

**Renaissance and Reformation**  
**Renaissance et Réforme**



**Undermining the Elect Nation: King Lear and the Hebrew Patriarchs at the Court of James I**

Patrick Timmis

Volume 43, Number 3, Summer 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1075285ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i3.35303>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Timmis, P. (2020). Undermining the Elect Nation: King Lear and the Hebrew Patriarchs at the Court of James I. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 43(3), 105–133. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i3.35303>

Article abstract

This article examines King Lear's creative redeployment of the Old Testament stories of the patriarchs, especially the narrative of Jacob and Esau in the book of Genesis. After contextualizing the reliance of the "Gloucester subplot" on this narrative within a broader predestinarian tradition of representing the English monarchy as the fulfillment of Hebrew typology, the article asks how a courtly audience, amid the political upheavals of 1606, might have reacted to the play's apparent subversion of Calvinist theopolitical certainties.

# Undermining the Elect Nation: *King Lear* and the Hebrew Patriarchs at the Court of James I<sup>1</sup>

PATRICK TIMMIS

Duke University

*This article examines King Lear's creative redeployment of the Old Testament stories of the patriarchs, especially the narrative of Jacob and Esau in the book of Genesis. After contextualizing the reliance of the "Gloucester subplot" on this narrative within a broader predestinarian tradition of representing the English monarchy as the fulfillment of Hebrew typology, the article asks how a courtly audience, amid the political upheavals of 1606, might have reacted to the play's apparent subversion of Calvinist theopolitical certainties.*

*Cet article examine la liberté avec laquelle les récits des patriarches de l'Ancien Testament sont redéployés dans Le roi Lear, en particulier l'épisode de Job et d'Ésaü dans le livre de la Genèse. Il propose d'abord de relire la « sous-intrigue Gloucester » dans le contexte de ce chapitre biblique puis de la situer dans une longue tradition sur la prédestination, où la monarchie britannique est présentée comme un accomplissement de la typologie hébraïque. L'article considère ensuite comment le public de la Cour, pris dans bouleversements politiques de 1606, a pu réagir à l'apparente subversion des certitudes théologico-politiques calvinistes dans la pièce.*

On 5 November 1606, Lancelot Andrewes marked the inauguration of a new religio-political holiday by preaching the first Gunpowder Plot sermon before James I at Whitehall. A danger had beset crown and parliament, he said, greater than any persecution faced by Israel's King David. He vividly imagined the consequences had the plot succeeded: "so much bloud, as would have made it raine bloud; so many baskets of heads, so many peeces of rent bodies cast up and downe, and scattered all over the face of the earth." There would have been "neither root nor branch left" of the kingdom; a "dissolution and desolation" so complete that the poets in "their Tragœdies can show none neer it." Continuing in this vein, Andrewes lamented that "ever age, or land, but that our age, and this land should foster or breed such monsters!"<sup>2</sup>

1. I am thankful to Sarah Beckwith, Julianne Werlin, Chandler Fry, Eric DeMeuse, Philip Tan, and the anonymous readers at *Renaissance and Reformation* for their invaluable input on earlier drafts of this article.

2. Lancelot Andrewes, *A Sermon Preached before the King's Majesty, at Whitehall, on the V. of November. A.D. MDCVI*, in Peter McCullough ed., *Lancelot Andrewes: Selected Sermons and Lectures* (Oxford:

Counterbalancing this exceptionalism of woe—“only we could breed monsters this evil”—is a healthy dose of the belief, which Patrick Collinson has shown was central to early modern England’s self-conception, that “God is English.” Or, at least, that God was in a particular sense England’s God, having covenanted with the English just as he once made a covenant with Israel. As a late Elizabethan preacher proclaimed, “Blessed is Israel, because the Lord is their God, and blessed is England, because the Lord is their God.”<sup>3</sup> If England was the new Israel, then London was the new Jerusalem.<sup>4</sup> And by extrapolation, if God had made a covenant with the Israelite patriarch Abraham to make him a great nation, and a covenant with the Israelite king David to establish his dynasty forever, then God must promise similar success to England’s monarch, the head of both church and nation.

Moreover, this new covenant was, in the words of Hebrews 8:6, a better covenant, since it comes after and through Christ. In a 1610 Gowrie Plot sermon, Andrewes preached that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David were all “princes” who should be read as figures or “types” pointing toward the eternal king Christ.<sup>5</sup> Christian kings were also miniature “Christs” (literally translated as God’s “anointed ones”). By inference, then, the Israelite leaders who were types of the greater anointed one, Jesus Christ, could also be seen, in the new covenant, as types of a glorious English monarchy. This was not original to Andrewes—Elizabeth herself was identified both with David and with Christ.<sup>6</sup>

This is the context for Andrewes’s assertion that the evil planned for the fifth of November would “overmatch” any evil King David ever faced by its scale. The entire ruling class would have perished had they entered Parliament:

---

Oxford University Press, 2005), 152.

3. Patrick Collinson, *The Birthpangs of Protestant England: Religious and Cultural Change in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1988), 5–7, doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-19584-8.

4. Collinson, 10.

5. For Andrewes’s 1610 Gowrie Day sermon, which repeats many of the themes of his first *V of November* sermon, see McCullough, ed., 178–206. For a luminous discussion of Christian typological readings of the Old Testament, see Erich Auerbach, “Figura (1938),” in *Time, History, and Literature: Selected Essays of Erich Auerbach*, ed. James I. Porter, trans. Jane O. Newman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 65–113.

6. Collinson, 9.

Not onely King David had gone, but Queen Esther too: and not onely they, but Salomon the young Prince, and Nathan his Brother. Nor these were not all. The Scriptures recount, David had Jehosaphat for his Chancellor, Adoram his Treasurer, Seroja his Secretarie, Sadoc and Abiathar and twenty more, the chiefe of the Priests, Admo his Judge, Joab his Generall; all had gone: His forty eight Worthies or Nobles, all they too. The Principall of all the Tribes in the kingdome: All they too; and many more then these; no man knoweth how many.

He then concludes that, as David had received deliverance from his troubles, so the English David (and his queen, two sons, etc.) had been delivered even more remarkably. Punning on Westminster's stone foundation while triumphantly casting James as Christ, Andrewes rejoices that "the Stone these Builders refused, is still the Head-stone of the corner."<sup>7</sup> Andrewes then urges the congregation to pray earnestly for the king's continued safety, because

our future salvation, by the continuance of His Religion and truth among us, and our present prosperitie (like two walls) meet upon the Head stone of the corner; depend both, first, upon the Name of the Lord, and next upon him, that in His name, and with His name, is come unto us (that is) the King.

England's welfare—spiritual and physical—rests upon this orthodox (Protestant) king who has come among the English in the name of God to uphold them. As long as he stands firm, "The building will be as *mount Sion*, so the corner stone be *fast*; so the two walls, that meet, never fall asunder." After raising the possibility that disaster might still strike in the future, Andrewes dismisses it, provided that England will pray for the king: "If otherwise: but, I will not so much as put the case; but, as we pray, so trust, it shall never be removed but stand fast for ever."<sup>8</sup>

This manifest-destiny hermeneutic found a theological justification in the predestinarian covenant theology of Protestant reformers like William Tyndale

7. Andrewes, *V. of November*, 153.

8. Andrewes, *V. of November*, 159.

and John Calvin.<sup>9</sup> One of the key passages for this theology was Romans 9:11–13, which explains why God passed over the birthright of Isaac’s elder son Esau to anoint Jacob as the new patriarch:<sup>10</sup>

For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth;) It was said unto her, The elder shall serve the younger. As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.<sup>11</sup>

Calvin understood this passage to be speaking both of the Old Testament political succession and typologically of personal salvation in the new covenant.

9. For a brief discussion of Tyndale’s covenant theology, see Peter Marshall, *Heretics and Believers: A History of the English Reformation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 147, doi.org/10.12987/yale/9780300170627.001.0001.

