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The Codification of Cordelia's Name

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Abstract

Although etymologically Cordelia's name relates to *cor de illa* 'with, or from, the heart' and the name in *King Lear* suggests an anagram of *ideal heart*, such sentiment is at variance with her failure to communicate with the king and her self-willed behavior. Thus, it may be helpful to see in her name another anagram, *cord* and *a lie*, suggesting that her response to Lear, despite her good intentions, is a breaking of her bond to him.

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To what extent is literary onomastics concerned with name play which goes beyond the etymological? This has always been a question, not one readily answered. Clearly a responsible author would take into account etymological concerns, not deny their historical validity, but might he or she not add to them as well? In the case of *King Lear*, this problem becomes especially acute, as I have pointed out earlier with regard to the protagonist's name ("Lear's Learned Name"). Although the historical origin may be taken as Celtic, as numerous scholars have agreed, depending on *Lyr*, the name as Shakespeare used it could connote other things, such as the homonym *lear(e)*, used by Ben Jonson at least, meaning "empty." This, as has been shown here, may reflect on the king's needing finally to be filled with grace. Various readers responded to my note in *Names* on this subject, some of them being convinced (in particular the religiously minded), others finding the effect mainly coincidental. But it was never intimated that it had to be conscious or intended deliberately. A similar issue arises now with regard to the king's youngest daughter.

Exactly what does Cordelia's name imply? Etymologically there can be no doubt that its earlier spelling would cancel any suggestion of original codification, as has been offered, for example, by Joseph Satin, who found "*Cor*, which is Italian and Latin for 'heart'" correlated with *Delia* as a "witty anagram for 'ideal'"(15–17). Thus, in the opening scene of the tragedy she indeed speaks from her heart in an ideal way in responding to her king and father. Or so it is inferred. This wordplay is based on "Drayton's semi-parody of Daniel's sequence" of sonnets

dealing with Lady Delia, since Daniel calls his love *Ideal*. The anagram of *Delia* meaning *ideal* was, it seems fair to say, a virtual Renaissance commonplace. Yet the name in the earlier play of *King Leir* is *Cordella*, and no anagram is involved. Still, Geoffrey of Monmouth's version of the Lear story had her name spelled *Cordeilla*, which has suggested *cor de illa* 'with, or from, the heart' (see Tatlock 382).

Although many scholars have gone along with the anagrammatic *Cor–delia/ideal heart* interpretation for some time, something new can be added. For example, the late F. N. Lees, a good name-hunter of Shakespeare's nomenclature, at least with regard to Othello's name (albeit we may happen to disagree with his finding there),[1] has written, in response to my note in *Names* on Lear's name, of an Elizabethan play entitled *Richard Cordelion* (*Coeur de Lion*) which he felt might relate to Cordelia's cognomen. He felt that it related to "'Cordella' and 'Cordell,' the name of the 'good' daughter of Sir Brian Annesley, who opposed her 'wicked' sisters in 1603, and later married Southampton's godfather."[2] That would provide more etymological suggestiveness or evidence of historical indebtedness. Yet a more onomastic meaning as such arises if we consider the syllabic split in her name as *Cord–elia* rather than *Cor–delia*. The result is that we arrive at a new codification, one in counterpoint with the earlier one.

The hint for this new distinction arises already with the time-honored problem of whether Shakespeare's own name breaks down into *Shake–speare* or *Shakes–peare*. The first division appears more natural at least in terms of his coat of arms with its crossed spears and then the refraction of such name play in Falstaff's name (*fall staff*), a commonplace noted by Harry Levin (87) among others, but the breakdown into the second possibility may be more natural in terms of everyday speech. This raises the question of whether onomastics is based mainly on *parole* or supersedes it.[3] A case could be made for *Shakes–peare* as relating just as well to the connotation of a *peer* who *shakes*, in other words an earth-shaking genius of the first rank.

As for *Cord–elia*, the hint for the first syllable as connotatively meaningful has been provided in a useful article by Robert F. Willson, who writes of her as a "figure whose name underscores the image of cords that hold together bodies, families, and societies, as well as suggesting the musical chord whose power can restore order out of chaos, or discord" (82).[4] With this in mind, what then about the *–elia* ending? Although Willson does not comment on this, even as *–delia* may be considered an anagram for *ideal*,

–elia can be taken as one for *a lie*. In other words, Cordelia breaks her *cord* or bond with her father and king when she responds negatively to him in the first scene; in answer to what love she holds for him, she responds, "Nothing," which, in effect, is a prevarication.

