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THE POWER AND RIGHTS OF THE CROWN IN  
*HAMLET AND KING LEAR*:  
'THE KING—THE KING'S TO BLAME'

BY ANDREW HADFIELD

Much drama written before and after the accession of James I comments on and analyses the issue of hereditary monarchical succession. A comparative analysis of the political comments, themes, and images made throughout *Hamlet* and *King Lear* shows how central such concerns were to Shakespeare's dramatic imagination, and how abruptly the political universe changed in England after Elizabeth's death. *Hamlet* shows a corrupt, beleaguered, and vulnerable nation which can be seen as a representation of the worst elements of England and Scotland combined. The plot can be read as a variation on the foundational republican story of the rape of Lucrece and the banishment of the Tarquins, and the play engages with monarchomach ideas expressed in a treatise such as *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos*, although the play provides no straightforward answer to the questions that it poses. *King Lear* also shows the consequences of an undesirable succession, but concentrates on what needs to be corrected rather than whether the monarch can be removed. The play can be seen in a tradition of 'mirror for princes' literature, advising and correcting a monarch—or those who were in a position to do this. In contrast, *Hamlet* suggests that the impending Stuart succession may be a disaster of such magnitude that some might turn to assassination to cure England's woes.

It is not surprising that Shakespeare's plays written just before and after the death of Elizabeth consider the problem of the succession and the question of the legitimacy of the ruler. The question of the succession was a constant factor in English political life throughout Elizabeth's reign: from the early 1560s when it seemed that she might marry the king of Sweden, a possibility publicly analysed in *Gorboduc* (1561–2); the succession of crises throughout that decade; her final chance of marriage, to the duke of Alençon (1579–80); the execution of Mary Queen of Scots (1597); to the uncertainty and sense of foreboding of the late 1580s and 1590s, Elizabeth's 'second reign', when everyone knew that the Tudor dynasty was definitely doomed.<sup>1</sup> Representation of the issue was rarely possible in a straightforward, unmediated manner.

1 See G. Walker, *The Politics of Performance in Early Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge, 1998), ch. 6; S. Alford, *The Early Elizabethan Polity: William Cecil and the British Succession Crisis, 1558–1569* (Cambridge, 1998); H. Hackett, *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen: Elizabeth I and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (Basingstoke, 1995); S. Doran, *Monarchy and Matriarchy: The Courtships of Elizabeth I* (London, 1996); J. Guy (ed.), *The Reign of Elizabeth: Court and Culture in the Last Decade* (Cambridge, 1995), introduction.

Elizabeth forbade discussion of the issue, and took drastic action against those, like the Puritan MP Peter Wentworth, who refused to obey this dictate by raising the matter in parliament.<sup>2</sup> Both Elizabeth and James resorted to censorship on a number of occasions: in Elizabeth's later years discussion of the succession was banned; James also prohibited a number of works, including those by his former tutor, George Buchanan, and John Knox, and advised his son Prince Henry to follow suit.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, representations of fundamental political questions appeared in various literary and artistic works for a variety of reasons. They were tolerated, even encouraged within a *speculum principis* (mirror for princes) tradition of giving advice to the monarch: the authorities simply could not censor and control the wealth of material published in London; they were misread because their content was cleverly disguised and suitably ambiguous; or, perhaps most important of all, sensible rulers recognized that all debate could not and should not be prohibited.<sup>4</sup> James was not a notably autocratic ruler despite his belief in the powers of the monarch and insistence that parliament was an advisory body that he could summon and dismiss at will.<sup>5</sup> He allowed Prince Henry to establish an alternative court with its own values and ideals based on a militant Protestantism completely at odds with his attempts to forge diplomatic allegiances with former Catholic enemies such as Spain.<sup>6</sup> James was keen to argue his case with his opponents—as his published works make clear—as long as they did not overstep the mark and seriously threaten his authority.<sup>7</sup> In *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies* (1598) James contrasts Scotland, which is a truly free monarchy, having a hereditary monarch, to false states which have 'elective kings, and much lesse of such sort of governors, as the dukes of Venice are, whose Aristocraticke and limited government, is nothing like to free Monarchies', adding that 'the malice of some writers hath not bene ashamed to mis-know any difference to be betwixt them'.<sup>8</sup> This attack came at

2 See N. Jones, 'Parliament and the Political Society of Elizabethan England', in D. Hoak (ed.), *Tudor Political Culture* (Cambridge, 1995), 226–42: 236–7.

3 C. S. Clegg, *Press Censorship in Elizabethan England* (Cambridge, 1997), 81–9; James I, *Basilikon Doron*, 176–7; Norbrook, 'Politics of Historiography in *Macbeth*', in K. Sharpe and S. Zwicker (edd.), *Politics of Discourse: The Literature and History of Seventeenth-Century England* (Berkeley, Calif., 1987), 82.

4 See e.g. Clegg, *Press Censorship*; A. Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England* (Madison, Wis., 1984); G. Parry, 'The Politics of the Jacobean Masque', in J. R. Mulryne and M. Shewring (edd.), *Theatre and Government under the Early Stuarts* (Cambridge, 1993), 87–117.

5 James I, *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies*, in *The Workes* (1616; Hildesheim and New York, 1971), 191–210: 202. For an analysis of James's political beliefs, see J. P. Somerville, *Politics and Ideology in England, 1603–1640* (London, 1996), 9–56.

6 R. Strong, *Henry Prince of Wales and England's Lost Renaissance* (London, 1986); Parry, 'Politics of the Jacobean Masque', 93.

7 S. J. Houston, *James I* (Harlow, 1973), 37–8.

8 *Trew Law of Free Monarchies*, 203.

a time when many English writers were praising Venice—certainly when the work was reprinted in James's *Workes* (1616)—showing that the monarch was keen to engage in polemical exchange with his ideological enemies and not simply suppress them.<sup>9</sup> It is a sign of the complex ideological relationships and divisions at court that Shakespeare's company, the King's Men, performed plays for James (including *Macbeth*); former patrons and associates, including Henry Wriothesley, the earl of Southampton and other members of the earl of Essex's entourage, gravitated towards Prince Henry.<sup>10</sup>

A pointed contrast between the political subtext of plays written in Elizabeth's last years and those produced in the early years of James's reign is revealed through a comparison of *Hamlet* (1601–2) and *King Lear* (1605–6), traditionally regarded as rivals for the title of Shakespeare's greatest play.<sup>11</sup> *Hamlet* represents a nation ruled by a paranoid and unstable court, threatened by aggressive and powerful enemies, ruled by a murderous usurper, and haunted by a ghost from the past whose intervention, while legitimate, only brings destruction. When the royal family have destroyed themselves and extinguished their line, Denmark is inherited by Fortinbras, Prince of Norway. The splendid irony is that *Hamlet* opens with the Danes fortifying their cities against the attempted invasion of Fortinbras, his aim being to recover the lands his father lost when he was defeated by Hamlet senior. The murder of Hamlet senior precipitates a chain of events which leaves Denmark not only deprived of its royal family, but in the same position it would have been in had Fortinbras senior defeated Hamlet.

