolerate any change, especially change in what Shakespeare presents as his dearest and emotionally most supportive relationship. Change always stirs up anxiety and some grief over losing what is familiar, but to an aging, infirm mind it can only be more or less alarming and painfully disorienting. As though scared to death, Lear reacts with absolute incomprehension, intolerance, and punitiveness. By attacking Cordelia as he does for moving further toward emancipation, he tragically adds destruction of his fatherly ties and responsibilities to his divestiture of crown and kingdom.

Up to this point I have been discussing Cordelia mostly as if I take Shakespeare to be idealizing her, portraying her as consistently and forcefully well integrated and insightful—a loving and idealistic daughter, a daughter sure enough of herself to be capable of achieving complex diagnostic insight, even under stress, and acting accordingly. But I have also begun to suggest that Shakespeare is casting a shadow over this glowing picture. Presented with so positive a picture of Cordelia, shouldn't we have begun to ask why Shakespeare is not having her apply her good understanding of Lear's plight by immediately responding to him more fully, though in her own straightforward way? For example, he could have her make an honest, simple declaration of love that includes reminding Lear why she does not sound like her sisters, in this way showing what there is about her that, up to now, has led him to consider her his favorite. By responding in some such way, she would not be compromising her need to remain true to herself and him; on the contrary, she would be highlighting it and at the same time protecting him in the infirmity she recognizes to be his. In contrast, her actual response is a clear instance of less being less, not more. So, the question remains, Why that minimal response?

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Listening to an account of this dialogue in clinical practice, I would be inclined to infer that, loving and true though Cordelia may be, she is also being provocative, even defiant and retaliatory, in not submitting to Lear's will. Recognizing that Lear has designed this love competition to relieve his narcissistic angst, Cordelia's "nothing" must be a way of humiliating him, her dear father; at least, this could well be so unconsciously.

Bear in mind that she utters her minimal but powerful response when she is about to become a queen. Very likely, she would already have been preparing herself for some time for that huge step forward, for Shakespeare makes it clear that her suitors have been around for a while. I would expect her to react with resentment, disappointment, hurt feelings, and an angry desire to humiliate by being withholding. Under the influence of these strong feelings and her recognition of her sisters' manipulations, she would be so polarized that she would feel and want to act contrary to her good understanding—that is, to want to strike out at her father for his being so deeply disappointing—and thus to blur the contrast between her and her treacherous sisters. "Nothing, my lord" would be a good way to draw Lear into a fight, though only to walk away with little relief and much guilt.

Continuing to regard these developments from the standpoint of a clinician, I would think that, unconsciously, a strong-willed daughter would be looking for some way to gain control of this wild situation. Could her being provocative and defiant be taken to show that she was using projective identification to accomplish having her way? That is to say, she could so anger her father by her minimal response that, in unconscious fantasy and in fact, he would become the container of her negative feelings. Her bad feelings would then be included in his. As his daughter, she could then experience him as the only one of the two who is in a troubled and offended state. That done, and now all innocence and self-control, at least in outward appearance, my hypothetical young woman could do what Shakespeare has Cordelia do: speak her love for Lear in her terms and, as she has so far refrained from doing, use the occasion to expose her sisters' insincerity. She would then clearly stand for unambivalent goodness. Giving that appearance manifests her successfully splitting off and projecting the angry part of ambivalence. Although the lines that would support this conjecture are not there in the play, and there is no reason to think Shakespeare consciously intended this meaning, I do think that this conjecture is consistent both with clinical understanding of polarized, ambivalent, and painful human interactions and with the lines of Shakespeare we do have.

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Cordelia has still more reason to feel guilty. Recall in this regard that in I.i, after showing her being banished, Shakespeare has her tell her sisters, "I know you what you are" (I.i.269). This she says right after she tells them to take good care of the father she knows they have just deceived. Isn't Shakespeare showing us here that Cordelia later on has come to know or sense that, despite her protective intentions, she has failed to save her beloved father from himself and from them? Isn't he leading us to realize that, by estranging him and abandoning him to her sisters' untender mercies, she would be in a position later to realize she had played a major part in bringing on the dreadful sequence of events with which this play is packed?

