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KINGLY INFIRMITY AND THE REMEDY: THE IMPORTANCE OF COUNSEL IN
THWARTING DIVINELY ORDAINED INCOMPETENCE

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THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

BY

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ABSTRACT

KINGLY INFIRMITY AND THE REMEDY: THE IMPORTANCE OF COUNSEL IN
THWARTING DIVINELY ORDAINED INCOMPETENCE

BY: TALIN MIKHAELPOUR

This thesis examines the influence of the divine right theory in George Peele's *The Love of King David and Fair Bethsabe*, and the way that ineffectual monarchs are protected under this theory. The early modern period was heavily influenced by the divine right theory, as well as the Protestant theology that undergirded much of everyday life. I look at Peele's play through the lens of Protestant theology, and show that Peele does adhere to the traditional orthodoxy by condemning those who disobey and rebel against their monarch. However, as much as Peele's work is a product of his time, his play raises the issue of what to do with a weak monarch, who must nonetheless rule due to divine right theory. He puts forth an answer to this theoretical issue by way of the counselor, someone who is able to correct and criticize a weak monarch, without being considered damned for their disobedience or rebellion. I put forth that the disobedience and rebellion that is apparent in Peele's counselor, although subverting from traditional orthodoxy, are necessary in the success of David's kingdom.

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Introduction

The Love of King David and Fair Bethsabe is a drama written by George Peele and published in 1599. It is a biblical play based on 2 Samuel, and, while biblical stories were common subject matter during the English Renaissance, Peele's play remains one of the few extant biblical stories from that time. The play was published posthumously, and not much is known about its performances; what is known, however, is the play's popularity, as the title page of the first quarto says: "As it hath been diuers times plaied on the stage."¹ The indication that there were multiple productions of Peele's play speaks to its popularity with the general public. In listing the stage properties for the Worcester's Men, Philip Henslowe's *Diary* mentions that in 1602 fourteen pence was paid to workmen for "poleyes & worckmanshipp for to hang absolome."² David was a popular religious and political figure in the early modern period, so that his story would have been well known; however, where most early modern treatments of David focus on David's struggle against Saul, or David's seduction of Bathsheba, Peele turns to Absalom's rebellion and David's response."³

¹ Roston, *Biblical Drama in England*, 100.

² "Peele's David and Bethsabe: Reconsidering Biblical Drama of the Long 1590s" by Annaliese Connolly. See page 217 of Philip Henslowe's *Diary*.

³ For example, Andrew Marvell's, "A Poem Upon the Death of O.C.," Michael Drayton's "David and Goliath," and Abraham Cowley's *Davidais*, focused on David's patience, fight, and victory over Saul, often paralleling him with Oliver Cromwell. Sir John Harrington's poem "Of King David. Written to the Queene" skims over David's altercation with Saul, and directly addresses David's "taking" of Bathsheba. See Robert Kilgore.

The play begins with David's great sin against Bathsheba, when he catches her bathing on her rooftop, and has her brought to his palace, where he rapes her. His transgression has consequences; they lose their newborn son as punishment and David becomes overwhelmed in hysterical grief when confronted by the prophet Nathan, causing him to throw himself off of his throne in penitence. Paralleling David's sin, his son Amnon rapes his half-sister Tamar, and, unlike David who marries Bathsheba, Amnon casts Tamar out. When David neglects to punish Amnon, his other son Absalom swears revenge and kills his brother. Having failed to punish Amnon for the rape, David, who despite having repented and been assured of God's forgiveness, is consumed with guilt over his sin, and once again shirks his obligations as a king, by excusing Absalom's revenge. His infirmity in carrying out justice leads to rebellion on the part of Absalom, and war breaks out in Israel between father and son. David's counselor Joab, who is the general of David's army, disobeys David's orders and kills Absalom. When David hears of Absalom's death, rather than rejoice in the death of a rebel, he throws himself on the floor in grief and wishes it had been him who had died. Seeing David mourn the death of a rebel causes Joab to threaten to leave with his army unless David picks himself up off the floor, and acts like the King he is meant to be. Sensing this brewing crisis, Bathsheba reminds David that he has an heir, Solomon, who needs to be taught how to rule Israel. Seeing that not all hope is lost, David, ceasing to mourn, promises his kingdom to Solomon, and dedicates himself to teaching Solomon how to become a wise king.

David's sins, failure to deal with his son's transgressions, and emotional collapse raise the question of what can be done to correct a weak monarch, who, as the play makes clear, rules by divine right - and is indeed God's anointed. David loses control of his kingdom by failing to

execute justice, and becomes an ineffectual king. Under the divine right theory, monarchs are protected as earthly extensions of God, and therefore, the theory also mandates a set of restrictive boundaries on what citizens can do if a monarch is ineffectual.

Due to divine right theory, religion became intimately tied with government and politics, as the monarch became the defender of faith and the enacter of divine justice. According to John Neville Figgis in his book *The Divine Right of Kings*, “The theory of the Divine Right of Kings... involves the following propositions: (1) Monarchy is a divinely ordained institution; (2) Hereditary rights is indefeasible... (3) Kings are accountable to God alone... (4) Non-resistance and passive obedience are enjoined by God.”⁴ The first proposition establishes the tie between monarchy and divinity, the second enables hereditary lines to continue unquestioned, regardless as to whether or not the next in succession is competent. The third and fourth propositions have the greatest bearing on this thesis. The third proposition gives the monarch the most power; by making them accountable to God alone, monarchs are removed from earthly authority, and therefore cannot be punished by any tangible court. The fourth proposition takes power away from the citizen by imposing divine sanction on obedience. Everyday citizens are subject to the monarch, to laws, to religious doctrine, whereas the monarch is accountable to God alone, and, therefore, no earthly court can punish them. The last proposition is the most telling, although space is left for passive disobedience, citizens are encouraged to be completely obedient to their monarchs, unless they are willing to accept the punishment for their refusal. Figgis later goes on to assert “the theory of Divine Right is a religious as well as a political dogma.”⁵ When

⁴ See pages 5-6

⁵ See page 208.

obedience is a divine commandment, and the monarch virtually has absolute power, there is nothing to check that power. For common people, “we have ‘no excuse’ for our frailty; the king always has an excuse,” and that excuse comes from a source that cannot be refuted.⁶ Although the divine right theory has been around since the Middle Ages, it was after Henry VIII passed the Act of Supremacy in 1534, that the king became the head of the visible church, strengthening the ideology behind the divine right theory. The sermons that were given by Protestant priests included homilies that pressed the importance of being obedient to kings, as they were an extension of God, and the inherent evil of rebellion and revenge. Literature of this period often grappled with the problematic implications of the divine right of kings, which forbade disobedience and rebellion no matter how bad the king was at ruling.