It would be a crude reading of the play that tried to relate its narrative mechanically to contemporary events. But, as Howard Erskine-Hill has pointed out, the play seems to contain numerous allusions to James VI of Scotland, his mother, Mary Queen of Scots, and her part in the murder of her second husband, Lord Darnley.<sup>12</sup> The killing of Hamlet senior bears an uncanny resemblance to the murder of Darnley in 1567 by the queen's lover Bothwell, whom she married four months later.<sup>13</sup> Darnley was, according to Holinshed, murdered in an orchard, exactly as the elder Hamlet is (I. v. 59); the effect of poison on Darnley, as related by Buchanan, was to corrupt and disfigure his skin, just as Hamlet's ghost relates happened to him (I. v. 71–3). Moreover, anti-Marian propaganda claimed that Mary slept with Bothwell

9 See A. Hadfield, *Literature, Travel, and Colonial Writing in the English Renaissance, 1545–1625* (Oxford, 1998), 49–67.

10 Strong, *Henry Prince of Wales*, 223–4.

11 See R. A. Foakes, *Hamlet versus Lear: Cultural Politics and Shakespeare's Art* (Cambridge, 1993). All references are to the Arden editions of these plays: *Hamlet*, ed. H. Jenkins (London, 1982); *King Lear*, ed. R. A. Foakes (London, 1997); *Julius Caesar*, ed. D. Daniel (London, 1998).

12 H. Erskine-Hill, *Poetry and the Realm of Politics: Shakespeare to Dryden* (Oxford, 1996), 99–111. I am much indebted to Erskine-Hill's incisive reading of *Hamlet*, even though I cannot fully agree with his conclusion that Shakespeare's political instinct was to side with the *de facto* ruler.

13 For details see A. Fraser, *Mary Queen of Scots* (London, 1969), ch. 16.

before her husband's death, exactly as Gertrude does with Claudius. The same material unfavourably contrasted the inferior 'appearance and character of Bothwell by comparison with Darnley', just as Hamlet confronts his mother with her bizarre trade-in of brothers for husbands (III. iv. 53–88).<sup>14</sup> Erskine-Hill suggests that in the portrait of the intellectual heir to the throne 'Shakespeare . . . seems to have dramatised the position of King James VI . . . as the tragically incapacitated inheritor of the unnatural scene into which he had been born'.<sup>15</sup> Denmark, an unusual setting for an English Renaissance play, stands for Scotland, both being elective monarchies.<sup>16</sup>

More pertinent than such a specific reading of the play—although Erskine-Hill's argument is persuasive and he is careful not to be reductive or formulaic in his subtle exposition of *Hamlet*—is the representation of a paranoid and dysfunctional court in which the proper functions of advice, counsel, and debate have degenerated into flattery, espionage, and silence. Moreover, the court is one in which the problem of dynastic succession has not been tackled. Elsinore represents dying Tudor England two to three years before the end of that dynasty as much as embattled Stuart Scotland.

Polonius, the chief counsellor of state (a role which had been occupied by William Cecil, Lord Burghley for most of Elizabeth's reign until his death in 1598), dispenses advice which is generally fatuous, long-winded, and too generalized to be useful.<sup>17</sup> Contemporary political treatises routinely railed against the dangers of flattery and urged rulers to select counsellors who could be critical without being subversive or treasonable in their comments. It is a sign of how ubiquitous a part of political discourse this was that both Machiavelli and his nemesis, Innocent Gentillet, should devote key sections of their supposedly diametrically opposed treatises to warning princes of the dangers of tolerating flatterers.<sup>18</sup> A prince who failed to allow free and open counsel to operate would experience a surly, hostile, and secretive court which would probably have to be controlled through the use of spies. Tacitus's account of the reign of Nero, a work which Shakespeare probably consulted in Sir Henry Saville's translation (1591), portrays his court as a poisonous mixture of flatterers and conspirators who have to be rooted out by spies in order for the cruel and depraved emperor to survive in power.<sup>19</sup> Nero was treacherous and could not be trusted by his subjects. The most infamous

14 Erskine-Hill, *Poetry and the Realm of Politics*, 105.

15 *Ibid.* 107.

16 *Ibid.* 104.

17 On Burghley see C. Read, *Lord Burghley and Queen Elizabeth* (London, 1960).

18 Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ed. Q. Skinner and R. Price (Cambridge, 1988), ch. 23; Innocent Gentillet, *A Discourse upon the meanes of wel governing and maintaining in Gods Peace, a Kingdome, or other principalitie . . . Against Nicholas Machiavell the Florentine* (1602), trans. S. Patericke (New York, 1969), 30–62.

19 D. Womersley, '3 Henry VI: Shakespeare, Tacitus, and Parricide', *Notes & Queries*, 280 (Dec. 1985), 468–73.

example was that of Seneca, who was forced to commit suicide after his involvement in a plot against the emperor.<sup>20</sup> Nero's tyrannical rule encouraged a serious conspiracy which was eventually betrayed by informers, and all connected were either executed or forced to commit suicide.<sup>21</sup>

All relationships are corrupted and abused at Elsinore. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet's former school friends, are drawn into the plot by the king and queen and sent to spy on the prince. Friendship, a relationship frequently praised and highly valued by Latin writers and their humanist followers, is corrupted at Elsinore, along with parenthood.<sup>22</sup> Eventually Hamlet exposes them, challenging Guildenstern to play the recorder that one of the travelling players carries, explaining that 'It is as easy as lying' (III. ii. 348). When Guildenstern admits that he has not the skill, Hamlet counters: 'how unworthy a thing you make of me. You would play upon me . . . you would pluck out the heart of my mystery, you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass' (III. ii. 354–7). Hamlet asserts his own independence through his resistance: 'Call me what instrument you will, though you fret me, you cannot play upon me' (III. ii. 361–2). These words resemble a similar metaphor employed by Francis Bacon, who argued that Elizabeth tempered her religious laws to insist on the outward obedience of her subjects only because she did not wish to 'make windows into men's hearts and secret thoughts' to discover their inner religious allegiances.<sup>23</sup>

One of Hamlet's most celebrated comments on the vicissitudes of the human condition, the speech where he reflects on 'What a piece of work is a man', is probably best read as a comment on life at the dysfunctional court of Elsinore, rather than a general statement of existential angst. The words are spoken just after Guildenstern has admitted that he and Rosencrantz are in the service of the king, and are preceded by Hamlet's statement, 'So shall my anticipation prevent your discovery, and your secrecy to the King and Queen moults no feather' (i.e. remain intact; II. ii. 294–5). Hamlet's sardonic parody of optimistic accounts of man's abilities and godlike potential, such as Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486), is conspicuously expressed as a means of describing and simultaneously disguising his madness, so refusing to let the corrupt and inadequate spies make a window through to his soul.<sup>24</sup>

20 Tacitus, *On Imperial Rome*, trans. M. Grant (Harmondsworth, 1956), 329. On Seneca's key influence on Renaissance writers, for his Stoic philosophy and drama, see R. Barbour, *English Epicures and Stoics: Ancient Legacies in Early Stuart Culture* (Amherst, Mass., 1998).