Also to be taken into account in understanding Cordelia's provocativeness is this. A daughter about to separate from a beloved father is likely to feel in need of creating some distance from him before the rupture, for she too is facing a loss; Lear is not alone in this. Ahead of her lies entry into the womanhood of marriage, queenhood, and new family, about which she would in all likelihood have a young woman's



doubts and apprehensions, as well as excitement and joy. Along with these would go mourning the loss of her girlhood and daughterhood, accompanied by efforts to ward off that feeling of loss.

There is yet more. In our deepest unconscious reactions, we are absolute; we do not engage in drawing fine distinctions or weighing degrees of this or that, so that the half her heart that Cordelia takes from Lear into her future must at that moment also feel like her whole heart. It is often the case that those who are ambivalently facing serious loss try to ease their pains by creating bad feeling in the relationships they are leaving behind. In the extreme, they may try to get to feel that they are well rid of them. In part, then, I would strongly suspect that in her ambivalent state a clinical "Cordelia" might be roughly renouncing the past, even if it means rashly gambling with her future.

In I.i Shakespeare introduces a multiplicity of viewpoints, thus creating a diffusion of empathy. He also plunges us into a crowd of questions concerning responsibility. By these means he prepares us to realize that we will be witnessing the unfolding of the kind of tragedy that bears his name: Shakespearean tragedy. Being thus prepared, we can understand Cordelia's finally saying, "No cause, no cause." What else could she honestly say? Fully developed tragedies of this sort extend us well beyond the arousal and purgation of pity and terror that Aristotle emphasized. They transform us, the audience, into wrought-up and ambivalent witnesses of sad, even grotesque, events, and they transport us while we are in this state to that place in subjective experience from which we view things simultaneously from several perspectives. Once there and knowing too much, we become so many more Cordelias, now positioned beyond the point of settling questions of blame, guilt, and forgiveness.

In the case of clinical psychoanalysis, as I suggested earlier, once an analysis has worked through and rounded out the analysand's history of significant relationships, it has moved both participants into an area of experience that includes this tragic aspect. But that is not all. The analytic developments include further personal activity, sounder judgment, and movement into regions of freer choice, effective strivings for mastery, and better chances of fulfillment. In an earlier paper on the psychoanalytic vision of reality (Schafer 1970), I took up this transformation of experience and activity at greater length. How far into this changed state did Cordelia get? For my suggested

answer, we must consider the linked questions of total forgiveness and waived forgiveness.

### **MORE ON METHOD**

Before returning to the analysis of forgiveness, I am obliged to pause in order to deal, however briefly, with some questions concerning method that may have concerned you as I developed my analysis of certain aspects of Cordelia's words and actions.

By not undertaking a comprehensive analysis of this play, I did not bow to the often emphasized literary principle of approaching all aspects of a work as parts of an organic, indissoluble whole. Nor did I adhere to the psychoanalytic tradition that calls for a full, psychosexual depth analysis—I did not, for example, treat Cordelia's "nothing" as a veiled reference to anatomical gender differences, or Lear's abdication of the crown and his failing mental powers as having to do with castration and associated issues of power and narcissism. And because in general I do not favor approaching characters in a play as though they are in analysis with me, I did not attempt full psychoanalytic case studies of Cordelia and Lear. For my purposes, I consider it legitimate to set these conjectures aside. I trusted that limiting the scope of my effort as I did would still allow me to bring out clearly (and, I hope, persuasively) certain dynamic and structural issues that bear specifically on the many problematic aspects of forgiveness.

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### **CAN ONE TRANSCEND THE ISSUE OF FORGIVENESS?**

In the main, the literature on forgiveness centers on the conditions that prolong unforgiveness and the factors that facilitate forgiving, as well as seeking and accepting it. Salman Akhtar (2002) recently reviewed the analytic literature on forgiveness, and I will not repeat his summary here. Less attention seems to have been directed at the question of whether, from a psychoanalytic point of view, completely transcending forgiveness is conceivable and, if not, what we are to make of all those obvious manifestations of forgiveness we encounter in the world of human relationships. We do take these manifestations seriously; in principle, we believe in both giving and receiving forgiveness, and we act on this belief.

To move ahead in this regard, I will focus first on general clinical considerations and only then return to Cordelia and Lear. In that context, I will consider Cordelia as a real person who has been the object of her father's abuse; speaking as an analyst, I will then ask whether she could possibly be altogether forgiving or altogether waive the issue of forgiveness.