By showing a weak David, the play stages the issue of how to criticize the monarch within the restrictive boundaries that divine right theology erected. Peele’s play grapples with this issue by contrasting the rebel Absalom to various counselor-figures who can correct and criticize a weak monarch. David’s recovery comes from the people around him: his wife, the prophet Nathan, and his general Joab. It is their pushing - and outright threats on the part of Joab - that help David in realizing that he has a duty to his kingdom, and that that duty supersedes his own grief. Peele posits a way to criticize and reform an ineffective monarch that does not venture into the realm of disobedience and rebellion, but works within the space of legitimate opposition that the divine right theory creates for subjects.

⁶ Robert Kilgore p.423

David's Sin and Fall

Most works of literature that use the story of David focus on the narrative arc of his confrontation and victory over King Saul. However, Peele begins his play with David's first look at Bathsheba and the consequent coercion and rape. The coercion of Bathsheba is described in a peculiar way by Peele, as he diverts from the biblical narrative and gives Bathsheba a very clear voice. In the face of David's desire she states, "Before their light had caused my lord to see/ His name disparaged, and my chastity" (I.i.117-118).⁷ While bathing on the rooftop, Bathsheba begs for darkness to cover her, lest the sun reveal her body and incite lust in someone else.

Immediately after, she is called by David's counselor Hushai to appear before David, as he had indeed seen her bathing. Bathsheba once again laments the fact that the sun has exposed her beauty to David's gaze, causing him to be inflamed with lust. She draws attention to the power of the gaze, and the dangerous exposure to sin. Bathsheba points out the precarious situation that they are now in, that before David saw her bathing, his name was admired and exalted and her chastity was safe. David's coercion of a married woman carries consequences that go beyond the ruining of Bathsheba's chastity. In this moment, David is presented with a choice to either divert from his plans, or stay the course. David's coercion of Bathsheba goes beyond being an adulterous affair, and to understand why his sin is so egregious, we turn to the Protestant theology that would have influenced Peele's work. When Martin Luther spoke on the concept of sin and its origins, his definition shifted throughout the course of his foray into religious

⁷ The version of the play that I will be using for the entirety of this thesis is the 2018 version by Mathew R. Martin.

theology. He initially understood sin as it had previously been understood, as unchecked pride.⁸ However, he later begins to define it as an intentional turning away from God, a willingness to turn a blind eye to the rightness of God, in order to fulfill your own desires. According to the Oxford Handbook, when he spoke on the tale of David, Luther states that, “Therefore, in David’s case, the real offence rests in the fact that this pious king gave reason for blasphemy against God.”⁹ It was not that David had sinned, but that David attempted to justify it, or, rather, to believe himself capable of rationalizing what he had done. It is the intentionality behind David’s actions, with full awareness of just how wrong his actions are, that make David’s sin so grievous. Even if David was unaware of the moral wrongness of his sin, Bathsheba’s blatant refusal and pleads should have been enough to get him to reconsider his actions. Bathsheba again states, “My lord the King, elect to God’s own heart, / Should not His gracious jealousy incense/ Whose thoughts are chaste. I hate incontinence” (I.i.83-85). Bathsheba’s rhetoric accomplishes two things simultaneously; she reminds David of his position as a king and his position as God’s elect, underscoring how egregious his transgression would be should he choose to go through with it. Someone of David’s position should not soil himself with lust and jealousy by submitting to lesser urges. Monarchs should be consistent and stable, acting as an example of good behavior. Those who cannot control themselves do not only do a disservice to themselves, but to what they represent, being both the head of church and state. David is an extension of the throne of Israel, therefore his sins reflect on the nation. David is also an extension of the divine, and so

⁸ *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther’s Theology*: Luther’s Teachings on Sin and Evil

⁹ 2 Sam. 12:14: But because by doing this you have shown utter contempt for[a] the Lord, the son born to you will die.

his sins reflect on God. We see this duality when the Chorus, which traditionally serves as the moral compass of plays, providing insight that ordinary characters cannot, criticize David's actions. They condemn his pride, presumptuousness, and then they ask, "If holy David so shook hands with sin,/ What shall our baser spirits glory in?" (I. Chorus I. 15-16). In this line they relay the anxieties surrounding political figures who are tied to divinity. Monarchs are meant to set a standard of living and behavior. When you are the face of not only an entire kingdom but the authority of your God, nothing you do is ever isolated. David's actions reflect on God himself and His decision in anointing David, once again adhering to Luther's view of David's sin, where the greater wrongdoing is David's attempt to justify his blasphemy against God. If David, who is so dear to the heart of God, can sin and seemingly get away with it, even if that may not be the reality, what hope do baser humans without divine connection have to live a pure life, and where is the incentive to do so? David begins to lose credibility as a ruler since "once a thing or institution loses holiness it loses political power."¹⁰

George Peele allows a much deeper insight into David's sin by giving Bathsheba a greater interiority than her counterpart in the biblical narrative. By giving Bathsheba a voice, the reader sees the effects of David's sin through the eyes of the one who was wronged, showing the depth of the consequences. She takes on the blame and considers herself to be foolish, when it was David who turned from his heavenly duty and used his influence as a powerful religious and political figure to coerce her. With the voice that Peele gives her, Bathsheba utters one of the most poignant lines in the play when she says, "Oh what is it to serve the lust of kings?/ How lion-like they rage when we resist!" (I.v.24-25). Through Bathsheba's insight we begin to see the

¹⁰ *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance* p. 125

paradox that Bathsheba has to navigate. On the one hand she sees David's folly, and she knows that David's desire is wrong, but, on the other hand, she has no choice but to obey because he is her king. As a subject to David, she could follow the route of passive disobedience and accept the punishment that comes from her refusal, yet in a moment where she is pressed by both her King, and his counselor, she submits.

