

Changes in the Blood : Shakespeare's King Lear

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In *The Tragedy of King Lear*, as in his other plays, Shakespeare borrows some of the ideas from his sources and alters them for his purpose. One of his most frequent alterations involves widening the distance between classes of characters through the use of blood references. Reflecting the class distinctions practiced in the Renaissance period, Shakespeare uses every opportunity to emphasize his respect for gentility and his aversion to base characteristics, believing like Thomas Milles, that non-gentles are "altogether base and un-noble" (24)¹. Rosalie Colie says that of all Shakespeare's political plays, *King Lear* most carefully "closes off considerations of non-noble life" (1). Shakespeare justifies his adherence to strict class structures through a close reliance upon the genetic theorists of his age, many of whom, like Thomas Walkington, believed that blood housed a person's very soul (58). In *King Lear*, Shakespeare alters the primary sources, *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* and Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*, through incorporation of blood references and the portrayal of devotion of Kent and Gloster in order to portray Lear as a more noble character.

Shakespeare derives his drama of the royal Lear from a variety of sources, dating back to the earliest known version, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*. In *Historia Regum Britanniae* Kordaila and her husband,

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the King of France, help Liur regain his kingdom where he has ruled happily until his death three years later at which time Kordaila becomes ruler (268). This version was probably not available to Shakespeare; however, the sixteenth-century versions are adaptations of this early work and retain its happy conclusion². David Bevington, following many critics, credits Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* —(Shakespeare's source for the Gloster sub-plot) — with adding the tragic tone to the play (1168). The sub-plot, which is derived from the story of an old Paphlagonian king, not only provides the tragic element for Shakespeare's *Lear* but also another means of using blood distinction to strengthen Lear's nobility. When Shakespeare provides Lear with two gentle and high ranking characters, Gloster and the Duke of Kent, so devoted to Lear that they willingly sacrifice themselves against humiliation, suffering, and physical torture, he thereby distinguishes Lear as an even greater and more noble king.

Aristocrats and especially kings are supposed to possess wisdom by nature. Throughout his canon, Shakespeare exclusively reserves intuitive knowledge and wisdom for the gentle class, showing “no base-borns attaining great knowledge” (Berkeley 91). In *A Treatise of Nobilitie* Giovanni Nenna credits “nobilitie of the minde” with even more importance than the “nobilitie of blood conjoined with riches” (69). Although Lear eventually succumbs to madness as a result of his grief and poor treatment from his daughters — Regan and Goneril — we nevertheless recognize his wisdom. Even during the moments of his madness, in Act IV the prose lines reflect his compassionate wisdom when he comforts the blinded Gloster by saying “A man may see how this world goes with no eyes. / Look with thine ears” (IV. vi. 150-51)³. Reflecting ironically upon his fallen state, Lear calls life “the great stage of fools” (IV. vi. 183), and says that he “will die bravely” (VI. vi. 198). He forces himself to think of something other than what his daughters have done to him, knowing that the mind must not dwell too long

grief. He says, "that way madness lies; let me shun that! / No more of that" (III. iv. 21-22). Lear suggests an understanding of his own approach of madness when he says, "we are not ourselves / When nature, being appress'd, commands the mind / To suffer with the body" (II. iv. 105-07). Even while within a near catatonic state, he recognizes Cordelia whom he has not seen for some time, suggesting a superior intelligence.

