

## King of Legend, King of History: Shakespeare's Reclamation of the Leir Story

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The earliest historical accounts of the origins of Britain, those penned by Gildas (ca. 540) and Bede (ca. 731), begin with the Roman conquest of the British Isles by Julius Caesar, implying that Britain prior to Roman occupation is unknowable. It is not until Geoffrey of Monmouth's publication of *Historia Regum Britanniae* (ca. 1136) that the people of Medieval England gain a national narrative predating Caesar's arrival upon British shores. Geoffrey's story, known as the Galfridian account, claims to have been translated from an ancient text and reckons the history of Britain all the way back to Brutus, grandson of Trojan Aeneas. In its time, it was accepted as history, but by the British Renaissance, historians had all but abandoned the Galfridian tradition of British antiquity as imaginative non-history.

As many of Geoffrey's kings had become the subject of history plays by that time, their loss of historicity threatened the future for stage adaptations of the stories of Gorboduc, Lochrine, Leir, and others. However, King Leir is rescued from being lost to the annals of forged history and re-popularized by William Shakespeare in his play *The Tragedy of King Lear*. While other playwrights adapting tales from *Historia* held tight to the Galfridian tradition of history, Shakespeare abandoned its trappings to write his *Lear*, thus situating its themes on a timeless foundation of an interweaving national narrative pointing toward the country's new monarch and a unified future determined by action rather than fate.

If Shakespeare believed in national unity, he also believed that the Leir story did not communicate the totality of Britain's

national narrative as it progressed toward that unification without incorporating multiple other sources that reflected important themes and highlighted cultural touchstones in British history. Through his application of these numerous inspirations, he shapes a version of the tale that is a medley of stories, symbols, and themes all pointing toward a Shakespearean vision of monarchy and nation for the early seventeenth century. Only by denying the historicity of Leir could he give birth to a new Lear, one who is of his own time and kingdom, but lives for all time and crosses national borders.

To illuminate the way in which Shakespeare discards Leir's historicity, reclaims and reshapes the story, and fashions it into a new national narrative, I will first discuss the major divergences and disconnects the play makes from Galfridian tradition and its successive historical accounts. From there, I will identify some of the historical and dramatic sources that are more important to Shakespeare's *Lear* and analyze their connections. And in conclusion, I will elaborate upon the implications of favoring these sources and what the playwright's choices say about the vision of British history and monarchy his play promotes.

The most notable divergence Shakespeare makes from Geoffrey's original story is also one of the most meaningful: his alteration of the play's outcome. As the tale of Leir deals in themes of royal succession, division of the kingdom, and monarchical privilege, how the narrative concludes directly affects its thematic statements concerning what a king (or queen) should and should not be and do. Therefore, when Geoffrey's Leir divides his kingdom among his elder daughters and denies it to his youngest daughter, Cordelia, based solely on their professions of love for him, it is important that by the story's end he come to see the error of his ways, be restored as monarch, and pass his crown to Cordelia, the rightful heir. This course of events not only underlines the story's moral values, but also ensures a proper succession of the throne leading into the next generation of Geoffrey's account.

Though Shakespeare's Lear makes the same mistake in spurning Cordelia for her honesty, his final reconciliation with her is brief and tragic. Both characters die in the play's final scene, Cordelia from a hanging and Lear from the despair of losing the only daughter who truly loved him. With the "happy ending"

destroyed, Shakespeare's Lear is not easily reduced to a moral, as Geoffrey's might be. Characters who are virtuous, like Cordelia, and redeemed, like Lear, do not overcome the evil actions of their enemies, but are instead brought to ruin along with them, eliminating the natural progression of the lineage. John E. Curran refers to this outcome, pointing out that "the play's lack of futurity de-emphasizes any political message or lesson that might be extracted from it. Such maxims as 'manage the succession well,' or 'do not divide the kingdom,' or 'avoid civil strife' seem of little use with all the putatively historical characters dead; apocalypse, not politics, prevails."<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the deaths of the older daughters, Regan and Goneril, without issue cuts off the narrative from its surrounding historical context. Curran also mentions that "Geoffrey of Monmouth's version . . . required that each daughter have a son so that the family feud could live on into the next generation."<sup>22</sup> These effects of the discontinued lineage present in Shakespeare's adaptation indicate his decision that the Leir story is legend, and therefore, a source similar to a ball of clay: to be manipulated, added to, and metamorphosed into a new creation.