21 Tacitus, *On Imperial Rome*, ch. 15.

22 Ben Jonson, for example, was especially concerned with the question of true friendship in his writings: see D. Riggs, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 284, 298, 312.

23 Cited in C. Haigh, *Elizabeth I* (Harlow, 1988), 37.

24 Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, in E. Cassirer, P. O. Kristellar, and J. H. Randall Jr. (edd.), *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man* (Chicago, 1948), 215–54: 224–5. For comment see A. Hadfield, *The English Renaissance, 1550–1620*, Blackwell Guides to Literature (Oxford, 2000), 239–40.

*Hamlet* appears to have been written with the Latin histories of Tacitus, Suetonius, and, to a lesser extent, Plutarch, and their representations of the tyranny and cruelty of imperial Rome very much at the forefront of the dramatist’s mind. The play is clearly concerned with the same issues of government and the possibility of tyrannicide explored in *Julius Caesar*, written only one or two years earlier.<sup>25</sup> Polonius is responsible for the poisoning of all forms of human relationship—paternal, friendly, master–servant, and political—only in so far as he is the chief counsellor. The real villain is the king, the usurper Claudius, as Laertes recognizes in the final, melodramatic denouement: ‘The King—the King’s to blame’ (V. ii. 326). Claudius has murdered his brother, the legitimate king, and subsequently married his wife (an action that might well have reminded an audience as much of Henry VIII’s union with his brother’s wife, Catherine of Aragon, and the subsequent problems he encountered, as the story of Mary Stuart and the earl of Bothwell) and in the process disinherited his nephew, the probable successor.<sup>26</sup> In doing so he has destroyed any hope of a workable political process, which has degenerated into the standard combination of sycophancy and espionage found at the court of tyrants, and left his country open to invasion by the very forces his brother managed to defeat. All this is not, of course, Claudius’s intention—and we do not see him behaving in the manner of a tyrant unless he is protecting his own guilty secrets against the suspicions of his nephew—but his rule has these malign effects. He may not be a Nero, a Tiberius, a Caligula, or even a Julius Caesar, but the similarities to their reigns are uncomfortably close.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, based on the evidence of the two plays, there is far more justification for the assassination of Claudius than there is for that of Julius Caesar. The conspirators do not manage to provide any convincing evidence that Caesar is a tyrant beyond their own assertions and demands for liberty. Cassius, the instigator of the plot, simply asserts:

And why should Caesar be a tyrant then?  
 Poor man, I know he would not be a wolf  
 But that he sees the Romans are but sheep.  
 He were no lion, were not Romans hinds.  
 Those that with haste will make a mighty fire  
 Begin it with weak straws. What trash is Rome?  
 What rubbish, and what offal? when it serves  
 For the base matter to illuminate  
 So vile a thing as Caesar?

(I. iii. 103–11)

25 R. S. Miola, ‘Julius Caesar and the Tyrannicide Debate’, *Renaissance Quarterly*, 36 (1985), 271–90.

26 J. J. Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII* (London, 1968), chs. 7–8.

27 Horatio compares the portent of the ghost to those which preceded the assassination of Julius Caesar (I. i. 115–28).

Cassius's words demonstrate republican contempt for the masses for being fickle and ill educated coupled with a desire for government that respects liberty, not legitimate criticism of a tyrant.<sup>28</sup> The speech is expressed in conditionals and subjunctives that concentrate on Cassius's haughty disdain for the citizens of Rome who support Caesar rather than for the supposed tyrant himself. We see Caesar as an isolated and ineffective ruler with poor judgement, cut off from the populace, and vain enough to refer to himself in the third person, but hardly a ruler who bears comparison to the worst tyrants represented in the pages of Tacitus or Suetonius.<sup>29</sup> In contrast, Claudius appears far more deserving of his brutal fate.

*Hamlet* might also have been written with the most infamous Huguenot monarchomach treatise in mind, *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos: or, concerning the legitimate power of a prince over the people, and of the people over a prince*. This work, which is generally agreed to have been written by Hubert Languet and Philippe Duplessis Mornay, was published in Basle in 1579, under the false imprint of Edinburgh, by Stephanus Junius Brutus, the Celt, a pseudonym which alluded to both Lucius Junius Brutus, the first consul of the Roman republic who led the revolt against the last king of Rome Tarquinus Superbus, and Marcus Junius Brutus, assassin of Julius Caesar.<sup>30</sup> One of the key sources of *Hamlet* was Saxo Grammaticus's *Historiae Danicae*, a late twelfth-century work, first published in Latin in Paris in 1514. The hero, Amleth, eventually manages to revenge his murdered father, fooling his enemies by pretending to be stupid (his name signals a fool or simpleton). As Harold Jenkins has pointed out, 'Reduced to its bare outline this is the same story as the Romans told of Lucius Junius Brutus (a name which likewise signals a simpleton), who avenged the murder of his father when he drove the Tarquins out of Rome.'<sup>31</sup> This provides one of many links between Shakespeare's play and *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos*, which frequently refers to Tarquinus Superbus as the archetypal tyrant.<sup>32</sup> It concludes with a poem, the last lines of which are: 'I believe that in vanquishing these huge monsters of evil, you will inscribe on the conquered: "O BRUTUS, YOU WERE MY TEACHER"'.<sup>33</sup>

The choice of Edinburgh as the supposed place of publication and the

28 On the aristocratic character of much early modern republicanism, see J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ, 1975), 100–3.

29 For an incisive analysis of the problem of rulers who are cut off from the people in Shakespeare's romances, see C. Jordan, *Shakespeare's Monarchies: Ruler and Subject in the Romances* (Ithaca, NY, 1997).

30 *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos*, ed. G. Garnett (Cambridge, 1994), introduction, pp. lv–lxxxvi, 3. See also R. M. Kingdon, 'Calvinism and Resistance Theory, 1550–1580', in J. H. Burns (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Political Thought, 1450–1700* (Cambridge, 1991), 193–253: 212.

31 *Hamlet*, ed. Jenkins, p. 86 (introd.).

32 *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos*, 71, 161, 184.

33 *Ibid.* 187.



transfer of the key figures of Roman republicanism to the Celtic fringe signal the importance that the series of debates over the rights of resistance to tyrants written in response to the problems precipitated by the reign of Mary Queen of Scots had in European political thought.<sup>34</sup> As has already been argued, *Hamlet* makes obvious allusions to events in Scotland, suggesting that the play ought to be read not only as a comment on the state of England c.1600, but, given its political emphasis, England seen in the light of its relationship to Scotland and in terms of Scottish political thought.