Shakespeare's first major move away from the primary source exhibits Lear's sagacity. In the source play the daughters are all unmarried, the Queen has recently died, and Leir believes the daughters should marry since they are left:

wanting now their mother's good advice,
 Under whose government they have receyved
 A perfit pattern of a vertuous life:
 Left as it were a ship without a sterne. (1)

Audiences learn later that Lear's Queen is also deceased when Regan says, "I would divorce me from my mother's tomb, / Sepulchering an adultress" (II. iv. 129-30) and when Lear also says, "I would divorce me from thy mother's tomb" (II. vi. 129). Although from these lines it is certain that the Queen is dead, Shakespeare ignores her in the opening lines of the play. When Lear says, "Know that we have divided / In three our kingdom (I. i. 37-38), the "we" is merely a royal usage. Since Shakespeare's Regan and Goneril are already married and Cordelia has two loving suitors, Lear must have a motive for giving up his kingdom other than his daughters' well-being. When he suggests the division of his land, we learn that Lear acts not only as a benevolent father, insuring provision for his heirs, but also as a wise king, preventing possible future strife. Lear explains, "We have this hour a constant will to publish / Our daughters

several dowers, that future strife / May be prevented now" (I. i. 43-45). Shakespeare includes the lines regarding Lear's concern for the future of his kingdom to evidence his wisdom. Although Lear's end result in giving up possession of his land proves unwise, we cannot question his initial reasoning, for the later actions of Lear's "pelican"⁴ daughters, Goneril and Regan, justify Lear's concern about his estate settlement. His elder daughter's greedy nature will never allow them satisfaction with less than all of their father's estate.

In the source Leir uses the play of determining which of his daughters loves him most in an attempt to trick Cordelia into marrying, since the father worries that she will not want to marry either of her suitors. Leir says:

I am resolved, and even now my mind
Doth meditate a sudden strategem,
To try which of my daughters loves me best:
Which till I know, I cannot be in rest,
This granted, when they jointly shall contend,
Each to exceed the other in their love:
Even as she doth protest she loves me best
I'll say, then daughter, grant me one request,
To show thou lovest me as thy sisters do.
Accept a husband whom myself will woo. (3)

This remark, although carried out for the best of reasons, represents devious behavior to which Shakespeare never allows his gentility. Instead, Lear acts in a most straightforward manner when he requests his daughters to respond by expressing the amount of their love for him, a scenario reflecting the courtly ritual common in Elizabethan times. With the

absence of sons, Lear must rely on his daughters to demonstrate their command of rhetoric as a proof of their own gentle breeding. His unquestioning acceptance of their obvious flattering responses is "entirely appropriate to the age" (Burckhardt 239-40).

Modern audiences might believe Cordelia justified herself in not flattering her father with lofty praises but speaking her true feelings openly. However, gentles in Elizabethan times had been, by necessity, often taught to hide their true feelings when the situation required it. Only the lower classes told the truth rather than saying what was expected of them. David S. Berkeley observes throughout Shakespeare's plays that even the word honest "may be a pejorative expressive of upper-class disapproval of plebeian openness" (29). In Act II when Cornwall says, "An honest mind and plain, he must speak truth!" (II. ii. 100), he characterizes his disdainful, aristocratic attitude towards truthfulness of the lower class. Gentles regarded base persons as incapable people of discerning a necessity for avoidance of the truth.

Aristocrats, on the other hand, were expected to use language effectively and in a courtly manner. Cordelia, by not providing a beautiful rhetorical response, exhibits a lack of gentility which indicates a weakness of her gentle blood when she answers "I cannot heave my mouth into my heart" (I. i. 92). Although hurt and offended at Cordelia's failure to demonstrate fatherly devotion, Lear is even more embarrassed by her lack of rhetorical prowess, one of the base characteristics. Both *Lear* and its source indicate that Cordelia is the favorite child. Lear calls her "our joy" (I. i. 82) and later admits "I lov'd her most" (I. i. 123). France reminds Lear that Cordelia "was your best object, / The argument of your praise, balm of your age, / The best, the dearest" (I. i. 215-17). Even Goneril admits to Regan that Lear "always lov'd our sister most" (I. i. 292). Cordelia's beauty and Lear's devotion to her strongly suggest that the youngest daughter resembles the

king more than the other two daughters. His pride in this beautiful daughter causes him to expect her to be able to express herself in equally beautiful rhetorical language. Her inability to speak fluently shames as well as angers the king.