10. The basic contours of the story of the patriarch Isaac and his sons Jacob and Esau, which can be found in Genesis 25–33, are central to my argument. In these chapters, God speaks to Isaac’s wife Rebekah, prophesying that she will give birth to two sons, and that the older boy will serve the younger. Esau, the elder, is born ruddy and hairy and grows into a hunter, while Jacob, the younger, is quiet, smooth-skinned, and stays close to the tents. Isaac loves Esau most, while Rebekah prefers Jacob. Esau returns from the field one day, fainting from hunger, and asks Jacob to share his dinner. Jacob offers to sell him food in return for Esau’s birthright. Esau, perhaps not taking Jacob’s request seriously, agrees and eats. As Isaac ages, he begins to grow blind and to anticipate his death. He tells Esau to prepare a ceremonial meal so that Isaac can formally bless him and confirm Esau’s birthright—the role of patriarch. Rebekah tells Jacob to disguise himself in Esau’s clothes, to cover his smooth hands with goat skins, and to mimic Esau’s voice in order to receive the blessing himself. Jacob deceives his father, and after receiving the blessing, flees out of the region to escape his brother’s revenge. Esau, despite having previously sold the birthright, is stunned upon returning to discover that Jacob has preempted him. He initially desires revenge, but years later reconciles with Jacob and welcomes him home.

11. There was a sixteenth-century tradition of staging this story, including the sixth play in the Towneley cycle and a musical drama, possibly performed at the court of Edward VI by the Children of the Chapel Royal, with a prologue that several scholars have read as explicitly Calvinist: “But before Iacob and Esau yet borne were, / Or had eyther done good, or yll perpetrate: / As the prophet Malachie and Paule witness beare, / Iacob was chosen, and Esau reprobate: / Iacob I loue (sayde God) and Esau I hate. / For it is not (sayth Paule) in man’s reuening or will, / But in Gods mercy who choseth whome he will” (*The Historie of Jacob and Esau*, Prol. 8–14). See especially Paul White, *Theatre and Reformation: Protestantism, Patronage, and Playing in Tudor England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 187; and John Curran, “Jacob and Esau and the Iconoclasm of Merit,” *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 49 (2009): 285–309. For editions of the two plays, see Martin Stevens and A. C. Cawley, ed., *The Towneley Plays*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), and Paul White, ed., *Reformation Biblical Drama in England: An Old-Spelling Critical Edition* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992).

Jacob represents at once the elect nation of Israel and the elect, truly godly member of a Protestant church.<sup>12</sup> Calvin condemned those who take the “short and easy method” of attributing “the origin and cause of election” to God’s foreknowledge of the “virtues and vices” of Jacob and Esau.<sup>13</sup> God does not elect “those who are worthy of his grace”—he makes them worthy by electing them. Nor does he reject (“reprobate”) “those whom he foresees to be unworthy”; rather, he gives or withholds salvation with absolute freedom, and with an absolute, eternal decree.<sup>14</sup> Esau had done nothing to merit being passed over for his brother politically and spiritually; God had simply hated him.

Calvin’s was the dominant theology of salvation in the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean church.<sup>15</sup> This helps us understand why, when applied on a national scale—easily done in a society that held citizenship and membership in the Church of England as synonymous—Andrewes and his fellow preachers felt no need to prove that James had done anything to make himself personally worthy of such a special relationship with God.<sup>16</sup> If the elect soul needed only faith to have a full “assurance” of salvation, then England (and her monarch) might have equal confidence in her elect status based on her Protestant faith.<sup>17</sup> As Milton would ask thirty years later in *Areopagitica*, “Why else was this nation

12. See Calvin’s *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses called Genesis*, trans. John King, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmann, 1948), 2:27.

13. Erasmus of Rotterdam, for instance. See *De Libero Arbitrio*, ed. and trans. E. Gordon Rupp, in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, The Library of Christian Classics 17 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1969), 43, 89.

14. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 3.22.4.

15. For the thesis of a “Calvinist consensus,” which has been confirmed by the majority of scholars of the Jacobean church, see Nicholas Tyacke’s *Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism c. 1590–1640* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

16. While Andrewes was remarkable at James’s court for being rather unenthusiastic about Calvinist soteriology at a personal level, he toed the party line regarding a providentialist nationalism. Peter McCullough has also shown that the context of a feast day impacted the tone of Andrewes’s preaching. A Good Friday sermon, for instance, was liable to sound more Calvinistic on the doctrine of the atonement than Andrewes typically might. See McCullough, ed., 366.

17. Collinson traces the tensions that could develop between a personal and national sense of election, particularly in Puritan discourse (Collinson, 11–27). See also Carlos Eire’s discussion of the English separatist Robert Browne (leader of the “Brownists”), who argued that “God established a one-on-one relationship with individual communities of the elect rather than with whole nations,” in Eire, *Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450–1650* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 345.

chos'n before any other, that out of her as out of *Sion* should be proclaim'd and sounded forth the first tidings and trumpet of Reformation all over Europe?"<sup>18</sup> As Providence had taken the sovereign initiative and appointed the patriarch Jacob, so he had anointed his Britannic majesty *Jacobus Rex*. Since England was on the side of Christ, the converse must be that her Roman Catholic enemies, primarily embodied in Habsburg Spain and in the Society of Jesus, were ranged on the side of the Devil and his deputy, the Anti-Christ (i.e., the pope).<sup>19</sup> And it was in moments of political crisis, Peter Lake writes, when "people needed inherently contingent, formally meaningless and threateningly open-ended events to be explained and thus rendered predictable and controllable," that the godly preachers most effectively moved their audiences to renew the covenant with God by prayer and repentance and thus reaffirm their election.<sup>20</sup>

Andrewes was back in the Whitehall pulpit the following month, on 25 December 1606, to preach the Christmas Day sermon.<sup>21</sup> Expounding on the Old Testament prophesy that Christ would be a great king who would bear the government "upon his shoulder" (Isaiah 9:6), Andrewes echoed his Gunpowder sermon by drawing an analogy to earthly kings:

Belike, governments have their weight—be heavy; and so they be; they need not only a good head, but good shoulders, that sustain them. But that not so much while they be in good tune and temper, then, they need no great carriage; but when they grow unwieldy, be it weakness or waywardness of the governed, in that case they need; and in that case, there is no governor but, at one time or other, he bears his government upon his shoulders.

18. John Milton, *Areopagitica*, in *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*, ed. William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon (New York: Modern Library, 2007), 957.

19. The conformist Puritan divine William Crashaw prayed in 1625 that God would strengthen Charles to "performe all thy pleasure, and to execute thy great and glorious Designes, not onely for the building up of our Jersusalem, in the Reformation and Restoration of our Church, but to subdue the Nations before thee, [...] doe this O Lord, for Jacob thy Servants sake, and Israel thy Elect." Printed in Crashaw, *Englands Lamentable Complaint to Her God: Out of Which May Bee Pickt a Prayer for Priuate Families. Together, with a Sovereigne Receipt against Sinne, the True Cause of All Our Sorrow. As Also, a Necessarie Catechisme, Intituled Meate for Men* (1629).

20. Peter Lake, with Michael Questier, *The Antichrist's Lewd Hat: Protestants, Papists and Players in Post-Reformation England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 473.

21. See James Shapiro, *1606: William Shakespeare and the Year of Lear* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), 297.

So it was with Aaron and with Moses, he continues. It should be hoped that governors should never be troubled by the “weakness or waywardness” of their subjects, that they might always “Bear their people only in their arms by love, and in their breasts by care.” Sometimes, however, “they must follow Christ’s example and patience here, and even that way bear them; not only bear with them, but even bear them also.”<sup>22</sup> The cornerstone must bear up his kingdom when it grows unwieldy. But while Andrewes had been unwilling to even “put the case” of that cornerstone *not* holding, the play performed at Whitehall on the following evening seems to do just that. Shakespeare’s *King Lear* would subtly question the typological connection between the Israelite patriarch and the English king.

The apocalyptic feel of *King Lear* has, not surprisingly, tempted critics to look for a connection with the Gunpowder Plot. Nina Taunton and Valerie Hart have argued that the composition of *King Lear* took place primarily in 1606, and that multiple episodes in the play refer directly to the Plot.<sup>23</sup> But their thesis does not seem to have been well received, and the scholarly consensus remains that Shakespeare had probably completed most of the play before November 1605.<sup>24</sup> Much of this criticism, however, has been focused on authorial intent. Could Shakespeare have *meant* to reference the Plot in his adaptation of the old play *King Leir*? But for the Elizabethan and Jacobean courts, original authorial intent was not the primary concern when it came to judging the political overtones of a performance. Plays could even be initially rubber stamped by the Master of Revels and later shuttered if someone with influence was offended. Thomas Middleton’s *A Game at Chess*, which was closed to appease the Spanish ambassador after a sold-out run playing to “old and young, rich and poor, masters and servants, papists and puritans, wise men etc., churchmen and statesmen,” is a classic example.<sup>25</sup> James Shapiro notes that Shakespeare’s play

22. Lancelot Andrewes, *Ninety-Six Sermons*, vol. 1 (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1841), 25.

23. Nina Taunton and Valerie Hart, “*King Lear*, King James and the Gunpowder Treason of 1605,” *Renaissance Studies* 17 (2003): 695–715, doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-4658.2003.00042.x.

