Thomas Hobbes was a philosopher who wrote in the 17th century, and in 1651, Hobbes published *Leviathan*, a political text centered on the rights of sovereignty and the supporting commonwealth, and the hypothetical contractual agreements entailed by certain political structures. His most prominent philosophical theory was in the rise of political structures; he argued that the commonwealth must agree to certain losses of liberty to be protected by a Sovereign. Hobbes’ explanation was that a state of Nature, a state where every man was out for himself, would predate a political structure. This natural state is what would lead the commonwealth to agree to a loss of liberty. In Hobbes’ own words:

> Hereby it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre; and such a warre, as is of every man, against every man… which is worst of all, [because of] continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short. (192)

The final portion of Hobbes’s description of his warlike state denotes the motivation for a Commonwealth to agree to be ruled over, a protective power would turn a populace away from this type of life and would, in theory, lead to the betterment of all involved. Andreas Höfele in his "‘I'll See Their Trial First’: Law and Disorder in Lear's Animal Kingdom" describes
Leviathan, “At every step, Hobbes’s exposition of civil order sets itself off against a backdrop of primordial anarchy where man was – and, unless properly governed, may become again – indistinguishable from beast, relapsing to that original state of war” (178-79). Logically, each participant would have to make concessions of personal liberty in order for this system to work. The term “Philosophy,” is defined as the study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence; one could say that philosophers write about the world as it is. William Shakespeare’s King Lear, a play surrounding a monarch’s familial downfall exemplifies the Natural state that Hobbes speaks of; Regan and Goneril, Lear’s dastardly daughters, acts as agents within the play of a developing Hobbesian natural state.

Approximately half a century before Hobbes published Leviathan, the concept of weakened sovereignty and a natural state were already being performed on the London stages. King Lear appears in the 1608 Quarto and the First Folio (1623) and one may assume it was conceived of, written, and performed in the late 16th century. The progression of the play is usually portrayed to chart two daughters’ (Goneril and Regan) stripping their father’s power, and descending into a torturous, and potentially traitorous, reactionary space. However, by applying Hobbes’s theories to the play the daughters’ actions are justified based on the political environment their father created; first, Lear’s decision to abdicate his power was inherently unjust, and second, when he separated his power between his daughters he fractured the foundation of the sovereignty. Lear’s decision to relinquish his sovereign power, through unjust practice and in a fundamentally unstable way for the kingdom, led to a downfall into a Hobbesian state of existence, a state of Nature. Lear created a deadly environment in which his daughters were required to survive; this caused Goneril and Regan to act in a way that most see as disregarding familial loyalties and common humanity, “And in their failure to grasp such
things Goneril and Regan put themselves beyond the human pale,” (Grant 182). However, by examining the play using Hobbesian logic it becomes clear that Regan and Goneril were behaving in an appropriate response to their father’s failure.

Although it would make sense to disregard a playwright’s political views as simple entertainment or controversial for the sake of publicity, Shakespeare “shows a highly educated acquaintance with political theory but – perhaps in coincidence – he is not a political theorist. He is, however, an unmatched political observer” (Grant 171). According to Robert Grant, Shakespeare would have easily noticed weaknesses in his own government, especially weaknesses in the sovereign. In *King Lear*, Shakespeare portrays a very specific problem when Lear relinquishes his kingdom and his power to his daughters:

> The map there. Know we have divided  
> In three out kingdom, and ‘tis our first intent  
> To shake all cares and business of our state,  
> Confirming them on younger years.