In addition to wisdom, Lear indicates possession of a great quantity of blood, an exceptional trait for old men in Shakespeare. In *Troilus and Cressida* the author exhibits his more common attitude when the old Nestor refers to his own limited amount of blood by calling it, "my three drops of blood" (I. iii. 301) and in *Coriolanus* as a "half-pint of blood" (V. ii. 58). Young nobles were believed to possess great quantities of thin, swift-flowing blood, but old men, even those of noble birth, were believed to have a shortage of blood. At more than "fourscore and upward" (IV. vii. 63), Shakespeare's King Lear is an extreme exception, possessing enough blood to display such powerful sentiments that he even dies of a broken heart (V. iii. 316)⁵. Shakespeare uses this unusual method of death to emphasize Lear's noble blood. A person must have a great quantity of blood in order to die by a broken heart. Lear also exhibits enough strength to kill the young soldier who has just slain Cordelia (V. iii. 277), another example of Shakespeare's dramatic moves away from the happy-ending source play. His possession of so much blood at such an advanced age attests to his "youthful constitution" and assures us that he is still "very much a king" (Berkeley 88).

Lear might have avoided death by heartbreak had he practiced another Elizabethan belief — that persons suffering sorrow should in some way unburden themselves of that grief. In *Macbeth* Malcolm advises Macduff to "Give sorrow words. The grief that does not speak / Whispers the o'er fraught heart and bids it break" (IV. iii. 209-10). Bridget Lyons in *Voices of Melancholy* describes the effect of such grieving as "the heart of bereaved sufferer who could not unburden himself by speech was literally oppressed

and suffocated by humours" (14). Lear's aged, and already overtaxed heart simply cannot withstand the added burden of grief of Cordelia's death.

The quantity of hot fast-flowing blood of royals makes them easily angered and Lear, said to be in his "infirm and choleric years" (I. i. 303), often exhibits his nobility through quick outbursts. He dismisses Cordelia by calling her his "sometimes daughter" (I. i. 119) and Kent with "vassal! Miscreant!" (I. i. 162). He delivers his longest tirade against Goneril, calling her a "detested kite" and "a plague-sore or embossed carbuncle" of his "own corrupted blood" (II. iv. 223). He prays that she has no children or has children as thankless as his own. Lear indicates his own respect for choleric in gentles when he describes Cornwall as "The fiery Duke" and "the hot Duke" (II. iv. 101-02). He reacts even more quickly and hotly to base characters. When Oswald acknowledges him disrespectfully as "My lady's father" (I. iv. 80), Lear responds with "whoresome dog," "slave," and "cur" (I. iv. 81). And he reacts even more adamantly when he exerts his own last outburst of choleric action, killing the slave who was hanging Cordelia, and carrying her limp body on stage. This action, demonstrating unheard of physical stamina for the eighty-year-old king, attests to Shakespeare's belief in the superiority of the noble.

An even greater testimonial to Lear's nobility results not from the noble king himself, but from those around him who devote themselves so completely to him. Servants, of course, are expected to show extreme devotion to nobility, and members of the aristocracy demonstrate allegiance to their king, but the sacrifices which Kent and Gloster make for Lear extend far beyond the ordinary. Shakespeare first establishes the nobility of these two worthy Earls and then exhibits their devotion to Lear. In *The Doctrine of the English Gentlemen in the 16th Century*, Ruth Kelso states that a gentleman "should live not for himself, but for others" (39). Both Kent and Gloster prove their gentility by living for Lear and their country.

By placing these worthies near Lear, reflecting his greatness, in addition to their own and by demonstrating their devotion to Lear, Shakespeare creates a circle of nobility, the reflection of Gloster and Kent thus making Lear shine even brighter. In commenting about the Gloster sub-plot, Lyons suggests that it "intensifies our experience of the central action" (24). The same principle applies for the noble gestures of Kent and Gloster. The appreciation for Lear's nobility intensifies as the Kent and Gloster's dedication is witnessed.