24. See, for instance, Shapiro, 103; Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), ch. 11, and Anne James, *Poets, Players, and Preachers: Remembering the Gunpowder Plot in Seventeenth-Century England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 283, doi.org/10.3138/9781442620056.

25. Quoted in Margot Heinemann, *Puritanism and Theatre: Thomas Middleton and Opposition Drama under the Early Stuarts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 151. Note also Ben Jonson’s



would have seemed “uncanny” in its foreshadowing, and that its politics would have “become more fraught” when staged the following year.<sup>26</sup> As regards *Lear*, then, I am less interested in what Shakespeare might have intended in its composition (whether before or after 5 November 1605) and more interested in what *King Lear* might have suggested to its aristocratic audience (and even its players) when it debuted at court on 26 December 1606.<sup>27</sup>

Cherrell Guilfoyle, Harold Fisch, and Simon Palfrey have briefly noted that there are echoes of the Jacob and Esau story in *Lear*’s Gloucester subplot, which Shakespeare added to counterpoint the central action of his Elizabethan source, *King Lear*.<sup>28</sup> What follows is an exploration of ways in which *Lear*’s courtly, educated, and politically sensitive audience might have interpreted the power struggle between Edmund, Edgar, and Gloucester in light of the Old Testament political typologies so common from the pulpit. Would the play’s insistent echoes of the supposedly reprobate Esau, elect Jacob, and blind Isaac—but with their roles unstable and their motivations unsettled and ambiguous—have subtly undermined the pulpit’s Calvinist/providentialist model of the elect governor of a chosen England?

Edmund is introduced in the opening scene, in a manner that invites some immediate compassion:

KENT. Is not this your son, my lord?

GLOUCESTER. His breeding, sir, hath been at my charge. I have so often blushed to acknowledge him that now I am brazed to’t.

KENT. I cannot conceive you.

---

habit of beginning his satirical comedies with a (disingenuous?) disclaimer to the effect that no real persons were being satirized, but that “If the shoe fits...”

26. Shapiro, 150–51.

27. As Grooms of the King’s Chamber, Shakespeare’s company did sometimes attend court sermons and might have heard Andrewes’s sermons, especially as both were preached on important holidays. See Hannibal Hamlin, *The Bible in Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 14, doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199677610.001.0001.

28. Shapiro, 57–58; Cherrell Guilfoyle, “The Redemption of King Lear,” *Comparative Drama* 23 (1989): 50–69, 54, doi.org/10.1353/cdr.1989.0012; Harold Fisch, *The Biblical Presence in Shakespeare, Milton, and Blake: A Comparative Study* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 137, doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198184898.001.0001; Simon Palfrey, *Poor Tom: Living King Lear* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 226–27.

GLOUCESTER. Sir, this young fellow's mother could; whereupon she grew round-wombed, and had, indeed, sir, a son for her cradle ere she had a husband for her bed.

Do you smell a fault?

KENT. I cannot wish the fault undone, the issue of it being so proper.

GLOUCESTER. But I have a son, sir, by order of law, some year elder than this, who yet is no dearer in my account. Though this knave came something saucily to the world before he was sent for, yet was his mother fair, there was good sport at his making, and the whoreson must be acknowledged. Do you know this noble gentleman, Edmund? (1.1.7–24)<sup>29</sup>

Gloucester seems, as the play unfolds, to consider himself on easy terms with both his sons (he does not, for instance, feel it necessary to reconcile with Edmund when disinheriting Edgar). But his introduction of Edmund, “I have *so often* blushed to acknowledge him,” implies a lifetime of cruel but casual raillery.<sup>30</sup> The ease with which this irrelevant and situationally inappropriate backstory comes out—Kent’s stiff politeness proves we haven’t opened the play *in medias res* of extended “locker room banter”—suggests that this is a favourite story of Gloucester’s. The acknowledgement itself is deeply ambiguous. Edgar, Gloucester claims, is “no dearer in my account” than is Edmund. But Gloucester speaks of Edgar differently in the following scenes: “To his father, that so tenderly and entirely loves him” (1.2.96–97); “I loved him, friend, / No father his son dearer” (3.4.164–65). Edgar is loved “entirely,” with a fervour that no other parent could exceed. The implication that little love remains for Edmund, and that “no dearer in my account” is wordplay, is confirmed by Gloucester’s dismissal of Kent’s courtesy as unnecessary: “He [Edmund] hath been out nine years, and away he shall again” (1.1.31–32). Like Isaac, Gloucester has a favourite: Edgar is dear to his heart; Edmund is dear to his (bank) “account.”<sup>31</sup>

29. William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. R.A. Foakes (London: *The Arden Shakespeare*, 3<sup>rd</sup> series, 2005), xvii. While I have relied on the Arden’s editorial text, the differences between the Folio and Quarto do not significantly affect my readings.

30. That Edmund enjoyed fewer privileges than Edgar is hardly surprising for seventeenth-century England, given his illegitimate birth. But Gloucester seems to delight in reminding him of the fact.

31. Shakespeare does use forms of “account” elsewhere to refer to finances: see Mowbray in *Richard II*, “For that my sovereign liege was in my debt / Upon remainder of a dear account” (1.1.130), and *Timon of Athens*, 2.2.130.

If he has been spared any repetitions of “the whoreson must be acknowledged,” he has only his absence to thank for it.<sup>32</sup> It is hardly surprising, then, when Edmund reveals his hostility towards his father and brother and his usurpation plot in 1.2.

Is Edmund Jacob? Or is he Esau (also called Edom)? Neither, and both. Rather than try to map the brothers strictly onto the Genesis account, I will simply attempt to follow Edmund and Edgar as they pass in and out of these two roles, and to notice ways in which their words and actions build up an overall impression regarding questions of birthright, disinheritance, rejection, and election. The soliloquy of 1.2 is one of Edmund’s most compelling moments, and further establishes him as a character who, at least initially, commands a level of sympathy:

Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law  
 My services are bound. Wherefore should I  
 Stand in the plague of custom, and permit  
 The curiosity of nations to deprive me?  
 For that I am some twelve or fourteen moon-shines  
 Lag of a brother? Why bastard? Wherefore base  
 When my dimensions are as well compact,  
 My mind as generous and my shape as true  
 As honest madam’s issue? Why brand they us  
 With base? With baseness, bastardy? Base, base?  
 Who in the lusty stealth of nature take  
 More composition and fierce quality  
 Than doth within a dull stale tired bed  
 Go to the creating of a whole tribe of fops  
 Got ’tween sleep and wake. (1.2.1–15)

Edmund’s service to Nature recalls Esau, the virile man of the fields. Edmund is “rough and lecherous,” full of “fierce quality” and reliant on his own devices, while Edgar is the dutiful son, the “fop” spending “two hours together” talking with Gloucester (1.2.130–31, 154). That Edgar should be chosen, and himself

32. See Claude Summers, “‘Stand up for bastards!’: Shakespeare’s Edmund and Love’s Failure,” *College Literature* 4 (1977): 225–31.

passed over, is a “plague” and a “curiosity,” based purely on an arbitrary predetermination. The two brothers are, to any outside observer, equal in merit, as Kent’s desire to show Edmund favour seems to confirm (1.1.29). The only differentiation comes from age and, more importantly, legitimacy, but in what possible way could Edmund be responsible or faulted for his bastardy?<sup>33</sup> He was the only person uninvolved in the affair, but the only person condemned, not just as illegitimate but as “base” in his very nature.<sup>34</sup> He continues:

Well, then,  
 Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land.  
 Our father’s love is to the bastard Edmund  
 As to the legitimate. Fine word, “legitimate”!  
 Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed  
 And my invention thrive, Edmund the base  
 Shall top the legitimate. I grow, I prosper:  
 Now gods, stand up for bastards! (1.2.16–23)