The scene begins to show the underlying and insidious ideologies set up against Bathsheba. When David sends for her, and she refuses, his counselor Hushai says, "Then come and do thy duty to his Grace, / And do what seemeth favour in his sight" (I.i.90-91). Hushai himself is another obedient servant to David. Rather than counsel David against this wrongdoing, he helps in David's coercion of Bethsabe, and we see how enforced obedience towards a monarch can be dangerous. Hushai reminds Bethsabe of "her duty" as a loyal servant. He effectively corners her, having her choose between her loyalty to her king and her loyalty to her own morals. After voicing her concerns to David and imploring that he not bow down to the yoke of sin, David's poorly disguised attempts at manipulation are clear when he tells her, "As erst my heart was hurt, displeasing thee, / So come and taste thy ease with easing me" (I.i.122-123). The manipulation in this scene highlights the paradoxical choice Bethsabe must make. David tells Bathsheba that any uneasiness should be dispelled by the act of her "easing" David. David is abusing his powers as a king, because he knows that Bethsabe feels uneasy about the affair that he is proposing. The rage of kings is powerful and fearsome, and, when it comes to running a kingdom, it is an essential trait. However, there is a dark side, where that same power and fear is turned on individuals and for selfish desires rather than the good of the kingdom. Bathsheba reveals the dangerous alternatives that absolute monarchy presents: you

must obey the king's orders or be willing to be punished for your refusal, even if those orders are morally wrong.

When sin is committed, it is never an isolated incident but instead often has a snowball effect, the first sin giving rise to further ones. The killing of Uriah is a perfect example of this effect. After his rape of Bathsheba, David knows that she's gotten pregnant, and unable to trick Uriah into sleeping with his wife in order to mask his sin, David orchestrates his death. When Uriah refuses to spend the night with Bathsheba in the comforts of his own home, David then says, "Put him into the forefront of the wars,/ That so my purposes may take effect" (I.iv.240-241). David may not have directly killed Uriah, but putting him in the frontlines of a war, knowing he almost certainly would die, is a purposeful taking of a life. Although he attempts to conceal Bathsheba's adultery by having Uriah sleep with his wife, David still escalates to murder when it becomes obvious that Uriah will not compromise and enjoy a frivolous night while the other soldiers were still at war. The juxtaposition between Uriah's moral character and David's in this scene provides a stark contrast between the two characters. David is trying to hide his sin rather than confess to what he did. Later, when he is unable to cover up his sin, he chooses to kill Uriah rather than take responsibility for what he has done.

Although the play introduces us to a sinful David in the beginning, Peele also makes it a point to show that David is a good king who often does his job well. The duality established, of David the sinner and the king, gives the reader an idea of the tension within David's character, and emphasizes why this tension is exacerbated by theological and political pressures. With all the mistakes that David makes, there are moments within the play when we see through the eyes of other characters that David is capable of being a good ruler. One telling moment comes when

Absalom confronts his father's concubines. Like Bathsheba, the concubines are given a voice that is absent from their biblical counterparts. When Absalom tells them to turn away from David, they refuse, stating that they would never turn from David, "Whose power is ever armed against the proud" (I.xi.20). They exalt his greatness and remind Absalom of David's strength. David, whose power is divinely ordained, will always stand in opposition against those who seek power out of pride. If those who seek power out of pride are abhorrent, David's opposition to pride positions him on the side of good. The way that David is depicted by the concubines enables us to see a David who is worthy of being redeemed and worthy of the throne of Israel. When David is advised to lead an army against his son, although he is reluctant, he replies, "What seems them best, then that will David do" (I.xii.121). He is still a monarch for his people, and, against his own selfish desire to keep his rebellious son safe, he agrees to raise arms against Absalom. He is a king for his people, able to carry out difficult actions for the good of his kingdom, regardless of personal pain. There is a correlation made between David's goodness and ability to rule, and the divine nature of his power. The concubines rebuke Absalom on the basis of David's divinity, stating "No, Absalom, his kingdom is enchained/ Fast to the finger of great Jacob's God, / Which will not loose it for a rebel's love" (I.xi.41-43). This chastisement is a reminder that David's kingdom belongs first and foremost to God, and its leader must be anointed by God in order to be a rightful ruler. In this case, Absalom is the rebel, and therefore not God's chosen.

David does his best in order to honor and bring glory to the throne of Israel, as a good monarch should. The play begins with David's kingdom going to war, and according to Annaliese Connolly

In the opening scenes of the play it is clear that David has God's authorisation to pursue the war against the Ammonites. Divine sanction for this war indicates the ways in which Peele's play appears to rehearse the Christian argument for a just war... David's defeat of the Ammonites provides another example of the ways in which such biblical precedents could be utilised to chime with those feelings of English nationalism which intensified during the 1590s.¹¹

Connolly makes two major points: the war has divine sanctification and it should be seen in the context of English nationalism. The divine sanctification of war is crucial in that it exempts the monarch from the charge of having used violence for selfish ends honor, glory, or imperialism. When David calls the city of the Ammonites the "town of the uncircumcised," he labels them as barbaric heathens, standing in direct opposition to the "just and civilized" people of Israel (I.viii.1). Through conquest, the defense of the right religion will be carried out. Religion gives a monarch a basis for justifying a war, a reason that is divorced from their physical government and put under the jurisdiction of a holy one. To an early modern audience, the reference to Elizabeth's war against and victory over the Spanish Armada could not be ignored.¹² Protecting English Protestantism from the evils of Catholicism became one of the justifications for her war

¹¹ Early Modern Literary Studies Special Issue 16 (October, 2007) 9.1-19 Annaliese Connolly. "Peele's David and Bethsabe: Reconsidering Biblical Drama of the Long 1590s".