Shakespeare's determination that Geoffrey's original story is legend rather than history most likely derives from his use of other historical accounts of King Leir contemporary to his own. Traditionally, Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles* is referenced as a major source for the play, and assumed to be a work that Shakespeare often turned to when writing his histories. However, there are some reasons to doubt that the content concerning Leir in *Chronicles*, which includes the story as unsubstantiated historical fact, had as much influence on Shakespeare's *Lear* as once suspected. Robert Adger Law, in discussing the influence of Holinshed on *King Lear*, asserts that any of the material present in Holinshed is also present in several other versions of the story (Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, John Higgins's version in *The Mirror for Magistrates*, and the anonymous *King Leir and His Three Daughters*), as is additional information that appears in Shakespeare's play. He states, "In fact, despite the oft-repeated assertion that Holinshed is the principal source for Shakespeare's great tragedy, I cannot find any convincing evidence that Shakespeare ever read a single line of Holinshed's account of King Leir . . . I cannot find in the entire drama of Shakespeare a single phrase echoed apparently from

Holinshed.”<sup>3</sup> Higgins again divorces *The Tragedy of King Lear* from its “historical” roots and aligns it closer with the aforementioned fictional versions of the Leir legend.

There is, however, a historical source that does contain the “echoes” to which Law is alluding. It is a brief, but significant reference to Leir in William Camden’s *Remains Concerning Britain*. Camden, a strong proponent for the abandonment of the Galfridian tradition, mentions Leir in a section on “Wise Speeches” referencing a seventh-century Saxon monarch, King Ina, and a story told concerning his rule. He recounts how Ina was a father to three daughters, who demanded them to describe their love for him above all others, and how his eldest daughters did as he asked, but the youngest was honest rather than flattering. Camden then adds, “One referreth this to the daughters of king *Leir*,”<sup>4</sup> claiming that this is the origin of Geoffrey’s Leir story in *Historia* and that Leir is then a fabrication by Geoffrey. Camden’s passage is tied directly to Shakespeare in two ways. First, its publication in 1605 makes it a close contemporary of Shakespeare’s play. More significantly, though, Camden quotes an anonymous account of the youngest daughter’s “wise speech”:

That albeit she did love, honour, and reverence him, and so would whilst she lived, as much as nature and daughterly dutie at the uttermost could expect: Yet she did thinke that one day it would come to passe, that she should affect another more fervently, meaning her husband, when she were married; Who being made one flesh with her, as God by commaundment had told, and nature had taught hir she was to cleave fast to, forsaking father and mother, kiffe and kinne.<sup>5</sup>

Wilfrid Perrett, author of *The Story of King Lear*, the most comprehensive account of the Leir story’s transformation between Geoffrey of Monmouth and Shakespeare, discusses Camden’s version of this speech as directly related to Cordelia’s monologue in *King Lear*. In her reply to her father’s request, Cordelia states,

Why have my sisters husbands, if they say  
They love you all? Haply, when I shall wed,  
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry  
Half my love with him, half my care and duty:  
Sure, I shall never marry like my sisters,  
To love my father all. (1.1.98-103)<sup>6</sup>

Perrett rejects Camden's claim that the Ina account is the inspiration for Monmouth's original story. However, addressing the inclusion of Cordelia's love for her future husband in Shakespeare's version of her response and its relation to Camden's anecdote, he concedes,

This part also appears to arise quite naturally out of the situation. We must remember that in Shakespeare alone Goneril and Regan are already married, and that consequently the objection occurs at once to Regan's declaration . . . that she loved Lear 'farre aboue all other creatures of the world' . . . Cordelia does not say that she should love her husband more than her father as in Polydore Vergil and [Camden] but that her husband should share her love, care, and duty. But if [this part] is taken from anywhere in particular, it must be from Camden.<sup>7</sup>

For Shakespeare to have read Camden enough to utilize this reference as a large part of Cordelia's speech to her father suggests an awareness of the original story's fictional nature and a willingness to utilize other sources outside of the Galfridian account as material for his version of the story.

Furthermore, Shakespeare's awareness of the divorce between *Lear* and "Leir" is made plain by a question asked by Shakespeare's Lear during his reunion with Cordelia: "Am I in France?" (4.7.77). Heather Hirschfield, in an essay named after this question, points out the importance of Lear's complete confusion at his surroundings, "a concern made more poignant in comparison to his earlier geographical authority."<sup>8</sup> However, rather than seeing this question as marking Lear's ignorance of the landscape he himself divided, it instead displays his knowledge of the details involved in his original narrative. In *Historia*, Leir embarks upon a voyage from Britain to Gaul, the kingdom that occupied what, by Shakespeare's day, had become France. Hirschfield concludes, "'Am I in France?' then, is best understood in terms of metadrama . . . Lear's line here, however, is a unique species of this kind of dramatic self-consciousness, calling attention to the interplay between stage and source. Lear literally announces the contrary facts of his chronicle; he makes the absence present. The line thus offers a sly wink to the audience, puncturing the dramatic illusion with a gesture to Lear's mad knowledge of his own back story."<sup>9</sup> The question thus implies of Shakespeare, not only an awareness of the play's break

from the Galfridian tradition, but a purpose in it, as the playwright acknowledges the events of his source material only to declare them irrelevant to his adaptation.