(I.i.35-39)

Lear is obviously gifting his kingdom to his daughters, however he is also dismissing his responsibility, as acting Sovereign, to his Commonwealth. Brian Sheerin in “Making Use of Nothing: The Sovereignties of King Lear” discusses the idea of ‘nothing’ and how each move that Lear makes deteriorates his kingdom until it dwindles to nothing. “If . . . we think of Lear’s role [as a patron and father] his acts of giving become (for him) a central component of his sovereignty . . . . [However,] no other character in this play registers the gifts of the king as even vaguely indicative of sovereign authority” (Sheerin 802-803). Lear’s acts of giving destabilize both his role as king *and* his role as father. Lear disgraces his crown because a sovereign accepts
the crown “with an oath, law and condition to keep and maintain it, not to depart with it or diminish it” (QTD Sheerin 796). His act of dividing his kingdom between his daughters reduces the crown and the commonwealth. In fact, the abdication of his kingship is unpatriotic because, “To be patriotic is to uphold law, precedent, degree, succession, and that whole hallowed framework which constitutes and national culture . . . . These things are in fact the ground of hereditary right and a king who plays ducks and drakes with them gambles also with his title” (Grant 173). In passing on his sovereignty Lear dismisses degree and proper formats of succession, by diminishing his own standing he destabilizes the hierarchy of the kingdom. The choice he makes depends on his belief that he has the ability and the right, as Sovereign, to divide up his kingdom, hand it over to his daughters to rule, and yet somehow, continue to hold power both over them and over his kingdom.

Lear’s act of gifting his kingdom is inherently unjust, it is a covenant between only him and his daughters and “He which is made Soveraigne maketh no Covenant with his Subjects before-hand, is manifest; because he must make it with the whole multitude, as one party to Covenant, or he must make severall Covenant with every man” (Hobbes 266). Firstly, according to Hobbes, the Sovereign may only make covenants with the entire body of the Commonwealth in order to act justly, therefore his act of making a covenant with his daughters alone was in fact, impossible. Therefore, the covenant is void. The state “Returns therefore to the Sword again; and everyman recovereth the right of Protecting himselfe by his own strength, contrary to the designe they had in the Institution” (Hobbes 266). Secondly, there is a religious aspect to sovereignty, Hobbes dictates that a bishop must crown a king or he is no king, “For who is there that does not see, to whose benefit it conduceth, to have it believed, that a King hath not his Authority from Christ, unless a Bishop crown him” (186). King Lear occurs in a pagan state, however the
passing of the crown is not sanctioned by any kind of religious leader or by anyone other than Lear himself. There is no coronation or systematic passing of the monarch mantle; the abdication is handled with no ceremony other than that of the meeting at the beginning of the play. In this meeting, the passing of the crown is not wholly supported by the present subjects. Kent accuses Lear of madness, foreshadowing the Lear’s future deterioration on the heath:

Let it fall rather, though the fork invade

The region of my heard. Be Kent unmannerly

When Lear is mad. What wilt though do, old man?

Think’st thou that duty shall have dread to speak

When power to flattery bows? (I.i.132-36)

According to Hobbes, a non-sanctioned sovereign is not a sovereign at all; which means that when Lear abdicated his crown to his daughters, he actually dismantled his kingdom to the point of destruction, leading to a Hobbesian state of Nature. Their power “is devoid of the legitimating veil of tradition and ritual” (Gil 98). Lear’s passing of power was a mock ceremony, and his abdication was not complete.

Lear also did not fully pass on his power to his daughters rather, he attempted to retain some of the power he once held as Sovereign. In II.iv, Shakespeare depicts the stripping of Lear, when his daughters undertake to disrobe him of his remaining vestiges of power. In this scene, Lear becomes distraught and verbally battles with his daughters to keep his soldiers, however they insist that he does not need them. Here, Lear makes a grievous error. When he relinquished his kingdom, he should have released it in totality, yet he does not, which further destabilizes the kingdom and both of his daughters, “When a man hath in either manner abandoned, or granted away his Right; then is he said to be Obliged, or Bound, not to hinder those, to whom such Right
is granted,” (Hobbes 200). By refusing to yield to Goneril and Regan, Lear is acting in an unjust way as he is undermining the power he gave to them; technically he is acting as a traitor to the state. In T. M. Burvill’s “Ulysses on ‘Degree’ – Shakespeare Doctrine of Political Order?” he discusses the idea of sovereignty and who has the right to rule, “When does ‘kingship’ leave one man and live in another? Shakespeare is questioning seriously how, with what moral or other authority, was one individual rather than another qualified to rule” (200). Lear’s shift of power to his daughters being inherently unjust, they had no right or qualification to rule. Their inability to do what he tasked them with is what leads to animosity between the sisters and their father, and their seemingly harsh treatment of Lear. Hobbes’s response to this would have been that no man is able to give up any right that would do him harm to give up, “Rights, which no man can be understood by any words, or other signes, to have abandoned, or transferred” (202). These inalienable rights that Lear could not have given up would only exist in a state of peace, but because his actions created a Hobbesian state of nature in his kingdom, Lear loses those rights. Lear’s decision to abdicate was an unjust act, and the way in which he bestows power to Goneril and Regan fractures the foundation of his kingdom.

