Lincoln's Shakespearean Education

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Lincoln’s Shakespearean Education

By
Ted Richards

Claremont Graduate University
2024
Approval of the Dissertation Committee

This dissertation has been duly read, reviewed, and critiqued by the Committee listed below, which hereby approves the manuscript of Ted Richards as fulfilling the scope and quality requirements for meriting the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science.

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Abstract

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This dissertation demonstrates that Abraham Lincoln’s self-education in the works of William Shakespeare substantially animates his thought and statesmanship, that Lincoln’s political philosophy is indelibly etched with Shakespeare’s influence. The project begins with an introduction, justifying this thesis and explaining the methodology. The paper’s justification relies on several important Shakespeare references in Lincoln’s speeches and writings. I analyze those references, comparing them to their original context, and thereby demonstrate Lincoln’s impressive grasp of Shakespeare, and Shakespeare’s deep influence on Lincoln. Once I establish this, I begin a series of thematic chapters on the basis of these references and their import, often referring to such references in approaching Lincoln and Shakespeare more obliquely. In the thematic studies there is a special emphasis on *Macbeth*, Lincoln’s self-identified favorite play. Additionally, those chapters approach Lincoln’s understanding of their respective subjects by way of accounts given in political philosophy. They provide definitional touchstones for the comparisons in Lincoln and Shakespeare.

This project includes, in addition to the introduction and chapter on Lincoln’s Shakespeare references, a chapter on Lincoln’s understanding of ambition and prudence as compared with that of Hobbes, Aristotle, and Shakespeare. It focuses primarily on Lincoln’s statements on the subjects compared with Shakespeare’s account of each in *Macbeth*.

Next comes a chapter on Lincoln’s marriage and its influence on his life and career. Mary Todd Lincoln is compared favorably to Lady Macbeth, among others. That chapter draws out the
important role wives have always played in the lives and careers of their husbands. Examples from both Aristotle and Tocqueville support those of Mary Todd and Lady Macbeth.

The final substantive chapter discusses Lincoln and Shakespeare’s views of divine and natural right in light of John Neville Figgis, King James, and Leo Strauss’ writings on the topics. The chapter uses Richard II, Macbeth, and King Lear as the primary basis for comparison. The connection between the two are as antagonisms. Lincoln places natural right as a stand in for rightness and right simply (as it upholds republican government) and divine right as wrong simply (as it provides sophistical support for the unjust rule of one man over others without their consent). A throughline is found in the concept of “trial by combat” in both Shakespeare and the Civil War: is it the naturally righteous or those favored by God or providence who conquer? This chapter combs carefully through this question, among others.

The light of Shakespeare’s genius serves to increase the brightness of Lincoln’s own flame. Joining them as this project has done improves our understanding of Shakespeare’s political thought as we learn from Lincoln’s approach to reading and using him. Other students of politics benefit from Lincoln’s example, and the reader gains greater appreciation for Shakespeare as a teacher of statesman.

This compounded source of light also enhances our view of Lincoln. Studying the key texts in which Lincoln expressed interest enriches our understanding of his ideas. Lincoln’s view of human nature (including ambition and prudence), his understanding of marriage, and his conception of divine and natural right sovereignty benefit from the light of Shakespeare’s insight. The result is not merely greater knowledge of those ideas, but an increased appreciation for his legacy as a whole. The discreet topics of the chapters coalesce, disclosing new points of interest in their relationships and an emerging coherence in the legacy of Lincoln. The man emerges in
greater complexity and power. His rhetoric and manner of thinking take on a distinctly Shakespearean caste, endowing his already estimable life and thought with greater dignity.
Dedication

To McKenzie, my love, my greatest support, my friend
Acknowledgements

Many contributed to this project who deserve acknowledgement. I include only a few here. Chris Nadon has been a mentor and advisor throughout my graduate education. His guidance as chair of my committee was indispensable. Charles Kesler has been by my side encouraging me and assisting me in securing funding and employment to make my PhD possible. His presence on my committee is greatly appreciated. James Nichols is the teacher from whom I took the greatest number of courses in my studies. His influence on this project as a member of the committee and on my formation as a scholar is immense. John Briggs has become a mentor despite his having no connection with my graduate institution. His guidance both before the official formation of my committee and after goes well beyond the call of duty. I count all the members of my committee as teachers, advisors, and friends and thank them sincerely for their assistance in this project.

The Rumsfeld Foundation Graduate Fellowship provided funding that enabled me to stay on track with my coursework. The Bradley Fund Graduate Fellowship eased the financial burden to pursuing a PhD both in and out of my courses.

*Perspectives on Political Science* graciously allowed me to adapt my essay “Lincoln and Shakespeare at Peoria,” for this dissertation’s opening chapter.

To all others who have helped directly and indirectly by reading, commenting, or advising on this project, and to those who provided other sorts of support, like childcare, such “unofficial” support may sometimes go unmentioned, but does not go unnoticed. My wife McKenzie Richards provided each type of help listed here, to say nothing of her continued support and encouragement.

Thank you.
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Introduction: Lincoln’s Shakespeare

*We can be reminded here of Lincoln’s own great comic gift as a storyteller, however much he restrained himself in his speeches as president...His ability both as a legendary storyteller and as a solemn orator brings to mind a scene reported at the end of Plato’s Symposium.*

-George Anastaplo¹

*Socrates was compelling them to agree that the same man should know how to make comedy and tragedy; and that he who is by art a tragic poet is also a comic poet.*

-Plato²

*Shakespeare is the greatest—perhaps he is the only—poet to have practiced the art referred to by Socrates at the end of the Symposium.*

-Harry Jaffa³

Abraham Lincoln’s statesmanship is regarded as “perfectly Aristotelian,” with good reason.⁴ However, Lincoln earned this characterization against the odds. His modest upbringing hardly implies all that he became. Of his education, Lincoln wrote, “the aggregate [sic] of all his schooling did not amount to one year. He was never in a college or Academy as a student; and never inside of a college or accademy [sic] building till since he had a law-license.” Despite his

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² From *Plato Symposium*, Seth Benardete Trans., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 223c-d
³ From “The Unity of Comedy, Tragedy and History: An Interpretation of the Shakespearean Universe,” in *Shakespeare as Political Thinker*, John E. Alvis and Thomas G. West ed., (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2000), 29
lack of formal training, Lincoln studied independently: “What he has in the way of education, he has picked up… He regrets his want of education, and does what he can to supply the want.”\(^5\) In this autodidactic project Lincoln “did not read widely, but he read deeply,”\(^6\) he was “gifted at getting the most quality out of the least quantity.”\(^7\)

Fortunately, though sparse his education was, the small library that supplied his core curriculum contained some very good books that reward deep study, the traditional pairing of Shakespeare and the Bible being the chief cornerstone. Given this generally accepted characterization, it is surprising to note that Shakespeare’s impact on Lincoln remains understudied and so, quite imperfectly understood.\(^8\)

This dissertation demonstrates that Lincoln’s Shakespearean self-education substantially animates his thought and statesmanship, that Lincoln’s political philosophy is indelibly etched with Shakespeare’s influence. This is established through a close reading of Lincoln’s speeches and writings, analyzing direct or oblique Shakespeare references, as well as several careful thematic treatments of Lincoln’s thought in light of Shakespearean ideas with which he engaged.

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\(^8\) Michael Anderegg, *Lincoln and Shakespeare* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2015) represents an important exception. The work largely consists of a collection of historical instances of Lincoln’s interaction with Shakespeare based on primary, secondary, and tertiary sources. It is a repository of evidence for Lincoln’s relationship with Shakespeare. Anderegg’s book is primarily an archival history. I am indebted to Anderegg for his exhaustive study; his work provided sources and sparked insights as noted throughout this dissertation. Occasionally others have engaged this topic. For example, Harry Jaffa, *A New Birth of Freedom*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 127-135, as well as a few passages (particularly on 35-40) from his essay in *Shakespeare as Political Thinker* cited above as an epigraph. I am, of course, extremely indebted as well to the careful analysis on the topic in the book of John Channing Briggs (a member of my dissertation committee) *Lincoln’s Speeches Reconsidered* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005). He offers many helpful insights in that work on Shakespeare and Lincoln, and therein models the right way to observe resonances of Shakespeare—and other literary influences—in Lincoln.
Justifying a dissertation on Abraham Lincoln proves a more challenging task than it might seem. After all, Lincoln is the subject of over 15,000 books. Discovering something unsaid (and worth saying) about the man presents a challenge in itself. However, one of the most notable strengths of this thesis is its novelty. Any dissertation ought to increase the total knowledge in the world on its subject. Though some minimal, often quite impressive, work has been done on Lincoln and Shakespeare, something so systematic and focused as this project has not been successfully carried off. This study improves our understanding of Lincoln’s education, rhetoric, and statesmanship by focusing on an area of his life and career that has very little written about it, thereby offering surprising new insights.

Should this project meet with approval of the community to which it addresses itself, it will open up other important scholarly avenues. For example, it naturally implies a future sequel on Lincoln and the Bible. Similar research on other statesmen and thinkers could prove fruitful as well.

In addition to its novelty, the thesis has explanatory power. Although it is not a silver bullet, Shakespeare’s influence reveals much about Lincoln. Shining this light into various corners of his life and thought helps illuminate sometimes puzzling things. One important example is Lincoln’s grasp of political philosophy. While his legal training accounts for his facility with legislative and judicial reasoning, it does not satisfactorily explain his understanding of tyranny, equality, providence, natural rights, republicanism, etc. These topics fill volumes from Plato to Nietzsche and everywhere in between. Lincoln, however, demonstrates that a person can gain insights into these important areas without delving too deep into the western canon. Indeed, Shakespeare sufficiently treats these subjects to explain, in large part, Lincoln’s understanding.
Finally, this dissertation provides an example for those seeking to educate themselves. Lincoln’s autodidactic self-improvement has always served as a potential inspiration for those who see some of themselves in this peasant-cum-president. However, the details of his education and its impact are often sparse. In absence of a thorough explanation, those inspired by Lincoln might find themselves unable to aspire to his education, since they might not know what it consists in, nor how to find it out. This project, as a secondary matter, will offer a tool for those who find themselves inspired by Lincoln’s Shakespearean education and looking for curriculum and examples of how to go and do likewise. This adds to a decidedly theoretical project an imminently practical application.

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Although all acknowledge Shakespeare’s brilliance, his status as a “thinker” and especially as a political philosopher remains extremely controversial. However, a look at Aristotle’s *Poetics* provides a succinct argument for Shakespeare’s power as a thinker, and specifically punctuates the significance of Lincoln’s favorite plays.

In *Poetics* 9, Aristotle says that the difference between history and poetry is not a distinction between “using verse and prose,” since any history could technically be set to verse and would still essentially be history. A poet does not present precisely what has occurred historically, “but the kinds of things that might occur.” This makes poetry “more philosophical and more elevated than history, since poetry relates more of the universal, while history relates the particulars.” Stated another way, poetry is more philosophical, and history is more political.9

Aristotle elides the question of historically inspired plays under his description of the relationship between tragedy and real events. Most poetry, Aristotle notes, aims at embodying

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universal principles in the most plausible way it can. Poetry tends to only name its characters and settings incidentally, “but, in tragedy [poets] adhere to the actual names. The reason is that the possible seems plausible…it is evident that actual events are possible—they could not otherwise have occurred.”

History, thus, informs good tragedy on this basis. However, Aristotle still classes such tragedies firmly under the label of poetry, neglecting treatment of the question of historical influence.

