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King Lear: Political Faults with Ruler Greed and Self-Satisfaction

Using the discourse of political corruption of power, Shakespeare strikes fear and realization into his audience. By presenting King Lear misusing his ruling for personal gain, Shakespeare displays the consequences of greed and overbearing one’s power by creating natural, god-created penalties for Lear’s actions. This godly movement of consequences of poor, materialistic ruling is Shakespeare’s way of representing the issues of politics of his time and is still relevant today. By using natural imagery, Shakespeare characterizes King Lear as a greedy ruler to present his political discourse.

Using the metaphor of Mother Nature, Shakespeare invents King Lear’s corrupt and greedy personality as damaging to his rule and to his family. His favorite daughter, Cordelia, gives Lear a speech in regards to her love for him that is more politically correct for the context of the time, yet Lear doesn’t appreciate the gesture as such. Lear, expecting a more extravagant speech, disowns his daughter when no such speech is given, calling her “a wretch whom Nature is ashamed” (1.1.210). Shakespeare uses nature as a metaphor here to construct Lear’s self-acclaimed divine right. Nature is a god-like power that man has no control over. Typically, nature is seen as a consequential entity. For example, if a ruler is misusing his or her power, a storm may destroy the lands or droughts may destroy the crop for the season. By using nature as a metaphor, Shakespeare constructs Lear’s path towards his demise. Lear claims, “Nature is ashamed” for Cordelia’s existence when mere moments before he was worshiping her as his favorite child. This turn against nature, by reasons of greed for a more pleasurable “I love you” from Cordelia, begins Lear’s downfall and establishes his tragic flaw. Harriet Dye furthers this argument by stating, “Lear wants […] to be bathed in an adoration excited by the promise of material reward” (Dye 514). The more love he receives out directly by his daughters, the more his greed is fulfilled.

Here, Shakespeare uses the Machiavellian principles to complement his larger discourse of corrupt power of the government or current rule. Fashioning Lear as a greed-stricken ruler, Shakespeare captures the problems of politics and government in his time, which is still relevant today. The principles provided by Niccoló Machiavelli, in 1513, suggest many ideas that Shakespeare implements in the play to warn his audience and represent how government should be handled. Machiavelli states: “Those who assume the bearing of the lion alone lack understanding” (Bedford 335). Shakespeare characterizes Lear exclusively as a lion. Taking what he wants, due to his greed and power as a ruler, and throwing away the things or people he does not want. This is poor rule as a king, according to Machiavellian politic; Shakespeare wants this strong figure of poor ruling to create a well-structured example of a corrupt, nasty leader. Machiavelli suggests that a rule’s role in politics varies from situation to situation; being a lion an entire reign is improper and awful ruling. Improper and awful is what Lear’s reign has become (from our knowledge within the play). His character does not vary throughout the play; he remains a “lion”.

Shakespeare uses the fool to construct and represent many different ideals, but using the fool and the metaphor of letter ‘O’ or zero, Shakespeare creates a growing consequence for Lear. The fool says to Lear: “Now thou art an O without a figure” (1.4.160). Using zero or nothing as a metaphor, Shakespeare represents Lear in many ways. Zero, as a number, is a meaningless number; it has no value. Zero is also nothing; nothing is often compared to ‘no thing’, importantly referring to the female’s genitalia. This can also suggest King Lear is a king in hysteria. The Greek word *hyster* mean uterus, which can be used as another definition for “no thing”. “No thing” also implies Lear does not hold a strong rule. If he has “no thing” that means he is ruling without his “thing” or male genitalia, which is often implied is needed for true and correct ruling. This reference to Lear having ‘no thing’, said by the fool, represents Lear’s reign as king. Having the fool degrade the king, considering him “nothing”, displays the honor the people have for him. Shakespeare, representing Lear as a disgraceful, corrupt king, shows the audience how the people view greed and rulers who are ruling for self-satisfaction.

