

# Representation of Religion and Power in "King Lear," "Henry V," and "The Merchant of Venice"

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William Shakespeare wrote a wide variety of plays under the rule of Queen Elizabeth I in Protestant England. Despite writing in an age heavily influenced by religious monarchy, not all of his work condones the actions of characters of power, whether royal or common, pagan or Christian. Shakespeare's presentation of religion drives his narratives' central power struggles as well as the plays' plots and characters. Themes of responsibility and power can initiate diverse discussions among students regarding how religion does or does not have the same power in government, social spheres, and economy. The balance of religion and power is either exemplified or rejected, and the audience can examine how these societal facets affect Shakespeare's characters. *King Lear*, *Henry V*, and *The Merchant of Venice* provide valuable insight on the balance of power and responsibility, which remains relevant in modern Christian collegiate studies.

## King Lear

*King Lear* showcases religious themes by creating a stark binary of good and evil characters in a political setting where pagan god-worship is prevalent. The lack of institutional religion in *King Lear* reflects a kingdom with morally evil characters ruling with lack of responsibility and selfish-motivation. The characters that consciously align with good are cast into exile for their actions and endure many hardships, though they demonstrate virtues of forgiveness, redemption, and sacrifice. The tension of this binary becomes the source of the suffering and separation of the families in the story. The tragedy of Lear unfolds from his intention to pass the responsibility of the crown to his children while maintaining his title as king. Lear says publicly before his family, friends, and attendants: "Tell me, my daughters, (since now we will divest us both of rule, interest in territory, cares of state), which of you shall we say doth love us most, that we our largest bounty may extend where nature both with merit challenge?" (*King Lear*, 1.1.48-53). King Lear already knows which of his daughters loves him most and presents a contest of words and praise in order to flatter himself before his court, giving him an excuse to grant his beloved Cordelia extra lands.

Cordelia immediately recognizes the irresponsibility and intentions of her father's actions. However, because Cordelia loves Lear most, she does not want to indulge him in petty flattery and fall into the game of manipulation in which she knows she cannot beat her sisters. Regal and Goneril play along with long, competitive, and superficial declarations of affection. When given her turn, Cordelia simply states she loves him as any daughter should, in her exact words, "according to my bond, no more, no less" (*King Lear*: 1.1.94). Lear then banishes Cordelia, severing her family ties because he fails to recognize the love in her words and actions. Lear's sense of power and hubris fuel his approach of distributing land. His hubris also makes him unable to see the same selfish and manipulative nature in his eldest two daughters, who later shun him like he did Cordelia.

Like Cordelia, the Earl of Gloucester also suffers consequences from a family member's shrewd plots. His bastard son, Edmund, tricks him to turn against his loyal son Edgar to gain Gloucester's honor and inheritance for himself. Edgar is forced to flee and go into hiding because of Gloucester's blindness to see Edmund's treachery and Edgar's virtue. Later on, Gloucester is both physically blinded and driven from his home by power-hungry Regan and Goneril. His denial of the sisters' false charges "becomes a confession of guilt" in the same way Cordelia's refusal of forced flattery sentenced her to exile (Bruce 129). Despite the distance put between the fathers and children of exile, both Lear and Gloucester reunite with their loyal child, offering glimpses of redemption in the tragedy and loss they face from kin turned against them.

Belief becomes a dividing factor in the morality and responsibility of the characters in *King Lear*. Shakespeare defines the good and evil characters of *King Lear* by their alignment with the pagan gods. Shakespeare uses the characters' reverence or lack of reverence to the pagan gods to "divide the characters into opposed extremes of good and evil" (Hole 219). The exiled characters who ultimately represent good—Lear, Gloucester, Kent, Edgar, and Cordelia—"call frequently upon the gods...and all pray for each other, but no evil character prays or is prayed for" (Hole 220). The virtues of familial love and faith are tied together despite the distinctly non-Christian setting of the play. Familial love and faith are also prevalent in the narrative of Christ with the sacrificial son of the gospel representing "good" on earth.

## Henry V

While *The Tragedy of King Lear* shows faith and power dynamics in a monarchy with a non-Christian worldview, other Shakespearean plays overtly display Christianity. For example, *Henry V* showcases the divine providence of the English conquering France—intertwining religion and military might. Arguments for whether or not this bond represents a Christian view of responsible power balance are widely debated by scholars. Many consider Henry's reliance on God to be insincere and selfish, serving as an excuse to redeem his reputation in battle and gain favor with his subjects.

The play opens with two archbishops' presenting King Henry with the idea to conquer France. To protect the church's interests, the archbishops seek to prevent the passing of a bill that threatens the church's wealth. After examining the Salique law, they claim "that there is no bar to make against Your Highness claim to France" (*Henry V*: 1.2.35-36). King Henry, who seeks to restore honor to his name, accepts the chance to finally claim France, warning the bishops, "God forbid... that you should fashion, wrest, or bow your reading...for God both know how many now in health shall drop their blood in approbation of what your reverence shall incite us to" (*Henry V*: 1.2.13-14, 18-20). Henry places the responsibility for his choice on the Church's interpretation of the law and infers all the following successes in his conquest are divine providence from God.

Scholars' skepticism of King Henry's intentions stem from the role of monarchy and religion in the play's era. At the time of *Henry V*, "kingship reflected a dual belief in the sanctity of the monarch, as well as in the monarch's obligation to meet the expectations of martial heroism, sanctified piety and wise judgment that comprised the sovereign ideal" (Bezio 31). King Henry knew that feats of glory would win him favor and honor with his subjects, making him accept the somewhat risky venture of invading France. King Henry repeatedly mentions and emphasizes God's provision over the course of his campaign.