The Poetics’ distinctions between history and poetry, even in its concessions to the realism of tragedy, does not fully anticipate Shakespeare’s History Plays. These plays draw their plot and characters from actual historical events and figures, yet they do not fall into Aristotle’s half-joking category of Herodotus set to verse. Shakespeare refracts the events through his own lens, endowing them with a teleological meaning they might naturally lack and usually forming compelling characters out of the true historical figures in his source materials. By his combination of the particularizing, political events of history with the universalizing, philosophical medium of poetry, Shakespeare’s history plays become, according to Aristotle’s teaching, a kind of political philosophy. That Shakespeare—the man who fulfills Socrates’s idea of a complete poet who can equally write both comedy and tragedy—should accomplish this near-complete synthesis of Aristotle’s distinction between history and poetry, accords with his talent and genius.

10 Ibid., 61
11 I argue that Shakespeare’s history plays are political philosophy on these bases. However, this is not necessarily an argument for their uniqueness. Other classical poetry based on historical events could fit under the same label, but the argument here deals with Lincoln’s curriculum, so I only argue for those plays, leaving the broader question aside.
12 Add to this the fact that Shakespearean plays can be read as dialogues not unlike those in the Socratic tradition, and Shakespeare’s status as a philosophical thinker becomes far more plausible. In fact, Aristotle lists Socratic dialogues as among a class of unnamed poetry in Poetics, 1447a-b. P. 31 in Loeb.
Granting the status of Shakespeare’s history plays as peculiar works of political philosophy, Abraham Lincoln’s favorite plays\(^\text{13}\) appear in a new light; they provided him a curriculum uniquely suited to his education in political philosophy.

Evidence enough for Shakespeare’s importance to Lincoln exists as initial justification for this dissertation. Writers endlessly cite Lincoln’s private letter to the Shakespearean actor James H. Hackett, as it represents the strongest evidence of Lincoln’s having read quite a lot of Shakespeare.\(^\text{14}\) It appears appropriate to wear it out a little more by quoting the relevant portion of the letter in full here:

> For one of my age, I have seen very little of the drama. The first presentation of Falstaff I ever saw was yours here, last winter or spring. Perhaps the best compliment I can pay is to say, as I truly can, I am very anxious to see it again. Some of Shakspeare’s [sic] plays I have never read; while others I have gone over perhaps as frequently as any unprofessional reader. Among the latter are Lear, Richard Third, Henry Eighth, Hamlet, and especially Macbeth. I think nothing equals Macbeth. It is wonderful. Unlike you gentlemen of the profession, I think the soliloquy in Hamlet commencing “O, my offence is rank” surpasses that commencing “To be, or not to be.” But pardon this small attempt at criticism. I should like to hear you pronounce the opening speech of Richard the Third.\(^\text{15}\)

In addition to confirming his enthusiastic study of Shakespeare and listing several favorite plays, he expresses special affinity for *Macbeth* and identifies a preferred soliloquy in *Hamlet*. On the basis of this letter, this project focuses primarily on the five plays listed as among Lincoln’s favorites, with special emphasis given to *Macbeth*.

\(^\text{13}\) See below for more detailed treatment of “Letter to James H. Hackett,” where Lincoln lists the plays that follow as those which he had “gone over perhaps as frequently as any unprofessional reader.”

\(^\text{14}\) Michael Anderegg in particularly offers a very thorough and helpful treatment of the Hackett letter in Ch. 4 of *Lincoln and Shakespeare*.

This project requires a delicacy of approach to avoid excesses or outright falsehood. Beyond the extraordinary Hackett letter, Lincoln rarely referenced any external sources in his speeches and writings. As a practical matter, one encounters difficulty studying his understanding of Shakespeare, or almost any other thing he might have read. In some places he makes clear Shakespeare references; these receive direct treatment in the opening chapter. In addition to such undeniable references, Lincoln often indirectly invoked Shakespeare. Such examples evince a Shakespearean influence, but not necessarily self-consciousness on Lincoln’s part in displaying it. Treatments of such examples are here taken up in establishing a justification for thematic chapters. For example, in the two chapters on ambition, Lincoln’s use of lions and eagles to describe ambitious political conquerors is compared with Shakespeare’s use of the same in describing Macbeth and Banquo in *Macbeth*. And again, in the chapter on nature and divine right, a comparison of Lincoln’s comments on bastards and those of Edmund in *King Lear* establishes a link between the two, without claiming anything definitive beyond a reasonable standard of verifiability.

My method in the thematic chapters involves taking these initial clues as a starting point, then engaging the writings of both Lincoln and Shakespeare, seeking out comparable language and ideas worth exploring. To bolster the depth of analysis and help in defining and comprehending sufficiently the concepts under consideration, the perspective of political thinkers like Hobbes, Aristotle, Nietzsche, Tocqueville, and others figure into each thematic chapter. The result is a robust examination of the kinds of things Lincoln learned from Shakespeare and how they manifested in his thought and statesmanship.

Much of what Lincoln espouses derives from his reasoning on the nature of political phenomena. His extraordinary mind allows him access to such ideas. Shakespeare’s similarity to
Lincoln does not always suggest his writings as the fundamental, self-conscious source of Lincoln’s thought. Rather, they likely sharpened and clarified Lincoln’s thoughts on the subject, allowing him to find his way to similar conclusions inspired both directly and indirectly by Shakespeare. Establishing this improves on and supplements extant accounts of Lincoln’s genius.

The opening chapter consists in an analysis of Lincoln’s Shakespeare references in two speeches, his famous “Peoria Address,” and his less familiar “Speech at a Republican Banquet.” The former contains references to Macbeth, Hamlet, Henry IV Part 1, and Richard III. The latter has a quote from King Lear. The chapter demonstrates the depth at which Lincoln read Shakespeare and the foundational influence Shakespeare had for certain of his important political ideas. It also offers a glimpse at the manner in which he uses Shakespeare, not just to beautify his speech, but to introduce implicit, literary arguments. For Lincoln, Shakespeare himself was a source of wisdom, not an intellectual adornment. Fundamentally, this chapter proposes to show a Lincolnian understanding of Shakespeare. Once established, this frees the subsequent chapters to reveal a Shakespearean understanding of Lincoln.

The next chapter explores Lincoln’s understanding of ambition and prudence in light of those themes in Macbeth. As noted above, this is bolstered by an apparent Shakespeare reference in Lincoln’s most famous writing that deals with ambition: his “Lyceum Address.” This chapter begins a pattern that each subsequent chapter follows in its organization and construction. After introductory material begins a philosophical analysis of a concept, in this case ambition, using a key thinker whose understanding accords with that of Lincoln, in this case Thomas Hobbes. Next, Lincoln’s perspective on the topic is addressed. Finally, Shakespeare is brought in as the final point of comparison. After this a section briefly analyzing and synthesizing the three
sources appears. This same pattern repeats as many times as the chapter calls for. In this case, the same procedure occurs twice, the second time dealing with prudence in Aristotle, Lincoln, and Shakespeare, before the conclusion of the chapter.

The findings in this chapter demonstrate in Lincoln a perspective sharp enough to comfortably bear comparison to Aristotle and Hobbes. That perspective, it is averred, comes by means of his brilliant reading of *Macbeth*. Further, his reading of *Macbeth* allowed him the ability to come to full grips with the absolute limits and possibilities of political ambition and thereby hone his own internal drive into a precise instrument in service of his ultimate, righteous goals: to free the slaves and preserve the Union.

The theme of ambition in *Macbeth* animates the next chapter as well, which deals with the question of ambitious wives. The chapter deals as much with Mary Todd Lincoln as with Abraham, bearing primarily on her role in his career. She is favorably compared with Lady Macbeth, while noting also the warning inherent in the latter’s tragic tale. The role of an ambitious wife in the development and career of a statesman of the highest order proves a tricky concept to pin down neatly in philosophy. To come to grips with the themes of the chapter a close reading of Aristotle on women and the politics of the household in his *Politics* is supplemented by Alexis de Tocqueville’s account of American women in *Democracy in America*. On the basis of these sources, this unusual account of Lincoln’s success concludes that, among his several romantic interests, he self-consciously married a brilliant, ambitious, politically-minded woman for the good of his career, seeing the role such a wife can play in the unfortunate example of Lady Macbeth. This explains the power Mary Todd exercised in their relationship and the undeniable friction attendant to their homelife, and of course the success she helped him achieve.
The final chapter explores the connection between divine right of kings and natural right. Lincoln’s view of the two forms of sovereignty is eminently practical, and deeply fascinating. His reductive, incisive view of divine right bears the mark of one familiar with the problems of the doctrine through careful thought on the matter. Shakespeare provided means of his thinking through the theory in his history plays, and through a unique reading of Macbeth. For a historical and philosophical foundation in divine right of kings, the chapter draws on the classic survey of the doctrine’s historical development by John Neville Figgis, and includes a summary of the theoretical account of the doctrine in the writings of King James VI and I.

Natural right, of course, is a distinctly American political theory about which Lincoln certainly knew more than divine right. The primary source of his thinking on nature in politics, of course, is the Declaration of Independence, but that document does not explain the full range of perspective Lincoln brings to the subject. His particular view of nature was also shaped by his study of Shakespeare. The exemplary play from which the chapter draws is King Lear, noted as one of his favorites, and one of the plays explicitly quoted in the references chapter. Furthermore, Lincoln’s account of bastardy aligns with surprising consistency to that given by Edmund in the play, as noted above. Leo Strauss provides the theoretical background on nature to show the full range of sources from which Lincoln’s unusual perspective might draw.

The chapter includes a throughline exploring trial by combat as an unusual, shared perspective in both divine and nature right thinking, particularly in Shakespeare. Lincoln offers some level synthesis of the two positions with his rhetorically cautious attempts to elevate the base elements of human nature, epitomized in his famous injunction to have faith that right makes might.
CHAPTER 1

Lincoln’s Shakespeare References

A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.

-Proverbs 25:11

Beyond the Hackett letter and occasional references in other correspondence, only two of Lincoln’s speeches contain clear, direct references to Shakespeare. In his “Speech on the Kansas-Nebraska Act at Peoria, IL,” Lincoln quotes Shakespeare three times. The first two references come from Hamlet and Macbeth respectively. The third reference remains ambiguous, but Macbeth is the likeliest source, though Hamlet could also plausibly be the source. Furthermore, Lincoln alludes to Shakespeare twice more, with subtle nods to Richard III and Henry IV, Part 1. All these citations fall within a seven-page span. We agree with John Channing Briggs that “the density of Shakespearean references in this section of the speech is remarkable,” and further assert that it is worthy of careful attention. Nothing like this appears anywhere else in Lincoln’s writings.

1 See, ex: his comparison of Mary Owens to Falstaff in his April 1, 1838 letter to Mrs. Orville H. Browning, Speeches and Writings, Vol. 1, 37-39.
4 Lincoln’s Speeches Reconsidered, 158. According to Anderegg (Lincoln and Shakespeare) it contains “more Shakespeare citations than the rest of Lincoln’s speeches put together” 25.
6 Much of the introduction, the full section on the references at Peoria, and some of the conclusion originally appeared in 2021 as an article titled “Lincoln and Shakespeare at Peoria,” in Perspectives on Political Science,
The other example is found in “Portion of Speech at Republican Banquet,” December 10, 1856, Chicago, IL where Lincoln cites *King Lear*, comparing Lear’s bereft condition following his expulsion by his daughters to President Franklin Pierce’s position after having unwittingly been used to propel designing men to power.\(^7\) I address each speech in turn, starting with Peoria.