While Shakespeare does not take Lear to France, in some respects he takes him further south to Rome via the dramatic traditions of Senecan tragedy. It is well-known that several of Shakespeare's plays reflect influence of Senecan drama, but *King Lear* has a unique connection to Seneca's *Phoenissae* in that it reconfigures two of the major plotlines featured in the Roman original and applies them with new meaning to the story of Lear. While Geoffrey's original story may have borrowed the trope of siblings warring over rightful claims to the throne from Polynices and Eteocles of *Phoenissae*, Shakespeare's version incorporates additional material from Seneca's play that highlights strong themes present in his own.

The struggle between nature and chaos is one of these themes that appears in both *Lear* and *Phoenissae*. In Seneca's text, Polynices answers his mother Jocasta's pledge to help him make peace, saying, "I am in fear; no longer do nature's laws avail. Since this example of a brother's faithlessness, even a mother's pledge may not be trusted."<sup>10</sup> Here Polynices equates natural law with familial loyalty. Seeing his brother's betrayal makes him doubt the validity of those natural laws and spurn the promises of his own mother. Similarly, Lear shouts to the heavens as he stands raving upon the heath,

Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! spout, rain!  
Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters . . .  
But yet I call you servile ministers,  
That have with two pernicious daughters join'd  
Your high engender'd battles 'gainst a head  
So old and white as this. O! O! 'tis foul! (3.2.13-14, 20-23)

Again, the natural order of things, namely his monarchical power, is disrupted by his daughters' treachery, and he sees nature as being in collusion with Regan and Goneril, refusing to obey his commands.

Secondly, the symbolism of blindness is appropriated from the character of Oedipus and applied literally to Gloucester and figuratively to Lear himself. Like Oedipus, Gloucester finds himself wandering in the wilderness with his own child as

his guide. While both Oedipus and Gloucester have the same intended destination in their journey, that of death, Shakespeare heightens the suspense of the drama by making Gloucester's guide unknown to him, though he is his own exiled son, Edgar. Gloucester's physical blindness and inability to recognize his most worthy son and heir directly parallels Lear's blindness to his daughters' true affection for him. In this way, Shakespeare adopts not only the plot details of *Phoenissae*, but utilizes its themes and symbols to increase suspense and meaning within *King Lear*. These connections increase the universality of the story by applying it to cultures beyond the national borders of Britain and outside the temporal setting of the Leir legend.

Yet the parallel subplot of Gloucester, Edgar, and Edmund has roots within British history, as well. Tony Perrello ties this plot thread to the Anglo-Saxon namesake of the play's hero, the tenth-century King Edgar, and his sons, Edward and Æthelred. He claims that "generations of scholars have failed to connect key elements in the Gloucester subplot of *Lear*—the bastardy, the anomalous nomenclature, the portentous star—to the Anglo-Saxon legend that it so strikingly resembles."<sup>11</sup> Apart from the obviously more Anglo-Saxon names (Edmund could be a reference to Edgar's first son, Edmund Ætheling), the "portentous star" that Perrello mentions is perhaps the most readily apparent connection between the historical tradition of King Edgar and *King Lear*. He quotes the monk Florence of Worcester telling of a meteor seen in the sky at Æthelred's coronation and associates it with Edmund's response to his father's talk of nature's wisdom:

An admirable evasion of whoremaster man, to lay his goatish disposition to the charge of a star! My father compounded with my mother under the dragon's tail; and my nativity was under Ursa major; so that it follows, I am rough and lecherous. Tut, I should have been that I am, had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardizing. (1.2.116-22)

This incorporation of nature imagery once again highlights the conflict between the chaos of men's actions and the natural order of the world, as Edmund denies the influence of the stars as omens of destiny.