The first example of King Henry's self-proclaimed divine providence occurs before his army's departure for France. Several traitors are revealed among his ranks and he decides to expose their deeds in front of his other loyal officers. After the public reveal of their treachery, Henry says, "for this revolt of thine, methinks, is like another fall of man. Arrest them to the answer of the law, and God acquit them of their practices!" (*Henry V*: 2.2.141-44). Henry's reference to the fall parallels Adam and Eve's price of sin, the consequences of sin being death reflected in their sentence of execution for their crimes. Henry continues his journey to France where he dedicates his victories to God.

King Henry uses his charisma to rally his soldiers behind the promise of providence. On the battlefield, Henry continues to lift his victories to God and humble himself in order to boost the morale of his men. This enables his soldiers to charge France's army of superior size and cause large-scale bloodshed for the sake of a "just" cause. Mebane argues Henry's power is a "compound of codes of chivalry, traditional Judeo-Christian 'just war' doctrine, and pagan heroic tradition" (251-52). These principles appear at the end of the battle when Henry declares, "O God, thy arm was here; and not to us but to thy arm alone. Ascribe we all" (*Henry V*: 4.8.106-08). This statement justifies the bloody battle, claiming that God handed the victory to the English and that it was predestined through His power.

The success of King Henry's campaign makes him an ideal king according to the standards of monarchy in his era. However, King Henry arguably used God's name and power as justification for an invasion done for glory rather than self-defense. The choices of Henry V receive scrutiny for his manipulation of divine authority, especially when read in a modern society no longer governed by monarchy. Shakespeare's presentation of Henry's deeds allows the reader to question the close tie of power and religion in government, especially in policy or war where divine authority can be abused.

## The Merchant of Venice

Lastly, *The Merchant of Venice* presents Christian and Jewish characters with both characters' speech and actions vividly critiquing the group to which they belong. The majority of the characters of the play are openly Christian, highlighting the tension between Christians and Jews in the play. Shylock, the Jewish moneylender, is portrayed having economic and legal power over Antonio, who borrows money to help his friend Bassanio. Shylock's harsh bond comes from the bitterness and persecution suffered from Antonio and other Christians. Shylock's daughter, Jessica, runs away with her father's money to marry Lorenzo and become a Christian. She doubts the motives behind Lorenzo's love and still feels out of place, stuck between the Jewish and Christian communities. The dark underlying themes of religious persecution and oppressive power—economic, social, and legal—make some scholars question *The Merchant of Venice's* categorization as a comedy, driving the plot and characters' actions throughout the play.

The tension between the Christian and Jewish characters can be seen throughout the entire play, climaxing at the end with Antonio's trial and Shylock's forced conversion. Adelman argues that this tension "traces back to the vexed familial relations between Judaism and Christianity: to Christianity's simultaneous dependence on its literal and theological lineage in Judaism and its guilty disavowal of that inheritance, to its chronic need both to claim and to repudiate the Jew" (Adelman, 4). Hostility between Shylock and Antonio is sensed from the beginning when Antonio takes a loan. Shylock says to Antonio, "I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him. He hates our sacred nation, and he rails, even there where merchants most do congregate on me, my bargains and my well-won thrift which he calls interest. Cursed be my tribe if I forgive him!" (*The Merchant of Venice*: 1.3.47-52). Shylock also makes reference to and "sees Jacob as a wholly exemplary, almost a guardian spirit" (Gross 43). Jacob's actions echo in Shylock's behavior, since both resort to trickery to fulfill their wishes—whether for birthright or revenge. Shylock is subject to scorn from the other merchants as well, warranting some justification for his bitter actions and making the audience question his villainous role within the play.

Shylock's daughter Jessica is caught between the cruelty of her Jewish father and the dubious promise of acceptance among the Christians. Jessica runs away with Lorenzo in order to escape her household but suspects Lorenzo only accepts her for her stolen fortune. Even when Jessica is promised to Lorenzo and swears to become a Christian, other characters make pointed remarks about her Jewish heritage. Launcelot says in front of her, "This making Christians will raise the price of hogs: if we grow all to be pork-eaters," which rudely comments on Jewish dietary traditions and discredits her willingness to convert (*The Merchant of Venice*: 3.5.23-25). For Jessica, this is especially devastating since her main goal was acceptance outside her household. In this scene, she begins to realize that she may not find acceptance through marriage or Christianity.

Despite Jewish persecution, Shylock feels the one place he truly has power is in the courtroom. In angered expectation of fulfilling his bond of flesh from Antonio, he says, "till thou canst rail the seal from off my bond, thou but offend'st thy tongue to speak so loud: Repair thy wit, good youth, or it will fall to cureless ruin. I stand here for thy" (*The Merchant of Venice*: 4.1.139-142). Even though Antonio offers to stand him more than the owed amount to avoid paying it all, Shylock refuses because his position of legal power allows him to collect his original reward. Eventually, the law is turned against him and is equally unmerciful—demanding Shylock's conversion and stripping away his wealth and identity. The cruelty of actions of both the Christians and Jews serve as a reminder that belief does not change the fact we are all fallen humanity—all deserving of God's grace and mercy.

Shakespeare's *King Lear*, *Henry V*, and *The Merchant of Venice* all seek to connect responsibility to power and religion through the power struggles present in each narrative. The diverse perspective each play offers create a powerful dynamic and platform for rich discussion about religious power and responsibility in government, social spheres, and economy. Christian students are challenged to examine the responsibility of power they hold as emerging adults in a modern secular society. These thought-provoking connections and reflections make *King Lear*, *Henry V*, and *The Merchant of Venice* suitable selections for Christian collegiate studies.

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