**The Peoria Speech**

Lincoln played a central role in the process of the Peoria speech’s publication. Bypassing traditional methods of third-party shorthand reporting, he personally sent his edited remarks to the *Illinois State Journal* for publication, a practice he made a habit of thereafter.\(^8\) “The reporter and editor of the speech,” wrote Lewis Lehrman, “was also its author. [Lincoln] had perfected it for the stump and then for publication.”\(^9\)

Knowing of Lincoln’s cautious publication process, and of his custom of eschewing literary references in his writing, finding quotation marks around three lines of Shakespeare (with two evident indirect references in addition) elicits a question: What did Lincoln intend with these quotes? These references powerfully punctuate important moments in his speech, as they might do for any talented orator. However, analysis of the lines in their original context as compared to Lincoln’s context reveals that, beyond mere stump rhetoric, he had deeper intentions in his use of Shakespeare. Furthermore, those intentions reveal the profound influence Shakespeare had on Lincoln.

\(^7\) *Speeches and Writings, Vol. 1*, 385-386.
\(^9\) *Lincoln at Peoria*, 103
I address each reference in chronological order, beginning with the line quoted from *Hamlet* (3.3.97), followed by the two subtler references from *Richard III* and *Henry IV Part 1*, then the quote from *Macbeth* (3.2.55), and concluding with the reference to *Macbeth* or *Hamlet*. But first, some background on the Peoria Speech.

After a five-year hiatus from politics following his single term in Congress, Lincoln was spurred into action by the repeal of the Missouri compromise in the Kansas-Nebraska Act. At Peoria, Illinois on October 16, 1854, Lincoln responded with prepared remarks to comments made the same day by the lead Senate sponsor of that bill, his famous interlocutor Stephen Douglas.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act granted the inhabitants of the Nebraska territory the right to decide whether they would permit slavery in their borders, replacing the Missouri Compromise with a policy of state/territory level popular sovereignty. The bill also stated that the territorial decision on slavery would be enshrined permanently at the establishment of Nebraska’s future state constitution. Once slavery was in, whether voted in by 10 or 10,000, it was in for good.

For Lincoln, it would be absurd for any number of settlers in Nebraska to decide permanently on as morally and politically momentous a question as slavery’s status within that prospective state for the future citizens of Nebraska and for the entire nation. Moreover, Lincoln argued that the question of slavery in the territories falls constitutionally under Congress’ purview and, at any rate, could never be decided by territorial inhabitants.

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10 These references are in the same paragraph as the first quote.
11 These latter two references are only four paragraphs apart.
13 ibid., 330-332
Lincoln’s speech at Peoria consists of a historical survey of compromises on the slave question generally (especially the Missouri Compromise), a discussion of certain founders’ views on slavery, and a dismantling of Douglas’ popular sovereignty. With these analyses Lincoln exposes the logical absurdity of slavery under the republican principles of the United States. The very idea that Douglas confidently asserted the sacred right of any number of individuals to extend the moral wrong of slavery struck Lincoln as ridiculous.\textsuperscript{14} Though the Constitution allowed for and even protected slavery where it already existed, Lincoln staked his political fate on preventing it from coming where it had once been forbidden.

Lincoln first quoted Shakespeare in addressing Douglas’ claim that his bill would permanently settle the slave question. Indeed, some claimed the inhabitants of Nebraska would almost certainly forgo slavery given the choice.\textsuperscript{15} However, the principles of Douglas’ proclaimed indifference to the question insisted that they ought to be given the choice. Popular sovereignty is, after all, a sacred right. Furthermore, granting this right to citizens of territories would remove the slave question from the national conversation and allow for local control, ending all sectional conflict over slavery, thus saving the union.\textsuperscript{16} Lincoln denounced this urging of Nebraska “as a great Union-saving measure,” as “a palliation—a lullaby.”\textsuperscript{17} He identified in the bill a “principle… [that]would have the effect of extending slavery,”\textsuperscript{18} contra its defenders. Yet, Lincoln’s hatred of slavery notwithstanding, he would “consent to the extension of it rather than see the Union dissolved,” if the bill truly offered the salvation claimed. However, Lincoln

\textsuperscript{14} Fifth Lincoln-Douglas Debate, \textit{Speeches and Writings, Vol. 1}, 708-709, for support of the idea in the Peoria Speech, see Lincoln’s comparison of chattel slaves to hogs, same volume, 326-327.\textsuperscript{15} Peoria Speech, ibid., 323-324.\textsuperscript{16} ibid., 332-333.\textsuperscript{17} ibid., 323.\textsuperscript{18} ibid., 340.
did not see salvation in the bill. It would, instead, stoke conflict by repealing the Missouri Compromise. Even Douglas had previously admitted that the Missouri Compromise “allayed all sectional jealousies and irritations growing out of [the slave] question, and harmonized and tranquilized the whole country.” To all of this Lincoln said:

…when I go to Union saving, I must believe, at least, that the means I employ has some adaptation to the end. To my mind, Nebraska has no such adaptation. “It hath no relish of salvation in it.” [Hamlet 3.3.97]

The scene in which Hamlet spoke the line begins with Claudius confessing in soliloquy to the murder of King Hamlet. After Claudius’ confession, Hamlet secretly enters the room to kill his uncle and, finding Claudius evidently praying, pauses. Having caught the King unawares, Hamlet could quite easily have carried out his plot of revenge, but he hesitates, lest he send the criminal to heaven by killing him during the righteous act of prayer. He resolves to wait and kill the king at a time when he is drunk, angry, in his “incestuous” bed, or committing some other act that, unlike praying, “has no relish of salvation in ‘t.” Thereby he can not only end his life, but also damn his eternal soul.

In his famous letter to James Hackett, Lincoln includes a comment on Hackett’s extended defense and analysis of the “To be or not to be” speech in Hamlet. Lincoln expresses a preference for the “soliloquy commencing in Hamlet ‘O, my offence is rank,’” to Hamlet’s most

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19 ibid., 311.
20 ibid., 333. Lincoln adapts the spelling, and changes the word “that,” at the beginning of the quote to “it,” and “has,” to “hath.” I always refer to Folger Shakespeare Library editions exclusively, unless specifically noted. Available in print and as free PDFs: https://shakespeare.folger.edu/shakespeares-works/. Which edition of Shakespeare Lincoln used is difficult to confidently ascertain. See Anderegg, Lincoln and Shakespeare, 30-33. The identification of Lincoln’s adaptations noted above is based on contemporary and earlier editions of the play.
21 Hamlet, 3.3.40-103, particularly lines 77-101.
22 Anderegg, Lincoln and Shakespeare, see Ch. 4, particularly 83-87.
famous speech. Despite the context of this “small attempt at criticism” ostensibly being Lincoln’s response to a portion of Hackett’s book, an insight into Lincoln’s interests in Hamlet shines through.23 The quote under consideration in this section comes from a passage that follows close on the heels of the “O, my offense is rank,” soliloquy.24 Studying that speech, given Lincoln’s interest in it, sheds contextual light on his intention for the quoted line.

In the speech, Claudius appears alone, languishing in the torture of his sins. He bemoans his soul’s hopeless prospects for salvation. Though Claudius desires to pray and repent, he knows that he cannot successfully do so because he is “still possessed/Of those effects for which [he] did the murder.” (3.3.57-58). Unless he divests himself of his ill-gotten gains, repentance will remain insincere, and thus fruitless. He cannot sincerely express sorrow and remorse for something from which he continues to benefit.25 He kneels in a hopeless effort to pray, and this is when Hamlet enters, and commences his struggle over whether he should kill the apparently pious king. After Hamlet’s exit, Claudius stands from his abortive attempt at prayer, and declares,

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below;

Words without thoughts never to heaven go. (3.3.102-103)

By Claudius’ own assessment the seemingly reverent act itself had “no relish of salvation in ‘t.”

Lincoln suggests the Kansas-Nebraska Act was not just sinful, but it was sinful in its pretensions to holiness. The union could no more be saved by Kansas-Nebraska than Claudius could by his thoughtless prayer. Lending more strength to this view, like Claudius, America then still enjoyed the direct fruits of the sin of slavery. Claudius’ “crown,…ambition, and…queen”

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24 My thoughts concerning the placement of the quoted line relative to the “O, my offence is rank” speech were sparked by reading p. 25 in Anderegg’s Lincoln and Shakespeare.
25 Hamlet, 3.3.40-76.
(3.3.59), obtained through the “primal eldest curse,” (3.3.41)\textsuperscript{26} prevented him from true repentance personally; the continued existence of, legal support of, and common profit from slavery thwarted America’s repentance nationally. Lincoln indicates that, far from achieving the salvific result Douglas claimed, the Kansas-Nebraska Act caused the country to commit a sin akin to those in which Hamlet hoped to eventually catch and kill his uncle. Douglas supposed that his hands-off approach to Nebraska, through its embrace of the “sacred right”\textsuperscript{27} of popular sovereignty, would put the country into the symbolic posture and appearance of prayer, like Claudius; beyond just the relish, Douglas’ bill allegedly offered salvation itself. Lincoln suggests that Hamlet’s proverbial sword could justly fall on the country’s back amidst its foolish prospective worship of “that insidious Douglas popular sovereignty,”\textsuperscript{28} and, what is more, that the destruction in that moment would fulfill Hamlet’s shocking wish to both slay and damn the victim.

Next, an analysis of two indirect references to Richard III and Henry IV, Part 1. These homages occur in the same long paragraph as the Hamlet quote treated above. The context established in the section immediately preceding this, therefore, remains substantially the same.

The first reference, a nod to Richard III, addresses Douglas personally as the author and representative of the bill. The second reference, a tribute to Falstaff in Henry IV, Part 1, criticizes the claims bolstering the bill which seek to contradict human nature itself. As neither of these two references is a quote, both require some discussion of linguistic and rhetorical patterns.

\textsuperscript{26} i.e.: The sin of Cain (Genesis 4:10-12). See Hamlet Ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, (New York: Folger Shakespeare Library, 2012) 164, Note to line 41
\textsuperscript{27} Speeches and Writings, Vol. I, 330.
\textsuperscript{28} “Speech at Columbus, Ohio,” September 16, 1859 Speeches and Writings, Vol. 2, 35.
This section relies heavily upon Briggs’ discussion of the references, as he first discovered and explicated them. The subtlety of Lincoln’s language in these apparent references makes one, with Briggs, wonder “whether or not many members of Lincoln’s audience detected the specific allusions” discussed in this section. Nevertheless, Briggs offers an argument demonstrating the value of including these subtle nods among the several Shakespeare references in the speech. Indeed, the indirectness of these two references supports the thesis that Lincoln had deep intentions for his use of Shakespeare, given that in these two cases he could only have a very elusive aim for their use in mind, since they would likely have been discernible by the careful reader in his indirect audience, but not by the attentive listener in his immediate audience.

Douglas’ bill, according to Lincoln, had always been seen as pro-slavery, not neutral, and certainly not anti-slavery.

It could not but be expected by its author [Douglas], that it would be looked upon as a measure for the extension of slavery, aggravated by a gross breach of faith. Argue as you will, and as long as you will, this is the naked FRONT and ASPECT, of the measure. And in this aspect it could not but produce agitation.