In the space of a few lines, Edmund’s role has shifted from the wronged to the criminal (though the two are not incompatible). “Legitimate” becomes a curse, denigrating Edgar and providing the only justification Edmund actually posits for the plot he now initiates. The words “Our father’s love is to the bastard Edmund / As to the legitimate” could serve as an irony-dripping rejoinder to Calvin’s claim that the reprobate children of Abraham (represented by Esau)

33. Edmund’s illegitimacy and lack of inheritance also suggest a resonance with Ishmael, who was sent into the wilderness by Abraham in favour of the legitimate Isaac a generation before the struggle between Jacob and Esau (Genesis 21). See a passage that James I wrote to his son Henry, and that serves to connect my argument here with the main plot of *Lear*: “If God sende you succession, bee carefull for their virtuous education: loue them as ye ought, but let them knowe as much of it as the gentlesse of their nature will deserue, conteyning them euer in a reuerente loue and louing feare of you: And in case it please God to prouide you to all thir three Kingdomes, make your eldest sonne ISAAC [original emphasis], leauing him all your Kindomes, and prouide the rest with priuate possessions: otherwayes by deuiding your Kingdomes, yee shall leaue the seede of diuisione and discorde among your posteritie.” James I, *Basilikon Doron; or, His majestys Instructions to his dearest sonne, Henry the Prince* (1603) (London, 1887), “Of a King’s Duetie in His Office: The Second Booke.”

34. For an opposite reading, see Ronald W. Cooley, “Kent and Primogeniture in *King Lear*,” *Studies in English Literature: 1500–1900*, 48 (2008): 327–48.

“have become bastards instead of sons.”<sup>35</sup> Who has the agency here? Gloucester harps on Edmund’s illegitimacy before Edmund does—he is constantly bastardized before he plays the bastard. Does oppression make a traitor, or do traitors necessitate oppression? All this, however, does not make Edmund inherently worthy of the inheritance. Two ways are open to Edmund: either to endure with patience, ally himself with Edgar (who trusts Edmund implicitly), and wait for a better kindness and justice (as Calvin argues that Esau should have done upon losing the birthright), or to annihilate justice by his own action.<sup>36</sup> It remains to Edmund whether to reject or freely embrace the role of “bastard,” and the soliloquy’s final line constitutes a brazen—Michael Brennan thinks “blasphemous”—expression of choice.<sup>37</sup>

Edmund now springs his Jacob-like plot, disguising himself not in his brother’s clothes or hairy hands, but in Edgar’s written hand. The forged patricidal letter snares Gloucester, who, oddly, must rely on Edmund’s judgment regarding the handwriting: “It is his?” “It is his hand, my lord” (1.2.66–67).<sup>38</sup> The temptation to subtext is strong: Has Gloucester never received a letter from Edgar because the eldest has never left his side? Does he fail to recognize Edmund’s pen because he has left the task of corresponding with Edmund to Edgar? Regardless, like the sale of soup for birthright, the first step of the two-part plan is complete, and Gloucester leaves bemoaning evil portents and astrological “sequent effects” pressing down on them (1.2.106).<sup>39</sup>

In his Fifth of November sermon, Andrewes had asked where the superhuman malevolence of the Plot could have come from. Surely neither God nor citizen would plot such destruction on the kingdom. Such evil “sequent effects” could only come from the Devil via his tools, foreign-trained Jesuits “out of the infernal pitt” who corrupt native Englishmen:

35. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.22.4. See Michael G. Brennan, “‘Now gods, stand up for bastards’ (*King Lear*, i. ii. 22) and the *Epistle to the Hebrews* 12: 5–8,” *Notes and Queries* 37.2 (1990): 186–87.

36. See Calvin’s *Commentary on Genesis*, 2.25, 27.

37. Brennan, 188.

38. Taunton and Hart see this letter as a direct reference to the mysterious warning delivered by Mounteagle to the Privy Council (Taunton and Hart, 698). Shapiro notes how suggestive this might have been to an audience but believes that this scene would have been written long before Mounteagle’s intervention (Shapiro, ch. 5).

39. See Genesis 25:29–34.

We must not looke to paterne it upon earth, we must to hell; thence it was certainly, even from the Devill. He was a murderer from the beginning, and wil be so to the ending. In every sinne of bloud, he hath a claw; but, all his clawes, in such an one as this. [...] As he is a murtherer; so we see (in Marke) by his renting and tearing the poore possessed child he is cruell; and in this, all his cruelties should have mett together. [...] Esau's crueltie, smiting mother, children and all: [...] Edom's crueltie not sparing the Sanctuarie nor the walls, downe with them to the ground: His [the Devil's] owne smiting the foure corners and bringing down the house upon the heads of Job's children. [...] Crueltie, more cruell to them, it spared and left behind, then to those it took away. [...] But this, that this so abominable and desolatorie a plott, stood in the holy place, this is the pitch of all. [...] That these holy religious persons, even the chiefe of all religious persons (the Jesuites) gave not onely absolution, but resolution, that all this was well done.<sup>40</sup>

All the cruel acts of the Old Testament would have met in this “abominable and desolatorie” plot. Entirely removed from God, Esau/Edom has become a claw of Satan for mass murder.<sup>41</sup> Compare this to George Whetstone's 1587 description of the Babington conspirators, where he rejoices that “God's providence has delivered their champion,” the famous Jesuit Edmund Campion, “into the hands of justice,” but marvels that the Jesuits manage “to draw young gentlemen to these desperate treasons.”<sup>42</sup> If the catspaws had any sense, “they should see the attempt as vain a matter as to throw stones against the stars or with a knock of their head, to level a mountain, that seek to displace so beloved a prince.” The only explanation, Whetstone's narrator concludes, must be active reprobation:

40. Andrewes, *V. of November*, 152.

41. Never mind that contrary to Jacob's fears, Esau never actually smote “mother, children and all” but instead welcomed them back to their homeland. See Genesis 33:1–12.

42. Edmund's name may even have recalled the Jesuit for the audience. Samuel Harsnett, whom Shakespeare draws on for the names of Edgar's “demons” in *Lear*, plays with the name to sonically connect the Jesuit exorcist Fr. Edmunds with Campion: “But when *Edmunds* came in *accepto bissino quodam funiculo, quem ipse Edmundus Campianus semper secū gestabat.*” See Harsnett, *A declaration of egregious popish impostures to with-draw the hart of her Majesties subjects from their alleageance, and from the truth of Christian Religion professed in England, under the pretence of casting out deuils* (London, 1603), 84.

“those whose hearts it pleases God to harden have neither eyes to look into their own danger nor judgment to consider of their own benefit.”<sup>43</sup>

Ironically, in his complaint that “nature finds itself scourged” by outside “sequent effects,” Gloucester has handed Edmund a similar “forces-outside-my-control” excuse for his behaviour: “This villain of mine comes under the prediction—there’s son against father” misidentifies the villain, but blames the catastrophe on “late eclipses in the sun and moon” (1.2.103–10). Edmund’s ally, Cornwall, uses similarly passive language—“the revenges we are bound to take upon your traitorous father”—to distance himself from agency in torturing Gloucester (3.7.7–8). Edmund, though, rejects any kind of determinism as disingenuous:

This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeits of our own behavior, we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars, as if we were villains on necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion, knaves, thieves and treachers by spherical predominance; drunkards, liars and adulterers by an enforced obedience of planetary influence; and all that we are evil by a divine thrusting on. An admirable evasion of whoremaster man, to lay his goatish disposition on the charge of a star. My father compounded with my mother under the dragon’s tail and my nativity was under Ursa Major, so it follows that I am rough and lecherous. Fut! I should have been that I am had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardizing. (1.2.118–33)

Neither God, the planets, nor the dragon’s tail necessitate evil human action; the sickness of fortune is the symptom of our own diseased activities.<sup>44</sup> The divine does not thrust upon us, does not “ravish.” Though the whoremaster may blame his actions on outside influence, the whoreson will not. Edmund’s insistence on his own free agency seems to rule out the kind of apocalyptic, Christ vs. the Devil reading of history that went hand-in-glove with English

43. Quoted in Lake and Questier, 237.

44. See Augustine’s argument against astrological forecasting, that while the twins Jacob and Esau were born under the same “constellation,” “what a difference there was in the manners, deeds, labors, and fortunes of these two men.” In Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1958), 2.33.

exceptionalism.<sup>45</sup> As Edmund's would-be allies will learn, he is no one's claw but his own. No need for the Devil or for the pope's agents—Britain can breed her own villains.

