Shakespeare’s *King Lear*: Establishing the Roots of the English Monarchy’s Divine Authority at the Expense of the Jews

Shakespeare uses *King Lear* as an allegorical propaganda tool. A propaganda tool is something produced in an effort to convince an audience to accept a certain viewpoint or act in a specific way. Propaganda is usually aimed at the general public and tries to more or less subtly impress a certain idea upon them. Shakespeare uses *King Lear* to reinforce the legitimacy of the Tudor monarchs by using complex symbolism. Woven into the fabric of this well known tragedy are messages and viewpoints about the authority possessed by the English monarchs. Through symbolism *King Lear* functions as an allegorical origin story for the authority of the English crown.

Shakespeare was more than a sonneteer and playwright; he was a propagandist. One critic points to the character Burgundy in *King Lear*, stating that this suitor for Cordelia’s hand is not part of the original story, but rather is Shakespeare’s nod to the current events of the day (T. D. Baldwin). In the early 1600s, Princess Elizabeth had potential suitors from both Spain and France competing for her hand and thus a political alliance with England. Baldwin argues that by including Burgundy but making sure that France still ends up with Cordelia, who is connected with Elizabeth that Shakespeare was voicing his own opinion on the marriage options of Princess Elizabeth. As a propagandist, Shakespeare purposefully included social issues and current events in his plays because he was concerned about the political state of his country.
In *King Lear*, Shakespeare is able to go a step further than merely mentioning marital prospects or even using theatre to legitimize the Tudor line. In this play he demonstrates the origin of the authority of the English monarchs at the expense of the Jews. Shakespeare uses *King Lear* as a propaganda tool in which he reveals that the divine authority of English monarchs truly had Christian roots. *King Lear* functions as a sort of allegory for the transfer of power that occurred when the Jewish leaders, blinded by pride, failed to accept Christ and thus lost their authority. This marked the beginning of a new royal lineage because it was then given to the Gentiles, predecessors of the English monarchy.

A skillfully made piece of propaganda from a monarchy, or any other source, capitalizes on beliefs and ideas that are already embedded in the audience that is being targeted. Instead of taking brand new, foreign ideas and trying to force them on an audience, successful propaganda typically uses common belief as middle ground and builds of it, taking advantage of a prior connection. Shakespeare does this regarding the common ideology of the day surrounding the divine right of kings. Many British subjects were Christians who saw their monarchs as called of God on conditions of righteousness. One example can be found in Proverbs 16:12, “It is an abomination to kings to commit wickedness: for the throne is established by righteousness” (King James Version). The British believed that a monarch’s authority came from God on the condition that he or she righteously exercise that power to benefit and care for the people. Or in other words, “the practice of kingship reflected a dual belief in the sanctity of the monarch, as well as in the monarch’s obligation to meet the expectations of martial heroism, sanctified piety and wise judgment that comprised the sovereign ideal” (Bezio). Shakespeare highlights this idea in *King Lear* by creating a king who transgresses this model. King Lear allows pride to blind him so that he oversteps his bound and loses his authority. By providing *King Lear* as a poor role
model, Shakespeare is able to justify the tragic Jewish loss of power and reinforce the morality and justice of the Gentile reception of that same power. This reinforces the legitimacy of the English claim on divine authority because British monarchs are descendants of those Gentile recipients.

King Lear plays a crucial role in the allegory of this power transfer. The proud, dominating father, King Lear is a symbol of the ancient Jewish ruling class, the Pharisees and Sadducees. King Lear is an old man who after ruling for many years has become blinded by pride and caught up in his own self interests. He wants to give someone else the responsibility of his kingdom, saying, “tis our fast intent / To shake all cares and business from our age” (1,1,38-39). However, despite handing over the responsibility, he wants to keep his position and authority. Lear struts up to his daughter’s house with his huge entourage and expects to be not only accommodated but enthusiastically served by his daughter. Truly, after decades of commanding and getting his way, Lear has allowed his own beliefs and opinions to supersede the law, and abuse the proper transfer of authority by separating the power of the crown from the responsibility of the kingdom. It is this transgression of the spirit of the law that allows King Lear to aptly reflect and represent the Pharisees and Sadducees.