The relevance of *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos* to *Hamlet*, and the likelihood of Shakespeare having consulted or read the work, is strengthened by other contextual evidence. James VI's political reflections, published in 1598, were written in response to the arguments for regicide of his former tutor, George Buchanan, articulated in *De jure regni apud Scotos* (1579), drawing further attention to both sides of the argument raging in Scotland.<sup>35</sup> Not only was the Sidney family and its circle friendly with Buchanan and influenced by his ideas, but Sir Philip Sidney corresponded extensively with Languet and translated works by Duplessis Mornay.<sup>36</sup> *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos* was undoubtedly the key political text informing the arguments of Sidney's *Arcadia* concerning the limited power a monarchy should have and the rights of individual subjects, as Blair Worden has demonstrated.<sup>37</sup> The published *Arcadia* (1593), in turn, was the source for the subplot of *King Lear*.<sup>38</sup>

*Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos* is divided into four sections, each based on a fundamental question of government. The first considers 'Whether subjects be bound, or ought, to obey princes who command anything against the law of God'; the second, 'Whether it be false to resist a prince wishing to abrogate the law of God and devastate the church: also by whom, how, and to what extent'; the third, 'Whether, and to what extent, it be lawful to resist a prince who is oppressing or ruining the commonwealth' (and by whom); and the fourth, 'Whether neighbouring princes may by right, or ought, to render assistance to subjects of other princes who are being persecuted on account of pure religion, or oppressed by manifest tyranny'.<sup>39</sup> It will be clear that these questions are all relevant to the plot of *Hamlet*, although sometimes the relationship between the two texts is somewhat oblique. Having stated this, though, it would be

34 For a comprehensive survey of the literature produced in the wake of Mary's reign, see J. E. Phillips, *Images of a Queen: Mary Stuart in Sixteenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley, Calif., 1964).

35 See Q. Skinner, *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1978), ii. 340–8; Kingdon, 'Calvinism and Resistance Theory', 213–15.

36 J. E. Phillips, 'George Buchanan and the Sidney Circle', *Huntingdon Library Quarterly*, 12 (1948–9), 23–55; B. Worden, *The Sound of Virtue: Philip Sidney's Arcadia and Elizabethan Politics* (New Haven, 1996), ch. 3.

37 Worden, *Sound of Virtue*.

38 The text is conveniently reproduced in Kenneth Muir's Arden 2 edition (1964), 229–35.

39 *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos*, 5.

surprising indeed, if a play were to follow such a work so closely, especially given Elizabeth's sensitivity to other political issues such as the question of the succession. Sidney's *Arcadia* circulated in manuscript in his lifetime and was therefore intended for a sophisticated coterie audience bearing little resemblance to the audience of the public theatres. Manuscript circulation 'allowed a certain freedom of expression, especially about political, religious, and personal matters, which printed books might not . . . Numerous works which were liable to attract official displeasure circulated in manuscript.'<sup>40</sup> The same consideration, obviously, applied even more to plays than printed books.<sup>41</sup> Political comment in literary works was often disguised through the use of remote and unfamiliar locations or historical events, both of which apply to *Hamlet*.<sup>42</sup>

The answer given to the first question in *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos* is straightforward, unequivocal, and unsurprising. The author(s) state(s) that 'The king . . . if he neglects God, if he goes over to his enemies, if he commits felonies against God, forfeits the kingdom by this very right and often loses it in practice'.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, 'subjects are not bound to obey a king against God'.<sup>44</sup> Claudius, although he does not specifically persecute the church, admits: 'O my offence is rank, it smells to heaven; | it hath the primal eldest curse upon't— | A brother's murder' (III. iii. 36–8), aligning him with the cursed race of Cain. His fear of inevitable damnation probably recalls the last speech of Faustus (64–9), linking him more closely to those sinful monarchs that *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos* suggests should be overthrown by their subjects.<sup>45</sup> His attempts to pray are futile: 'My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. | Words without thoughts never to heaven go' (III. iii. 97–8). Claudius's actions as king are not sanctioned by God. Hamlet's refusal to kill Claudius in this scene is not through fear of breaking any religious or ethical code, but to prevent the victim's soul from ascending to heaven.

*Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos* asks that rulers be judged according to the effects of their rule, and tyrants labelled accordingly:

It can happen that someone who has occupied a kingdom by force rules it justly, and one to whom it is granted by right, does so unjustly. And clearly, since kingship is more a right than an inheritance, more a performance than a possession, he who performs his

40 On manuscript circulation, see H. R. Woudhuysen, *Sir Philip Sidney and the Circulation of Manuscripts, 1558–1640* (Oxford, 1996), 12.

41 For a suggestion that *Hamlet* might have attracted the unwelcome eye of the censor, see J. Clare, 'Art made tongue-tied by authority': *Elizabethan and Jacobean Dramatic Censorship*, 2nd edn. (Manchester, 1999), 129.

42 Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation*; Hadfield, *Literature, Travel, and Colonial Writing*.

43 *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos*, 20–1.

44 *Ibid.* 33–4.

45 Christopher Marlowe, *Dr. Faustus* (A-Text, V. ii. 56–115; B-Text, V. ii. 132–85), in *Doctor Faustus and Other Plays*, ed. D. Bevington and E. Rasmussen (Oxford, 1995).

function badly seems more worthy of the name tyrant than he who has not received his function in the proper fashion.<sup>46</sup>

Although *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos* explicitly rejects the political philosophy of Machiavelli on numerous occasions, punning polemically on his name as 'Poxy Pelt' in the prefatory address to the reader, at this point the line of argument resembles his practical theories of rule rather than ones based on natural rights.<sup>47</sup> Many of the central questions that *Hamlet* poses derive from the particular problem *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos* articulates: is Claudius a good ruler and are the effects of his rule just? Would it be better on balance if Fortinbras were to take Denmark and rule instead? (After all, England in 1600 faced a similar prospect.) Should dutiful subjects accept their lot and obey the ruler however he obtained power, or is it their duty to oppose him?<sup>48</sup>

If the answer to the last question is yes, then is it therefore legitimate for Hamlet to resist, overthrow, and depose Claudius, as the second and third questions in *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos* ask? Hamlet's most famous soliloquy can be read as a response to this central political problem, as much as a meditation on the nature of existence (although, in a theocentric universe, the two are intimately related):

To be, or not to be, that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles  
And by opposing end them

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  
Th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,  
The pangs of dispriz'd love, the law's delay,  
The insolence of office, and the spurns  
That patient merit of th'unworthy takes,  
When he himself might his quietus make  
With a bare bodkin?

(III. i. 56–60, 71–7)

The speech is nicely balanced in its hesitant embrace of violence as a solution. When Hamlet meditates on the nature of suffering and action, we cannot be sure whether he is planning 'to take arms against a sea of troubles' by ending his own life or that of the person or thing who has caused his misery. Equally, the desire to achieve 'quietus' (settling a debt) through the use of a 'bare bodkin' (dagger) does not indicate whether the intended target is his own

46 *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos*, 140–1.

47 *Ibid.* 7 and *passim*; Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 8.

48 Howard Erskine-Hill argues that this is the central tenet of Shakespeare's political thought: *Poetry and the Realm of Politics*, chs. 2–3.

breast or another's, and the mention of 'oppressor' and 'office' in the immediately preceding build-up of phrases indicates that Hamlet's mind is at least partly on the sins of Claudius. Furthermore, political assassination, successful or not, invariably ended in the death of the perpetrator, as is the spectacular case at the end of the play. Assuming the mantle of God's avenger against tyranny was, of course, a dubious honour because, even if he was certain of his right to kill, death undoubtedly awaited the perpetrator. Hamlet's anxiety and hesitation are understandable, especially as his only authority is a ghost claiming to be his father who urges him to kill the king. According to *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos* private individuals were not handed the sword of justice to perform acts of revenge; only magistrates were entitled to bear it.<sup>49</sup> Hamlet's status could not be more ambiguous: although an educated member of the royal family, he holds no particular office and is still a student in Wittenberg.