Although the source play contained Perillus, the noble prototype for Kent, Shakespeare's creation far exceeds the original both through richness of character and through Kent's extraordinary devotion to his king which Rosalle Colle calls "a mark of his commitment to the aristocratic ethos" (193). By naming him Kent, which contrasts with Perillus in the source, Shakespeare emphasizes the importance of this character, for he follows the original names more closely for most of the other characters in the play⁶. Berkeley correctly argues that merely by naming his character Kent, Shakespeare made "Kent's distinctiveness immediately apprehensible to Jacobean audiences and readers" (40). These audiences had recognized the Kentish as valiant and unconquerable people. Because of their brave stands against oppression dating back centuries, citizens of Kent enjoyed a greater personal freedom than other subjects (Berkeley 40). Kent exemplifies his expectation of personal freedom by voicing his opinions, daring to disagree with a king.

In the source play Perillus faults Lear's harsh actions against Cordella:

Oh, how I grieve, to see my Lord thus fond,
To dote so much upon vayne flattering words,
Ah, if he but with good advice had weyghed,
The hidden tenure of her humble speech,

Reason to rage should not have given place,
Nor poore Cordella suffer such disgrace.

(Stafford 9-10)

When he utters these words, however, Perillus speaks only in Cordella's presence, Leir having already left the stage. While indicating his support of Cordella, Perillus causes no great risk to his own well-being by speaking. Later, as Leir divides his kingdom between Gonorill and Ragan and their husbands, Perillus does speak directly to the king:

I have bin silent all this while, my Lord,
To see if any worthyer then my selfe,
Would once have spoke in poore Cordella's cause:
But love or feare types silence to their touns,
Oh, heare me speake for her, thy gracious Lord,
Whose deeds have not deserved this ruthless doome,
As thus to disinherit her of all.

(Stafford 15-16)

Leir threatens death to anyone who dares to speak of the matter again and promptly exits before Perillus has opportunity to speak further. Although Perillus vows to continue to try to help Cordella, his help must come in some form other than a direct request to Leir on her behalf.

When he speaks on behalf of Cordella, Kent approaches Lear far differently. Perillus has begun cautiously, speaking with the deference a king expects, and giving the king ample clue of his next words. Kent, already warned by Lear, does not come "between the dragon and his wrath," (I. i. 122), begins with the respectful courtesy due a king, saying, "Royal Lear, / whom I have ever honor'd as my king, / Lov'd as my father,

as my master follow' d (I. i. 139-141), but he continues to express what he thinks, demonstrating an unrelenting nature which Shakespeare's audience will identify with his name⁷. He exhibits his own harsh cholera when he speaks to Lear, calling him "mad" and his actions "folly" (I. i. 146-50). Brushing aside all concern for himself, but evidencing wisdom which Lear is to remember later, Kent pleads with Lear to "Reserve thy state, / And in thy best consideration check. / This hideous rashness" (I. i. 150-52). Even after three warnings, Kent continues to plead for Lear to reconsider his actions, not to mistreat Cordella, and to retain possession of his kingdom. Kent verbally drives the king to banish him since Lear cannot allow anyone to speak to him in such a disrespectful manner in his entire court.

Although banished, Kent stubbornly refuses to discontinue his service of the king. Only someone with his fortitude would maneuver to remain near a king who has expelled him, but he truly reflects the attitude of gentlemanly conduct which requires a gentleman to live "not for himself, but for others: to the neglect even of his own interest and of his own inclinations" (Kelso 39). After disguising both his person and his speech, Kent innocently believes he will go unrecognized, and, in fact, Lear and his followers do not suspect the base-appearing Caius who arrives mysteriously at Goneril's castle even though Kent cannot refrain from identifying himself as "a gentleman of blood and breeding" (III. i. 40). However, Kent's underlying spirit is clearly evident through his Caius disguise. His unconquerable nature makes him unable to allow base and deceptive persons, such as Oswald, to take advantage of him or of his king. His quick and angered responses evidence his noble and choleric nature. Possessing a choleric nature like Lear and other persons of noble blood, Kent has difficulty remaining in the disguise mode of a low-ranking person.