¹² The Spanish Armada refers to 130 ships that sailed from Spain, which was under the Habsburg rule of Phillip II, in late May of 1588. The aim of the armada was to overthrow Queen Elizabeth and her establishment of Protestantism, as well as stop English interference in Spanish affairs both domestically and abroad.

against Spain. The king portrayed here is a David who wields the sword of God and collects victories for holy Israel. David insures more honor for his continued legacy, and by correlation, to Israel. This is not the David who commits sin and chooses to turn away from God, this is a David who is able to rule a kingdom, and rule it well.

The holy David that wins wars for his God and kingdom, is a far cry from the David that sins willfully. David's initial encounter with divine justice comes in the form of the prophet Nathan. After his rape of Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah, Nathan walks into the court and demands on the behalf of God, "Wherefore, then, hast thou gone so far astray/And hast done evil and sinned in My sight?" (I.vi.41-42). Nathan reminds David of everything he has been given by God, including his kingdom, and that is why David's sin is a blatant turning away from God. Nathan tells David that, as recompense, his newborn son will die. When his son dies as punishment for his rape of Bathsheba, David's sorrow is keenly felt: "From heaven's throne doth David throw himself/ And groan and grovel to the gates of hell" (I.vi.57-58). We now get to see David as the penitent sinner, being held accountable by the only force that the monarch bows down to: God. He encapsulates the idea of a fall from grace, as he physically throws himself off of his heavenly throne to the metaphorical "gates of hell," begging for forgiveness. The message is clear - not even the king can get away with sinning. The prophet Nathan tells David to get up and states, "'David the King shall live,' for He hath seen/ The true repentant sorrow of thy heart" (I.vi.60-61). David's sorrow is keenly felt, and when he essentially degrades himself by groveling on the floor, he is forgiven by God. Peele's view on sin and forgiveness is influenced by the Protestant Reformation, and it shows in the way he addresses the sins of the various characters.

In Protestant theology, forgiveness of sin is a topic touched on by both Martin Luther and John Calvin. For Martin Luther, one did not have to do good deeds in order to pay penitence for their sins. In the Smalcald Articles, Luther states that:

The First and Chief Article:

1] *That Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, died for our sins, and was raised again for our justification, Rom. 4:25. 2] And He alone is the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world, John 1:29; and God has laid upon Him the iniquities of us all, Is. 53:6...* 4] Now, since it is necessary to believe this, and it cannot be otherwise acquired or apprehended by any work, law, or merit, it is clear and certain that this faith alone justifies us as St. Paul says, Rom. 3:28: *For we conclude that a man is justified by faith, without the deeds of the Law.*

Likewise 3:27: *That He might be just, and the Justifier of him which believeth in Christ.*¹³

Martin Luther's doctrine of *sola fide*, or justification through faith alone, holds that God freely grants forgiveness "to him which believeth in Christ." This view clashed with the established practices of the Catholic Church, which relied on a system of penitence to earn forgiveness. Without a set system that dictated what constituted forgiveness, Protestantism took a greater

¹³ The Smalcald Articles are a summary of Luther's doctrines that he was asked to put together for an intended nondenominational Council of the Church. It was accepted as a confessional document in the *Book of Concord*.

focus on the individual's relationship with God, making both transgression and repentance far more personal. It is faith that kills the "Old Adam," and allows us to become free.¹⁴

After Martin Luther, it is John Calvin who had the biggest impact on Protestantism. John Calvin viewed humanity as damned from the start, since the fall of Adam and the consequent passing of the original sin to the rest of humanity.¹⁵ Humans are only redeemed through the love and sacrifice of Christ. According to Calvin, the entirety of Christ's obedience to the Father is what removed the discord between humanity and the divine.¹⁶ Like Luther, he believed that faith was the only thing that was needed for forgiveness, but he also held that faith, and therefore forgiveness, were granted only to the elect, those who were predestined to be saved.

When viewed through the lens of Protestant theology, David's repentance over his sin is odd. First, if faith alone is all that is required in order to absolve one of sin, his repentance is excessive. However, this discrepancy can be explained by the fact that David is an Old Testament king and therefore could not rely on a faith in Christ as his redeemer, at least in the ordinary sense. Yet, though there is no Christ for David to have faith in, David should have had faith in the fact that he is the elect of God, divinely chosen to rule, and therefore under God's grace. Throughout the play, David's place with God, as his elect, is never in question, and his forgiveness is outright stated by Nathan. However, throughout the second half of the play, David allows himself to be wracked with guilt over his shortcomings, and this guilt bleeds into his

¹⁴ Martin Luther's Definition of Faith: An excerpt from "An Introduction to St. Paul's Letter to the Romans."

¹⁵ *The Theology of Calvin* by Wilhelm Niesel pp.126-130

¹⁶ *Calvin: An Introduction to His Thought* pp. 57-77

duties as a king. He begins to grow lax in his punishment of rebels and criminals, including his son Amnon who raped his sister. David begins to lose his grip on his kingdom when he allows his personal guilt to bleed into every part of his life. He is no longer the good king, “armed against the proud,” who wins victories for Holy Israel; he is the weak king who degrades himself by his exaggerated repentance, not believing that God’s forgiveness, promised by Nathan, is enough to absolve him of sin.

When looking at David’s sin and its consequences, David’s fate is cause for pity. However, according to Robert Kilgore, “Audiences may have pitied this broken David, but Peele makes it clear that David’s suffering was largely caused by David himself.”¹⁷ The play continues to remind everyone of David’s wrongdoing, never seeming to skirt around the immorality of what he did and the dire consequences it precipitated.