While Edmund's soliloquy is primarily aimed at refuting his father, the word "foppery" seems also to direct his anti-determinist polemic against Edgar, whom Edmund earlier characterized as one of "a whole tribe of fops / Got 'tween a sleep and wake" (1.2.13–14). If Edmund is fair to identify Edgar with Gloucester's fatalism, the truth of it must be subtle. Edgar laughs at Edmund's deceptive adoption of his father's astrological language: "Do you busy yourself with that? [...] How long have you been a sectary astronomical?" (1.2.142, 150). But when Edmund completes the coup and receives Gloucester's blessing—"[...] of my land, / Loyal and natural boy, I'll work the means / To make thee capable" (2.1.83–5)—the exiled Edgar does explore the psychology of the despairing reprobate (one who, having been passed over by God, is handed over to the Devil).

In an inverse of the Genesis story, the birthright plot's victim flees from the vengeance of the perpetrator.<sup>46</sup> Now Edgar steps into a Jacob-like role and adopts a disguise, concealing his body, voice, and mind in the person of Poor Tom, the Bedlam beggar. Edgar sinks into this role so thoroughly that it all but takes over: "Poor Turlygod, poor Tom, / That's something yet. Edgar I nothing am" (2.2.191–92). The old Edgar has been put off, at least for a time, and the new Tom put on. By doing this, Edgar invites the audience to contemplate Poor Tom's mad words as *his* (he who was Edgar's) own words. Thus, the rather tiresome litany in 3.4 of Samuel Harsnett's demons becomes more than mere seeming: a chance for Edgar, like Hamlet, to delve into covert metaphysical speculations that leave little room for freedom or for hope.<sup>47</sup>

45. John Foxe's ubiquitous *Actes and Monuments* is the key example of this. For a discussion of Foxe, see Collinson, ch. 1. For a more thorough discussion, see Anthony Milton, *Catholic and Reformed: The Roman and Protestant Churches in English Protestant Thought, 1600–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), ch. 2.

46. Jacob, of course, flees from his dupe Esau (Genesis 27:42–45).

47. Though Lear is a somewhat unreliable witness here, his repeated insistence that Tom is a learned "philosopher" supports this view (3.4.150, 169, 175). For a debate over the nature of Shakespeare's engagement with Harsnett's *A declaration of egregious popish impostures* (1603), see Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley:



When Lear confronts Edgar on the heath, he believes in only one possible cause for Tom's state: "Nothing could have subdued nature / To such a lowness but his unkind daughters" (3.4.69–70). Tom, who of course has no daughters, offers an alternate explanation. He begins with an abbreviated statement of the Old Testament law: "Take heed o'the foul fiend; obey thy parents, keep thy word justly, swear not, commit not with man's sworn spouse, set not thy sweet-heart on proud array. Tom's a-cold" (3.4.78–80). Kenneth Graham writes of these lines:

Coming from a man bent on self-preservation, such a position of moral legal wisdom fails to convince: it is too abstract, too far from the ethical activity, the performance, that must support it. It is, in fact, the type of thing that skeptical critics of the play point to when they talk about its empty commonplaces.<sup>48</sup>

What Graham does not consider is the empty feeling that New Testament authors *intended* should be the result of reading the law. St. Paul writes:

What shal we say then? Is the Law sinne? God forbid. Nay, I knew not sinne, but by the Law: for I had not knowen lust, except the Law had said, Thou shalt not lust. But sinne toke an occasion by the commandement, and wrought in me all maner of concupiscence: for without the Law sinne is dead. For I once was aliuie, without the Law: but when the commandement came, sinne reuiuied, But I dyed: and the same commandement which was ordained unto life, was founde to be vnto me vnto death. For sinne toke occasion by the commandement, and disceiued me, and thereby slew me. (Rom. 7:7–11)<sup>49</sup>

---

University of California Press, 1988), 94–128, and Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 57–60.

48. Kenneth Graham, "'Without the form of justice': Plainness and the Performance of Love in *King Lear*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42 (1991): 438–61, 452, doi.org/10.2307/2870463.

49. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are from *The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1590 Version*, ed. Lloyd Eason Berry and William Whittingham (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969).

In the 1604 Prayerbook Communion service, the reading of the Ten Commandments is intended to result in mortification: “Lord have mercy” is the first part of the congregation’s response to each commandment. The sinner, led to self-assessment by hearing the law, should be disturbed by his examination, and be stricken with the realization that he entirely lacks the power and goodness necessary for righteousness. Tom should be a-cold. So when Lear asks “What hast thou been?” (3.4.82), Tom replies with a description of himself that sounds more like the servant Oswald than what we know of Edgar:<sup>50</sup>

A serving man, proud in heart and mind, that curled my hair, wore gloves in my cap, served the lust of my mistress’ heart and did the act of darkness with her; swore as many oaths as I spake words and broke them in the sweet face of heaven. One that slept in the contriving of lust and waked to do it. Wine loved I deeply, dice dearly; and, in woman, out-paramoured the Turk: false of heart, light of ear, bloody of hand; hog in sloth, fox in stealth, wolf in greediness, dog in madness, lion in prey. (3.4.83–92)

According to Tom, Edgar has been the epitome of the desperate sinner, the type of person (fornicator, drunkard, swindler, thief) whom St. Paul says will not “*inherit* [emphasis added] the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 6:10). But this realization is not simply horrifying; it is also essentially liturgical. The Prayerbook response in full is “Lord have mercy, and incline our hearts to keep thy law.”<sup>51</sup> To realize one’s sin is to understand one’s need for divine aid, leading to repentance and to acceptance of the grace offered by God in the scriptures

50. See the apparently virtuous Malcolm’s astonishing and ambiguous description of himself to Macduff in *Macbeth*: “[...] but there’s no bottom, none, / In my voluptuousness. Your wives, your daughters, / Your matrons, and your maids could not fill up / The cestern of my lust, and my desire / All continent impediments would o’erbear / That did oppose my will. Better Macbeth / Than such an one to reign” (4.3.60–66).

51. See Calvin: “[B]ut when once the thought that God will one day ascend his tribunal to take an account of all words and actions has taken possession of his mind, it will not allow him to rest, or have one moment’s peace, but will perpetually urge him to adopt a different plan of life, that he may be able to stand securely at that judgment seat.” That other life is the life of grace: “In one word, then, by repentance I understand regeneration, the only aim of which is to form in us anew the image of God” (*Institutes*, 3.3.7, 9).

and sacraments.<sup>52</sup> This, however, is not the move Tom makes. Instead, he now does resort to “commonplaces”: “Let not the creaking of shoes, nor the rustling of silks, betray thy poor heart to woman. Keep thy foot out of brothels, thy hand out of plackets, thy pen from lenders’ books, and defy the foul fiend. Still through the hawthorn blows the cold wind, says suum, mun, nonny, Dauphin my boy, my boy, *cezzez!* Let him trot by” (3.4.92–98). How is the vicious to begin the journey to salvation? How should the disinherited gain the spiritual inheritance? Even in classical ethics without a doctrine of grace, a negative approach—simply avoiding dangerous haunts—will fail. One must begin to act in a “godly” manner in order to slowly purge the impulse to sin.<sup>53</sup> At this point, Tom (at least for the purposes of Edgar’s speculation) despairs, concluding the soliloquy with frantic negations.<sup>54</sup>

Tom, then, has drawn together material disinheritance with spiritual abandonment, as Calvin did in his *Commentary* respecting Esau.<sup>55</sup> Edgar would be in an odd situation in Calvin’s salvation economy: neither one of the elect who will always remember Christ’s grace in times of doubt, no matter how great the trial, nor one of those apparent heirs who is later revealed as reprobate, a punishment for “ingratitude” and deliberate rejection of the divine gifts.<sup>56</sup> He

52. The mode of seeking this grace, and the comparative emphasis laid on scripture or sacrament, of course varied depending on tradition. For a discussion of the competing cultures of penance and repentance in Shakespeare’s England, see Sarah Beckwith, *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), ch. 2, doi.org/10.7591/cornell/9780801449789.001.0001.