Just as his Kentish spirit makes its appearance through the disguise, so too does his noble birth. Although he covers his physical body with the

disguise garments and alters his true speech with vulgar and base phrases, his aristocratic blood is always evident. His nobility of birth makes him regard Oswald's base characteristics with such a disdain that he cannot refrain from calling the servant "base" (I. iv. 85), a "knave", and a "rascal" (II. ii. 14-15). His vicious diatribe delivered against Oswald covers the gamut of every known base characteristic, from an "eater of broken meats" (II. ii. 14-15), referring to the poor diet of the lower classes, which Shakespeare partially blames for their lack of intelligence, their poor health, their foul odors, and general unpleasantness, to Oswald's "epileptic visage," indicating his paleness, for Shakespeare an indication of cowardice. Kent's aristocratic temperament regards all these traits so abominable that, even in disguise, he must lash out against them.

For a person with such regard for conduct and appearance, being placed in the stocks could be a debilitating experience; however, Kent faces it with his usual stalwartness, exhibiting a loyalty to his king that Rosalie Colie calls "a mark of his commitment to the aristocratic ethos" (193). The punishment is normally reserved for only the "basest and contemned'st wretches" (II. ii. 146) as Lawrence Stone confirms in *The Crisis of the Aristocracy 1558-1641*, adding that "both government and the public saw a clear distinction" between the types of punishment for different classes, and gentility were "immune from physical penalties" (29). Had Kent revealed his true identity, he would never have been placed in the stocks. But to continue to serve his king, Kent must remain in disguise. Shakespeare's amplification of Kent's exemplary behavior emphasizes Kent's respect for the noble king. Gloucester defends Lear when he argues that only the worst criminals would be required to suffer such punishment, but never the King's messenger.

Indignant when learning that Cornwall has placed his servant in the stocks, Lear protests in disbelief that "Tis worse than murder / To do upon respect such violent outrage" (II. ii. 210-12). Lear's outrage, of course,

stems from his own insult of Cornwall's dishonoring him by punishing Caius in such a lowly manner. However, Cornwall commits a far greater crime than either he or Lear realizes since he has really placed Kent, an Earl, in the stocks. Titled nobility "could not be arrested except for treason, felony, or breach of the peace. . . They were free of various writs designed to force men to appear in court. They were not obliged to testify under oath" (Stone 54). Kent's willingness to undergo the humiliation of the stocks with a mere comment of "A good man's fortune may grow out at heels" (II. ii. 160) reinforces the awareness of his supreme devotion to King Lear. Like Thomas Milles, he views the king as "the fountaine of all nobilitie" (26).

Shakespeare includes the punishment scene, brought about when Kent, alias Caius, delivers Lear's message to Gloster, to provide a method of further demonstrating Kent's devotion to Lear. In the source messengers abound, delivering notes from Cornwall to Leir, from Gonorill to Ragan, and from Cordella to Leir, but the faithful Perillus remains at Leir's side and thus never encounters the difficulties faced by Kent. By having Kent deliver the message to Gloster, Shakespeare not only includes the event which demonstrates Kent's devotion so adequately, but also enables him to include Gloster, another noble devoted to Lear,

Shakespeare's addition of the dual sub-plot of Gloster's difficulty with his bastard son provides the most extreme move away from the source play of *King Lear*. Although derived from only a single scene in Sidney's *Arcadia*, the Gloster sub-plot adds many dimensions to the overall play. From this single scene of "an aged man, and a young, scardelie come to the age of a man, both poorely arrayed, extreemely weather-beaten: the old man blind, the young man leading him" (Sidney 386), Shakespeare adds the elements of blindness, a young man's devotion to an older, the storm, and an added element of nobility through "and yet through all those miserises, in both there seemed to appeare a kind of noblenesse, not suitable to that affliction"

(Sidney 386). The dual plot acts as a reflection, re-emphasizing the difficulty that Lear has with his own children, but it also provides another noble character who devotes himself to Lear in a brave and selfless manner.