¹⁷ See page 421

Amnon's Sin and Absalom's Rebellion

The catalyst for the major conflict within the play comes from the rape of Tamar by her half-brother Amnon, and Peele juxtaposes this rape to Bathsheba's by David. The two acts occur consecutively within the play. David's lust stems from seeing Bathsheba's beauty while she is bathing, and Amnon's reason for raping Tamar is that "her beauty, having seized upon my heart," inflames his own desires (I.iii.12). Like his father, Amnon is a slave to his desires, and like his father, he chooses to act upon his lust. The emphasis on Tamar's beauty as the cause behind Amnon's actions is meant to equate the sins committed by father and son. When Tamar's brother Absalom learns of what happens, he calls the action, "a sickness, sprung from the root of heinous lust" (I.iv.67-70). This line is interesting in the way it proposes a double meaning. Using the term "root" can either refer to lust being the root of Amnon's sick actions towards his sister, or it can refer to David's seed. David is the root from which Amnon sprung, and his seed is now corrupt due to his own heinous lust. The sins of the father, the root of the family, will corrupt and rot all that springs from it. That is the reason why the child begat David dies as an infant. The only difference between the two, and what ultimately makes David redeemable as opposed to the corrupt Amnon, is their individual treatment of the women they wronged. After he rapes Tamar, Amnon throws her out, and she says, "To force and then refuse thy sister's love,/ ... This second evil far exceeds the first" (I.iv.4 & 9).¹⁸ By raping Tamar, Amnon has taken responsibility for her honor, and by turning her away, he lowers her to the dregs of society. David at least attempts to do right by Bathsheba by marrying her, this fact is not revealed until the end of the play, but it is the main factor that differentiates David's sin from Amnon's. The two rapes are partially

¹⁸ This refers to Deuteronomy 22:28 which states that if a man rapes a virgin, he must marry her.

equated, but whereas Amnon casts Tamar out and becomes irredeemable in the eyes of the reader, David is not completely lost.

The infirmity that David exhibits in his personal life affects the rest of his kingdom. After Amnon's rape of Tamar, her brother Absalom swears revenge but is told by David that it is not his place to punish but David's. Although David promises to punish, he fails to do so, and Absalom takes justice into his own hands and becomes a revenger. During the English Renaissance, literacy was not common among the laity. Protestant orthodoxy was taught via sermons: above all, those printed in *The Book of Homilies*. The homilies were authorized sermons that presented the topical messages of the Church, as well as Reformation theology. One sermon, "Homily Against Strife and Contention," states that:

That as long as emulation or enuying, contention, and factions or sects be among vs, we be carnall, and walke according to the fleshly man (1 Corinthians 3.3). And Saint Iames saith, If yee haue bitter emulation or enuying, and contention in your hearts, glorie not of it (James 3.14): for where as contention is, there is vnstedfastnesse, and all euill deeds.

The homily condemns contention and strife, and advocates a meekness and forgiving attitude in the face of your enemies. Anger and contention had no place in the lives of good Protestants. The homilies stress that strife and contention lead to further evil deeds.

The "Homily on Obedience" further states that:

that no man (of his owne priuate authority) may bee iudge ouer other, may punish, or may kill. But we must referre all iudgement to GOD, to Kings, and Rulers, Iudges vnder them, which be GODS officers to execute iustice, and by plaine wordes of Scripture, haue their authoritie and vse of the sword graunted from GOD.

Both of these sermons explicitly state that any form of contention and strife is ungodly, and to enact revenge is to usurp the power of justice from God. They also place emphasis on the divine right theory, making the connection that, in the place of God, kings and rulers take up the mantle of judge. Justice and vengeance belong to God and his divinely ordained leaders, to pursue personal revenge was to go against the theological doctrine of the time. Peele makes it explicit that David is clearly ordained by God and Absalom is not. Absalom, although initially just wanting to avenge his sister's death, does not have the authority to do so, and Absalom goes against David's explicit orders. According to William Tyndale, an English scholar and key figure in the Protestant Reformation, that turning away from earthly authority is turning away from God's authority.¹⁹ To even cast judgement is a form of private imputation, severely limiting the ability of a commoner to cast criticism. According to John Gillies: "The image of rebellion in the homily recapitulates original sin at the political level. Rebels are not defined by any "singular" sin so much as by a totalization, or "the whole puddle and sink of all sins." On the theological level, rebellion speaks to the act of the original sin committed by Adam and Eve. By turning against God's commandments, choosing to disobey his orders, they damned all of humanity. When viewed through this lens, acts of rebellion are always the most damning of sins. When Absalom rebels against his father, he throws the kingdom of Israel into chaos, and almost displaces David from his rightful place on the throne. Rebellion is never an isolated sin, but stems from sinful pride, greed, and lust for power. In one act, Absalom embodies the "sink of all sins."

¹⁹ See the section, "The Obedience of Subjects unto Kings, Princes, and Rulers," in *The Obedience of a Christian Man*.

When Protestant theology condemning revenge and disobedience is paired with the divine right theory, it becomes hard to see what one can do when the person whose job it is to maintain justice fails. In Elizabethan England, this is the dilemma that the revenge tragedy speaks to. While Peele's play is a biblical historical play, it also serves as a quasi-revenge play due to it carrying many of the characteristics of the traditional Elizabethan revenge tragedy. The characteristics that define a revenge play include violence, a perceived wrongdoing, a crumbling of state justice, where it seems as if the government cannot be trusted in dispensing justice towards those who have wronged and been wronged, then finally, the initially just revenger is punished for enacting his vengeance. *The Love of King David and Fair Bethsabe* speaks to many of these categories. The existence of the revenge play goes against the discursive norm of the established Protestant theology that condemned revenge. According to John Gillies,:

On one side is an essentially earlier critical generation most forcefully represented by Eleanor Prosser's *Hamlet and Revenge* (1971) that reads the revenge play as an *exemplum horrendum* of the damnable consequences of breaking the Tudor prohibition on private revenge and/or resistance. On the other side is Linda Woodbridge's *English Revenge Drama: Money, Resistance, Equality* (2010), in which the revenge play is read as a simulacrum of resistance promoting a wider imputation of ingrained inequity and injustice. While the answers are different, the question is the same. As Woodbridge puts it:

While I give different answers from those of Prosser and other religiously oriented writers, the question they raise is crucial: what *is* a substantial body of

revenge drama doing in a Christian society? Why, in a monarchy, did stage avengers assassinate kings? Why did a hierarchical nation relish scenes of commoners killing dukes? (5).²⁰