Douglas, thus, rather than creating peace and laying the slave question to rest creates war and agitates it. The Shakespearean language requires a keen eye. As Briggs noted, “Richard III declares himself the destroyer of peace par excellence,” thus connecting Richard to Douglas. Furthermore, “Lincoln may be using emphatic capitalizations” on the words “the naked FRONT and ASPECT,” in order “to register a connection with the vocabulary and themes of Richard’s introductory speeches in which war’s ‘smooth-visaged front’ [1.1.9] is allied with Richard’s

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29 *Lincoln’s Speeches Reconsidered*, 156.
30 *Speeches and Writings, Vol. 1*, 333-334.
‘ugly and unnatural aspect’ [1.2.24] and ‘naked villainy.’ [1.3.356]”\(^{31}\) In addition to the fact that Lincoln listed Richard III as among his favorite plays in the Hackett letter, sufficiently reliable anecdotal evidence tells us that “Lincoln could recite Richard’s [famous opening] speech by heart, and to great effect, in his presidential years.”\(^{32}\)

This oblique connection to Richard III attacks the character of both Douglas and the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Douglas appears as Richard the “Machiavel” (Henry VI, Part 3, 3.2.195), attempting, with his cynical legislative machinations, to undermine the efforts of freedom loving Americans seeking to limit slavery under the clear authority of the Constitution, all while claiming the moral high ground. Lincoln is the stand-in for Richard’s doomed extended family, court, and country, the representative of those interested in the furtherance of justice and equality. Lincoln thus exposes Douglas’ motives as he perceives them by inviting this comparison to Shakespeare’s most infamous villain.

Following close upon the heels of Lincoln’s invocation of Richard, he enters a pattern of speech mirroring that of Sir John Falstaff, Shakespeare’s hedonistic representative of man’s fallen and selfish nature who played so essential a role in the worldly education of Prince Hal in Henry IV parts 1 and 2.\(^{33}\) “Repeal the Missouri compromise—repeal all compromises—repeal the declaration of independence—repeal all past history, you still can not [sic] repeal human nature.”\(^{34}\)

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\(^{31}\) Lincoln’s Speeches Reconsidered, 159
\(^{32}\) ibid., 158
\(^{34}\) Speeches and Writings, Vol. 1, 334
Lincoln’s rhythm and word choice match Falstaff’s presentation of Prince Hal as he and Hal (impersonating King Henry IV) roleplay a meeting between the boy and his royal father. Falstaff seeks to vindicate his own importance as a friend and mentor to Prince Hal as he fills the fictionalized role of the Prince himself. Many uncouth influences on young Henry could be found in his daily dalliance among the common and vulgar in the Eastcheap tavern scene, this Falstaff’s Hal admits. However, one bright light shines among them: the beloved and benevolent John Falstaff. Of all negative influences Falstaff’s Hal willingly sheds himself, but he draws the line at the removal of Falstaff:

No, my good lord, banish Peto, banish Bardolph, banish Poins, but for sweet Jack Falstaff, kind Jack Falstaff, true Jack Falstaff, valiant Jack Falstaff…banish not him thy Harry’s company. Banish plump Jack, and banish all the world. (2.4.491-498)

Hal’s King Henry blithely replies, “I do, I will.”

The similarity in Lincoln’s use of “repeal” and Falstaff’s use of “banish” is clear. This single fact on its own might not be all that significant as it could plausibly simply be seen as a compelling rhetorical device. However, knowing Falstaff’s role in Shakespeare’s plays, the conclusion of Lincoln’s swelling flourish solidifies and deepens the connection to the lines in Henry IV, Part 1. Briggs notes that Prince Hal “is the rising embodiment of a kind of kingly justice, and his immensely humorous yet menacing friend Falstaff is Shakespeare’s complicated representation of a self-interest from which Hal can hardly separate himself.”

The connection to Lincoln’s argument on humanity’s mixed nature is quite evident. One cannot repeal human nature, neither that part animated by justice nor by self-interest, one might as well try to repeal “all the world.” Lincoln’s use of Falstaff’s words is a parody, per Briggs. But the parody reveals

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35 Hal made good on this apparently facetious statement upon taking the throne in Henry IV, Part 2, 5.5.39-73
36 Lincoln’s Speeches Reconsidered, 156
a possible “mythic base for Lincoln’s understanding that human nature is an unchangeable yet volatile (and perhaps perfectible) compound of opposites.”


The second direct quote at Peoria came as part of a warning about the fragile nature of liberty. Those who championed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, in Lincoln’s view, promoted principles tending to the spread of slavery. In doing so, they put their own liberty in peril. As Lincoln made the point,

Is there no danger to liberty itself, in discarding the earliest practice, and first precept of our ancient faith? In our greedy chase to make profit of the negro, let us beware, lest we “cancel and tear to pieces” [Macbeth, 3.2.55] even the white man’s charter of freedom.

This quote’s meaning is not immediately apparent. As explained in a note about the line in the Folger edition of Macbeth, the phrase “cancel and tear to pieces that great bond” evokes the image of a hypothetical legal document Macbeth wishes to make void. If Lincoln was merely suggesting that idea and nothing more, then surely he could have written a different phrase, or have simply used the phrase without quotation marks. Indeed, were it not for this punctuation choice, and the other clear Shakespeare references found in the same speech, its origin might have remained unknown. Given the initial difficulty the quote presents, it seems that

37 ibid. 156-157
40 Anderegg (25-26) suggests that Lincoln’s use of the phrase may be explained by his use of the near quote (“bloody hand”) from Macbeth’s same speech four paragraphs later. This possibility cannot be entirely discounted. However, below in treating Lincoln’s use of the phrase “bloody hand,” I indicate that the context of the quote Anderegg refers to (Macbeth 3.3.49-63) is incongruous with Lincoln’s use, whereas other contexts in that play, as well as in Hamlet, align much better. While Lincoln certainly read this section, he seems to have done so for a different purpose than to find the quote about the bloody hand. Anderegg’s suggestion underestimates Lincoln’s comprehension of Shakespeare.
Lincoln intended something more than the bare meaning of the phrase, otherwise why drag Shakespeare into it at all?

Macbeth and his Lady, just before the quoted line, had discussed the fact that Banquo still lives, thus threatening Macbeth’s security on the throne; Banquo’s survival haunts them with the ever-present possibility that he will, in fulfillment of his portion of the Weird Sisters’ prophecies, rise up and remove them from power, making way for a line of kings among his sons.41 In the speech from which Lincoln quoted, Macbeth begs the night’s “bloody and invisible hand,” to destroy the threat of Banquo’s family, to “Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond/Which keeps me pale.” (3.2.52-55)

Many views on the meaning of the phrase “that great bond,” can be found in the literature on Macbeth.42 While any plausible suggestion surely deserves consideration, the most important thing to remember about the line is Macbeth’s wish to not only be king but to be secure in this title. As he says, “to be thus is nothing/but to be safely thus” (3.1.52-53). Macbeth must remove the obstacle to his safety: Banquo and his sons. Macbeth’s wish to murder Banquo and Fleance is the substance of the lines in question, and he undeniably wished to thereby nullify the portion of the prophecy pertaining to Banquo’s sons; that nullification thus suggests itself as the most likely candidate for “that great bond.”

The bloody and Invisible hand of night takes the great bond and attempts to cancel and tear it to pieces through the actions of Macbeth’s hired murderers. Banquo dies as Macbeth wishes, but Fleance escapes. Since Banquo had no prophetic promise of taking the throne but Fleance did, Macbeth’s plan failed.

41 See Macbeth 1.3.54-89
42 ibid., note to 3.2.55, 195.
At Peoria, Lincoln took the quote and removed it from the context of prophecy and murder to that of liberty and slavery. Macbeth’s plot would bolster his unrighteous power by defying the dictates of the prophecy that first impelled him forward. The Kansas-Nebraska Act sought similarly to further the unrighteous power of slavery by destroying the black race’s “charter of freedom”; such legislation increased the power of white men, while destroying the actual freedom of black men, all under the guise of a sacred manifestation of freedom itself (popular sovereignty).

Lincoln knew the bill favored slavery’s proliferation, not its ultimate abolition as some claimed. Those claims, along with the bill’s professed neutrality on the slave question, provided the same cover of “seeling night” Macbeth sought for his wicked actions. Those who desired the extension of slavery into the territories (and throughout the nation) saw this bill and its agenda as a means of destroying any chance of black men ever becoming free in the United States. They supposed that under the obscuring cloak of legislation, night’s “bloody and invisible hand” might “cancel and tear to pieces that great bond/which [kept them] pale.” To this supposition Lincoln issued the warning now under consideration.

Just as the Senators who supported the Kansas-Nebraska Act sought (as Lincoln saw it) to perpetually deny a small part of society the natural freedom all enjoy in common, so too Macbeth wished to overturn a troubling part of the prophecy that secured his reign as king. In both cases, they vainly sought to substantially alter an inconvenient aspect of a metaphysically consistent concept while retaining desirable aspects for themselves. Such alteration undermines conceptual consistency: if a prophecy fails in one aspect it proves the categorical unreliability of the whole prophecy; if a natural right can successfully be denied in perpetuity to a small number
it demonstrates the possibility of the same denial to a larger number. Douglas and his coalition wished to destroy freedom itself, just as Macbeth sought to debunk the entire prophecy. Neither Macbeth nor the Senators seemed to realize it.

This remains moot if the source of the prophecy (for Macbeth) or right (for Lincoln) proves trustworthy. In Macbeth’s case, the Weird sisters certainly do not seem trustworthy. Yet the fact remains, each aspect of their prophecies came to fruition, no matter how semantically. True prophecies are unfazed by human action because they exist outside of individual will. Fate has determined it; no man can change it. The same goes for liberty, a natural right in the Declaration of Independence. It has been said that “nature does nothing in vain.” No human action can undo the dictates of the controlling power of nature, fate, or God. All attempts to tear any person’s or group of persons’ charter of freedom come to naught, assuming the premise of liberty’s inherence in human nature, as Lincoln consistently did. In his early “Address to the Washington Temperance Society,” echoing Milton, Lincoln stated that “human nature… is God’s decree, and never can be reversed.” Though it may be suppressed for a time, perhaps a long time, if immutable human nature is the actual source of the natural rights in the Declaration, liberty cannot remain hidden forever. As Horace famously put it, “If you drive nature out with a

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43 Undermining the natural liberty inherent to all men exclusively in those of darker skin undermines the logic of liberty for those of lighter skin. See Lincoln’s “Fragment on Slavery,” in *Speeches and Writings, Vol. 1*, 303
45 Questions of fate always fascinated Lincoln. Lincoln thought deeply on the concepts of “the doctrine of necessity,” and providence throughout his career. He first identified the nature of necessity, and his belief therein in “Handbill Replying to Charges of Infidelity,” (Speches and Writings, Vol. 1, 139-140). Much later he wrote a note about the will of providence (as he put it) as it regarded the slavery question just before the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation (“Meditation on the Divine Will,” *Speeches and Writings, Vol. 2*, 359), which he later used in a reply to a group of Christian ministers calling on him to free the slaves (*Speeches and Writings* vol. 2 “Reply to Chicago Emancipation Memorial,” 361-367).
46 See section above on the “Subtle References” for my treatment of Falstaff and human nature.
47 See Briggs, *Lincoln’s Speeches Reconsidered*, 274.
48 *Speeches and Writing, Vol. 1*, 83.
pitchfork, she will soon find a way back and, before you know it, will burst triumphantly through your foolish caprices.”