The very act of trying to maintain his authority while forcing someone else to deal with the responsibility of the kingdom demonstrates the blindness of pride that plagues the monarch. Like the Pharisees of old, King Lear is also eccentrically obsessed with pomp and ceremony. This prompts him to create a public spectacle of dividing the kingdom to his three daughters, insisting that they theatrically proclaim the answer to his question: “Which of you [my daughters] shall we say doth love us most?” (1,1,51). The first daughter gushingly replies, “Sir, I love you more than word can wield the matter, / Dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty, /
Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare,” (1,1,60-63). Not to be beat, the second challenges and supersedes the hyperbole of the first. The exaggerated responses of the first two thrill him, but when his youngest daughter, bound by her conscience, fails to inflate her sense of love and respect, his pride is wounded and he goes berserk: disowning and banishing her.

King Lear’s banishment of Cordelia is another key point in the allegorical nature of this play. In all of her moral uprightness, Cordelia, the honest, truly loving, compassionate youngest daughter of King Lear, symbolizes Christ. In her simple way, lacking the power of hyperbole so readily seen in her sisters, Cordelia states, “I love your Majesty / According to my bond; no more nor less (1,1, 94-95). In utter rage, completely blinded by his pride, King Lear bellows, “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” (1,1,117-120). His rejection of Cordelia is a symbolic representation of the way the Jewish leaders rejected the Savior.

As with the Jews of old, the rejection of the Savior was the final straw. Violating the sanctity of the crown’s progression and his malicious dismissal of the Savior figure cause Lear to be stripped of his divine authority and protection. The consequences of Lear’s choices begin to come down upon his crownless head. Having already divided his kingdom between his two elder daughters, he goes to each of their homes to be a guest anticipating respect and complete compliance with his wishes. The former king is denied even the respect due a father. When he attempts to exert his power as a king, despite having relinquished responsibility for the kingdom, he is not accommodated. The daughters who claimed such extravagant love for him refuse him and turn him out into a storm. His utter abandonment finds words in his apostrophe to the elements raging about him, “I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness: I never gave you kingdom, called you children; You owe me no subscription” (2,2,18-20). King Lear is brought to
a recognition of his proud blindness and the way his own actions have doomed him to dreadful consequences when he is faced with the very same fault in his two oldest daughters. Rejected by his own family, weighed down under the guilt of his rejection of the loyal Cordelia, tears begin to wash the pride from his eyes as Lear truly laments the life he has chosen and finally begins to see clearly.

Through the course of the next several acts, Lear is taken in from the storm by a loyal earl and eventually Lear is reunited with Cordelia. In spite the risk of defying her cruel sisters Cordelia seeks out Lear. As the Christ figure, Cordelia has forgiven Lear for banishing and disowning her and goes to find him so that she can care for him in his maddened state. This happy reunion is interrupted by justice, who will still have his due. The reality that the consequences of Lear’s actions have not yet come full circle is darkly alluded to by Cordelia’s prophetic statement, “We are not the first/ Who with best meaning have incurred the worst. / For thee, oppressèd king, I am cast down” (5,3, 4-6). Like Jesus Christ, Cordelia has willingly consented to going with her captors, knowing that she is goes humbly, quietly to her death. Like Christ, she went “as a lamb to the slaughter,” (Isaiah 53:7). Cordelia is aware that she is going into a dangerous situation; however, motivated by love, she meekly submits and stays with Lear.