That Shakespeare culls this symbol from an Anglo-Saxon source to couple with similar themes connected to Roman tragedy

in a Medieval history purporting to tell the story of a pre-Roman British king shows a blending of sources that unifies the national narrative of Britain despite the years and stories that divide it from its parts. But although it reflects a rich past, it also points to a hopeful future. The same decision to end Lear's line of succession by killing him off and all three of his daughters, allows Edgar to assume the throne instead. Meredith Skura sees Edgar as an amalgamation of both the Saxon King Edgar and another well-known British ruler, writing, "Insofar as Edgar inherits this role, he is like Shakespeare's own new monarch, James I, prince of the newly united realm of Britain and first in a new dynastic line."<sup>12</sup> James's coronation brought England and Scotland into a union that connected the whole isle of Great Britain, just as Edgar's rule will reunite the portions of Lear's kingdom that he divided between Regan and Goneril. Skura goes on to quote James's own words on division of kingdom from the *Basilikon Doron* (1599): "Dividing your kingdomes, yee shall leave the seed of division and discord among your posteritie; as befell to this Ile, by the division and assignement thereof, to the three sonnes of Brutus, Lochrine, Albanact, and Camber."<sup>13</sup> That James would be so familiar with Brutus and use him in his political rhetoric speaks to the potency of the Galfridian tradition in late sixteenth-century Britain despite its erosion, as well as to its relevance to James's own political philosophy.

Shakespeare tapped into that potency by telling the story of Leir, but he also reclaimed it by his alterations and utilized it as a veiled tribute to James's ascension to the throne. If Edgar stands in for James, he also stands as a symbol of defiance to the natural order of both the national narrative and the Galfridian narrative. Edgar breaks with the tradition of Geoffrey's original by usurping Lear's descendants' lineage, as well as with the tradition of royal succession. Joseph Alulis asserts, "Edgar has no conventional claim to the throne as does Albany . . . In this context, on behalf of Edmund, a contrary claim is raised: 'In his own grace he doth exalt himself,'" (5.3.68). By the same token, Edgar's ascension raises the issue of a nonconventional claim to rule, a claim of "grace" as opposed to blood.<sup>14</sup>

This new claim to the throne is reminiscent of James's own ascension through appointment by Elizabeth I. However, the play's



disregard for both the story's original outcome and the natural order of royal succession implies a denial of fatalism that echoes Lear's acknowledgement upon the heath of disturbance in the natural order. The Britain depicted in Shakespeare's *Lear* is shaped not by an unfolding destiny, but by the actions and decisions of its rulers and people, who can ascend to any height or fall to terrible depths via their own agency. It is therefore, the responsibility of the nation to maintain the unity portrayed by Edgar's victory and made reality in James's coronation.

Shakespeare utilized a broad palette of inspiration and adaptation to reconstruct Leir's story, tying together unifying strands of the past while incorporating inklings of hope for the future. Enduring myths such as Lear's still hold sway and influence upon their culture because they appeal to such national ideals that remain perennially relevant. Though Lochrine, Gorboduc, and Bladud no longer survive in the cultural consciousness of Britons, casualties of the collapse of their "history," Lear remains relevant because Shakespeare rescued him from history and housed him in a legend that tells a compelling story: the story of Britain.

## Notes

1. John E. Curran, Jr., "Geoffrey of Monmouth in Renaissance Drama: Imagining Non-history," *Modern Philology* 97, no. 1 (1999): 1.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Robert Adger Law, "Holinshed as Source For *Henry V* and *King Lear*," *Studies in English*, no. 14 (1934): 41-42.
4. William Camden, *Remains Concerning Britain*, ed. R. D. Dunn (1605; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 210.
5. *Ibid.*
6. William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Lear: A Conflated Text*, prepared by Barbara K. Lewalski in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2008), 2493-567. All line references are taken from this text.
7. Wilfrid Perrett, *The Story of King Lear: from Geoffrey of Monmouth to Shakespeare* (Berlin: Mayer & Muller, 1904), 238.
8. Heather Hirschfeld, "'Am I in France?': King Lear and Source," *Notes & Queries* 56, no. 4 (2009): 588, 590.
9. *Ibid.*, 590.
10. Seneca, *Phoenissae*, trans. Frank Justus Miller, 478, <http://www.theoi.com/Text/SenecaPhoenissae.html>.
11. Tony Perrello, "Anglo-Saxon elements of the Gloucester sub-plot in *King Lear*," *English Language Notes* 35, no. 1 (1997): 14.

12. Meredith Skura, "Dragon Fathers and Unnatural Children: Warring Generations in *King Lear* and Its Sources," *Comparative Drama* 42, no. 2 (2008): 142.

13. James I, *Basilikon Doron*, in *The Political Works of James I*, ed. Charles Howard McIlwain (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1918), 37.

14. Joseph Alulis, "Wisdom and Fortune: The Education of the Prince in Shakespeare's *King Lear*," *Interpretation: A Journal Of Political Philosophy* 21, no. 3 (1994): 376.