By breaking down the revenge tragedy into two schools of thought, Gillies calls attention to what exactly makes the genre so compelling. The Eleanor Prosser model puts the genre into a direct dialogue with not only the Protestant theology that permeated England, but with the Tudor political ideology as a result. The privatization of revenge was condemned on both fronts due to the fact that revenge and justice belonged solely to God, and by the divine right theory, the ruling monarch. To take revenge into your own hands, and out of the monarch's, was to spite God directly. This message would have been clear and understandable to the early modern audience, as the homilies that were preached to them cemented these ideas into the normative boundaries of society. This inequality in power feeds into the second point espoused by Linda Woodbridge, where the revenge tragedy stands in as a representation for the injustice and inequality that was prevalent. For a group of people who felt injustice and inequality, and could do nothing about it, the revenge play became an outlet for their frustration. That is why, in a society where the theology condemns revenge and contention, we see a genre of play that acts it out and kills the offending monarch, or individual in a position of power. Unlike what Woodbridge points out, rather than killing a king, Peele's play puts forth an alternative idea of what others can do to remedy an injustice; an idea that does not break theological commandments. As a tool for acting out tensions and anxiety that surrounded a monarchy and power structures, the revenge tragedy

²⁰ "Calvinism as tragedy in the English revenge play" by John Gillies.

did well by killing monarchs and enacting vengeance, but it also acquiesced to the discursive Protestant norm by damning and condemning the initially just avenger.

After Tamar's rape, Absalom goes to his father and states his desires to avenge her honor. David denies his request, but promises that "with the spirit of my kingdom's God/I'll thrust the flattering tyrant from his throne/And scourge his bondslaves from my hallowed court/With rods of iron and thorns of sharpened steel./Then Absalom, revenge not thou this sin; Leave it to me, and I will chasten him" (I.iv.84-89). It is David's duty as king to uphold justice in his kingdom. He promises Absalom "iron" and "thorns of steel," yet David does not go through with his promise to dispense justice and lets Amnon go free, a failure to dispense fair justice in his kingdom that opens a space for an avenger to fill up. Thus when Absalom says, "For in the holy temple have I sworn/ Wreak of his villainy in Tamar's rape," he takes on the role of the Elizabethan revenger (I.vii.12-13). In doing so, Absalom disobeys David the King as well as David his father. According to John Gillies "On the one hand, the very existence of the English revenge play bespeaks the power of discursive energies that the official ideology seeks to annul. On the other hand, the genre approaches the quietism of the *Homilies* by tending to depict its revengers as initially just but finally sinful and damned." Absalom's motives stem from a genuine desire to punish Amnon's sin and avenge his sister's lost honour, however, the play makes it clear that good intentions do not change the nature of the sin. Indeed, what changes are his good intentions.

Absalom kills Amnon; it is now, once again, David's job to punish a son. Instead, David recalls him from exile and says, "Live, Absalom my son, live once in peace;/ Peace with thee and with Jerusalem!" (I.ix.143-144). David allows disobedience to go on unpunished, calling in

question his capability as a ruler. His forgiveness of Absalom does the opposite of keeping the peace in Jerusalem; it leads the way to Absalom's rebellion. Absalom claims that Israel is not receiving the justice that it is due from its king. He believes himself to be a far more capable ruler than David, and that David has lost his position as the rightful ruler of Israel. He therefore decides to raise an army against David. Yet, although Absalom is unwavering in his convictions that he is doing what is best for the kingdom, all the other characters see his actions as stemming from damnable pride. He begins to see his physical beauty as a sign that he himself is God's elect:

Why should not Absalom, that in his face
 Carries the final purpose of his God,
 That is, to work him grace in Israel,
 ... Keeping His statutes and His covenants pure?
 His thunder is entangled in my hair,
 And with my beauty is His lightning quenched; (I.xi.57-67).

Throughout the play, Absalom's beauty is constantly praised. As the play goes on, Absalom's own view of his beauty becomes laced through with pride and vanity. He sees himself as the "final purpose of his God," but goes one step further by proclaiming that his beauty could outshine the lightning of heaven. As initially just as Absalom's demand for Amnon's punishment may have been, his patricidal violence and absurd vanity reveal him to be, in Gillies' words, "sinful and damnable."

There is an underlying tension between the imperatives of justice and obedience that the revenge play speaks to, and that the official doctrine attempts to deny by requiring obedience and

submission, and condemning rebellion and privatized revenge. Absalom's rebellion embodies this tension. The play sets out an ineffective David, and thus Absalom's rebellion, motivated by his desire for a more just kingdom, is understandable. Yet, the play immediately reestablishes the normative boundaries by punishing Absalom for disobeying, by depicting his act of rebellion as abhorrent and an affront against heaven.

David's Hysterical Grief

At the war's end, when David's armies reign supreme, Absalom is hanging from a tree, his beautiful hair caught in its branches, and he wonders aloud how God could allow someone of his beauty to be destroyed and the "choicest fruit of nature's workmanship/Hang like a rotten branch upon this tree" (I.xv. 8-9). Even at the end of the war, when it is obvious that Absalom is in the wrong, and that his rebellion was for nothing, Absalom still clings to his belief that his beauty makes him worth redeeming. This view is immediately crushed when he is killed by Joab who calls him "That rebel to his father and to heaven" (I.xv). To rebel against David is to rebel against heaven, and this is an error that Joab makes clear is unforgivable. Joab goes on to say that no matter how just Absalom believes himself to be, his actions were "stuffed with naught but pride and stubbornness?/But preach I to thee, while I should revenge/Thy cursèd sin that staineth Israel" (I.xv.54-56). He reveals Absalom for the prideful creature that he is. The play began with a war that was religiously sanctified. The play ends with a war based on sinful pride of a self-appointed avenger. Ironically enough, in this moment, Joab takes on the role of the revenger, avenging the dishonour Absalom cast on his father. The sin against David is a sin against Israel, and Joab will repay that sin with Absalom's death. When he hears of this, David is overcome in his grief crying out, "Die, David, for the death of Absalom" and "Would God that I had died for

Absalom!” (I.xvii.166&200). Feeling grief over the death of his son is understandable, but David’s grief borders on hysterical. In this scene, where he lays himself on the floor, he becomes a leader no longer worth following. Absalom was a dangerous, and theologically damned, thorn in the side of Israel, and David lowers himself to the point of despair over such a person. His country has just been victorious in a war that started due to rebellion from his own family, and rather than step into the role of a powerful monarch, he allows his grief to overwhelm him.