Equally kings had to remember who granted them their power. Citing David as the ideal king, the treatise argues

He was anointed twice: first by the prophet at the command of God as a token of election; then at the command of the people while he was being constituted as king. This was done in order that kings should always remember that it is from God, but by the people and for the people that they rule; and that they should not claim that they have received their kingdom from God alone and by the sword, as they say, since they were first girded with that very sword by the people.<sup>50</sup>

Claudius fails on both counts: he is described by Hamlet as having circumvented the normal process of establishing the succession by choice ('Popp'd in between the election and my hopes', V. ii. 65) and is manifestly cut off from the voice of God.<sup>51</sup> What popular acclaim that does take place is for Laertes, a significantly less tormented avenger than Hamlet, who is championed by the 'rabble' who want him to be king (IV. v. 102–8), and, to a lesser extent, Hamlet, whom Claudius will not try for the murder of Polonius because of 'the great love the general gender bear him' (IV. vii. 18).<sup>52</sup> Hamlet may be unsure of his rights, but Claudius, as an 'incestuous, murd'rous, damned Dane' (V. ii. 330) masquerading as a legitimate king, is a ripe candidate for deposition.

*Hamlet* provides no obvious answers to the variety of political questions it raises. Nevertheless, it demands to be read in terms of the political anxieties of

49 *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos*, 60. This was a standard argument of 'resistance literature': see e.g. John Ponet, *A shorte treatise of politicke power* (1556), 71–2; Christopher Goodman, *How Superior Powers Ought to be Obeyed* (1558), 139.

50 *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos*, 69.

51 Hamlet's statement does not necessarily have to be taken at face value; as Harold Jenkins points out, 'There was no [earlier] suggestion of any such "hopes" or of any discreditable manoeuvre on the part of Claudius' (*Hamlet*, 397). However one reads the line, it draws attention to Claudius's self-centred pursuit of power and authoritarian style of government.

52 A. Patterson, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* (Oxford, 1989), 104.

(very) late Elizabethan England, ruled by a decrepit, dying queen who could no longer command the respect of many of her most influential subjects, with the uncertainty of being ruled by a new dynasty in prospect, surrounded by hostile enemies (France, Spain, Ireland), divided in religious affiliation, and riven by factions at court.<sup>53</sup> Depending on the actual date of its composition—a problematic concept given the difference between the texts published as the first two quartos and the Folio, which suggest that it was revised at various points<sup>54</sup>—it may have been written during or after the rebellion and execution of the earl of Essex (February 1601).<sup>55</sup> The plot is, as I have already noted, in essence a variation of the story of the killing of Tarquin, a narrative of republican liberation that haunted Shakespeare's working life and which he had first used in *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594). There is no straightforward way out of the political impasse at Elsinore as there was in Rome. But this may be a deliberate comment on the state of England in 1600.

*King Lear*, like *Hamlet*, represents the consequences of an undesirable succession and shows the disastrous events precipitated by the advent of the new reign. However, while the plot of *Hamlet* revolves around the question of whether to get rid of the incumbent monarch, *King Lear* is more concerned with how to restore what has been lost by the king's foolish actions. *Hamlet* looks towards an impending event; *King Lear* debates whether what has been lost can be restored or rebuilt. The play, which surely looks back to the story of Oedipus, as dramatized by Seneca, represents the fall of a king from power and his subsequent path to enlightenment.<sup>56</sup> As Harry V. Jaffa has pointed out, at the start of the play, Lear is conspicuously 'the greatest of Shakespeare's kings . . . at the head of a united Britain (not merely England) and at peace, not only with all domestic factions, but with the outside world as well'.<sup>57</sup> The problem is that he then gives his kingdom away foolishly to his evil daughters, retaining the name of king and a supposed vestige of power, before his redemption begins on the heath with the poorest and least visible of his former subjects. Unlike his sources, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* and the chronicle play *The History of King Leir*, Shakespeare grants Lear no

53 See Guy, *The Reign of Elizabeth*, *passim*; R. B. Wernham, *After the Armada: Elizabethan England and the Struggle for Western Europe, 1588–1595* (Oxford, 1984); C. Z. Weiner, 'The Beleaguered Isle: A Study of Elizabethan and Early Jacobean Anti-Catholicism', *Past and Present*, 51 (1971), 27–62.

54 For a discussion of the different texts and their significance, see *The First Quarto of Hamlet*, ed. K. O. Itrace (Cambridge, 1998).

55 Harold Jenkins, in his edition, concludes that the Folio text dates from 1601, but that versions of the play may have been performed in 1599 and 1600 (p. 13). See also Patterson, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice*, 93–4.

56 Seneca, *Oedipus in Four Tragedies and Octavia*, trans. E. F. Watling (Harmondsworth, 1966). See also Barbour, *English Epicures and Stoics*, *passim*; F. L. Lucas, *Seneca and Elizabethan Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1922).

57 H. V. Jaffa, 'The Limits of Politics: King Lear, Act I, Scene 1', in A. Bloom with H. V. Jaffa, *Shakespeare's Politics* (1964; repr. Chicago, 1981), 113–45: 113.

ultimate redemption.<sup>58</sup> Just as it appears that Cordelia and France's invading army will restore the fractured dynasty, Cordelia is murdered and the grief-stricken Lear dies, leaving the kingdom in limbo with his heirs all dead.

The start and the conclusion clearly refer the audience back to the succession from Elizabeth to James and the extinction of the Tudor dynasty. But other details provided in the first scene link the play more specifically to the early rule of James and his grand plans for the unification of Britain, which, despite the adoption of the Union Jack as the official British flag in April 1605 and James's assumption of the title 'King of Britain', was rejected by the English parliament in early 1607.<sup>59</sup> *King Lear* was undoubtedly first performed on the commercial stage some time in 1605–6, and was produced at court for the king 'during the Christmas period in 1606'.<sup>60</sup> Terence Hawkes has recently observed that Lear's attempted division of his kingdom into three portions would have appeared to contemporary playgoers, especially given that Lear's first imperious command is to ask for a map (I. i. 36), as a breaking up of a unified Britain into its constituent nations. Goneril is to be married to the Duke of Albany, 'the old name for the area which a modern map terms Scotland', and Regan is to be married to the Duke of Cornwall, 'the old name for Wales and the West of England', which means that the 'third more opulent than your sisters' (I. i. 86) offered to Cordelia 'appears as a cut-down, ragged, violated English remainder'.<sup>61</sup> Lear destroys Britain, while James was attempting—although unsuccessfully—to unite it. As if these parallels did not make the point obvious enough, James's two sons, Henry and Charles, had just been made duke of Cornwall and duke of Albany, the names of the suitors of Regan and Goneril.<sup>62</sup> *King Lear* both reflects and inverts the contemporary political situation of James, representing a king who tears Britain apart in the mistaken belief that he is handing over a secure and well-ordered kingdom to the next generation. His plan may be to ensure a balance of power in Britain, but the result is a destructive civil war.<sup>63</sup>

Lear's story can be read as a political odyssey; the dire fate he suffers, along with his family and subjects, stems from the errors he makes as a monarch. Like Duncan, he is—or has become—a poor judge of character, a key problem for a monarch who has to rely on advisers and counsellors. By the end of the first scene the damage has been done and the tragedy precipitated. Cordelia

58 Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. L. Thorpe (Harmondsworth, 1966), 81–6; *The History of King Lear* (1605), Malone Society (Oxford, 1907).