This also plays into a line Lear states within the play: “nothing can be made out of nothing” (1.4.120). If, metaphorically, Lear is nothing, and “nothing can be made out of nothing”, this alludes to Lear’s inevitable end. King Lear, as nothing, with eventually end up as nothing. His tragic flaws, which create mistakes on his part, end up creating him and his reign as king to be meaningless or nothing.

Using the metaphor of being blind, Shakespeare uses the fool to foreshadow King Lear’s eventual demise. Having disowned two of his three daughters, Lear’s tragic flaw of greed slowly builds to work against him. The fool says to Lear: “Fathers that wear rags / Do make their children blind” (2.2.228-9). The fool, an ironically smart character in the play, uses this line to represent a forewarning to Lear, but, due to his pride and greed, Lear does not heed this warning. Being blind is an impairment of eyesight. Being blind, metaphorically, means one can’t see something that is right in front of them or obvious. This metaphoric use is Shakespeare’s way of constructing the consequences of Lear’s tragic flaw. Because of Lear’s greed as a father and ruler, his daughters start disobeying and become “blind to their father’s needs” (footnote 4 p. 691). But the use of “children” can also be in correlation to Lear being the “Father” of the country as king. Shakespeare uses this to also build on how problematic Lear’s personality is to not only Lear’s personal life but also the subjects he rules over. Lear is also metaphorically blind in the sense that his greed has made him lose focus to making sure the best has been procured his people and land.

This brings forth more Machiavellian principles which state: “[A ruler] cannot and should not keep his pledge when it is against his interest to do so and when his reasons for making the pledge are no longer operative” (335). In other words, when a ruler is corrupt and takes advantage of his or her power, they lose sight of what is best for their governing country or lands. Lear takes much advantage of his rule; he takes what he wants and gets rid of what he does not. His greed and power has steered him away from, or made him blind to, his true purpose as king. According to Machiavelli, as Shakespeare suggests through his characterization of Lear, Lear “cannot and should not keep his [reign or rule because] it is against his interest to do so… [because his pledge] is no longer operative [for his people]” (335).

As well, if the body or feet of the body politic is “blind” or disobeying the head, there are two parts of the body politic working against the one, and the body is basically fighting itself. If the head of the body politic is blind or ill, then the rest of the body is going to have a hard time functioning. This problematic personality, as stated above, plays into the idea of the body politic of government. King Lear bears the head of the body politic; his family, friends, and workers are the body; his governing country-people are the legs and feet. In an article published by, *Perspective of Political Science,* a scholarly political journal,authors, B. Dobski and D. Gish, define the body politic: “Justice, the paramount political virtue, derives from the proper function of the parts working in harmony with each other for the good of the whole.” (Dobski, Gish). Shakespeare uses this idea to his advantage to the overlying discourse; he constructs an ill body politic by inventing King Lear as corrupt and greedy to teach a lesson. Dobski and Gish further this point by saying: “political thought in Shakespeare’s time referred to the image of the body politic as a means to explore republican principles and mixed government as well as to sustain or even re-conceive royal authority.” (Dobski, Gish). Shakespeare also suggests, as Dobski and Gish mentioned, there are other ways of governing a country that may work or reforms of the current monarchy that can “cure” or create a better body politic and government. This is where Shakespeare implies the Machiavellian politic as a reform of the standing governing rule at this time.

Using ‘sinning’ as a metaphor and allusion, Shakespeare invents King Lear as self-absorbed and corrupt. Lear is cursing, “I am a man / More sinned against than sinning.” Sinning, as an allusion, suggests the biblical reference of the seven deadly sins (greed being one of the deadly sins). Shakespeare suggests, ironically, Lear has been “sinned against more than” the act of “sinning”. Using sinning as a metaphor, Lear suggests that others have treated him poorly. Sin is the act of doing wrong in any way that is harmful to others as well as to one’s self. An overpowering sin, such as one of the deadly sins, does not only affects others, but the integrity of one’s personality. This, Shakespeare suggests, ties into Lear’s personality and characterization. Stating “[Lear is] more sinned against than sinning”, Lear suggests he is wronged more than any sin he can do. This also implies that he justifies his actions; his agency of this justification is his divine right as king.