The Role of Counsel

Much of Peele's play comes standard from the period it was written in. The way the play lines up with traditional Protestant ideas is expected. However, there are moments where the play seems to be going against normative values. Rather than fully adhering to Protestant values, the play subverts them in ways that challenge the absolute power of the monarch. This section will show that the monarch can be questioned, and sometimes even disobeyed. By giving considerable power to various counselor-figures, the play offers a potential answer to the problem of how to correct a weak and ineffectual monarch.

The first character within the play to take up the role of the counselor, and the most normative, is the role of the prophet Nathan. He is the one who can speak out against the king in a religious context, as he also has a connection to heavenly authority. According to Robert Kilgore, "In the biblical narrative, David needs a prophet to make things clear, to apply the precept (don't take what is not yours) to his own life (don't take Bathseba)."²¹ Nathan is one of the few characters in the play who can speak against the king rather than blindly obey. Nathan speaks to the divine half of David that must answer to God, just as he does. When David realizes what he has done wrong, it is Nathan who says, "Thou art the man, and thou has judged thyself" (I.vi.33). The act of passing judgement is a powerful one, as judgement is reserved for God

²¹ Nathan tells David an allegory about a man who has multiple sheep who decides to steal the only lamb that another poor man has. He asks David who he believes is in the wrong, to which David replies that it is obviously the selfish man. Unbeknownst to David, the rich man is him, the poor man Uriah, and the lamb is Bathsheba. Also see Kilgore page 424 for quote.

alone. For David to cast judgement on himself, we are privy to a moment of incredible introspection, all due to the interference of Nathan. Rather than outrightly criticize David, Nathan turns to allegory in order to get David to criticize himself. Direct rebellion, disobedience and criticism may be condemned by theology, but by subtly forcing introspection, Nathan gets David to correct himself. It is through the prophet that David faces consequences for his sin, but it is also where he finds his absolution.

The most bizarre deviation from Protestant values in the play comes from the character Shimei, who is portrayed as an ordinary citizen with major grievances against David.²² He is neither a prophet nor a counselor, yet he gives some of the harshest criticism of David, as well as some of the most violent. Shimei's aggression comes from him being a citizen who feels as if the government is not doing its job properly, and thus should not be allowed to rule. While David is walking out of his palace, Shimei begins to throw rocks at him and states, "So shall thy murders and adultery/ Be punished in the sight of Israel" (I.xii.33-34). Shimei is trying to publicly shame David in the eyes of Israel, stating how David had "unworthily had [been] blessed" with the throne of Israel (I.xii.4). We are privy to how an average citizen views David and his actions. So much emphasis is constantly placed on how the throne is connected to the divine, and in the eyes

²² Various sources differ on who exactly Shimei is. Some say he comes from the clan of Saul, which would make him more than just an ordinary citizen. Other sources put him as the chieftain of other tribes. In this play, Peele gives no information on the identity of Shimei, perhaps intentionally keeping him ambiguous. Abishai refers to him as a, "dead dog," so we can assume he is of no one of consequence.

of Shimei, David is no longer worthy of that throne. In the eyes of this citizen, David has corrupted his sacred duty to the throne and to Israel.

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This scene involving Shimei brings up questions that the play never really answers. Just how much can a monarch get away with on the basis of their divinity? If disobedience and casting judgement is unholy to everyone except for the king, why are some moments excusable? Shimei enters the scene throwing rocks at David, a physical act of violence, yet he goes unpunished. The homilies do not allow subjects to throw rocks. The play asserts that David is still a good and redeemable character, and that contention and disobedience are bad, but it allows

Shimei's violence to go unpunished.²³ Yet David, against the counsel of Joab who would see Shimei punished, lets Shimei continue his verbal and physical assault. In the face of willful rebellion, David once again does nothing, and Shimei does not have the excuse of being David's son, and unlike Nathan, this is not a gentle nudge towards self-discovery. The throwing of rocks makes Shimei a harmful and dangerous character, and his actions should not have been ignored as they were.

What this scene does is show that, even in the midst of his hysterical grief over the death of one son and the rebellion of another, David is able to take criticism, but not allow himself to succumb to his emotions. When faced with Shimei's accusations, David agrees and accepts the guilt, but when Shimei calls on him to step down, he refuses because he believes in the forgiveness of God. The scene with Shimei offers David another choice: In the midst of debilitating grief, he can acknowledge his guilt and once again become the monarch that his kingdom needs, or he can step down and allow someone who is not elected by God to sit on his throne. This time David makes the right choice and chooses to continue in his duties, not only to Israel, but to God. David is capable of acting rationally, of remembering why he is the rightful ruler of Israel.

²³ Shimei is an interesting figure within Peele's play. Biblically, he is too minor a figure for Peele to assume that his audience would know of his fate. In 1 Kings 2:9, Shimei is punished for his actions against David, but Peele leaves this out of his play intentionally.

The next example within the play of counsel is that of Joab, the counselor to David and the general of his armies.²⁴ The role of the counselor in early modern England is an interesting one, as they have the ear of the monarch, and therefore have a certain degree of influence over them. In her article “Kingship and Counsel in Early Modern England,” Jacqueline Rose traces the importance of a good counselor from the Ciceronian *vita activa* to Erasmus’ *Education of a Christian prince*. She states that, “Counsellors praised a king’s wisdom, bolstering his reason, not flattering him into enslavement to his passions. Thus a bad king was to be preferred to one with bad friends, and a country should thank counsellors more than kings for good rule.”²⁵ The counselor was meant to be more than just a simple “yes” man, but how far did their influence extend? Could they go against a direct order of the King’s as Joab did? Throughout the play, Joab continues to undermine David’s wishes and orders. When Absalom is exiled after the murder of Amnon, it is Joab who encourages David to bring him back to Jerusalem, and when David forbids anyone from killing Absalom after his rebellion, it is Joab who takes it upon himself to avenge David’s dishonor. To understand Joab’s actions, we turn to Henri de Bracton, who also wrote on the importance of a good counselor and said, “let each one take care for himself lest, by judging perversely and against the laws because of prayer or price, for the advantage of a temporary and insignificant gain, he dare to bring upon himself sorrow and lamentation everlasting.”²⁶ When talking about breaking the law, Bracton pays special attention

²⁴ Joab is the son of David’s sister Zeruah as mentioned in 2 Samuel 8:16, so he is one of David’s citizens, not merely an ally.