When Lear passes his power to his daughters he splits the kingdom between them, in “Equality of ability, ariseth equality of hope in the attaining of Ends” (Hobbes 190). By splitting his power between Goneril and Regan, Lear made them equals in power; this created a competition between the sisters. Evidence of their competition is demonstrated in Regan and Goneril’s yearning and pursuit of Edmund. Regan knows of her sister’s attraction for Edmund, and she seeks to tarnish any feelings Edmund has for Goneril, “I never shall endure her. Dear my lord, /Be not familiar with her” (V.i.15-16). Then, when Goneril catches Regan and Edmund together her own venomous jealousy is revealed, “I had rather lose the battle than that
sister/Should loosen him and me” (V.i.18-19). Both sisters are, of course, already married yet they both compete for Edmund – which inevitably leads to their suicides. Anthoney DiMatteo suggests in “’When Blood Is Their Argument’: Shakespeare on War, Freedom, and the Nature of Man” that Edmund, as a character, “espoused the view of man – as bloody and foul by nature,” harkening the Hobbesian description of man in the state of Nature, endowing Edmund as not only a quasi-villain but a symbol of Hobbes’s argument (123). Goneril and Regan’s fight for the affections of Edmund demonstrate their connection with Hobbes’ natural state, they have been functioning in this state for the majority of the play and their attraction to Edmund demonstrates their desire for the power they receive in the state of Nature.

Hobbes declares that “A Kingdome divided in it self cannot stand;” as soon as Lear divided his land and power between the two sisters he set them on a destructive path, neither could act fully as Sovereign because one had to contend with the other (278). In practice Lear attempted to create two separate sovereign powers in his daughters however, as Hobbes points out, that is impossible to maintain:

Therefore, where there is already erected a Soveraign Power, there can be no other Representative of the same people, but onely to certain particular ends, by the Soveraign limited. . . . [For if] every man to have his person represented by two Actors, that by opposing one another, must needs divide that Power . . . and thereby reduce the Multitude into the condition of Warre, contrary to the end for which all Soveraignty is instituted. (286)

Brian Sheerin elaborates on the idea of splitting the kingdom; he argues that the split occurred because of Lear’s weakness in the beginning, either a political weakness or a financial weakness, led to Lear’s sectioning of the lands but that his ability to section the land off to his
daughters, “Does not constitute ‘power’ at all, such power is in fact anti-power; it is nothing” (795). Meaning, though Lear had the ability to divide up his lands and gift them to his daughters, doing so actually weakened the monarch itself and every character involved; rather than gifting them with any kind of strength increase, which is why each member of the familial monarch must be dead at the end of the play. Goneril’s responses to her father in II.iv follows the argument for Lear to get rid of his remaining vestiges of kingship:

What need you five-and-twenty, ten, or five,
To follow in a house where twice so many
Have a command to tend you?

. . .
‘Tis his own blame hath put himself from rest,
And must needs taste his folly.
(II.iv.239-40, 267-68)

In this scene, Goneril is attempting to take what remains of Lear’s power away from him in order to fully instate Regan and herself into power. Goneril accepts that the difficulties she and her sister are experiencing and any woes Lear experiences were brought about by Lear’s own actions. As long as Lear still retains some part of the kingship, neither daughter can fully undertake the Sovereignty.