59 B. P. Levack, *The Formation of the British State: England, Scotland and the Union, 1603–1707* (Oxford, 1987), 4–9, 42–4.

60 *Lear*, ed. Foakes, p. 90.

61 T. Hawkes, *King Lear* (Plymouth, 1995), 5–6.

62 Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Lear*, ed. J. L. Halio (Cambridge, 1992), 1; Patterson, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice*, 107.

63 Jaffa, 'Limits of Politics', 121. Jaffa argues that Lear's actions are 'not arbitrary or foolish', but a reasonable attempt to preserve unity (p. 122).

refuses to play the inheritance game demanded by her father and speaks plainly in insisting on the language of natural rights rather than competitive court flattery, stating that she loves her father 'According to my bond, no more nor less', and will 'Return those duties back as are right fit, | Obey you, love you, and most honour you' (I. i. 93, 97–8). Her bluntness is in direct contrast to the poetic effusions of Goneril and Regan. Goneril proclaims: 'I do love you more than word can wield the matter, | Dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty, | Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare, | No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honour' (I. i. 55–8). Such words recall the language of sonnets and sonnet sequences of the 1590s, many composed as witty courtly games in order to win favour with Elizabeth, access to her person, patronage, and, most directly, material reward in the form of the licensed monopolies that were distributed.<sup>64</sup> They could be read as a warning to James, already notorious for his promotion of favourites, not to lapse into the errors of his predecessor in her final years.<sup>65</sup> Lear's blindness provokes an outburst from the loyal, but undiplomatic, Kent, who makes a desperate attempt to advise his king that his youngest daughter loves him best and the other two are deceiving him, despite a regal warning not to come 'between the dragon and his wrath' (I. i. 122):

be Kent unmannerly  
 When Lear is mad. What wouldst thou do, old man?  
 Think'st thou that duty shall have dread to speak  
 When power to flattery bows? To plainness honour's bound,  
 When majesty falls to folly. Reserve thy state,  
 And in thy best consideration check  
 This hideous rashness.

(I. i. 146–52)

Few kings would relish the prospect of being addressed as 'old man', but Kent's urgency is inspired by his sense that drastic action is required to bring the king to his senses before everybody suffers. Lear should 'reserve his state' and rule; but, and this is the key point, he should listen to advice.

In *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies*, James refers to himself as a father and to his subjects as his children:

By the Law of Nature the King becomes a naturall Father to all his Lieges at his Coronation: And as the Father of his fatherly duty is bound to care for the nourishing, education, and vertuous government of his children; even so is the king bound to care for all his subjects. As all the toile and paine that the father can take for his children, will be thought light and well bestowed by him, so that the effect thereof redound to their profite and weale; so ought the Prince to doe towards his people.<sup>66</sup>

64 A. F. Marotti, "'Love is not love": Elizabethan Sonnet Sequences and the Social Order', *English Literary History*, 49 (1982), 396–428.

65 I. Carrier, *James VI and I: King of Great Britain* (Cambridge, 1998), 100–1; D. H. Willson, *James VI and I* (London, 1956), 175–6.

66 *Trew Law of Free Monarchies*, 195. Elsewhere James describes the people as apes who copy what the king does: *Basilikon Doron*, 155.



Such a conception of the relationship between ruler and subject allows little room for political intervention by the subject, who can never grow enough to meet the monarch on anything like equal terms and will always be a minor. Kent's words, which do not derive from any of Shakespeare's sources, abruptly challenge James's political assumptions. Status and forms of address assume a central importance in the play, making the style as well as the content of Kent's intervention all the more provocative.<sup>67</sup> Kent is denied the right to speak and advise the ailing father of the people, who is showing himself to be wanting as both a parent and a ruler, especially as it must have been clear to the audience, whether they knew the story or not, that Kent is right and Lear is wrong.<sup>68</sup> If Kent seems childish in his bluntness, is this not primarily because the political world of *King Lear* is childish, requiring family and subjects alike to compete for the father's affection when required, be seen and not heard when required, and obey the one who knows best? For James, kings should be 'the authors and makers of the Lawes', which they then ought to obey, even though they could not be challenged by their subjects.<sup>69</sup> Any assembled or elected body of representatives, such as parliament, could only advise the monarch and was to be summoned when he desired to hear what it had to say, and dismissed when he had learned what he needed to know.<sup>70</sup>

In such states, political comment and advice has to be carefully coded or it risks incurring the 'dragon's wrath'. The word 'counsel' is used frequently throughout the play—more so than in any other work by Shakespeare—but it does not always simply mean the expression of advice. When Kent returns in disguise to Lear's service, one of the ways in which he recommends himself to his king is through his ability to 'keep honest counsel' (I. iv. 32), meaning to keep secrets, a sign of how Kent's status as a loyal servant has changed, as well as how one should live in a state where free speech is circumscribed. Set against Kent's blunt attempt to advise the king while remaining loyal is the Fool, whose own advice consists of a series of cryptic maxims, or allegorical fables. Later in the same scene, the Fool makes his first entrance and criticizes Lear's folly, offering him his coxcomb (jester's hat) because Lear, not he, is the real fool. When Lear threatens to whip him, the Fool counters with 'Truth's a dog must to kennel. He must be whipped out, when the Lady Brach [bitch] may stand by th'fire and stink' (I. iv. 109–11). The king has exchanged the faithful hound for the sycophantic and false flatterer. Equally significant is the

67 For one analysis, see L. Jardine, 'Reading and the Technology of Textual Affect: Erasmus's Familiar Letters and Shakespeare's *King Lear*', in *Reading Shakespeare Historically* (London, 1996), 78–97.

68 For an invaluable assessment of the significance of the debates over the matter of Britain in the 16th century and the wider knowledge of them, see T. D. Kendrick, *British Antiquity* (London, 1950).

69 *Trew Law of Free Monarchies*, 203.

70 *Basilikon Doron*, 156; *Trew Law of Free Monarchies*, 202.



implication that, just as James regarded his subjects as perpetual children incapable of assuming proper political rights and engaging in reasonable and sustained debate, so Lear sees his as animals (a key theme throughout the play).<sup>71</sup> That the Fool has in mind Goneril and Regan is further emphasized at the end of this exchange when the Fool, establishing himself as the figure of the truth-teller, states, 'I marvel what kin thou and thy daughters are. They'll have me whipped for speaking true, thou'lt have me whipped for lying, and sometimes I am whipped for holding my peace' (I. iv. 173–6).