Again, alluding to his larger discourse of political corruption through Machiavellian constructs, Shakespeare characterizes Lear as a ruler that bears no respect from his subjects. Machiavelli states, as Shakespeare makes very prominent, “…since [all men] are evil and would not keep a pledge to you, then you need not keep yours to them” (335). Since Lear does not keep his pledge to his governing lands and subjects, why would anyone keep their pledge to him? This creates a sick body politic, as mentioned before. Lear does awful things, such as disowning his own kin for greedy, self-fulfilling reasons, which causes backlash against him. Shakespeare purposely and cleverly places this throughout the play to enlighten and strengthen his larger discourse for his audience.

Shakespeare uses the allusion of the seven deadly sins and biblical ideals of forgiveness as a reflection of Lear’s downfall and foreshadows a possible way out for the corrupt leader. Lear pardons Gloucester for adultery by saying: “I pardon that man’s life … / Thou shalt not die. Die for adultery?” (4.5.109-110). Adultery can be compared to the deadly sin of lust. This allusion to the seven deadly sins is put here by Shakespeare to have the audience realize a pattern between Lear’s pardoning of this severe sin and Lear’s greed (greed being another deadly sin). This occurrence of another deadly sin suggests Shakespeare wants the audience to notice the way Lear deals with the sin of lust/adultery. Lear pushes off the crime of Gloucester’s adultery like it was a petty, insignificant offense. This, Shakespeare suggests, is how Lear sees his greed; he does not see it as a crime, more so, Lear sees his greed as nothing. This foreshadows Lear’s downfall in a way that, if he continues his path, he is going to lose everything. This is related to the quote Lear stated earlier, “Nothing” (Lear or Lear’s death) “will come from nothing” (this nothing implies how Lear thinks of his greed) (1.4.120). If greed, to Lear, is “nothing”, than he will become nothing.

But as well, Shakespeare also gives Lear a chance to change with this foreshadowing. Lear forgave Gloucester. If Lear can be metaphorically a god (due to his divine right), then Shakespeare represents, through his act of forgiving, a biblical metaphor and allusion for forgiveness. If maybe Lear searched forgiveness for his greed and corruption, he may be freed from his demise. Although this idea sheds a possible light at the end of the tunnel, the audience also sees this light die out. Gloucester dies, which means this possibility of forgiveness, whether Lear asks for it or not, is nonexistent and Lear will ultimately will die by the end of the play.

In the 2008 rendition of King Lear, directed by Trevor Nunn, starring Ian McKellen as Lear, there are many factors that are used to present the end of Lear’s life in the play. The sound scape used in the last scene, once Lear arrives with the dead Cordelia in his arms, is completely silent except for Lear’s heavy breathing and the dialogue among characters. This creates the sense of “becoming nothing” as Lear stated in act one. The characters are all close to the ground, which alludes to death. Once one dies, they are typically buried in the earth. This also is suggested when Lear says grimily, “She’s dead as earth” (5.3.235). This placement of Lear and Cordelia near the ground was intentional, suggesting the death of not only Cordelia, but that Lear was near his end. As well, the light was dark and dim, also creating a sense of ending and closure. Furthermore, soon before Lear dies, he requests: “Pray you, undo this button” (5.3.284). This action suggests he is requesting that all of his faults and mistakes be undone or forgiven. He wishes, now that he has lost something most precious to him, or essentially “everything” to him, that he had not possessed the tragic flaw of being greedy. This is where he realizes he has lost “everything” and finally become “nothing”; and Lear dies along side his dead daughter on the ground.

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