53. But see below for a discussion of the intrusion of grace into Edgar’s pagan world.

54. Foakes notes that the “suum, mun, nonny” line is “unexplained, and presumably deliberate ‘mad’ nonsense” (footnote to 3.4.97–98). While there is no real evidence for the following attempt at an explanation, it is interesting that the pairing of the words *munus* and *suum* appears a number of times in William Robertson’s *Phraseologia Generalis*—printed in Cambridge in 1681 (Early English Books Online, about.proquest.com/products-services/databases/eebo.html)—typically with the idea of following or executing one’s duty or calling. I am tempted to make “nonny” *nonne* (though it is certainly a common enough nonsense word in Shakespeare) and read “*suum munus nonne?*” We have, then, a statement of the law, followed by a description of reprobate behaviour, followed by a moralistic injunction to avoid what the reprobate has done, followed by a concession that a cold wind (original sin or concupiscence?) blows away the injunction and leaves only the mocking question, “Is this not your duty, prince (Dauphin; Edgar of course stands to inherit both Gloucestershire and perhaps the kingdom)?,” followed by the despairing call to inaction: “Cease, and let it trot by.”

55. See note 11. See also Calvin’s *Commentary on Genesis*, 2.25, 27.

56. See Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.24.8.

seems, rather, to fall into a category Calvin dismissed as impossible, but of which later Calvinism provides many examples: the faithful and innocent people who feel God's love withdrawn and so despair, however much they might desire grace, caught somewhere between elect Jacob and reprobate Esau.<sup>57</sup>

The Gloucester subplot moves forward with its inversions of the Genesis story. Edmund, after receiving Gloucester's blessing, betrays him and accepts instead the perverse adoption of Cornwall, who promises that Edmund will "find a dear father in my love" (3.5.24). Gloucester, in his blinding by Cornwall and Regan, becomes more firmly identified with blind Isaac. All he now desires, Gloucester says, is to see Edgar "in my touch," to feel and to bless his son as Isaac ran his hands over Jacob (4.1.25). Although Edgar hears this wish, he refuses to abandon Tom and become again Gloucester's son. Edgar's only explanation for this reticence is his lament that he "must play fool to sorrow," a sorrow expressed by Gloucester in words ("As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, / They kill us for their sport") so akin to Tom's recent musings as to demand Edgar's acknowledgement (4.1.40). Edgar's later explanation, "Why I do trifle thus with his despair / Is done to cure it," applies directly to the suicide stunt, not to the whole performance, and cannot excuse him (4.6.19). Most troubling, though, is that Gloucester decides on suicide only after Edgar fails to present himself. Poor Tom, Gloucester demands, must lead him to Dover cliff.

Justifying Edgar's actions here is a commonplace, even for critics with otherwise diametrically opposed readings. Stephen Greenblatt, who reads the world of *Lear* as disenchanting and graceless, writes that "Edgar adopts the role of Poor Tom not out of a corrupt will to deceive but out of a commendable desire to survive." Though "why he does not simply reveal himself to Gloucester at this point is unclear," "the clever inventions [of demons] enable a decent and unjustly persecuted man to live."<sup>58</sup> Piero Boitani, who calls the play an "eminently poetic Gospel," writes that, in the cliff scene, "the father's radical pessimism

57. See, for instance, the stories of Mrs. Mary Honeywood and Sarah Wright in Leif Dixon, *Practical Predestinarians in England, c. 1590–1640* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 28–32. The Puritans became more comfortable viewing this as a temporary condition in need of therapeutic care: "Sarah Wright eventually overcame her melancholy and, having fully recovered, founded a clinic to help young women who were as despairing as she had once been" (Dixon, 31).

58. Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 117–18, 121.

is answered, in his son, by a flash of firmness and hope.”<sup>59</sup> But Edgar’s later self-denouncement, “never – O fault! – revealed myself unto him” (5.3.191), indicates that he is less confident in the righteousness of his behaviour, the strangeness of which reaches its climax in 4.6. In his attempt to restore order to his life, Tom the Bedlam beggar (commonly known in Elizabethan England as an “Abraham man”) reenacts the scene of Isaac’s own dramatic initiation as the patriarchal heir, his near escape from becoming a burnt offering recounted in Genesis 22.<sup>60</sup> The suspense, the anxious queries of the victim, the deceptive answers, and, above all the sense of unreality, of purposelessness, of cruelty that pervade the biblical scene all find their echoes here as Edgar leads Gloucester up the supposed cliff. A gloss on verse 9 in the Geneva text—“When they came to the place which God had shewed him, Abraham buylded an altar there, & couched the wood, & [bound] Izhak his sonne & laied him on the altar vpon the wood”—attempts to rationalize Isaac’s passivity under the sacrificial knife: “For it is like that his father had declared to him Gods comandement whereunto he shewed himself obedient.” The passage calls for explanation, but resists such comfortable efforts at taming the story (why then did Isaac ask where they would find a lamb?). Gloucester’s interpretation of the action echoes his earlier complaint; the divine forces in the world of *Lear* are the cruel gods of the pagan myths:

O you mighty gods,  
 This world I do renounce and in your sights  
 Shake patiently my great affliction off.  
 If I could bear it longer and not fall  
 To quarrel with your great opposeless wills,  
 My snuff and loathed part of nature should  
 Burn itself out. If Edgar live, O, bless him! (4.6.34–41)

59. Piero Boitani, *The Gospel according to Shakespeare*, trans. Vittorio Montemaggi and Rachel Jacoff (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 32, 38. See also William Elton, *King Lear and the Gods* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1966), 87: “Edgar functions as benevolent hoaxer to his father, while Edmund operates as malign paternal deceiver.”

60. See William C. Carroll, “‘The base shall top th’legitimate’: The Bedlam Beggar and the Role of Edgar in *King Lear*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 38 (1987): 426–41, 431–32, doi.org/10.2307/2870423.

Edgar has regained the paternal blessing, though Edmund retains the title. The spiritual and material aspects of the birthright have been separated. Gloucester jumps.

But Abraham's knife does not fall; Gloucester faints into grass. God provides at the last moment a ram in Isaac's place; "Thy life's a miracle," Edgar tells the reviving Gloucester, "Think that the clearest gods, who make them honours of men's impossibilities, have preserved thee" (4.6.55, 73–74). Andrewes may have been referencing Isaac's rescue, in a tone of "firmness and hope" similar to Boitani's, in the denouement of his Fifth of November sermon:

This then we all wish, that are now in the House of the Lord; and we that are of the House of the Lord do now and ever, in the Temple and out of it, morning and evening, night and day, wish and pray both, that He would continue forth His goodnesse, and blesse with length of dayes, with strength of health, with increase of all honour, and happinesse, with terror in the eyes of his enemies, with grace in the eyes of his Subjects, with whatsoever David, or Salomon or any King, that ever was happie, was blessed with; Him, that in the Name of the Lord is come to us, and hath now these foure yeares stayed with us, that he may be blessed, in that Name, wherein he is come, and by the Lord, in whose Name he is come, many and many yeares yet to come. And, when we have put this incense in our phialls, *and bound this sacrifice with cords, to the altar fast*, we blesse you and dismisse you, to eat your bread with joy, and to drinke your wine with a cheerfull heart: for, God accepteth your worke; your joy shall please Him: this Hosanna shall sanctifie all the joy, shall follow it.<sup>61</sup>

"This sacrifice" can refer at once to the congregation's prayers for James, to the king's miraculous last minute salvation by the God of David and Solomon, and to the eucharistic bread that signifies Christ's death as the sacrificial lamb on behalf of his people. Analogously, Shakespeare's Gloucester reluctantly accepts Edgar's declaration of a miracle, first crying "'Twas yet some comfort / When misery could beguile the tyrant's rage / And frustrate his proud will" before conceding "Henceforth I'll bear / Affliction till it do cry out itself / 'Enough, enough' and die" (4.6.61–63, 75–77). But Gloucester has been restored to

61. Andrewes, *V. of November*, 160–61. Emphasis added.

stoicism, not to happiness (he still has not recognized Edgar), and Edgar's final explanation only adds a final level of ambiguity: it was not an "Abraham man" who led Gloucester, but "some fiend," with horns and a thousand noses (4.6.70–73). So what was the purpose of this test? Are the gods wanton, capriciously destroying helpless victims, in the manner (according to his critics at least) of Calvin's reprobating deity?<sup>62</sup> Or has Edgar himself become a claw of the devil?

