

# Biblical Allusions in Shakespeare's *King Lear*: Echoing the *Book of Job*

*Puskás, Andrea*

## Abstract

The paper examines Biblical allusions in Shakespeare's *King Lear* with special attention to the parallels and differences between the *Book of Job* and *King Lear*. It investigates themes such as patience, knowledge and wisdom in both works. It highlights the centrality of the character of King Lear in the traditional interpretation of the play and claims that the frequently drawn parallel between Lear and Job can be completed with the parallel between Cordelia and Job as well.

**Key words:** the Book of Job, tragedy, patience, wisdom, love test.

Shakespeare's well-known tragedy of *King Lear* has many times been discussed in terms of its Christian allusions. This kind of discussion or interpretation is usually based on the assumption that the central focus in the play is on the character of Lear, all the action and circumstances are built around him, therefore, traditional critical approaches tend to highlight his reactions and development.

In his monograph *Shakespeare and the Bible* (2000), Steven Marx describes the connection between Shakespeare's drama and the Bible. In one of his chapters called "Within a Foot of the Extreme Verge: The Book of Job and King Lear" (Marx 2000, 60–78) he deals with *King Lear* in a very interesting context. He points out the parallels and contrasts between the *Book of Job* and *King Lear* in order to reveal to what extent Shakespeare's imagination may have been inspired by the Bible in this particular piece of drama.

Marx states that the basic parallels between the two stories are in plot, character, theme and language. He claims that both pieces of work belong to the category of 'Wisdom Literature', which he defines as "a category of ancient texts that questions God's plan and purpose" (Marx 2000, 61). It can be assumed that in both works the protagonist (Job and Lear) is put into difficult situations, where his suffering is graduated to such an extent that he starts questioning 'God's purpose' and loses his faith in providence. However, at the end both the characters and the readers gain certain knowledge that contributes to salvation or some personal growth.

Marx pays special attention to chronology and setting. He emphasises that both stories take place in a mythological time: *King Lear* among the prehistoric Britons and *Job*, as the first of the non-historical books of the Bible, outside fixed chronology. Lear's Fool plays with the notion of time, in one of his chants he gives a prophecy that talks about a future yet-to-come: "This prophecy Merlin shall make, for I live before / his time" (3.2.95–96). This confusion of the ages deepens the reader's/audience's uncertainty of time.

The setting of the two stories is also somehow mysterious. The story of Job is set “in the land of Uz” (Marx 2000, 60), a vaguely specified place outside the land of Israel. Similarly, the setting of *King Lear* is also a rather mythical, mysterious place, especially if we keep in mind Lear’s wandering in the storm. The place is defined and specified through the interplay of the basic elements, the wind, thunder, lightning, fire, which are mentioned by Lear: “Spit fire, spout rain!/Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire are my daughters;” (3.2.14–15). His kingdom is not a geographical place, but the reign of the basic elements, the fact that he is fully aware of. The image of this no-place or no man’s land also includes the possibility of every man’s land, and recalls the ideas of the Theatre of the Absurd. In his *Introduction* to the Arden edition of *King Lear*, R. A. Foakes claims that the imaginative power and the emotional intensity of the play anticipate the twentieth-century ‘Theatre of the Absurd’, and he draws a parallel between *King Lear* and Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. He points out “a progression towards despair or mere nothingness” (Foakes 1997, 2). The protagonist marches towards a state of absolute nakedness, accompanied by placelessness and timelessness, a state where one can see a man stripped down, completely alone and desperate. The only thing we can hear is a violent howl. This image is very much similar to Sartre’s ideas of anxiety, fear and God’s disappearance. Furthermore, if we compare Vladimir’s and Estragon’s ‘nothingness’ with King Lear, we also find out certain similarities between them. All of them are people who are stripped down into somebodies who own nothing and, in Marx’s words, are nothing. In addition, Foakes argues that the play of *King Lear* is open to a nihilistic interpretation, typical for the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’, which suggests a purposeless lonely fight, during which the gods are silent and passive. At this point, I believe, we can see a basic difference between the *Book of Job* and Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, a kind of difference, which can be described in the following way.

