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Reply to Madelon Sprengnether

Roy Schafer ⓘ

I regret that I did not clearly distinguish forgiveness and waiving of forgiveness, and so led Madelon Sprengnether to be uncertain of my meaning. I am grateful to her thoughtful reading of my paper, and to the editor, for affording me this further opportunity to clarify a distinction between forgiveness and unforgiveness that I was attempting to make.

By “waiving of forgiveness” I intended to convey the rational action one would take upon realizing that he or she had been active in provoking the painful situation in which another person seemed to be the sole perpetrator. Lear might seem to be the sole perpetrator were one to interpret Cordelia's “Nothing, my lord” in any way other than her expressing anger and a desire to be hurtful at the time of the love contest, and her doing so ambivalently, that is, despite her loving, dutiful, and protective feelings for Lear, feelings all the more intense in view of his mental and emotional decline. I tried to point to a number of lines throughout the play's first scene that, taken together, seem to show that Shakespeare was preparing the ground for Cordelia's ultimate “No cause, no cause.” A complex, multiple view of responsibility for pain and disaster often, as here, precludes any one participant's feeling it appropriate to assume a forgiving attitude toward the other(s). In this case, forgiveness is no longer at issue, though, unconsciously, unforgiving feelings may persist. I have tried to show that Shakespeare carefully constructed act I, scene i, to prepare his audience to realize that both Lear and Cordelia, loving as they were but each being in a complex developmental and emotional situation, jointly brought about a tragic course of events that culminated in their both perishing.

Then, in my final discussion of forgiveness, I reiterated my belief in one's being capable of experiencing and extending forgiveness on higher levels of function, while reasserting my belief that in response to significant abuse one is bound to remain unconsciously irreconcilable. Accordingly, it is not part of my argument that, as the play nears

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its end, Cordelia is showing “forgivingness.” Rather, I interpret her to be acting on her realization that she has failed to live up to her ideal self and so has played a major part in bringing about the dreadful course of events that make up the bulk of this great play.

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