The political state established by King Lear is represented most clearly in Act II, scene ii via interrelated exchanges. First Kent challenges the authority of Oswald, Goneril's steward, hurling a spectacular series of insults before physically assaulting him. Kent describes Oswald as 'one that wouldst be a bawd in the way of good service . . . and the son and heir of a mongrel bitch' (II. ii. 19–22), indicating that the substance of his dislike of Oswald is his prostitution of the value of loyalty that Kent holds dear, as well as linking Oswald to the comments of the Fool earlier when he alleged that the Lady Brach had won patronage and favour. Kent's defence of his actions to Cornwall and Gloucester culminates in a speech that appears to have contemporary political events in mind. Asked why he has become so violent with anger, Kent explains

That such a slave as this should wear a sword,  
Who wears no honesty. Such smiling rogues as these  
Like rats, oft bite the holy cords atwain  
Which are too intricate t'unloose; smooth every passion  
That in the natures of their lords rebel,  
Bring oil to fire, snow to their colder moods,  
Renege, affirm and turn their halcyon beaks  
With every gale and vary of their masters,  
Knowing naught, like dogs, but following.

(II. i. 70–8)

Kent is placed in the stocks for his outburst.

*King Lear* was written and performed just over two years into James's reign. But already a series of events had started to sour the initial relief many felt at the accession of James after the bitter political struggles and uncertainty of Elizabeth's last years. James held his first parliament in 1604 and a dispute over the election established the tenor of the developing political struggle between the king and the House of Commons. Sir John Fortesque, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, was defeated in Buckinghamshire by a local gentleman with Puritan sympathies, Sir Francis Goodwin. Fortesque would have been one of the members of the Privy Council in the Commons, so the Council tried to find if the election could be rendered invalid. Finding that Goodwin could be branded an outlaw, a second election was held and Fortesque was elected. The

71 C. Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us* (Cambridge, 1935), 214, 341–2.

Commons responded by having Goodwin sworn in as a member, insisting that the first result should stand. The resulting dispute became the first of many serious constitutional conflicts between parliament and Crown in the next half-century. The Commons argued that they should be the judge of disputed elections and pointed to a series of historical precedents; James claimed that his government had the right and also referred to a number of precedents. The issue centred on the question of who held ultimate authority, parliament or the monarch. The Commons were afraid that 'if the king could decide an election, enforce a proclamation, or raise a tax, once, then he might do it all the time, and liberty would be gone'.<sup>72</sup> During the dispute, James made the claim that 'the Commons only held their privileges by his grace', an ultra-royalist interpretation of the constitution in line with James's political statements elsewhere, which only served to reanimate the struggle between advocates of the 'mixed polity' and royal supremacy fought out in the second half of Elizabeth's reign.<sup>73</sup>

Kent can be seen as a Peter Wentworth figure: Wentworth argued the independence of the House of Commons against the Crown in the Elizabethan parliaments of 1586–7 and 1593, and was imprisoned in 1591 for his pains.<sup>74</sup> Wentworth's son Thomas was an MP in 1604, and was instrumental in raising the issue of the Buckinghamshire election.<sup>75</sup> As Wentworth had been, Kent is rude, blunt, and disrespectful in his attempt to advise Lear and censure those who have helped to erode the liberties of loyal subjects. But this does not invalidate his argument, one the play strongly endorses. Just as the House of Commons argued that its loyalty was to a constitution which governed the people, and of which the monarch was the head, not to the monarch independent of the constitution, so Kent argues that he knows better how Lear ought to govern himself in order to govern. Such arguments were familiar versions of the question of the 'king's two bodies', whereby the monarch was deemed to have a private person and a public persona as ruler. A conservative interpretation of this distinction—such as that of James—regarded the two bodies as virtually identical, the monarch ruling as head of state, his subjects only aspiring to be advisers who could be ignored if the monarch so chose. A more radical interpretation insisted on the importance of the distinction, arguing that subjects often knew better than the monarch's private body how his or her public body should behave.<sup>76</sup> *King Lear* clearly espouses the latter

72 C. Russell, *The Crisis of Parliaments: English History, 1509–1660* (Oxford, 1971), 267.

73 Ibid. 268; Guy, *The Reign of Elizabeth*, 11–12. For a reading of the episode in terms of *Pericles*, see C. Jordan, *Shakespeare's Monarchies: Ruler and Subject in the Romances* (Ithaca, NY, 1997), ch. 2.

74 On Wentworth see J. E. Neale, 'Peter Wentworth', in E. B. Fryde and E. Miller (edd.), *Historical Studies of the English Parliament*, ii: 1399–1603 (Cambridge, 1970), 246–95; J. E. Neale, *Elizabeth I and her Parliaments*, ii: 1584–1601 (London, 1957), pt. 4, ch. 2.

75 Russell, *Crisis of Parliaments*, 266–7; D. Mathew, *James I* (London, 1967), 132.

76 E. H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton,

reading, showing that the king should have listened to his loyal followers Cordelia, Kent, and the Fool, who reserve the right to give him advice for his own good, and not the base flattery of Goneril and Regan.

Equally pointed is Kent's reference to Oswald as an undeserving servant who has been unfairly promoted through a failure to perceive the self-serving nature beneath his flattery. James had already become notorious in England in the first years of his reign for ignoring loyal English courtiers and Crown servants, and giving out wardships (the right to administer the estate and finances of orphans who had not yet come of age), pensions, and lucrative monopolies to his own Scottish entourage. That James acted as he did to help ease the debt of £422,000 he had inherited from his predecessor did little to placate his critics. Those who benefited were generally attacked as sycophants, precisely the complaint that Kent makes about Oswald.<sup>77</sup>

Later in the same scene the Fool confronts Kent in the stocks, a symbolic juxtaposition of the two good subjects—Cordelia having gone into exile and Edgar having only just donned his disguise as Poor Tom—now marginalized by recent developments. When Kent asks 'How chance the King comes with so small a number?' the Fool responds: 'An thou hadst been set i'the stocks for that question, thou hadst well deserved it' (II. i. 252–5), a sign that legitimate questions cannot be asked under the new authoritarian government of Goneril and Regan. Equally important, Kent's naivety and the Fool's continued privilege show that under Lear such harsh repression was undoubtedly the exception rather than the rule. Indeed, the role of the Fool as a licensed court jester who is shown to be an astute, loyal adviser to the king, and who helps start the arduous process of Lear's recovery to sanity and better government, could well be read as deliberate defence of the value of a play such as *King Lear* and the role of drama in general to advise, warn, and counsel the monarch (a role it had traditionally enjoyed).<sup>78</sup> The Fool gives Kent an analysis of the fate of Lear and his supporters:

Let go thy hold when a great wheel runs down a hill lest it break thy neck with following it; but the great one that goes upward, let him draw thee after. When a wise man gives thee better counsel give me mine again; I would have none but knaves follow it, since a fool gives it (II. i. 261–6)

According to the Fool, fools like himself and Kent will plummet along with Lear, while knaves like Oswald will rise with Goneril and Regan. The fate of the king who refuses to listen can be read as astringent advice: James may well find himself neglecting and banishing his loyal critics and promoting knaves and flatterers if he cuts himself off from his people (although, of course, Lear is

NJ, 1957); M. Axton, *The Queen's Two Bodies: Drama and the Elizabethan Succession* (London, 1977).

<sup>77</sup> Carrier, *James VI and I*, 100–1.

<sup>78</sup> G. Walker, 'Household Drama and the Art of Good Counsel', in id., *Politics of Performance*, 51–75.

tactfully represented as much the inverse as the image of James). The word 'counsel' has again been diminished in significance, referring here to advice on whether to act ethically and foolishly, or sensibly and badly, rather than a public process of advising the king. The exchange ends when Kent asks the Fool where he learned such wisdom, to which the Fool replies 'Not i'th' stocks, fool' (II. i. 276). Freedom can only be achieved through disguise—physical or verbal—because criticism of authority inevitably results in punishment.

The rest of the play focuses primarily on the re-education of the old king and the attempts of the forces loyal to him and his good daughter to re-establish political order in Britain. Out on the heath in the storm, Lear, rather belatedly, starts to comprehend the reality of governing through his newfound empathy with the lowest of his subjects:

Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,  
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,  
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,  
Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you  
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en  
Too little care of this.

(III. iv. 28–33)

Later on, when Lear has descended into madness, his utterances start to resemble those of the Fool, who has disappeared from the action of the play, and he directly criticizes the existing social and legal order:

a dog's obeyed in office  
.....  
Through tattered clothes great vices do appear;  
Robes and furred gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold,  
And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks;  
Arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw does pierce it.

(IV. vi. 154–63)

Lear's education ultimately proves futile. At every point his redemption is undercut by subsequent dramatic events: his initial recognition of the suffering of the poor that has been tolerated in his state leads only to madness when he is confronted by Edgar disguised as Poor Tom; the realization that injustice has generally prevailed is followed by an intense bout of insanity when the arrival of Cordelia's forces makes it possible for Lear to be restored to his throne and so in a position to solve the problems he has recognized.

Shakespeare's transformation of the ending of the story of King Lear baffled subsequent readers, who generally restored the happy ending in Geoffrey of Monmouth and the chronicle play. *King Lear* has always had the reputation of being Shakespeare's most tragic play.<sup>79</sup> Yet, in political terms, *Hamlet* is far

79 The most influential interpretation for modern readers has been A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth* (London, 1904), lectures 7 and 8.

more pessimistic, expressing doubts about the Stuart succession (which was an inevitability in 1600), and openly flirting with the arguments of the tyrannicides as a means out of a dangerous impasse. *King Lear* ruthlessly exposes the political errors of a ruler who was both type and antitype of James I, a reading strengthened by the Fool's speech in Act III, scene ii: left alone on stage, he prophesies a series of events, the first half of which refers to contemporary malpractice, the second to a utopian ideal: 'Then shall the realm of Albion | Come to great confusion' (III. ii. 91–2). This is a version of the famous sixteenth-century HEMPE prophecy, which decreed that England would come to an end after the reigns of Henry, Edward, Mary and Philip, and Elizabeth. The prophecy was fulfilled when James came to the throne and 'ended' England by attempting to establish a British kingdom.<sup>80</sup> James tried to achieve this union while also attempting to stamp his political ideas on the English parliament in 1604–5.

*King Lear* must surely then be read in terms of the danger of a monarch cutting himself off from the people he rules, and so destroying what he has so carefully built up. The play does not represent a king who is ineffective or unimpressive, but one who has not taken enough care of his kingdom. The fact that he has ruled for so long and needs to secure the succession recalls the dilemmas faced by Elizabeth and her subjects rather than James and his. Of course, everything comes to nothing in *King Lear*, and Kent and Edgar, neither of whom has shown any particular aptitude or propensity for government, are left in charge of 'the gored state' (V. iii. 319). Nevertheless, the play is obsessed with the question of political advice or counsel and the need for government to be conducted with the consent of the people. Far from being radical, such views were entirely mainstream; it was James's arguments that the monarch could take or leave the advice of powerful subjects that were a radical departure in terms of political discourse in England.<sup>81</sup> To take one example of a work that may have influenced Shakespeare, given the date of its publication, its general impact in Britain, and the fact that it was the only published source of material from *The Prince* until the first full translation appeared in 1636,<sup>82</sup> Innocent Gentillet's *Discourse upon the meanes of wel governing*<sup>83</sup> was a Huguenot treatise, attacking Machiavelli as an apologist for tyranny seeking to undermine a tradition of mutual co-operation between rulers and subjects.<sup>84</sup> Gentillet argues that laws are more likely to be obeyed if

80 H. Dobin, *Merlin's Disciples: Prophecy, Poetry, and Power in Renaissance England* (Stanford, Calif., 1990), 89, 194–6. Doubts have been raised about the passage's authenticity, as it does not exist in the quarto. But it seems most likely that it was added later by Shakespeare himself.

81 R. W. Bushnell, *Tragedies of Tyrants: Political Thought and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca, NY, 1990), 69–70.

82 F. Raab, *The English Face of Machiavelli: A Changing Interpretation, 1500–1700* (London, 1965), 56–7.

83 See n. 18 above.

84 Kingdon, 'Calvinism and Resistance Theory', 208; Skinner, *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, i. 250–1, ii.308–9.

they are established by a representative body; that such a body was more stable than a prince (given the publication date of the translation, completed in 1577 and subsequently circulated in manuscript, this may be a rather pointed observation),<sup>85</sup> that freely given counsel is best, and that princes should encourage debate and differing advice as most helpful to them.<sup>86</sup> Most telling perhaps, Gentillet argues, in response to Machiavelli's assertion that a prince is better off being feared than loved, that the massacre of St Bartholomew's Day (23 August 1572), when Catholics slaughtered Protestants in Paris and throughout France, an event which sent shock waves throughout Protestant Europe, would not have occurred had the king had the respect and loyalty of the people.<sup>87</sup> Just as the massacre was frequently interpreted in apocalyptic terms, so *King Lear* signals an apocalyptic destruction of Albion/Britain.<sup>88</sup> Gentillet's treatise, written only four years after the massacre, carefully and deliberately refuses to discount the ways and means of ordinary politics as a cure for the spectacular horrors of recent events. Similarly, Shakespeare, while representing a bleak universe and a depressing tragedy, never loses sight of the political manoeuvres that would have prevented the catastrophe from unfolding. *King Lear* is an optimistic work, unlike *Hamlet*, because the ways and means of avoiding tragedy are explicit within the play.

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85 Raab, *English Face of Machiavelli*, 56.

86 Gentillet, *Discourse upon the Meanes of wel governing*, 15–16, 21, 29–30.

87 Ibid. 65–6; Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 27. On the massacre and its effects, see R. M. Kingdon, *Myths about the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, 1572–1576* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988).

88 See Hadfield, *Literature, Travel, and Colonial Writing*, 100; J. Wittreich, "'Image of that horror': The Apocalypse in King Lear", in C. A. Patrides and J. Wittreich (edd.), *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature* (Manchester, 1984), 175–206.