I believe that clinical and theoretical psychoanalysis of unconscious mental processes requires as one of its propositions that, in relation to serious abuse, it is not possible to waive forgiveness totally or to be entirely forgiving. Unconsciously, the talion law prevails; violence breeds violence; revenge is sweet; memory is long; and reflex-like retaliation needs no justification. Justification makes sense only in the setting of a much higher order of mental function than that which characterizes unconscious mental processes.

It is the higher order of function that features multiple perspectives on extenuating circumstances, accidental factors, moral values, moralistic injunctions, ego interests, group identities and affiliations, and so on, all of them manifestations of the complex workings of ego functions in relation to superego pressures, id impulses, and the challenges and opportunities presented by the external world. These functions interpose delay, thought, renunciation, and transformation between unconscious wishful fantasies and overt action. We do moderate, soften, or restrain our eye-for-an-eye responses. Either explicitly or implicitly, Freudian and Kleinian psychoanalysts view the forgiveness we achieve or waive as triumphant advances in ego functioning. On this basis, we are able to see ourselves through the eyes of others. Overcoming shame and defensive humility and recognizing at least some of our own characterological blemishes and virtues, we might even gain insight into both and become able to limit the destructive expression of the one and free up the constructive expression of the other. Cordelia shines in these respects. At the same time, analysts recognize that complete stability in this regard is not to be expected, for we regularly observe levels of function fluctuating in response to acutely disturbing changes in our patients' and our own internal and external worlds.

In "The Unconscious" (1915), Freud made it clear that the practice of analysis is based on a number of propositions, among them that unconscious mental processes are characterized by their timelessness, tolerance of contradiction, concreteness, and ineradicable nature—that is to say, it is only their derivatives that can be transformed and mastered. In this regard, mastery is understood as balanced and adaptive compro-

mise of conflicting tendencies. The study of dreams provides ample support for this requirement. We do and do not outgrow what we have once been. Ego strength is shown not in complete breaks with the past but in resilience and balance, in cutting regressive shifts short, not going to regressive extremes, and not prolonging regressions for seriously destructive purposes.

Our analytic interpretations would lose some of their potential effectiveness were we to think otherwise. Something else that would be lost were we to accept and rely heavily on the idea of total moderation or in-between states, is the idea of being *sort of* forgiving or unforgiving. In both cases we would be trying to bypass not only the very important matter of flux but also the extent to which we engage in splitting when under stress. We would be soft-pedaling the infantile, absolute, contradictory, totalistic, and arbitrary qualities we attribute to our deeply unconscious mental processes.

Therefore, I consider it consistent with the theoretical and technical principles of psychoanalysis to believe that someone in Cordelia's position could genuinely transcend the issue of forgiveness on higher levels of ego and superego function; that consciously she could say "no cause" wholeheartedly and yet unconsciously remain disappointed, hurt, angry, and unforgiving. Under the circumstances Shakespeare has her live through, would it make analytic sense to expect of her more self-awareness and self-mastery than that? To understand a real-life Cordelia saying "no cause" we would have to view her as having finally realized or at least preconsciously sensed that, owing in part to the desublimating effects of Lear's savagery and in part to the impending great step forward in her womanly development, she had failed to live up to her ideal self. As to the depth and persistence of her wounded response, it would seem that she has remained unable to relax her characterological defenses and come to the realization that she has never healed completely. Holding this view, I believe we have some warrant to revise this play's title: *The Tragedies of King Lear and Cordelia*. Two tragedies, two deaths!

Think how it is with us. We contend with the same limitations on self-knowledge and self-mastery in daily life at those times when old wounds, long healed or so we think, seem still to be open and bleeding when we are caught up in events severe enough to impinge on our unsuspected persisting vulnerabilities. These are the times when, all heated up, we are likely to hurl charges that, in our saner moments,

we would instantly repudiate—such charges as “You never,” “You always,” “I never,” and “I always”—and also when we finally bow to the recognition that there are some things we will never get over. We see it, too, when we encounter in our would-be tolerant, enlightened selves, and in others like us, signs of persisting prejudices against those of different race, ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, and social and political status and viewpoint; and also, of course, when we encounter persisting prejudices against ourselves, as in Jewish self-hatred (Gilman 1986). Having once been children and in our internal worlds having remained children in part, and so also continuing to carry with us archaic superego injunctions and grandiose ego ideals, we remain unconsciously unforgiving toward others and also toward ourselves for never having achieved unshakable mastery and harmony. All of which makes it all the more remarkable that, in this difficult aspect of life, we achieve as much as we do.

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