²⁵ Page 49

²⁶ See Henri de Bracton’s *On the Laws and Customs of England* page 21.

to the intentionality behind the actions. This same principle can be stretched to cover criticism from a counselor. Joab does not disobey David for any selfish desire or gain, but because of a genuine want for David and his kingdom to remain safe. Unlike Absalom, there is no pride or presumptuousness behind Joab's actions. He is spurred by a true desire to help David. He encourages Absalom's return because he worries over the line of succession. He kills Absalom because he understands the danger that Absalom poses, and that Absalom bears malice and true contention against David. At the end of the play, after Joab has killed Absalom, David has laid himself prostrate on the ground, wallowing in his grief, and it is Joab who steps forward and asks, "What, art thou weary of thy royal rule?" (I.xviii.222). Not only is David allowing himself to grieve the loss of a wicked ruler, he allows his grief to stand in the way of his ability to rule. Joab threatens, "Or by the Lord that sways the heavens I swear/ I'll lead thine armies to another king" (I.xvii.240-241). This declaration, as shocking as it is because of how close it seems to rebellion, serves to remind David that he is the divinely anointed king of Israel.

Interestingly, with all the agency that Peele has given Bathsheba, she also steps into the unofficial role of the counselor. In the beginning of the play, we get a hint of this capability when Bathsheba attempts to counsel David away from his lustful desires, but this is largely overshadowed by David's own power. However, as David lies on the floor, and Joab threatens to leave with his armies, Bathsheba steps forward and dispels the tensions by and tells David, "That Solomon, whom Israel's God affects/ And give the name unto him for His love,/ Should be no salve to comfort poor David's soul?" (I.xvii.35-37). She reminds David that not all hope is lost, and as king he must look to the future of his kingdom, which rests on securing an heir. Bathsheba is able to read the energy in the room and understands that if David does not get up and shake off

his excessive grief, Absalom's rebellion would have finished its job of displacing David from the throne, regardless of whether or not Absalom lived. The rebellion exposed that the power of the monarch is absolute, but balanced precariously. The fact that David leads his kingdom to the brink of war, and over corrects with repentance to the point of ineffectuality, shows the dangers that monarchs must traverse through. Bathsheba thwarts this danger by securing a successor to the throne and giving David a reason to want to continue ruling. Unlike Nathan, Shimei and Joab, there is no outright rebellion or criticism on the part of Bathsheba. She presents a voice of reason that is subtle, but just as powerful. She is able to look to the future, and by reminding David of this future, she dispels the rising tension. The play may be titled *The Love of King David and Fair Bethsabe*, but after the initial scenes, the story moves away from her narrative; yet, she is given one of the most powerful roles in the play. In the beginning of the play, where she is caught between a rock and a hard place, she still tries to turn David away from his sin, urging him to make a better choice. It becomes fitting, that at the end of the play when David's kingdom is on a precarious precipice, it is she that turns David's head to the future and urges him to pull himself off the floor and become a better king. Counselors come in many forms, but their importance is keenly felt throughout the play. Peele's answer to the question: how do you correct a weak monarch without damning yourself in the process is a relatively simple one, but difficult to execute. There is still a lot of danger that surrounds being a counselor, and the risk that your counsel may not be well met, but rather punished, but its importance cannot be overlooked. The role that the counselor plays is pivotal to the success of a kingdom, even if they go against the normative ideas of obedience and loyalty. The counsel takes on the dangerous job of being

willing to disobey, even if that comes with its own set of punishments, for the good of their kingdom.

Conclusion

When George Peele took the story of David and wrote *The Love of King David and Fair Bethsabe*, I do not imagine that he would have expected that in a several hundred years an undergraduate student would use his work in order to form criticism on the failure of monarchs, the danger behind divinely ordained obedience, and theoretical loophole that helps in getting out of having to comply with divinely sanctioned incompetence. However, that is the reality of the situation. Traditional early modern retellings of the David material tend to be topical allegories, using David as merely a political figure standing in as a representation of Queen Elizabeth. The use of the figure of King David as a tool of communication between the poet and monarch creates the sense that David begins to sit in for the monarch, and what happens to David, the monarch is also susceptible to. For example, when speaking on the King David of George Peele's play, which is the topic of this thesis, Kilgore states, "English writers turned to this David to talk either of the tyranny of kings or of how even a man such as David can sin, and yet through poetry and penance, be restored."²⁷ Sir John Harrington, the godson of Queen Elizabeth, uses David in such a manner in his poem "Of King David. Written to the Queene." There are parallels that can be drawn between the figure of David and Queen Elizabeth. However, to view David as a stand-in for Elizabeth would do a disservice to Peele's play, as it provides too narrow of a view. Peele does not equate David with Elizabeth, choosing to focus on David's personal sins and the consequences that stem from his infirmity. As mentioned in my thesis, there is a parallel that can be made between David's divinely sanctified war against the Ammonites, and that of the victory over the Spanish Armada by Queen Elizabeth. The possibility of further parallels within

²⁷ See Page 419

the play is within the scope of possibility. The relation of the play to the Elizabethan regime remains an open question that absolutely deserves further inquiry, but this thesis concerned itself with the theological and political ramifications of a weak monarch protected by divine right theory. Peele depicts an understanding of the hardships that stem from the divine right theory, specifically the disempowerment of citizens when it comes to their ability to deal with a potentially weak monarch. Using the play, Peele stresses the importance of good counsel as a means of correcting an ineffectual ruler. By straying away from rebellion and contention, a counselor with good intentions can criticize a monarch, and as shown in the play, is morally obligated to.

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