At this point in the Genesis account, God speaks a second time, promising manifold covenant blessings for Isaac and his heirs because of Abraham's implicit obedience. The voice that breaks into Edgar and Gloucester's scene is Lear's: "No, they cannot touch me for coining. I am the King himself." To which Edgar responds: "O thou side-piercing sight!" (4.6.83–86). Guilfoyle writes of the king that:

In his rage and madness he acts both the part of the disillusioned God and, at times, of the Creation that God is prepared to abandon. As the play progresses, the Old Testament analogies give way to New Testament imagery; the evocation of God in the first person is overlaid with that of God in the second person, presented in scenic form and with verbal reference.<sup>63</sup>

Edgar's clear Christological reference to the king—Lear is "side-piercing" (cf. John 19:34)—is a prime example. But as Lear admits a few lines later, the comparisons with Christ immediately break down: "When the rain came to wet me once and the wind to make me chatter; when the thunder would not peace at my bidding, there I found 'em, there I smelt 'em out" (4.6.100–03). Unlike Christ, Lear cannot calm the storm; all he can do is acknowledge it in words that recall Andrewes's "dissolution and desolation": "Blow, wind, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow! / [...] you sulphurous and thought-executing fires, / [...] Singe my white head; and thou all-shaking thunder, / Smite flat the

62. See, for example, Michael Keefer's extraordinarily brief summation of Calvinist theology in "Accommodation and Synecdoche: Calvin's God in *King Lear*," *Shakespeare Studies* 20 (1988): 147–68, 147: "I wish to show that Calvin's God—who was for most purposes also the God of the Elizabethan Anglican Church, and whose similarity to Blake's tyrannical Urizen need hardly be demonstrated—is a pervasive presence in this play."

63. Guilfoyle, 55–56.

thick rotundity o' the world" (3.2.1–7).<sup>64</sup> In place of comfort and covenant, the chaos and the ambiguity remain.

Edmund, meanwhile, has contracted himself to both Regan and Goneril. The untenable marriage to two sisters links him to Jacob, whose polygamy with his cousins, the sisters Rachel and Leah, is a constant source of strife. Jacob, true to form, manages to acquire most of his father-in-law's property, and Rachel goes so far as to steal even her father's household idols.<sup>65</sup> The echoes of this in Edmund, set to usurp Lear's kingdom while the old king vainly calls on his gods for support, seem clear. The exaggerated odiousness of Lear's older daughters, however, also links Edmund to Esau, whose two heathen wives tormented his mother.<sup>66</sup> Edmund continues to inhabit this doubleness, moving between the characters of "bastard" and "son," until the play's end, when the brothers will meet face to face as in Genesis 33. After defeating Cordelia and ordering that both she and Lear be covertly hung, Edmund enacts his most reprobate moment. Challenged by Albany for treason, he throws down his gauntlet:

What in the world he is  
That names me traitor, villain-like he lies.  
Call by the trumpet: he that dares approach,  
On him, on you – who not? – I will maintain  
My truth and honour firmly. (5.3.98–102)

Edmund here becomes the destructive hypocrite who deceives even himself in his belief that he can blindfold justice. This brazenness corresponds to St. Paul's picture of damnation: "For the wrath of God is reueiled from heauen against all vngodlines, and vnrighteousnes of men, which withhold the trueth in vnrighteousness. [...] For as thei regarded not to knowe God, euen so God deliuered them vp vnto a reprobate minde."<sup>67</sup> At this moment, the description fits. Edgar, who earlier took on himself the role of minister to Gloucester, now steps forward as the agent of justice, the revelation of this divine wrath.

64. See Shapiro, 151.

65. See Genesis 31:1–19.

66. Genesis 27:46: "Then Rebekah said to Isaac, 'I'm disgusted with living because of these Hittite women. If Jacob takes a wife from among the women of this land, from Hittite women like these, my life will not be worth living.'"

67. Romans 1:18, 28.



And as before, his answer to Edmund's question "What are you?" is far from straightforward:

O know my name is lost,  
 By treason's tooth bare-gnawn and canker-bit;  
 Yet am I noble as the adversary  
 I come to cope withal. (5.3.117, 119–22)

Edgar's claim to equal nobility with Edmund is strange. Though they are both an earl's sons, they are not equals in birth or social standing. Further, early modern writing on nobility stressed that true nobility was earned; it was a matter of character more than of title.<sup>68</sup> For Edgar to equate himself with Edmund is to lower himself, not to raise Edmund up.

Central to the Calvinist reading of Jacob and Esau is the fact that, throughout all his manipulations of the situation, Jacob seeks to follow God's will and to "more fully establish the certainty of his own election." Esau, meanwhile, even when he seems to be in the right (welcoming Jacob home with open arms, for instance), must in fact be secretly motivated by "profane" desires.<sup>69</sup> The ending should feel as simple as "I love Jacob and hate Esau."<sup>70</sup> But

68. See, for instance, the Sorbonne theologian Josse Clichtove, *On True Nobility*, in *Cambridge Translations of Renaissance Philosophical Texts, Volume 2: Political Philosophy*, ed. Jill Krayer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 247–57.

69. See Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 2.33.

70. See Peter Lake's discussion of the villains' refusal to repent in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, in Lake and Questier, 385–87, 472. "The effects of a hardened heart and a reprobate soul could scarcely be more starkly drawn. But if Claudius and Macbeth are types for the reprobate, evil twins, as it were, of the elect, both are provided with a virtuous, 'elect' alter ego [King Hamlet and Banquo]" (385). Lake highlights Claudius's application of Cain's "primal eldest curse" to himself: "since as two brothers, the one good, the other evil, the one a murderer, the other his victim, the one saved, the other damned, the biblical siblings [Cain and Abel] were very often used as types or figures for the elect and the reprobate" (386). *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, much more clearly than *Lear*, end with the "triumph of Christian kingship over the forces of demonic disorder" in the figures of Malcolm and Fortinbras (387). But Lake argues that even here, in Prince Hamlet's ambiguous relationship to "Providence" and in Macbeth's glamorous, Miltonic Satan-esque role as "tragic hero," "tragedies like *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* disrupted and thus perhaps called into question the smooth exemplary narratives of popular and indeed elite providentialism" (388, 472). See Martin Bucer's *De Regno Christi* (dedicated to Edward VI), where he recommends the story of Jacob as a fitting plot for a comedy illustrating "the goodness of God" and the "faithful service" of the patriarch. He cautions, though, that when "the crimes of reprobate men are related, yet a certain terror of divine

the brothers' end is complicated. After Edgar mortally wounds Edmund, and Albany holds up the record of Edmund's treachery ("read thine own evil"), Edmund at first continues his suppression of the truth: "Ask me not what I know" (5.3.153, 158). In the space of one line, however, Edmund performs an about-face. There is little in that line—"Go after her; she's desperate, govern her" (5.3.159)—to explain this. The conversion is internal but immediately communicated:

What you have charged me with, that have I done,  
 And more, much more; the time will bring it out.  
 'Tis past and so am I. [*To Edgar*] But what art thou  
 That has this fortune on me? If thou'rt noble,  
 I do forgive thee. (5.3.161–64)

This is not yet a complete confession, but it is a statement of self-knowledge, like the liturgical recital of the broken law as the first step of repentance. Edgar reveals his own identity with the introduction "Let's exchange charity" (5.3.165). This "charity" is conveyed thus:

The gods are just and of our pleasant vices  
 Make instruments to plague us:  
 The dark and vicious place where thee he [*Gloucester*] got  
 Cost him his eyes. (5.3.168–71)

Like the elder brother of the Prodigal Son, Edgar, in his moment of vindication, seems incapable of compassion to his (we soon learn) dead father or his fallen brother.<sup>71</sup> Divine vengeance may be justified, but where is the love? Edmund, however, accepts this justice humbly: "Thou'st spoken right, 'tis true; / The wheel is come full circle, I am here" (5.3.172–73). Edmund acknowledges that Fortune has brought him the surfeit of his own behaviour.

---

judgment and horror of sin should appear in these things, and a shameless daring an exultant delight in crimes should not be expressed. It is better here to take something away from poetic fitness rather than from the concern for edifying the piety of the spectators, which demands that in every representation of sin there be felt the condemnation of one's conscience and the horrible fear of God's judgment." In Wilhelm Pauck, ed. *Melanchthon and Bucer* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1969), 350–51.