The prophetic nature of Cordelia’s earlier statement is quickly brought to realization. While imprisoned with Lear, she is strangled to death. She was conspired against by her own sister and Edmund. In utter dejection and despair, King Lear suffers immensely under the knowledge that Cordelia would never have been put in that situation if not for his actions. He truly feels responsible for her death, and in desperation, he continues frantically grasping a false hope that she might yet be alive. He seeks desperately for a way to test if she is still breathing (5,3,308-315). He also struggles to undo a button that he thinks could be restraining her intake
of breath (5,3,369-375). However, all of this is in vain because her corpse cannot breathe; she is dead. The fact that Lear clings to this vain hope demonstrates that though his vision has been slightly cleared, he still does not completely understand the sacrifice that she has made for him. Lear is still blinded by pride: caught up in the guilt of his actions. He fails to understand the savior that she was and the redemptive grace that she offered in her forgiveness and her premature death. Similarly, the Jewish leaders failed to see the power in Christ’s words of forgiveness and His willingness to approach death. While they may have come to regret the innocent blood on their hands, they were never able to understand the gift and power His death represented. In the same vein, King Lear futilely grasped and sought any sign that Cordelia might yet be alive because he failed to understand the gift of total forgiveness and redemption that she offered him.

The despondent King Lear’s grief completely overwhelms him. Still vainly denying Cordelia’s death, he dies (5, 3, 372-375). Justice is satisfied. Lear’sdeath marks the end in a line of tragedies; and thus, there is no one left in his line to carry the crown. As a result, the crown is passed to a new line, hereditarily unconnected and therefore, un tarnished. Edgar, the son of the loyal earl, and Kent, a loyal assistant to the king, are told to aksed to run the kingdom (5,3, 386-389). Thus, the line of descendancy was completely altered; the authority was completely revoked and given to another.

The absolute destruction of King Lear’s royal lineage is symbolic and significant. The concept of monarchy that prevailed amongst the ancient Jews, and the British people at the time of the Shakespeare, held the rightful succession of the throne in sacred respect. Any interruption was seen as a divinely appointed judgment upon the former. The British people held firm to accounts from the Bible that told of fallen kings, like the one found in Daniel which reads, “But
when his heart was lifted up, and his mind hardened in pride, he was deposed from his kingly throne, and they took his glory from him” (Daniel 5:20). Like this unfortunate king, Lear’s throne and glory were stripped from him because in his pride he violated his sacred authority. To the English Lear, like the Jewish leaders of old became so blinded by pomp and pride that he failed to recognize his savior and because of that brought the judgment of God upon himself and his people. The British people believed that according to divine justice, the Jews lost their authority and so God granted it to a new line of rulers who the British identified as their own predecessors. They truly believed that their monarchs were descendents of the recipients of this sacred mantle. Shakespeare’s rendition of *King Lear* attempts to reaffirm this vague belief by creating symbolic origin story for the authority of the British monarchy.

An accomplished playwright and propagandist, Shakespeare was able to weave important beliefs, questions, and ideologies of his day into his plays. *King Lear* is a prime example of the masterful incorporation of this storyteller. In the space of five acts, Shakespeare is able to not only touch on important political elements of the day, he is able to establish the legitimacy of the English monarchy by creating an entertaining origin story that builds off of a cultural belief that was ingrained in the hearts and minds of most of his audience.

The extermination of a royal lineage, because of the transgressions of a pride blinded king, echoed beliefs already held by many of English of the day. They would have agreed with the justice of Lear’s demise and would have recognized the new royal line as divinely appointed. Furthermore, they would have seen parallels between this play and their own understanding of the history of the Jews. Shakespeare understood that many of the English held the Jews to be a lost and inferior people who once the chosen people of God had been scattered and scourged because of their prideful rejection and crucifixion of the Savior. Shakespeare intentionally drew
on these beliefs as he created *King Lear* in order to solidify the legitimacy of the English royal line. He anchored the authority of the English monarchy to its Christian roots and created an allegory to more clearly connect the fall of the Jewish government with the rise of the Gentiles, the accepted predecessors of the English monarchy.
Works Cited:


