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Alan Lopez<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> South Bend, Indiana

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ALAN LOPEZ

South Bend, Indiana

## Trespass and Forgiveness in William Shakespeare's *King Lear*

A daughter's kiss awakens a father from the heaviness of sleep and attempts to return him to his rightful position (Shakespeare, *King Lear* 4.7.21; 1.1.276). In William Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1608), Lear establishes a contest for his love. Cordelia loses and is banished. She wishes for her sisters to return him to his rightful position, which is sovereign. Cordelia herself will have the opportunity to do this when she storms Edmund's castle. I argue that what Cordelia wishes to amend is both Lear's prone body and his sovereignty. This is problematic, of course, since Lear has already banished her. The issue in *Lear* is thus injury, and in two senses: Lear's injury to his daughter Cordelia in banishing her, and Cordelia's injury to her father in attempting, despite her father's protestations, to restore him to himself and to his crown. It is a fool's errand, and Lear says as much. Though Lear will later forgive his daughter, he initially calls her intervention mockery (4.7.59) and "vile offense" (4.2.48). Lear admonishes Cordelia for injuring him, above and beyond what daughters Regan and Goneril have done. Cordelia, we are to believe, if not Regan and Goneril, should know better. As it turns out, of course, Lear himself should know better than to second-guess the daughter who love him the most.

Lear's characterization of Cordelia's intervention is helpful in making sense of Cordelia's own legal language. I am thinking of Cordelia's language of "[m]end[ing]" (2.2.418). On the one hand, Cordelia quite literally wishes to mend her father's position. When Cordelia meets Lear in Edmund's castle, after not having seen each other since Cordelia's earlier banishment by Lear, a defeated Lear lies prostrate on the floor. On the other hand, and more symbolically, Cordelia wishes to mend Lear's crown. Now, when I say "crown," I refer to the literal crown of Lear's, which he at the outset divides between daughters Regan and Goneril. But I also refer to the divided sovereignty signified by Lear's division of his crown between his children. It is these divisions, civil and familiar, Cordelia hopes to mend when she returns to England with French arms. Eighteenth-century jurist William Blackstone would call Cordelia's plea for "[r]epair" (4.7.28) an act of "trespass" and "breach of the peace" (Blackstone 42), for Cordelia cannot help her father without "tak[ing him] out o' the grave" (4.7.45).<sup>1</sup> Cordelia calls her "wrong" (4.7.45) that "civil remedy" owed to an "injured party" (Blackstone 42), one who happens to be both father and sovereign.

William Shakespeare composed *King Lear* before the appearance of William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1768). However, Blackstone's writings on trespass and wrongs can lend us insight into the trespass of a daughter and the forgiveness of a father. In *Lear*, Cordelia "breaks the house" (Blackstone 213), what remains of Lear's kingdom (*King Lear* 4.7.47), and with him "stay[s] there all night" (Blackstone 213).<sup>2</sup> This is Cordelia's trespass. She does this for reasons earlier told to us by a gentleman who was near Cordelia as she read Kent's letter on

her sisters' treatment of their father (4.3.11–14). We are told of the “shame” (4.3.28) Cordelia felt over her sisters' actions, which she imagines have also brought shame upon their father, “a poor old man” (2.2.461), whose kingdom her sisters have denied “i'th the storm, i'the night” (4.3.29).<sup>3</sup> Unlike Regan and Goneril, who discuss but do not carry out a specific plan to further injure Lear (1.1.305–309), Cordelia does work to remedy that “abused” “wound” (1.3.21; 1.4.293) that “press[es]” hers and Lear's “heart” (4.3.27).<sup>4</sup> Although Edmund reads Cordelia's entry into England as an “unlawful purpose” (Blackstone 213) and not “legal” in manner (Blackstone 212), since he does imprison her with Lear, Cordelia justifies her trespass on those grounds of “remedy” (Blackstone 255): Cordelia trespasses in order to prevent further “waste” (Blackstone 213) of Lear's “dignity” and “sovereignty” (Blackstone 255), hence to remedy “injury” to another's “rights of *property* (Blackstone 255; emphasis in original)—Lear's, who in “giv[ing] away” (*King Lear* 1.3.19) his sovereignty commits an “injustice” (Blackstone 255) upon himself and that sovereignty. Still, Cordelia offers Lear, for her trespass, Regan and Goneril's, “tender. . . amends” (Blackstone 213), that she might, through these “smiles and tears” (*King Lear* 4.3.18), show her father his “[m]end[ed]” (*King Lear* 2.2.418) crown.<sup>5</sup>

Like Annabella and the Friar in John Ford's later *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (1633), whose incest trope *Lear* approaches,<sup>6</sup> Cordelia's plea for repair is actually a plea for more time, Lear's: that with her return to his life and the acceptance of her forgiveness, Lear might now listen to whom he did once call his, Cordelia, hence take “leave of that life [he] long ha[s] died in” (Ford 5.1.36–37), his “little world of man” (*King Lear* 3.1.10). And this not in order to shorten that “breath” (5.2.58), which for his and his blood has been “prolonged” (Ford 5.2.58) but, on the contrary, to “[l]ive to die more blessed” (Ford 5.1.57) in another's—in this instance, his own (*King Lear* 1.1.275–276). Lear insists Cordelia wrongs him in un-“b[inding]” him of his tears (4.7.46,47). Cordelia, for her part, draws her father's tears because she wishes to remedy Lear's own wrong upon himself, which is his division of his kingdom between his daughters.

In Book 1, Chapter 8 of Jean Bodin's *Six Books of the Commonwealth* (1583), with which Shakespeare was likely familiar, Bodin holds that sovereign power “is not limited either in power, or in function, or in length of time” (Franklin 3). Applicable to our discussion of *Lear* is how Lear, in giving away his sovereignty, does that which “a sovereign prince cannot [do]” (Franklin 13), which is “tie his hands” (Franklin 13). Although Lear may reasonably “be relieved of anything that involves a diminution of his majesty” (Franklin 14), as in seditious daughter Goneril, whom he disowns, yet he may not, for these same reasons, relieve himself of that majesty. Lear does this not necessarily by dividing his crown between his daughters, which Bodin permits on grounds of descent and rights of succession (Franklin 8), but in giving in such a way as to resemble no more than “a pure and simple gift of his goods for no other reason than his generosity” (Franklin 8). Lear disowns and “gives so much that he does not hold back [anything] more” (Franklin 2). Cordelia's, as I suggest, is thus an attempt to remedy not only the injury her father inflicts upon himself but also the injury, in turn, he inflicts upon that sovereignty in vesting it in the hands of Goneril and Regan—what Bodin calls an intervention in the name of “justice” (Franklin 39), that against which Lear's sovereign's power, however “absolute and perpetual” (Franklin 1), “should always be measured” (Franklin 39): “For the people has . . . dispossessed and stripped itself of sovereign power in order to put him in possession of it and vest it in him. It has transferred all of its power, authority, prerogatives, and sovereign rights to him and [[placed them]] in him” (Franklin 6–7). Bodin, in holding what Ernst Kantorowicz describes as this belief that “the kingdom itself seizes the heir to the throne” (409 n), anticipates Francisco Suárez's distinction between what Philip Lorenz calls “delegation versus transfer” of power, Suárez also believing it “crucial to refute the popular claim, upon which much popular sovereignty thinking rests, that the political community merely *delegates* civil power

to the ruler—which it can subsequently revoke” (310 n. 128; emphasis in original). Bodin’s, and thus Lear’s, is Giorgio Agamben’s

distinction between *dignitas* and *administrato*, the office and the activity in which it expresses itself. According to this doctrine, the illness, old age, madness, or sloth of a prince or prelate should not necessarily lead to his disposition, but rather to separation between the *dignitas*, which remains attached to his person, and the practice, which is entrusted to a *coadiutor* or *curator*. (98; emphasis in original)

*Lear*, in aligning itself with Bodin’s and Suárez’s accounts of royal prerogative as, for the most part, absolute, invites our reconsideration of what Glenn Burgess, anticipating Agamben, calls the “theory of the divine right of kings in the history of political thought” (838). Drawing on this theory, concisely put forth by J. N. Figgis’ *The Divine Right of Kings* (1922), Burgess identifies the crisis Agamben provides relief for and which *Lear* so tragically dramatizes, Bodin’s idea that “[a] mixed or limited monarchy is a contradiction in terms” (Figgis cited and quoted in Burgess 837; 838). Yet *Lear* also recalls J. W. Allen’s different but coterminous account of sovereignty, *English Political Thought 1603–1660*. By stressing sovereignty as a “theory of obligation”—in this instance, obligation to God (qtd. in Burgess 839; emphasis in original)—Allen returns us to Bodin and Suárez, but not for the reasons espoused by Figgis. On the contrary, Allen does so by way of a critique of their absolutist models of sovereignty, as in identifying once more what chagrined Cordelia and subsequently alerted her to action: her sisters’ and her father’s dereliction of “their duties before God” (Burgess 839). Until the point of Cordelia’s kiss, which would “[r]epair those violent harms that [Cordelia’s] two sisters/Ha[d] in [his] reverence made” (*King Lear* 4.7.27–28) and, indeed, repair Lear’s own injury to himself, Lear has not believed himself worthy of the redemption (5.3.263) Cordelia offers him. Lear ultimately believes this wrong is righted, Cordelia’s trespass, when, like Gloucester, he realizes why Cordelia has returned to England: to offer her father what she offered from the beginning of this wrong of himself and her (1.5.24)—her forgiveness and her continued love (4.7.84), what Lear calls that “voice [that] was ever soft, / Gentle and low” (5.3.271), his fair “child[,] Cordelia” (4.7.69).

In Cordelia’s taking pity on her father, Lear finds his “soul in bliss” (4.7.46), banished Cordelia, and so, once more, that “flawed heart,” his own, which would “Burst smilingly” (5.3.195, 198): “Do you see this? Look on her: look, on her lips, / Look there, there!” (5.3.309–310).<sup>7</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Cordelia’s appeal recalls Orlando’s plea to Oliver in *As You Like It*, that Oliver restore what he has “mar[r]jed,” “that which God made” (1.1.30–31). For an alternative reading on marring, though one in keeping with Lear’s state of mind as he divides his kingdom between his daughters, see *Romeo and Juliet* 2.4.11. See also York’s confession to Bolingbroke over his wish to “mend (2.3.153) Bolingbroke’s “wrong” (2.3.141) of Richard, which he admits he is unable to do: “I cannot mend it, I must needs confess, / Because my power is weak and all ill-left; / But if I could, by Him that gave me life, / I would attach you all and make you stoop / Unto the sovereign mercy of the King” (*Richard II* 2.3.153–157).

<sup>2</sup>This admittedly heightened “legal fiction” (65) in *Lear*, to draw on Kathleen Davis’ work, *Periodization and Sovereignty*, is, in fact, quite close to Blackstone’s own conception of the law, specifically common law and our inheritance of it from feudal law. Blackstone, as Davis observes, draws on the literary fiction of the Gothic, offering, too, an allegorization of Lear’s body politic: “We inherit an old Gothic castle, erected in the days of chivalry, but fitted up for a modern inhabitant. The moated ramparts, the embattled towers, the trophied halls, are magnificent and venerable, but useless, and therefore neglected. The interior apartments, now converted into rooms of convenience, are cheerful and commodious, though their approaches are winding and difficult” (Davis 66).

<sup>3</sup>I am grateful to Reg Foake's helpful observation, in his edited edition of *Lear*, for this insight (1.3.27 n. 26–27).

<sup>4</sup>For a powerful and nuanced reading of treason in Shakespeare, notably the plays *Richard II* and *Macbeth*, see Lemon.

<sup>5</sup>See also Celia's oath to Rosalind in *As You Like It*, where it is not (uncle) Duke Senior but cousin Rosalind whose tears Celia will requite (1.2.19–23).

<sup>6</sup>On incest and the revenge tragedy, a theme present in *Lear*, see also, in addition to Ford, Cyril Tourneur's *The Atheist's Tragedy* (1611) (see Maus).

<sup>7</sup>Perhaps Lear comments to his wife, absent in the play except through Lear's reference to her, as they looked upon newly-born Cordelia.

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