Marx emphasises that the endings of these works are different. While the ending of the *Book of Job* celebrates God’s greatness and justifies his deeds and decisions, *King Lear* appears to be “a bitter Beckett-like parody.” (Marx 2000, 77) While in *Job*, God speaks directly and is an active participant in the story (therefore cannot be passive and silent), in *King Lear* we have references to nature or ‘the gods’, but there is no sign of divine intervention. However, this does not appear as a difference between the two works, on the contrary, it links them together. Marx refers to Jan Kott who claims that there is a link between the ending of the *Book of Job* and *King Lear*, as the latter is the parody of *Job*, a Job-story performed by clowns (very similar to Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*) where the gods are silent and do not intervene (Marx 2000, 77). A good example of this feeling of abandonment is when Albany says “The gods defend her.” (5.3.254), referring to Cordelia, which is ironically followed by Lear carrying the dead Cordelia in his arms. Furthermore, this experience of purposeless progression towards an end and the experience of ‘left-alone’ is deepened by Kent saying bitterly “Is this the promised end?” (5.3.262).

Of course, the interpretation of the ending of *King Lear* depends on which text of the play is preferred. There are two versions of *King Lear*, the Quarto (1608) and the Folio (1623) version. The two differ not just in length, but also in many other aspects. The Quarto version, with Lear saying "Break, heart, I prithee break", gives space to an absurd-oriented interpretation, suggesting a moment of depression and aimlessness. The Folio, where Lear's last words are "Look there, look there!", is much more ready to offer a moment of hope, untypical for the 'Theatre of the Absurd'. The link between Job and Lear may be seen as a hypertextual link, using Gerald Genette's term, where the *Book of Job* as the 'hypertext' and *King Lear* as the 'hypotext' are tightly tied together and offer us a various number of links, either similarities or differences.

The contrast between the endings of the *Book of Job* and *King Lear* is very much rooted in the beginnings of the two works. When comparing the two works, one has to keep in mind that there is a significant element, the so called folk tale motif, which is present in both works. This motif is made concrete in the test of love, which appears in fairy tales, where the king tests his daughters' love or the father checks his sons' love and devotion, where the youngest proves to be the truest. Marx presents this folk tale motif as a basic similarity between the *Book of Job* and *King Lear*; however, I think it rather emphasises a basic difference, since the test is initiated by different agents in the stories.

Job's faith and love is tested by God, who appears to be a higher authority playing with his servant. Job is taken away everything he has, consequently he realises that earthly possessions are fragile. However, Lear's case is different. At the beginning he is the one who plays with his daughters and judges Cordelia's feelings on the basis of external appearances. The tragedy of *King Lear* is very much about a father acting like God, who makes decisions about human beings, judging them on the basis of external appearances and utterances. The test of love in *King Lear* is not initiated by a loving father, who wants his child to grow personally, but a father who wants to measure the immeasurable and encourage flattery. That is why the ending of the play cannot be the same as Job's, as it is Lear's blindness and vanity that initiates the action and leads to tragedy.

The motif of blindness embraces the whole play. It is intensified by the suffering of Lear and his discovery of wisdom. In fact it is the metaphor of the blindness of his soul, his shallow judgement and superficial expectations. His 'blindness' is pointed out by Kent, right at the beginning:

*"See better, Lear, and let me still remain  
The true blank of thine eye"*

(1.1.161–162)

Later, as Lear realises his mistake and learns the cruel lesson of loss, he himself talks about blindness and his eyes several times: “Old, fond eyes” (1.4.293) or

*“All weary and o’erwetched,  
Take vantage, heavy eyes, nor to behold  
This shameful lodging”*

(2.2.168–170)

Marx discusses several other motifs, which are links between the *Book of Job* and *King Lear*, such as the “nature of the deity” (Marx 2000, 79) and the ways this deity is depicted in the two works, basic existential questions about man, the motif of suicide, patience, justice and the experience of being unjustly punished. Patience, I believe, is the key theme of both works. The story of Job is actually a lesson on patience. Job’s patience, humbleness and faith in God ensure him God’s blessing and reward at the end. On the other hand, there is also a shift from patience to impatience. Even Job’s persistence and tranquillity is limited, he cries out to God in agony, but this shift, according to Marx, “can be regarded as a healthy transition from depression to anger, or as a heroic protest that defines the tragic protagonist against the patient piety of the chorus” (Marx 2000, 73). Job’s impatience, however, turns out to be the proof of God’s presence, the manifestation of his workings within the soul and also the characteristic feature of human nature. This impatience elicits God’s response and challenges a final vindication.