Shakespeare's gentry displays behavior proper to his title, believing that he is "the example, the leader, the governor of the common people" (Kelso 13), and must look especially "to his morals more closely" (Kelso 13). In the opening scene Gloucester indicates that while he may not have always practiced morality, he does regret the transgression. Exhibiting his shame, Gloucester says, "I have so often blushed to acknowledge him," (I. i. 10), referring to Edmund, his bastard son. Shakespeare focuses on Edmund's bastardy as other characters call him "a natural boy" (II. i. 85), a "villain," (I. ii. 169), and "base" (I. ii. 6), realizing his audience will attribute the young man's lamentable behavior to his birth. In a 16th century treatise Sir John Fortescue explains that "bastards are actually contaminated by the sinful circumstances of their begetting" (Lyons, "The Subplot" 26)⁸. The repetition of Edmund's birthright reminds us of Gloucester's shame which, in turn reminds us of the Earl's noble blood.

At great risk himself, Gloucester goes out into the storm to warn Lear that "His daughters seek his death" (III. iv. 161). By his action, Gloucester brings violence upon himself, actually suggesting it when in defense of his actions toward Lear, he says, "Because I would not see thy cruel nails / Pluck out his poor old eyes" (III. vii. 57-58). By refusing to reveal Lear's destination and standing up to Cornwall and his men so bravely, Gloucester exhibits the gentlemanly courage Kelso describes as "steeling a man to patient endurance of misfortune," not as "slow passivity," but as "valor" (93). Shakespeare allows his highest tribute to individuals undergoing suffering in such a noble manner, describing it in *Coriolanus* as "fortune's blows / When most struck home, being gentle wounded craves / A noble cunning" (IV. i. 7-9). Outnumbered by younger, stronger men, Gloucester stands firm,

displaying his valor with such dignity that one of Cornwall's own servants attempts to defend the old man, stabbing Cornwall, an otherwise unheard of action in Shakespeare. After Gloucester's eyes have been put out, his two servants tenderly apply egg whites to his bleeding face, apparently breathing no offensive odor (III. vii. 108).

In the storm scene both Gloucester and Lear exhibit their brave fortitude in the face of adversity, thereby achieving their greatest moment. The oldest and most suffering of the group, each places the needs of others before his own, reflecting the true nature of their gentility. Lear allows the Fool to enter the cave before him and Gloucester speaks kindly and respectfully to Edgar, disguised as Tom O' Bedlam. Each displays his finest hour amid pain, suffering, and poverty. The noted critic A. C. Bradley describes their actions aptly when he writes that the "rage of the storm awakes a power and a poetic grandeur surpassing even that of Othello's anguish" (24). Lear, who earlier had but "slenderly known himself" (I. i. 294), and Gloucester, who was likewise misinformed, have come to think of others first even amid the greatest suffering of their own lives. By placing them together near the play's end, each suffering great pain: Gloucester the loss of his eyesight, Lear the loss of his beautiful Cordelia, Shakespeare doubles the significance of Lear's nobility. In the final scenes as he bravely faces adversity, no longer evidencing any trace of his former arrogance, Lear displays a dignity which allows him to stand beside classic heroes of the past. He remains "every inch a king" (IV. vi. 108).

Notes

1 Citing two ways of producing gentility: native (by birth) or dative (by direct acquisition from the king), Ruth Kelso indicates that "the idea that gentility meant fundamentally gentle birth was never lost" (20).