71. See Luke 15:11–32.

Edgar's recounting of Gloucester's "pilgrimage" to Dover and his death upon finally recognizing his son, as his heart "burst smilingly" between the extremes of "joy and grief," moves Edmund further toward full confession, while Edgar's comfortable assumption that the smile rather than the grief broke the heart moves him in the opposite direction (5.3.195–200). The sudden offstage deaths of Regan and Goneril complete these movements. Edgar's ally Albany states one position: "This judgement of the heavens that makes us tremble / Touches us not with pity" (5.3.230–31). Edmund offers another: "Yet Edmund was beloved: / The one the other poisoned for my sake, / And after slew herself" (5.3.240–42). Though twisted in one sense, Edmund's "beloved" has a haunting reverberation that silences Albany's "not with pity." A gasping confession follows:

I pant for life. Some good I mean to do,  
 Despite of mine own nature. Quickly send –  
 Be brief in it – to the castle, for my writ  
 Is on the life of Lear and on Cordelia;  
 Nay, send in time. (5.3.241–45)

Edmund's phrase "Despite of mine own nature" makes little sense within a Calvinistic theory of reprobation, as the reprobate cannot even desire to transcend his corrupted nature. Rather, the sudden conversion from murder to repentance must be a sign of grace.

What would it mean, though, for a play performed to early modern Christians (of either confessional allegiance) to invoke grace in a pagan world? Edgar's use of the word "charity" imports into ancient Britain one of the most potent common nouns of Christian discourse. St. Paul writes: "Nunc autem manent fides, spes, caritas, tria haec: major autem horum est caritas" (1 Corinthians 13:13), and St. John writes: "Qui non diligit, non novit Deum: quoniam Deus caritas est" (1 John 4:8).<sup>72</sup> Faith, hope, and above all charity were seen as direct gifts (grace) of the Triune God. With this vocabulary of Christian grace, Shakespeare again gestures toward typology: like Genesis, Lear's Britain

72. Quoted from *Biblia Sacra: Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, ed. Roger Gryson (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007), with modern punctuation added. Geneva Bible: "And now abideth faith, hope & loue, euen these thre: but the chiefest of these is loue" (1 Corinthians 13:12); "He that loueth not, knoweth not God: for God is loue" (1 John 4:8).

foreshadows seventeenth-century England.<sup>73</sup> The most a pagan could hope for, following St. Augustine, was fool's gold, a shiny looking *libido dominandi* (lust for power, whether over a nation, another person, or an inanimate object).<sup>74</sup> This is, on the one hand, all that Edmund receives; his labelling of Goneril and Regan's desperate desire as "love" cannot redeem it for the audience as anything but lust. Sarah Beckwith writes of Lear's self-deceit regarding these two daughters that "[Lear] cannot discern love from its imitation, and this, Shakespeare shows us, is tragic."<sup>75</sup> Lear rejects real love in favour of a lie. Edmund, however, is never offered real love, and his only possible comfort is to make a (highly) charitable reading of *libido*, infusing the sisters' murder/suicide "for my sake" with something like the weight of the dominical word: "Greater loue then this hathe no man, when any man bestoweth his life for his friends" (John 15:13). Lear's and Edmund's are not equivalent sins. In juxtaposition to Lear in act 1, Edmund's desperate "beloved" is followed by an acknowledgement that Cordelia—she who "redeems nature"—is innocent and righteous. "Nay, send in time," Edmund begs, and as "token of reprieve" sends his sword (5.3.245–50).

The iconography of this token depends largely on the properties used by the players (a basket handguard lacks the connotations of a cross-shaped hilt), but Shakespeare invokes the use of a sword as a sacred object elsewhere in his corpus.<sup>76</sup> It is interesting, then, to think about the conversion here of an instrument of violence into a symbol of reprieve (the very transformation inherent to the cross or crucifix, the Roman equivalent of a gallows). This impression is strengthened by the assumptions of early modern London

73. The Fool's prophecy beginning "when priests are more in word than matter" does so explicitly (3.2.80–97). See John Hughes, who argues that Christian forgiveness, with its implications of rebirth and resurrection, is foreshadowed in *Lear* in the manner of Old Testament typology, in Hughes, "The Politics of Forgiveness: A Theological Exploration of *King Lear*," *Modern Theology* 17 (2001): 261–87, 262, doi.org/10.1111/1468-0025.00160.

74. Augustine, *The City of God*, preface to book 1 (PL 41). Calvin viewed love as a fruit of regeneration received from the Holy Spirit (*Institutes*, 3.6.1–2).

75. Beckwith, 90.

76. See *Hamlet*, 1.5.150, and *The Winter's Tale*, 3.2.122. In medieval romance, the nobleman's sword may double as an icon of the crucifix, as in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* (Caxton, bk. 10, ch. 18). It is also interesting to note that Edmund Campion performatively bowed to the Cheapside cross as he was led to the gallows, and that several of the Jesuits condemned as traitors managed to prominently display crosses in their dress prior to execution. See Lake and Questier, 243.

audiences regarding the final public confession of a condemned traitor. Discussing the 1586 “Babington Plot” against Elizabeth’s life, and the ensuing trials, hangings, and eviscerations, Peter Lake and Michael Questier write that the “last dying speech and good death on the gallows could easily be associated by both catholics and protestants with the tropes and conventions of evangelical and confessional conversion.”<sup>77</sup> The dying man’s freedom to address the crowd, moreover, could cut both ways. The condemned could express remorse for attempted regicide, while at the same time inviting the audience to see that attempt as catalyzed by the regime’s intolerance for traditional (Catholic) practices. The “charismatic aura” of these words, spoken with nothing to gain and thus a presumption of absolute sincerity, turned the meaning of this gallows theatre into a critical battleground, as both state-sponsored clergy and recusant hagiographers rushed to gloss the events for a persuadable public.<sup>78</sup> In this light, Edmund’s conversion could both be genuine and unsettling for the party of the victorious Edgar, despite coming too late to undo his crime.

Albany’s gloss on Edmund’s subsequent death—“That’s but a trifle here” (5.3.294)—seems to ratify Lear’s accusation: “O, you are men of stones!” (5.3.255). Albany’s ensuing claim that “All friends shall taste / The wages of their virtue and all foes / The cup of their deservings,” as Cordelia lies dead centre stage, extends the self-righteous emptiness of this vision of justice. Perhaps Edgar realizes this, but he is ambiguous to the last. The only clear feature of his (and the play’s) closing lines, after Albany has advanced Edgar to his earldom and perhaps the throne, is suffering:

The weight of this sad time we must obey,  
 Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say,  
 The oldest hath borne most, we that are young  
 Shall never see so much, nor live so long. (5.3.321–25)

Edgar’s inheritance, finally won, is a stage littered with dead bodies.

Bringing his Gunpowder Plot sermon to a close, Andrewes releases his congregation from the horror of “baskets of heads” and “rent bodies,” verbally putting all the pieces back together:

77. Lake and Questier, 242.

78. Lake and Questier, 243–45, quoted at 243. Cf. Harsnett: “What a wonderfull Saint-maker is *Tyburne* by this, that in a quarter of an houre shall miscreate a Saint ...” (84).

He, that satt in heaven all this while, and from thence looked down and saw all this doing of the Devill and his limmes, in that mercie of His, which is over all his workes; to save the effusion of so much bloud, to preserve the soules of so many innocents, to keepe this Land from so foule a confusion, to shew still some token, some sensible token upon us for good, that they which hate us may see it, and be ashamed; but especially, that that, was so lately united, might not so soon be dissolved; He took the matter into his own hand.<sup>79</sup>

Stretching forth his hand from his sovereign throne, God has ensured that James's kingdoms remain united, to the shame and confusion of England's enemies. Playgoers who had seen *King Leir*, a staple of the Queen's Men in Elizabeth's time, would have expected just such a resolution to Shakespeare's adaptation: Lear returned to power, and Cordelia confirmed as his sole heir;<sup>80</sup> "Having been turned upside down, the world could be righted again."<sup>81</sup> Instead, Lear's royal line ends, shocking the audience. A few lines later, the play ends, with the "election," as Hamlet would have said, falling on young Edgar as the last man standing—an election that would have inspired little assurance in the Whitehall audience.

79. Andrewes, *V. of November*, 154.

80. Shapiro, 72–73.

81. Lake, on the typical resolution of popular providentialist literature, in Lake and Questier, 471.