In case of Lear, there is also a shift; however, this one, I believe, evidently moves from impatience towards patience. The beginning of the play is marked with Lear’s impatience. He expects his daughters to express what they feel, and when he does not get a kind of answer that he expected from Cordelia, he becomes so furious within such a short period of time that the reader/audience can hardly keep pace with the rapid change of his emotions and the intensity of his rage. He moves from love towards cruelty within a single moment. First he calls his Cordelia “our joy” (1.1.82) then just a few lines afterwards he says:

*“Here I disclaim all my paternal care  
Propinquity and property of blood,  
And as a stranger to my heart and me  
Hold thee from this for ever.”*

(1.1.114–117)

This sudden change and shocking judgement questions the originality and trustworthiness of Lear’s previous feelings. When he faces the consequences of his impatience, he realises that he cannot cope with them. He is humiliated

by his daughters; he loses his kingdom, servants, home; he even loses his sanity. He comes onto the stage as a lonely, mad man, crowned with wild flowers, recalling the image of the mad Ophelia. He loses hope and is afraid of loving anybody. Can one lose more than this? He is praying for patience: "You heavens, give me that patience, patience I need!" (2.2.460), because it is only patience that can prevent him from doing another hasty deed such as revenge or any form of cruelty. However, it is evident that he has remained a quick-tempered man, he even considers revenge:

*"I will have such revenges on you both  
That all the world shall – I will do such things –  
What they are yet I know not, nut they shall be  
The terrors of the earth!"*

(2.2.468–471)

On his way, throughout the play, Lear learns to be patient, thus he is ready to gain knowledge, since he is given a fatal lesson and has to experience the consequences of his impulsive, hasty and even selfish decisions and desires.

Shifting the central focus point of criticism from Lear enables to see the play from a different angle, which results in new interpretations and discourses. When drawing a parallel between *The Book of Job* and the play *King Lear*, it can be assumed that in many ways Cordelia is much more similar to Job than Lear. Right at the beginning, just after she is rejected and chased away by her father, she proves to be humble and patient, just like Job.

*"Time shall unfold what plighted cunning hides,  
Who covert faults at last with shame derides."*

(1.1.282–283)

She is wise enough to know that time will show the truth. Of course, the focus of traditional criticism is not on her. It is even difficult to decipher her inner ideas from the play, since her appearance is limited; she is not given enough space to express her thoughts in the play. We cannot see her agony or possible inner changes throughout the story; she vanishes and comes back only at the end, to find out that her father has learned the lesson, the lesson of humbleness and patience. It is frequently noticed by critics that Cordelia is several times identified with Christ, and echoes Jesus' words in Luke 2:49 – "I must go about my father's business" – when she states: "O dear father,/ It is thy business that I go about" (4.3.23–24).

Marx argues that one thing not taken away from neither Lear nor Job is the power of speech. The more they suffer, the more onomatopoeic their language becomes. However, in spite of their torture, they remain able to express their thoughts till the end. He explains that their agony is expressed verbally. It is evident that speech definitely matters a lot to Lear, as we can see right at the very beginning of the play, however, Marx fails to notice that Lear loses his ability to speak at the very moment he discovers the death of his beloved daughter. At the beginning, Lear insists on listening to his daughters explaining their love. When hearing Cordelia's 'nothing', he becomes enraged and refuses to accept that true love cannot be transformed into words. His emphasis is on words and believes that everything that exists can be expressed verbally. At the end, his nothingness and loss culminates in losing his language. When he appears on stage carrying the dead body of Cordelia, all we hear is an animal-like howl. This is the moment when he experiences and bitterly learns that deep feelings, both deep love and the loss, the death of the beloved one cannot be expressed by words. He can only gain knowledge through the loss of language. He learns that language fails to express the deepest inner workings of the soul.

To obtain a more detailed view onto what extent Shakespeare was inspired by the Bible when writing *King Lear*, apart from the *Book of Job*, one should also have a look at the close links between *King Lear* and the Ten Commandments, or the Gospels for instance. However, even just the *Book of Job* on its own provides plenty of interpretations, new ideas and questions. Drawing a parallel between Job and Cordelia makes the long history of Shakespeare interpretations even more colourful and opens new discourses as well as literary challenges.

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