The value of this additional anagrammatic reading is that it would help to enrichen Cordelia's character by working in counterpoint with the reading first offered. The point would be that whereas the daughter most loved *means well* in her utterance, she still starts the tragedy because of her lack of effective communication. In effect, she *cruelly* severs her bond or *cord* with the king in answering the way she does, one that is not fully restored till the end, so that eventually out of her "Nothing" comes everything – a commonplace in criticism of the play. Whether this response is owing to some stubbornness on her part (as Heinrich Heine among others has felt[5]), to her lack of maturity, or to her undue forthrightness in dealing with a man at least on the edge of senility, is a moot point.[6] It can even be argued that she breaks the biblical commandment about honoring one's father. (Lest too much be made of this, it is wise always to qualify such a connection by adding how her older sisters act much worse.) Further, does she act somehow like a kind of *fool* in her response, so that Lear's reference to his "poore Foole" (5.3.306) being hanged at the end would allude to her? Or to doubling in the theater whereby the same actor played her and the court jester? A case could be made for Lear, in his wandering mind, conflating these two characters, but, in any event, it is unnecessary to assume, as has sometimes been done, that they do not appear together on the stage; the jester may well be part of the king's entourage in the initial scene, can be thought of as a witness to Cordelia's strange behavior, and thus is in a position to refer back to it in his own "echoing" of her "Nothing" later in the play with the king, again a commonplace in studies of the tragedy's imagery. To my mind, the bulk of the evidence, including the orthographic (the capitalization of the final "Foole"), suggests that Lear had only his jester in mind during the last scene (the two characters being so totally different in terms of their voice and characterization). Hence Cordelia's initial action may best be thought of as not foolishness but rather an effect of deliberate tragic happenstance.

One other effect of saying that her name embraces both an "ideal heart" and a "cord" that has become, at least for the time, "a lie" is that it might detract from her being considered a true *Christus* figure. Granted, this may be an obstacle, mythically speaking, but associations have been made with her and other prominent symbols, for example

Israel. (Thus her difficulty in communicating with her father relates to Israel's leaving and coming back to God in the Old Testament, a major allegiance with which Shakespeare was concerned as is indicated, for example, in his extensive use of the Book of Jeremiah in *Hamlet* [see Rossky].) Even if the Christian story is introduced in this pre-Christian play (Shakespeare himself being presumably a believing Christian and also capable of anachronism), Cordelia need hardly be thought of as directly related to Christ. For example, several years ago, during a discussion following an MLA paper which argued that Cordelia was a Christ figure, I heard a feminist respondent assure the others that she was instead a *Mary* figure. That would still hardly make her capable of lying, at least if the Catholic stress upon the Immaculate Conception be borne in mind, but it gives more "ambiguity" to her makeup anyway. My own inclination is that Shakespeare would not have intended consciously to have the connotation of *a lie* present in her very name, the anagram being clearly not an obvious one and quite at variance with established etymology, but he certainly left ample room for such an effect to be present regardless. Not all Shakespearean feminists would be pleased with this effect, but then the same kind of ambivalent reaction has been found with regard to the final effect of *The Taming of the Shrew*, which has been both denounced as an example of "bad" Shakespeare[7] and extolled as ending with a true sense of mutuality. The same kind of ambivalence resulting in a restored ending is present in *King Lear*.[8] Hence a certain decoding appears in order.

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Notes

1. See Lees, "Othello's Name," and my response (Fleissner, "The Moor's Nomenclature").

2. Lees, letter. In the same letter, he affirmed that *ello* in Othello's name is not an Italian diminutive for proper names, hence detracting from his view earlier that the name was word play on "little Othoman." He concurred with the reasonableness of my submission that the suffix would lend itself to an anagram on *Leo* (the double consonant in the hero's name notwithstanding), thus bearing on John Leo, whose major work on Africa could well have influenced Shakespeare. This suggestion of a final anagram ties in directly with the burden of the present paper.

3. The distinction between *parole* and *langue* (language *not* conceived of as speech) is a famous one made initially by de Saussure. Clearly anagrams, palindromes, and the like are valid onomastic word games, for example, not dependent on the naturalness of speech patterns. John Shawcross discussed this topic recently at the Modern Language Association Convention in Chicago.

4. All of this is missing, says Willson, in Nahum Tate's 1681 version of the play (which does not end tragically) because "paradoxically, the bond of reuniting with Lear must be broken before the storm within and without man can subside" (86).

5. "Cordelia inclines to be self-willed, and this small spot is a birth-mark from the father" (qtd. in Ralli 1: 247).

6. See my essay, "The 'Nothing' Element in *King Lear*," and, for more in-depth analyses, Wilbern's "Shakespeare's Nothing" and Tayler's "*King Lear* and Negation."

7. Maurice Charney has recently discussed this concept at length.

8. That Shakespeare made use of "anagrams" elsewhere is well enough known (e.g. of *Caliban* and *cannibal, Moth* and *Thom*[as] Nashe) without inviting the charge that such an interest is playing into the hands of the Anti-Stratfordians and their eccentric names games. A more important charge that might be leveled historically is whether *partial* anagrams have valid signification. But I have found plenty of evidence of this in Thomas Coryate's *Odcombian Banquet*, which was set up by the same head of a printing press who supervised Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, namely Thomas Thorpe. In certain cases, of course, anagrammatic formulations simply do not work or are relatively meaningless. Thus the fact that Lear's name happens to be an anagram of *real* (as is noted in passing in "Lear's Learned Name") may at best relate to the so-called "appearance and reality" theme in the tragedy (to the extent that that is considered still useful) but has not much thematic significance.

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