Goneril and Regan are usually seen as villains, however, they are responding to a world they were forced into, where “There is only the chaos and nightmare of the world revealed to us . . . a world of Hobbesian struggle, of a decapitated Nature, red in tooth and claw, which no one can invoke as witness to his activities without ceasing to be human” (Grant 178). The scene that is usually cited to outline the evil of the sisters is the blinding of Gloucester in III.vii. Hobbes
addresses the morality of torture in *Leviathan* and rules that any admission made under torture is invalid because the confession is made under duress:

> For Torture is to be used but as means of conjecture, and light, in the further examination, and search of truth: and what is in that case confessed tendeth to the ease of him that is Tortured; not to the informing of the Torturers: and therefore ought not to have the credit of a sufficient Testimony: for whether he deliver himself by true, or false Accusation, he does it by Right of preserving his own life. (214)

This seemingly causes issue with Regan and Goneril’s justification. According to Hobbes, torture is not acceptable, however it must be kept in mind that the daughters are functioning in a state of Nature, rather than a legal, sovereign led state. In a state of sovereignty, Hobbes’ comments against torture hold weight, yet in a natural state, social contracts are done away with, as each person exists in a state of war with each other person. In this environment, Regan and Goneril would not be held to Hobbes’s standards of behavior, rather they should be expected to behave in a way that protects them from the state of war that surrounds them. Furthermore, “Rocklin notes that the common law tradition does not allow torture and that torture is therefore always seen as an expression of the prerogative power of the king” (Gil 112). In this case, although torture was still frowned upon, it was accepted that the king or sovereign power could resort to torture but usually only “to achieve extralegal goals such as finding the names of accomplices or demoralizing an oppositional party” the exact motivation behind the torturing of Gloucester (Gil 113). Examination of the questions put forward to Gloucester proves Regan and Cornwall’s motivation for torture; “And what confederacy have you with the traitors/ Late footed in the kingdom?” (III.vii.44-45); “Where hast thou sent the king?” (III.vii.50). Each of their
questions focuses on finding the “lunatic king” (III.vii.47) and those who are helping him, King Lear at the time is considered a danger to the state and a traitor, and each person who helps him becomes an accomplice:

Gloucester has gone out into the wilderness to save his old king rather than obeying his new lords, he is now identified as a ‘traitor’ to the legal and political order that Cornwall and Regan represent and anchor . . . . The torture scene that follows is to highlight how abjectly Gloucester is exposed to the power of Cornwall. (Gil 113)

As distasteful as the torturing of Gloucester is, Regan and Cornwall were acting within their rights as a sovereign power, especially a sovereign power battling a decline into a Hobbesian state of Nature.

The torture scene holds another symbol of the deteriorating state of peace in the kingdom. In a Hobbesian state of Nature, those who continue to uphold social contracts usually end up receiving the negative consequences:

For he that performeth first, has no assurance the other will performe after; because the bonds of words are too weak to bridle mens [sic] ambition, avarice, anger, and other Passions, without the feare of some coercive Power; which is the condition of meer Nature, where all men are equal, and judges of the justnesse of their own fears, cannot possibly be supposed. (Hobbes 210)

Without a Sovereign power there is no one to enforce a penalty when someone does not do what he or she agreed to do. Hobbes argues that without that fear of enforced penalty to make people keep their bargains, there would be no bargains upheld at all. During the blinding of Gloucester,
the text includes a servant who steps up to defend Gloucester against Cornwall and Regan, his
declaration harkens Kent’s plea to Lear, depending on his years of service:

    Hold your hand, my lord.

    *I have served you ever since I was a child,*

    But better service have I never done you

    Than now to bid you hold.

    . . .

    Why then, come on, and take the chance of anger.

(emphasis added III.vii.76-79, 82)

The servant springs into action fatally wounding Gloucester, but only to be killed by Regan. His
action however, demonstrates his attempt to continue honoring the social contracts that should
exist in a Sovereign state (but are deteriorating quickly in the play):

    The servant, who appears only in this one scene in the mighty play, defends the
    natural right of the Earl of Gloucester’s freedom – implicitly even any
    commoner’s freedom – from torture, as well as his right to own property inclusive
    of his body and his home, where the torture takes place in open violation to the
    rights and duties of hospitality. (DiMatteo 128)

The servant presents a picture of a character that is attempting to still participate in, and enforce,
the social contracts that one would expect to find in a civilized nation. However, the descent into
a Natural state has uprooted those values. The servant is not the only character this idea happens
to. Cordelia, the youngest sibling and outcast that was banished at the beginning of the play, and
Lear, at the climax of the play, continue to play by the rules of capture and surrender, and do not
expect to be killed as soon as they are taken to prison:
No, no. Come let’s away to prison.
We two alone will sing like birds i’ th’ cage.
When thou dost ask me blessing, I’ll kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness, so we’ll live,
And pray and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh

(V.iii.8-12)

Lear’s predictions to Cordelia about their behavior in prison, his begging her forgiveness and they telling stories back and forth, does not indicate a man who thinks he is in danger of dying immediately following this scene. He expects those in his former kingdom to continue to follow the social contracts that have always been in place; Edmund discredits Lear’s trust by secretly ordering them to be executed with no trial of any sort; Edmund does not act inappropriately however, he is eradicating a problem effectively and efficiently – for a Hobbesian natural state.

Edmund is a prime example of a successful participant in a Hobbesian state. DiMatteo discusses “evil characters such as Iago, Edmund, Aaron, Shylock, and Richard III” as “loathsome versions” of what Stephen Greenblat calls “radical individualism” (QTD 128). Radical individualism is defined as when the “Villains exploit the powers and dangers if the social and political atomization that [Niccolò di Bernardo dei] Machiavelli had first described in The Prince and that Shakespeare puts to his own dramatic and analytic uses” (DiMatteo 129). By DiMatteo’s reasoning however, Edmund is a villain, extorting the weaknesses of his environment and those around him:

One of the hallmarks of evil in Shakespeare is precisely that freedom from the ‘despotism of custom’ . . . Evil . . is ‘the impulse separated from the being.’ Here the ‘being’ is human, and finds its true identity only in the acceptance of
customary constraints, values and order . . . [Goneril, Edmund, and Regan] are nothing if not ‘rational.’ Given their chosen purposes, they allow no traditional scruples to block the shortest and most economical route to them. (Grant 179)

By Hobbesian reasoning however, the ‘being’ from above would be success in an aggressive and warring world. Therefore, in acting with economy of purpose and a lack of scruples, Regan, Goneril and Edmund are acting in a way to make them successful; they are playing the system, or technically the lack of system, in order to triumph over others.

It is this reasoning that supports the appropriateness of Regan and Goneril’s behavior within the play. Rather than being painted as villains, if they are studied and understood from a Hobbesian perspective their (choices even the unsavory ones) make logical sense. They were forced into this state of being, this natural state, by their father’s failure to maintain his responsibility, and his choice to not abdicate his throne in a way that was beneficial to his family and to the Commonwealth. Rather, he shucked his responsibility as Sovereign and cast partial power onto his daughters. By renouncing the throne irresponsibly, he fostered dissent and distrust between his daughters, creating an unhealthy competitive atmosphere between them. Also, by dividing his power between his daughters he fractured the foundation of his throne, neither daughter was able to fully establish herself into sovereign power, they were not able to rule; his irresponsible decisions created a state of being that technically did not have a sovereign power to protect and rule over it. Regan and Goneril were forced to behave in a way that correlated with the state their father created for them, they had to break social contracts, undermine each other, and resort to torture in order to keep control of what their father hurled onto them. In this way, Goneril and Regan acted appropriately in response to their father’s incompetence.
Works Cited