2 Versions of the Lear story available to Shakespeare include: Holinshed's *Chronicles of England* (1587), John Higgin's *The First Part of the Mirour for Magistrates* (1574), and Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, II: 10. In *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare: King Lear*, Horace Furness credits another play, *The Chronicle History of King Leir*, which dramatized as early as 1593 or 1594, with having provided the closest model for Shakespeare's Lear. Entered in the Stationers' Register in 1594 by Edward White, this early source play was later published under the name *The True Chronicle Historie of King Leir and His Three Daughters* by Simon Stafford in 1605, (383).

3 All quotations are from *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. David Bevington, 3rd ed.

4 The OED cites the legend of this bird, understood to feed her young with her own blood. When Lear says "Twas this flesh begot / Those Pelican Daughters" (III. iv. 77), he accuses them of trying to take his life's blood. A similar use can be found in *King Richard II* (II. i. 126).

5 A. C. Bradley's interpretation that Lear's death is caused by

unbearable joy induced by the belief that Cordelia is alive, has been adopted by some recent critics, including William Empson, and Kenneth Muir, yet none have discussed the physical properties necessary for such a death. Berkeley describes the phenomena to the heart as “bursting” (38).

6 The following characters’ names reflect Shakespeare’s close adherence to his source: King Leir (Lear), King of Cornwall (Cornwall), Gonorill (Goneril), Ragan (Regan), and Cordella (Cordelia). Shakespeare made drastic changes in the following: Perillus (Kent) and Prince of Cambria (Duke of Albany). Shakespeare added the following characters: Earl of Gloster, Edgar, Edmund, The Fool, and Oswald.

7 For more information regarding the Kentish, see David Berkeley’s *Blood Will Tell*, 40-43.

8 For more information regarding bastardy in the 16th century, see John W. Draper’s “Bastardy in Shakespeare’s Plays.”

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국문 초록

혈통의 변형 : 셰익스피어의 리어 왕

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그의 다른 극들에서와 마찬가지로, 『리어 왕의 비극』(*The Tragedy of King Lear*)에서 셰익스피어(Shakespeare)는 그의 원전(source)들로부터 몇몇 아이디어들을 가져와서 그것들을 그의 목적에 맞도록 변형시키고 있다. 그 중에서도 가장 빈번하고 확실하게 변형시킨 것 중의 하나는 혈통에 바탕을 둔 등장 인물들의 신분을 구분하는 것이다. 르네상스 시대의 사회적 신분 구분을 반영해서, 셰익스피어는 왕족 및 귀족을 존경하고, 하층민을 혐오하는 그의 사상을 강조하기 위해 그의 작품 속에서 모든 노력을 경주하고 있다. 셰익스피어는 엄격한 신분 구조에 대한 그의 집착을 정당화시키기 위해, 토마스 왈킹톤(Thomas Walkington) 같은 동시대의 이론가들에게 많은 의존을 하고 있다. 그들은 혈통이 바로 사람의 영혼을 가지고 있다고 믿고 있었다. 『리어 왕』에서 셰익스피어는 이 작품의 일차 원전(primary source)들인 『리어 왕 연대기』(*The True Chronicle History of King Lear*)와 필립 시드니(Philip Sidney)의 『아케이디아』(*Arcadia*)를 변형시키고 있다. 즉, 혈통에 대한 언급들을 통해 그리고 켄트(Kent)와 글로스터(Gloster)의 현신의 모습을 통해 리어 왕을 원전들에서보다 더욱 고상하고 귀족적인 인물로 그리고 있는 것이다.

본 논문에서는, 첫째, 셰익스피어의 『리어 왕』과 이 작품의 일차 원전들과의 비교를 통해 내용상의 차이점들을 밝히고, 둘째, 어떠한 목적으로 셰익스피어가 그의 원전들을 변형시켰는지를 르네상스 시대의 사상과 그의 작품을 바탕으로 구체적으로 분석하고, 셋째, 셰익스피어가 그의 원전들을 어떻게 변형시키고 있으며 그것

이 그의 작품에 어떠한 영향을 주고 있는 지를 스타일과 테크닉의 측면에서 분석하고 있다.