The final Shakespeare allusion in the speech comes in Lincoln’s revealing the countenance “the world believed at the start and continues to believe” is central to the Kansas-Nebraska Act: that of its pro-slavery intentions and effects. Though Douglas or anyone else wished to remove or change that countenance, it remained. “Like the ‘bloody hand’ you may wash it, and wash it, the red witness of guilt still sticks and stares horribly at you.”

Given the fact that the precise phrase “bloody hand,” appears in none of the four plays discussed thus far, the reference leaves room for speculation. However, Macbeth and Hamlet were both prominently quoted earlier, and the immediate sense the quote conveys suggests one or both of those plays as the likely inspiration, Macbeth most plausibly.

Lady Macbeth’s nightly fits of handwashing and of cursing the stubborn, invisible blood represents the likeliest point of reference for Lincoln’s bloody hand simile. No matter how many nights Lady Macbeth spends washing her seemingly bloody hand, she always finds that the imaginary “red witness of guilt still sticks, and stares horribly” at her when she falls asleep. The guilt of the foul deed could not be removed by the water of “all great Neptune’s ocean” (2.2.78). Only internal change can cleanse such a bloody hand. Indeed, Macbeth wanted to see his Lady released from her guilt-induced ailment. He begged her doctor,

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50 *Speeches and Writings, Vol. 1*, 340
51 It should be noted, per Anderegg, that Macbeth begs the “bloody and invisible hand” of night to “cancel and tear to pieces that great bond which keeps me pale,” (3.2.49-63). However, given the greater context of Lincoln’s reference, it is likelier that he refers to Lady Macbeth’s. See note 42 above.
52 The insufficiency of any amount of water proved true as Macbeth said here, despite Lady Macbeth’s confidence that “A little water clears us of this deed.” 2.2.85-86
Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuffed bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?

To which the doctor replied, “Therein the patient/Must minister to himself” (5.4.49-57).53

The bloody hand reference also accords well (albeit less obviously) with the *Hamlet*
soliloquy discussed above. In his speech, Claudius asks

What if this cursed hand

Were thicker than itself with brother’s blood?

Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens

To wash it white as snow?54 (3.3.47-50)

The concept of having a sin removed to leave the tarnished object white recalls a similar
statement made by Lincoln three paragraphs above the current reference: “Our republican robe is
soiled, and trailed in the dust. Let us repurify it. Let us turn and wash it white, in the spirit, if not
the blood of the Revolution.” Both Claudius’ and Lincoln’s statements call Revelation 7:14 to
mind, with its reference to those who have “washed their robes, and made them white in the
blood of the lamb.”

Claudius, as stated above, could not find salvation while enjoying the fruits of his sin. He
needed to turn away from his sinful behavior and all it brought him, and to have his robes
washed white. Lincoln changes the figure from the blood of the pascal lamb to the blood of

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53 Note the male pronouns the doctor uses in referring, ostensibly, to Lady Macbeth.
54 See Isaiah 1:18. I use the King James Version.
patriots who sacrificed themselves for America in the revolutionary war. What is in that “blood of the revolution”? If we accept the connection to the blood of the lamb in Revelation, then the answer is redemption. But on what principle? Lincoln does not leave any doubt on the subject:

Let us turn slavery from its claims of “moral right,” back upon its existing legal rights, and its arguments of “necessity.” Let us return it to the position our fathers gave it; and there let it rest in peace. Let us re-adopt the Declaration of Independence, and with it, the practices and policy which harmonize with it.55

In contradistinction to arguments that focus on the Founders’ prudential legal tolerance of slavery, Lincoln points to the Founders’ explicit, foundational opposition to slavery in the principles of the Declaration of Independence. Those ideas, and the blood spilt in their name, are the bases Lincoln offers for cleansing the stain of slavery from our republican robe, and from the bloody hand.

Both Macbeth and Hamlet include bloody hands like those Lincoln referenced, and both have characters who hope to wash away the blood with water. Lincoln indicates that although water cannot remove the stain of blood spilt wrongfully, a righteous sacrifice can do so. Whether Lincoln had Macbeth, Hamlet, or both in mind with his reference to the bloody hand, the figure remains nearly the same. Both evoke a guilt-ridden soul wishing for absolution but finding none. Whether Claudius, Macbeth, or Lady Macbeth, each must willingly have stepped away from the benefits gained through their crimes and taken a just punishment for their part in the murder of their respective kings if they wished to remove their guilt.

Although, like Shakespeare’s characters, America did not immediately seek to expiate its sins, it did not ultimately choose Douglas’ path of apparent neutrality. Only direct action, not

55 Speeches and Writings, Vol. 1, 340
palliates with claims of tending toward the ultimate demise of slavery’s spread, had the power to heal the soul-sick nation to which Lincoln addressed himself. Thus, America soon entered its famous, violent internal struggle over slavery. The blood of the fathers proved insufficient for their sins, instead God willed that the bloodshed of the Civil War necessarily continued “until every drop of blood drawn with the lash,” was “paid by another drawn with the sword.”

What does one learn from examining the Shakespeare references in Lincoln’s Peoria Speech? Doing so offers evidence of Lincoln’s profound grasp of Shakespeare. The quotes he selected arise from literary settings that mirror, by analogy, the situations to which he applied them. He quotes each line to great rhetorical effect without waxing overly verbose, while also encouraging his audience’s engagement with his thought on a deeper level. The quotes’ contexts, Shakespearean and Lincolnian, draw Lincoln’s audience into Shakespeare’s world, and thus effectively draw Shakespeare into Lincoln’s.

Beyond revealing Lincoln’s educational attainment, the foregoing also demonstrates the impact of his study of Shakespeare. Peoria marked Lincoln’s return to politics after a five-year retirement. “In 1854,” Lincoln wrote of himself, “the repeal of the Missouri Compromise aroused him as he had never been before.” The Peoria Speech emerged from this new awakening. Significantly, it proved crucial for Lincoln’s thought; those arguments “would carry him through the political debates of the next decade.” In this, “the opportunity of his life,” Lincoln debuted his comprehensive, authoritative repudiation of the principles that upheld slavery with a burst of Shakespearean language.

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58 Lehrman, Lincoln at Peoria: The Turning Point, 257.
Republican Banquet Speech

On December 10, 1856, Lincoln gave a speech before a Republican banquet, the only remaining written record of which is an incomplete newspaper report. His speech consisted primarily in a response to President Franklin Pierce’s annual message. Lincoln addresses several of what he sees as Pierce’s questionable claims, mischaracterizations, and “unmitigated falsehood[s].” In the midst of his repudiation of Pierce, Lincoln offered his own account of the political situation surrounding the message.

Before analyzing the speech, a word on the quality of the text. From the outset, this incomplete report of Lincoln’s remarks contains a number of issues not present in many of his speeches, for example, the Peoria Address. At Peoria Lincoln wrote, delivered, and edited the speech for publication. Here, Lincoln had no hand in the process of publication. The report does not contain his full remarks and is relayed by a third party. As a result, one discovers apparent problems with the text.

For example, the grammatical confusion of the phrase “[Pierce] is in the cat’s paw.” Given the context, Lincoln clearly meant to say, “Pierce is the cat” or “Pierce is the cat’s paw,” since he goes on to say that his (Pierce’s) paw is burned from pulling chestnuts out of the fire for others. As it is reported, the meaning becomes garbled in a way very uncharacteristic of Lincoln.

One other important discrepancy of note: the report of Lincoln’s peroration. He seeks to reconcile warring factions within the Republican party, and waxes unificatory in his conclusion. On the question of slavery, a central plank in the Republican platform around which he hoped to unify the party, Lincoln reportedly says “The human heart is with us—God is with us.” Compare this with Lincoln’s rhetoric in his “Meditation on the Divine Will,” and his “Reply to
Emancipation Memorial Presented by Chicago Christians of all Denominations,” (both written in September 1862) to say nothing of his “Second Inaugural,” (written in 1865). In those cases, rather than positively stating that God is on his side, Lincoln only expresses certainty that God cannot support both sides of a given conflict. He does note the reasonableness of amazement that the South might pray to God to support them “wringing their bread from the brow of another,” but he concludes this comment with the injunction, “let us judge not that we be not judged.”

Lincoln’s reported rhetoric here, although inconsistent with later statements on the subject, does not definitively prove errors in the report. He was speaking before a largely Republican audience. This alone might account for the change. However, this issue, combined with the evident grammatical confusion above, brings certain detailed aspects of the report into question.

Granting these textual caveats, the speech itself should not simply be discarded on this account. Lincoln did, in fact, speak on this occasion. A newspaper man took down the report, and perhaps made some mistakes in his shorthand. However, the sticking issue for this analysis deals with Lincoln’s use of Shakespeare in the speech. There is no reason to believe the Shakespeare quote is anything but authentic. Although Lincoln was rising in fame for his political activities by this time, he was not yet the towering giant of history. Furthermore, the reports publicly connecting him with Shakespeare, particularly the Hackett letter, did not spread until he was President. The reporter had no reason to invent Shakespeare references in recounting a relatively unimportant speech by a somewhat prominent state politician. Despite the evident imperfections in the text, Lincoln’s use of Shakespeare remains relevant and worthy of note.
President Pierce lost the Democratic nomination for reelection in 1856, and his party’s nominee, James Buchanan, beat the Republican candidate, John C. Frémont (among others), in the general election. With this background, Pierce presented his annual message. He spoke in his message, Lincoln asserts, “like a rejected lover, making merry at the wedding of his rival.” He sang the praises not of himself, nor of his rival, but of “the people” for “a signal triumph of good principles and good men, and a very pointed rebuke of bad ones.” Lincoln finds these assertions strange given that, although Buchanan won, he did not even earn a majority of the popular vote. “The people,” Pierce subjected to such effusive praise was a minority. The supposed triumph and rebuke, therefore, was not likely to be all that long lasting.

Among those in the losing majority were Lincoln and his cohort of Republican “Fremonters.” Pierce states that Lincoln and his ilk, due to their commitment to “liberty, in the abstract,” were deceived into joining a political coalition that included “a few wicked and designing men.” Lincoln brushes this claim off and issues his own claim about Pierce. “[H]e being ardently attached to the hope of a second term, in the concrete, was duped by men who had liberty every way.”

To lend rhetorical support to this point, Lincoln provides two literary comparisons. First, he cites a famous allegory he likely read in Aesop’s Fables sometimes called “The Cat’s Paw” or “The Monkey and The Cat.” The fable features a monkey that convinces (or forces) a cat to reach into a fire to grab chestnuts for him to eat, while the cat gets nothing for his labor but burns. The pair continue this activity until they are caught by their owner and run off. Pierce, he

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60 We know Lincoln read Aesop, but this fable probably was written much later, possibly by La Fontaine, but is often included among published volumes of Aesop. Its true origin is of little consequence here since what matters most in understanding the reference is only what Lincoln read, not necessarily where it came from before that.
says “is in⁶¹ [sic] the cat’s paw. By much dragging of chestnuts from the fire for others to eat, his
claws are burnt off to the gristle, and he is thrown aside as unfit for further use.”

The meaning of this first comparison is fairly evident. However, Lincoln next makes a
slightly opaquer comparison: “As the fool said to King Lear, when his daughters had turned him
out of doors, ‘He’s like a shelled pea’s cod.’”⁶² This latter quote requires a great deal more
unraveling than the former.

The Fool speaks the line not after (as Lincoln reportedly said) but before Regan and
Goneril turned Lear out of doors. The major event that precedes the line is Lear’s decision to
split his kingdom in two and surrender effective political control, with the caveat that he will
“retain/The name and all th’ addition to a king” (1.1.151-152). Lear plans to retire with all of the
honors, comforts, and benefits due to a King, but without the responsibilities. He wishes to have
his cake and eat it too. At this point, Lear believes himself in the good graces of his two elder
daughters.

Of course, Lear never truly was in their good graces. The baffling, tragic opening scene
of the play has Lear, ostensibly a very wise King, rejecting reality in favor of appearance. He
asserts his plan to retire and requests that his daughters verbally express their love before he
rewards them with their inheritances. His two elder daughters, Regan and Goneril, heap
extravagant—verging on ridiculous—praise on their father to great effect. He smiles on their
offerings and grants them their portions of the kingdom. Then he turns to his favorite, Cordelia.
She, in the purity of her love, expresses herself in simple honesty. She does not perform the

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⁶¹ See textual note above. As this is a newspaper report, two explanations for this obvious error are possible. One,
Lincoln misspoke, and his fumbled words were taken down verbatim. Or, two, the reporter misheard,
misunderstood, or otherwise incorrectly recorded what Lincoln said.

⁶² Act 1, Scene 4, Line 205. Lincoln adjusts the line slightly. The original reads “That’s a shelled peascod.”
rhetorical oblations Lear demands. When prompted repeatedly to do so, she notes the
disingenuity of her sisters’ speeches and holds firm that she loves her father only according to
duty, worth, and truth (1.1.105-115). For this, the King revokes Cordelia’s premeditated
patrimony, splits it among her sisters, and exiles her.

Cordelia, the play demonstrates, was the only daughter who loved Lear. Upon her exile, his elder children immediately grow hostile, successfully depriving their aged father of his planned retirement, usurping his authority in full, and revoking his nominal power and honor. They half-heartedly offer him a quiet life as a father with his daughters but deny him the rights and dignity afforded a king.

Before his daughters fully wrench his power from him, Lear goes about his business blissfully unaware of the ensuing conflict. At the beginning of the Act 1, Scene 4, he returns from hunting, enters Goneril’s home, and demands to see his fool, whom he says has been absent for two days. He then requests to speak with Goneril. Oswald, his daughter’s servant, grossly disrespects him, refusing to fetch Goneril (on Goneril’s orders), and is abused in turn by a member of the King’s coterie (the King’s former counselor Kent, now in disguise). When the King sends a messenger seeking an explanation for Oswald’s impertinence, the messenger returns and expresses concern about the King’s treatment and status in the house. In this state of rising unease, the Fool enters.

The Fool calls the disguised Kent a fool for serving a King with no power. He calls Lear a fool, because he gave away all other titles, and he was “born with” that of a fool (1.4.152-154). Lear’s kingship is an egg without its “meat;” once he broke his kingdom in half and gave it away, he made an ass of himself, bearing his donkey on his own back (1.4.156-169). With his

63 This image is, like the Monkey’s Paw, often found among Aesop’s Fables.
imprudent choice, he cut off the sides of his wits, “and left nothing i’ th’ middle,” (1.4.190-193).

To supplement and affirm his already unsteady state, the Fool reveals the gravity of Lear’s situation with this barrage of barbed witticisms. As Goneril enters, Lear notes her frown. The Fool offers a final retort, reminding the King how much happier his life was when his daughter’s frown had no direct bearing on his fate. And, before the Fool stops talking, as he promises to do under the heat of Goneril’s glare, he points at Lear and says, “That’s a shelled peascod,” (1.4.205).

With the peas removed, what is one likely to do with the pod? A shelled peascod is something that was of essential importance at one time. It provided protection and nutrition while the peas matured. Once the peas mature and are removed from the pod, however, it becomes hollow, desolate trash. It becomes defined by the absence of fruit. It becomes nothing, and, as Lear repeatedly reminds us, nothing comes of nothing; nothing is good for nothing.64

When the Fool says this, he does so like one who knows what comes next.65 With his decision to exile Cordelia and divide his kingdom among his less sympathetic children, the King has not only deprived himself of Cordelia; his rash decision to expel the only daughter who loved him in truth (if not in insincere word) ruined his retirement, and left him empty, desolate. For, had Cordelia stayed and held 1/3 of the kingdom as Lear’s original plan dictated, he would likely have had a loving home, and have retained some measure of political influence and deference. In splitting the kingdom and rejecting the one unrotten kernel among his seed, Lear lost everything,

64 See 1.1.99 and 1.4.136-7
65 The Fool could possibly have overheard Goneril’s intentions. He has lived with Goneril as long as Lear has and has been absent from Lear for two days by the King’s account. He was in Goneril’s home while Lear was out hunting, while she was discussing her treasonous plans with Oswald and penning a letter for Regan’s support. That he might have become aware of this during his absence from Lear and presence in Goneril’s home would make sense. Then again, he might just be perceptive.
and will now be thrown out because he is no longer of any use to the bad seeds to whom he gave power.

The remainder of Acts 1 and 2 show Regan and Goneril uniting to refuse Lear’s presence in either of their homes unless he surrenders his entire train of knights and servants. Although they do not technically exile King Lear, the circumstances by which they are willing to permit him to stay, leave him apoplectic, on the verge of insanity. He thought he had loving daughters, but he had been duped and used by them to gain power and was now to be cast aside since he could do nothing more for his ungrateful, unnatural children. When he runs away into nature during a raging storm in the middle of the night, his daughters threaten to punish any person offering him help with their “perpetual displeasure,” (3.3.1-6). Now independent of their pod, the peas cast it aside as worthless.

As Lincoln noted, Pierce’s situation resembles Lear’s. From early in his administration, Pierce’s desire to appeal to a very broad coalition left him unable to adequately administer the government. He found himself so overwhelmed with the coalition building duty of cabinet selection and assigning patronage spoils to deserving friends and party members that it took him and his cabinet many months to distribute the most necessary offices. In the end, none of the various factions Pierce hoped to satisfy were pleased.\(^6\) He found himself pulled in too many directions. New England, Western, and Southern Democrats all staked a claim, and he did not want to let anyone down. So thoroughly did this disposition define his awarding of spoils, that Pierce ended up promising more than he could deliver. “He lacked a sustained feeling of self-confidence and was desirous of approbation. Consequently, he endeavored to be gracious and

\(^{66}\) Nichols, Roy Franklin, *Franklin Pierce: Young Hickory of the Granite Hills* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1931), 254
accommodating to all who sought [offices]. His graciousness was interpreted by many to mean approval of their requests." Often his unreflective, implied acquiescence was overturned in later consultation when shown to be unwise.

This spirit which animated the beginning of his administration held sway throughout his entire term. The mishandling of Kansas, a too thorough preference for his southern constituency in policy and rhetoric, and imprudence and bad luck in foreign affairs roiled his administration. When the time came to assemble his constituency for the renomination, they were scattered to the four winds. Senator Clay of Alabama characterized the situation quite well:

The Abolitionists charge that the President approved the Nebraska Kansas bill to open new fields for slavery; the South Americans [i.e. southerners], that he did so to enlarge the area of free soil. The Abolitionists say his Administration has been exerted to make Kansas a slave state, the South Americans, to make it a free state. The Abolitionists abuse the President for removing Reeder; the South Americans for appointing him. The Abolitionists say he was removed too soon; the South Americans, too late. The Abolitionists say he was removed for no official delinquency; the South Americans that he was retained after repeated delinquencies. The Abolitionists complain that squatter sovereignty is frowned upon and threatened with suppression; the South Americans that it is countenanced and encouraged. The Abolitionists complain that the proclamation is leveled at Free-Soilers; the South Americans, at pro-slavery men.\(^{67}\)

Pierce succeeded with his policies, as in his appointments, in upsetting everyone and satisfying no one.

\(^{67}\) Ibid., 257-258
\(^{68}\) Ibid., 448-449
Pierce committed himself fully to a strategy of courting the South in his 1855 annual message, leading up to the nominating conventions and election of 1856. That message includes a presentation of Constitutional theory that favors the sovereignty of states over the federal government (with obvious implications), the imputation of the motives and actions of “the Northern states” engaged in activities in opposition to slavery “while the people of the Southern States confine their attention to their own affairs,” and a narrative surrounding the creation of territories and the question of slavery that ignores historical fact in favor of ideological convenience in suggesting the prevalence of state sovereignty as the main principle animating the choice of a free or slave constitution rather than geographic location or the many compromises inherent to those negotiations. In short, that message rhetorically turns its back on the North in order to pay humble obeisance to the South.69

The Southerners were, of course, pleased with Pierce’s pro-slave-state rhetoric. However, they knew the message, though it catered to them, spoiled Pierce for reelection. Such a man could never carry enough of the North to win even if the South supported him enthusiastically. John P. Hale satirized the situation with the following “overheard” conversation in early 1856 just before the nominating conventions:

A Southerner: "It is one of the best messages that ever was written and Pierce Is the best President we have ever had since Washington."

His companion: “Well—you will renominate him, will you not?”

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Southerner: “No, that is another thing; his message is a little strong to get northern votes with; we shall not use him anymore.”

Pierce had focused so much on pleasing what he saw as his broad, varied coalition, that he only succeeded in rhetorically endearing a minority, while practically alienating that very same minority, to say nothing of the vast majority on whom he had turned his back. By Hale’s assessment of the situation, Pierce’s extreme rhetoric got him applause from the south, but gave him no chance at renomination, let alone reelection. He had outlived his usefulness as a politician for the Democratic, pro-slavery south, and in the process of wooing them, had alienated the moderate north, such that he did not even win nomination in his home state of New Hampshire.

The president’s failed rhetorical strategies, first in the insincerity and imprudence of tacitly offering offices to anyone who came seeking and later in flattering the south and shunning the north, welcome comparisons to King Lear from two different perspectives. In the first case, he resembled Regan and Goneril himself. Following his desire to please the hearer and gain political power, Pierce gave assurances which he knew were untrue. Lear’s older daughters pretended to sincerely care for him to take control, only to prove unfaithful to him once their power was secured; Pierce convinced the office seekers of his sincere intentions to endear them to his cause, only to prove unfaithful in following through with his promises. Granting the offices he offered, in many of those cases, was never a real possibility. Like Regan and Goneril, this strategic dishonesty paid off in the short run by allowing Pierce to appear generous. However, after the dust of awarding the patronage settled, his insincerity undoubtedly tested the

70 Nichols, 438-439
faith Pierce’s administration sought from those individuals and the constituencies they symbolically represented.

More potently, as Lincoln noted, Pierce resembles Lear in his position as an unwitting patsy for the South. Lear exiled the only daughter who loved him, Pierce alienated his home region and the entire North in pursuit of the wayward, inconstant South, hoping that if he said the right things, he would gain their support. But, once those imprudent things were said, the Southerners proved Regans and Gonerils all. They got the words they wanted from the White House and thereby felt more politically secure. Having alienated the North and being cast off by the South, like a shelled peascod, Pierce was thus disposed of.

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At the Republican Banquet, Lincoln made one almost offhand reference to King Lear. The simplicity and pertinence of this quote further solidifies Lincoln’s careful attention in his study of Shakespeare. The comparison of the pathetic Pierce to the tragic Lear allows the audience a view of Lincoln’s brain at work. Holding Shakespeare as a mirror to Pierce’s situation, Lincoln analogizes it to that of another statesman of horrible imprudence; Lincoln saw in Pierce both scorn and a lesson of folly unlearned until too late, like so many other political tragedies.

These unique examples of Lincoln’s use of Shakespeare, given the very few cases of his direct engagement with the poet, serve an essential function in the project of this dissertation. This peek into his understanding and approach to the Bard provides a vital interpretive lens through which Shakespeare’s subtler, deeper influence on Lincoln (explored in subsequent chapters) emerges with far greater clarity.
Lincoln’s masterful use of Shakespeare in his career-defining speech at Peoria evinces Shakespeare’s foundational influence on Lincoln’s statesmanship and political philosophy. It was no indulgent display of superficial erudition; rather, he expertly wove Shakespeare’s ideas into the fabric of that essential argument. In Chicago, Lincoln offered a clear example of Shakespeare’s persistent, active pedagogical role in his life. He held the poet up, ever comparing himself and others with the images reflected by that ingeniously wrought mirror for princes. The casual brilliance of the reference at the Republican Banquet evinces a mind “saturated” with Shakespeare, self-consciously molded under his keen eye.  

That carefully crafted mind continuously performed deeds and wrote words worthy of its greatest literary influence. For Lincoln, Shakespeare’s works were neither mere entertainments, nor quote books for speechwriting, but a deep, quiet spring of political wisdom that rippled perpetually in his extraordinary mind.

71 Charnwood, 103 “It astonished the self-improving young Herndon that the serious books he read were few and that he seldom seemed to read the whole of them--though with the Bible, Shakespeare, and to a less extent Burns, he saturated his mind.”
CHAPTER 2

Of Lions and Eagles: Shakespeare and Lincoln on Laudable Ambition

He who fights with monsters should see that he does not thereby become a monster.

-Friedrich Nietzsche

Abraham Lincoln’s close friend and biographer William Herndon stated—in what has become a well-worn, mandatory cliché—that Lincoln’s ambition was a “little engine that knew no rest.” ambition is part of human nature, but particularly present in a certain kind of person. Such men possess an innate, relentless drive, a raw desire that wants taming, focus, and form; though human nature necessarily occurs spontaneously, it admits of deliberate external refinement. Although education does not create human nature, it can strive to perfect it. Lincoln embraced his natural ambition, but he also demonstrated a recognition of the proper place of ambition and ruled his ambition by his prudence. Lincoln’s study of Shakespeare, especially Macbeth, doubtless contributed to his understanding of ambition and the necessity of constraining it.

Prudence is particularly difficult to study through direct observation because the “prudent man concealeth knowledge,” (Proverbs 12:3). Accessing the mind of the prudent man of ambition thus requires keen observation but proves nearly impossible. Shakespeare exposes the minds of the ambitious and the prudent in works like Macbeth, allowing potential statesmen

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1 My translation
privileged access. Such individuals learn from *Macbeth* both the virtues to emulate in their own actions and the vices to flee and against which to balance the other extreme.

Understanding Lincoln’s view of ambition and prudence requires first understanding those concepts. Allan Bloom notes that the study of human nature from the beginning “was really a debate.” 3 This perennial dialectic—conducted between works, among different writers, and across eras—yields a holistic, if very complicated picture of man. Apprehending something like a view of this multifarious whole requires an expansive approach. So, as Bloom noted, “one must read Aristotle and Hobbes together and look at what each saw in man. Then one has the material on which to reflect.” 4

The following approaches Lincoln’s understanding of ambition and prudence by taking Bloom’s advice seriously (and literally), exploring the thought of both Hobbes 5 and Aristotle. This provides a theoretical and definitional foundation, allowing for a clearer understanding of the kinds of things Lincoln learned studying Shakespeare. Shakespeare, as among the keenest observers of human nature, offered Lincoln access to sufficient “material on which to reflect,” for his political education in the problem of ambition, and its solution.

**Ambition**

In the fertile soil of the soul, from the moment man first considers himself in relation to others, swells the seed of competition, acquisition, and ambition, planted there from the beginning. Thomas Hobbes understood this aspect of human nature more clearly than most: “I

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4 Ibid.
5 Although I do not intend to take up an extended speculation on the question, resonances between Hobbes and Shakespeare seem to suggest his familiarity with the Bard. No scholarly account of this hypothesis is attempted here beyond the mere suggestion, asking the reader’s attention to the possibility.
put for a general inclination of all mankind a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death.”⁶ For Hobbes, a kind of ambition appears natural. However, this general inclination does not make all men conventionally “ambitious.” The general inclination is enough to keep men alive and moving and able to escape the natural dangers surrounding them, leading them eventually to enter society. “Life,” as Hobbes put it, “is but a motion of limbs,” and so an ultimate repose in a fixed felicity means death.⁷ A man dies if his desires reach an end just as much as if his limbs cease their motion. So, “felicity is a continual progress from one object to another, the attaining the former being still but the way to the latter.”⁸ The movement from power to power is the vehicle of human life. No one wishes to possess what they seek only impermanently, and the only way to “secure forever the way of [one’s] future desire” is by gaining and exercising ever-increasing power.⁹

True ambition becomes most evident after men enter the commonwealth. Cast a group of people into “the state of mere nature,”¹⁰ and they will fight for their lives. Place that same group in civilization and they will seek “higher” desires than the avoidance of death. Society’s regulation of violence liberates everyone to pursue their particular inclinations. Hobbes demonstrated the general inclination toward the acquisitive pursuit of power in the example of kings. “Kings, whose power is greatest, turn their endeavours to the assuring it at home by laws and abroad by wars,” but they do not stop there. Once they have accomplished this much, “there succeedeth a new desire in some of fame from new conquest, in others of ease and sensual pleasure, in others of admiration or being flattered for excellence in some art or other ability of

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⁷ Ibid., “The Introduction, paragraph 1, 3
⁸ Ibid, Ch. XI, paragraph 1, 57
⁹ Ibid. paragraph 1-2, 57-58
¹⁰ Ibid., Ch. XX, Paragraph 4, 129
the mind.” Of the three paths afforded the king once secure in his power, only the first example matches the conventional view of ambition. Only the conventionally ambitious man continues to seek glory over and above necessity after he has secured his power.12

Hobbes recaps and elaborates on these three dispositions, removing the context of kings and looking to the average person. The central example in this second presentation13 are the ambitious: “needy men, and hardy, not contented with their present condition, as also all men that are ambitious for military command.” These individuals will not accept mere peace. They “are inclined to continue the causes of war,” and if war does not exist “to stir up trouble and sedition,” to gain the power they desire. The man ambitious for military command can gain no honor “but by war.” The tough men who lack power wish to change their lot in life. They feel they were dealt a bad hand and “hope to mend an ill game [...] by causing a new shuffle.”14

11 Ibid., Ch. XI, Paragraph 2, 58
12 The other two options hardly resemble ambition at all. One is said to seek “ease and sensual pleasure,” and another “admiration or being flattered for excellence in some art or other ability of the mind.” The third example, in some sense, could be identified with the philosopher or poet (as translating the Greek word poietes which can simply mean creator). Plato and Aristotle point to philosophy as the worthiest life great men can pursue. That Hobbes might hold such up as a logical conclusion of ambition follows. The first example represents a common manifestation of ambition and defines the constant state of war around the world that contributed to Hobbes’ view of the state of nature; the third example is quite rare. The central example, however, (the king seeking ease and sensual pleasure) is common enough to hardly be of note. Everyone, ambitious or otherwise, pursues sensual pleasures to some extent. This relates almost in no way to ambition. In the case of Hobbes’ example it applies because the ability to successfully gain the most lavish pleasures is available only to a person possessing sufficient power, i.e. a man who once pursued power to a sufficient degree that all goods he pleases are within reach.
13 First, in paragraph four he says that “desire of ease and sensual delight disposeth men to obey a central power.” That is to say, when one has a soul inclined toward such things, escaping the state of nature is the most important thing, or else enjoyment of one’s animating desires can never occur, for improvident nature and one’s violent fellows ensure life remains ever solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. If such a one lived as man lives by nature, his resources would be occupied improvidently, and his life would be implicitly valued as straw for how long he would survive. “Fear of death and wounds,” Hobbes notes, “disposeth to the same, and for the same reason.”

In paragraph five Hobbes identifies the same disposition in those who “desire knowledge, and arts of peace.” Such men, he says, incline “to obey a common power.” For such he identifies the necessity of leisure, and therefore the protection of someone other than oneself.

Hobbes changes the order, making the man of ambition the central example, appearing in the last sentence of paragraph four.
14 Ibid., Ch. XI, paragraph 4, 58
Few men experience a desire for glory so potent that they would willingly thrust the world from peace into war. Such men would temporarily abandon society, risking the chance of never returning thereto in this life, and live as beasts if only for the small chance that they might one day rule over society as mortal gods, rather than content themselves with ordinary life. Great men who spurn the commonwealth in favor of war might be persuaded to end man’s natural struggle via contract, but only on terms that do not (as they see it) impose false equality upon them. The men who would claim the crown of Hobbes’ absolute sovereign reject Hobbes’ claim of natural egalitarianism. Only sovereignty on terms they approve would satisfy them.

These men are a problem for Hobbes. Though apparently natural in his anthropology, ambition finds no permissible vent of its loftiest aspirations in Hobbes’ political science. Once the commonwealth is formed, no right of rebellion exists. Everyone must content themselves with the contract or else threaten to upend the entire system. Ambitious men who lack ultimate political power, therefore, wish to push beyond the limitations set upon them by Hobbes’ sovereign. In Hobbes’ political society ambition does not disappear, but it must find a means of

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15 Two difficulties complicate this account. First, firmness in the question of human nature does not characterize Hobbesian thought. Indeed, these insights on human ambition follow his evaluation of “felicity.” By Hobbes’ assessment, “there is no such finis ultimus (utmost aim) nor summum bonum (greatest good) as is spoken of in the books of the old moral philosophers.” In Hobbes’ thought, teleology fails, acquisitiveness triumphs. This acquisitiveness, as we have seen, is the root of true ambition, and seems one principle that holds firm. But, even if one relies on Hobbes’ observation about the naturalness of ambition, his view of nature lacks fixity. Although Hobbes uses definitive language in speaking about certain aspects of human nature, he undermines his seeming certainty in other places in the work. For example, in Ch. 30 he compares the “common-people’s minds,” to “clean paper, fit to receive whatsoever by Public Authority shall be imprinted in them.” The suggestion here points not to a universal fixity in the Hobbesian account of human nature; his own thought contradicts that. Rather, we point to Hobbes’ account’s seeming access to a truth of human nature, regardless of his statements that cut against. Second, ignoring the first difficulty for a moment, granting that ambition is indeed natural, nature as such (for Hobbes) is not desirable. Man flees his natural state for the safety and convenience of social and political union. Ambition, man’s perpetual, general inclination, is tamed by contracted equality, in which all men equally give their voice to form the state, under the central power of the sovereign, and only the sovereign alone can satisfy life’s highest ambition in society; Hobbes allows for no right of rebellion in any case. Such a right creates a dangerous precedent and does not accord with reason. Only the sovereign as officially established in the contract may rightfully be sovereign, ambitious men to the contrary notwithstanding.
moderation or else bring about its own (or the regime’s) ruin. Hobbes offers no direct solution to this problem.

Abraham Lincoln’s account of ambitious men in the Lyceum Address resembles that of Hobbes. He speaks of men who look back on America’s Founding generation with something other than admiration. When seeing that the Founders’ “experiment is successful,” these men do not content themselves with their ancestral blessings of constitutional government, but instead brood over the fact that “this field of glory is harvested, and the crop is already appropriated.” While this may frustrate, it does not stop them, “they, too, will seek a field.” Less fiery men of “great and good” character might consider such an idea in passing, but eventually move on to content themselves with something more practically, legally, and morally permissible, like “a seat in Congress, a gubernatorial or a presidential chair.” But the perennial “men of ambition and talents,” refuse to let the issue drop. Perhaps they too could aspire to the presidency or some lower office, but such achievements would leave their restive souls dissatisfied. They find no “gratification… in supporting and maintaining an edifice that has been erected by others.” Such men are classed in with Alexander, Caesar, and Napoleon, men of power who would never content themselves with these paltry honors.

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16 Abraham Lincoln Speeches and Writings: 1832-1858, (New York: Library of America, 1989) Lyceum Address (January 1838), 34. Unless otherwise noted, all references to Lincoln’s speeches are to this volume or its companion 1859-1865.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid. With this list of individuals who subjected their nations in most inegalitarian fashion Lincoln brings out the tension between the man of great ambition and the American creed of equality. This tension simmers beneath the surface of all Lincoln’s actions and career as he himself feels the pull toward greatness, but also seeks to forge a path within the American republic, and not through it to a new regime. Claims that he “refounded” America to the contrary notwithstanding, Lincoln demonstrably sought always to respect and uphold the America of the Declaration and the Constitution, even as he occasionally edged beyond the limits in pursuing the objects of his ambition.
The path to satisfying their ambition leads out of civilized American life and into the darkness of the state of war. The Founders surely had such men in their ranks. One need only reflect on the obsession among the Founders with glory and fame to see the ambition inherent to their project. Such men as Lincoln fears will arise again see circumstances like those in America before the Revolution or the Constitutional Convention not primarily as regrettable and perilous, but as opportunities for distinction. Now, in a settled and prosperous republic erected by men of ambition and talents of a former generation, men of “towering genius” who “scorn a beaten path,” see no alternative, “that opportunity being past, and nothing left to be done in the way of building up, [they] set boldly to the task of pulling down.”

The difficulty of this situation, in Lincoln’s mind, is the moral ambiguity of these men. As he sees it, they care not whether they gain fame by “emancipating slaves, or enslaving freemen.” In fact, they “would as willingly, perhaps more so, acquire [distinction] by doing good as harm.” But if the opportunity to make a name by doing good has passed, then doing harm proves the only path, for “distinction will be [their] paramount object.”

The same Founders who declared independence, plunging America into the state of war, created the new regime of the United States under the Articles of Confederation (and eventually the Constitution), pulling America out of the state of war into a contracted society. These men of ambition in Lincoln, as in Hobbes, see the Founding generation’s effort as a lost opportunity—perhaps even their preferred scenario—and will reenter the state of war to gain the distinction

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19 Examples of the Founders expressing their desire for fame are common. Much of the musical Hamilton, for example, is predicated on Alexander Hamilton’s well-documented desire for distinction. In Federalist 72, for example, Hamilton states that fame is the “ruling passion of the most noble minds,” and explains what an individual motivated thereby might endeavor to do great things in service of others, but only if they know their project will be completed. Two notable works on the subject include Douglass Adair’s 1974 Fame and the Founding Fathers: Essays, and Eric Burns’ 2007 Virtue, Valor, and Vanity: The Founding Fathers and the Pursuit of Fame.
20 Lyceum, 34
21 Ibid.
they deserve. Lincoln, like Hobbes, never fully explicates a regime-level solution to the problem of ambitious men, beyond the suggestion that a religious devotion to law, vigilant awareness of the inevitably of such men, and dispassionate rationality creates a culture that combats and subverts these imposing figures. As Jaffa put it, “Lincoln does not, as we might expect, propose any good for [the great man] to do,” if he cannot immediately find a morally permissible outlet for his ruling passion. Yet, the great men will continue to exist regardless of anyone’s wishes to the contrary; the best Hobbes or Lincoln can do is warn about the danger they pose.

Lincoln’s insight into the “passion” of ambition accords with “cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason.” Assuming ambition as a part of human nature, any person, particularly one (like Lincoln) inclined toward lofty ambition, can naturally grasp the idea. The surprising part of Lincoln’s account of ambition is his thorough grasp of the subject, demonstrated in his apprehension of its danger, on clear display in the Lyceum address. The comparison with Hobbes proves a useful means of demonstrating the brilliance of Lincoln’s account, although Lincoln probably never read him.

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22 Ibid.
23 Lyceum, 36
24 Lincoln finds himself in line with the philosophical tradition in general on this question. As Harry Jaffa notes, Lincoln’s view of ambitious men also resembles that expressed by Callicles in Plato’s Gorgias (see CHD, 212-213) and another from Aristotle’s Politics (214). Incidentally, Bray notes that Lincoln read at least some Plato, though likely not much; he finds no mention of Lincoln reading Aristotle (See “What Abraham Lincoln Read,” 70n163). 25 See Bray “What Abraham Lincoln Read,” which finds no reference to Lincoln’s reading Hobbes by any source at all. That being said, one other interesting similarity between Hobbes and Lincoln’s accounts occurs after Lincoln’s conclusion of his discussion of the dangers of great men. He next discusses the dangers of negative passions in American society since the scenes of the revolution have passed. Among these passions “incident to our nature,” he lists “jealousy, envy, and avarice,” a list one might expect in the writings of Hobbes, who notes “bonds of words are too weak to bridle men’s ambition, avarice, and anger,” (XIV.18, 84). What’s more, these passions, Lincoln states, are “so common during a state of peace, prosperity and conscious strength.” The state of peace, of course, is the opposite of the state of war, a phrase not found in Hobbes (“condition of war” is repeated often and bears the same meaning), but colloquially used in explicating him. That concept was very common in America by this time, however. Lincoln could have as easily learned of the state of nature from, for example, Thomas Paine, who in the opening pages of Common Sense speaks of the “state of natural liberty,” from which men emerge (paragraph 7).
Lincoln had the opportunity to encounter numerous examples of ambition and its folly in his study of Shakespeare. Statesmen, scheming cardinals, shrewd women, emperors, kings, nobles, peasants, merchants, and soldiers. Shakespeare, like Hobbes, saw clearly that everyone feels the fire of ambition to a greater or lesser degree. This section focuses primarily on Lincoln’s favorite play, and the one in which he encountered ambition in Shakespeare most directly, *Macbeth*.

Accounting for Lincoln’s view of ambition in the Lyceum starts with *Macbeth* for good reason. At the beginning of *Macbeth*, Duncan receives a report on a battle between Scotland and Norway. The captain delivering the report describes the Norwegian army being pushed back by Scotland, only for Norway to immediately begin a renewed assault with fresh troops. Duncan inquires “Dismayed not this our captains, Macbeth and Banquo?” “Yes,” the man sarcastically replies, “as sparrows eagles, or the hare the lion” (1.2.37-39). In his Lyceum Address, Abraham Lincoln warned of the “towering genius[es]” which threaten the integrity of the republic, identifying such extraordinary men as members of the “family of the lion and tribe of the eagle.”26 That pairing of animals, though logical in a basic sense (both apex predators, both royal symbols, etc.) consciously echoes *Macbeth*.27 Even ignoring the fact that Lincoln expressed affinity for the play in the Hackett letter, the internal evidence in the Lyceum points to *Macbeth* as among its sources. It provides insight into Lincoln’s early thoughts on the power and danger of ambition recorded in the Lyceum and provides a framework for approaching his thoughts on the subject throughout his career.

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26 Lyceum, 34
27 Briggs, *Lincoln’s Speeches Reconsidered* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 48-52, supports this. He also notes the possibility that Lincoln referenced the Bible with the phrase but favors *Macbeth* as the source because of its applicability to Lincoln’s subject.
It is easy to forget that Macbeth begins his eventually reckless path to the throne with some circumspection. He considers various possibilities held out for his obtaining the crown. Immediately upon becoming Thane of Cawdor, confirming the truthfulness of the Sisters’ prophecies, Macbeth contemplates the murder of the King. The thought of the potential murder, though it remains “but fantastical” thus far, causes Macbeth such distress that he proposes a more humane path potentially enjoined by the prophecy. “If chance will have me king, why chance may crown me/Without my stir” (1.3.157-159). Macbeth had done nothing outside the ordinary course of his life, duty, and nature to be named Cawdor. Whether he deserved the promotion is hardly a question. The reports of his performance in battle demonstrate his merit, and Duncan promotes him primarily on that basis. Action would unquestionably be necessary to obtain the throne, but Macbeth hoped that, like with Cawdor, he might become king as chance and the “golden opinions” (1.7.36) he had earned would have it, not as a matter of direct effort primarily in service to the goal.

This reasonable hesitance lives with Macbeth until the very night of Duncan’s murder. A second dose of Lady Macbeth’s evil “spirits,” (1.5.29) once poured into his ear, sufficiently rids Macbeth of his doubts, producing firmness of purpose. However, for the time being he proves able to keep his wits about him. He demonstrates this when, before the act, he seeks out Banquo to curry support for his bid for the throne (ostensibly requesting Banquo’s vote on election day), with promises of promotion in exchange. “If you shall cleave to my consent, when ‘tis,/It shall

28 What Macbeth calls chance should more accurately be termed something like providence, fortune, fate, or destiny. He calls his receipt of Cawdor chance, when in reality he implicitly knows the Sisters, whoever they are (perhaps “goddesses of destinie” as suggested below) have some hand in the process. This difficulty is Macbeth’s. What he calls chance he does seem to grasp as providence when he later seeks to excise portions of the prophecy by overcoming his fate through action. Paul Cantor noted in his article “Macbeth and the Gospelling of Scotland,” (333-334), “Macbeth contains a teaching on providence.” That article implies the presence of a supernatural support of Macbeth’s throne which I later termed (with the late Professor Cantor’s blessing) “Macbeth’s Demonic Right Monarchy,” in a forthcoming article for Political Science Reviewer.
make honor of you” (2.1.34-35). To this Banquo verbally assents, with a caveat that reveals his suspicions of Macbeth’s plan.\(^{29}\) Macbeth need not have spoken with Banquo that night, but he decided to do so for political reasons, seeing the wisdom in obtaining allies in his bid for the throne. Banquo evinces himself an intelligent enough man that he likely already knew Macbeth would murder the King from the moment that Duncan announced Malcolm as his successor. Indeed, he prompts Macbeth to talk of their encounter with the Sisters in this exchange, desiring to know his mind further on the subject. Macbeth sought Banquo out as an ally. But Banquo was already willing to join his cause and suspects he “played’st most fouly for ‘t” (3.1.3) notwithstanding, he had Banquo’s support.

The moment they part, Macbeth’s “heat-oppressed brain,” (2.1.51) produces a vision of a floating dagger, leading him on to the murder. This heat-oppression might equate to genuine madness, not to say lunacy,\(^{30}\) and indeed, Macbeth’s hallucination and most of the vicious massacre that followed (with the exception of Duncan’s murder) confound rational explanation. Each mendacious deed has the color of logic from a certain point of view, but none stand up to careful scrutiny. The perfect case in point is Macbeth’s crusade against Banquo and Fleance. Absent any information about the Weird Sisters, Macbeth’s tirade against an ally and his family stands outside of plausible comprehensibility. However, knowing that the Sisters promised the throne to Banquo’s posterity rather than Macbeth’s sheds some explanatory light on the action. Yet, a moment’s thought brings the absurd picture into clarity: if the Sisters were right about Macbeth, then they are right about Banquo. Once he obtains the throne, with Banquo’s tacit and

\(^{29}\) See Macbeth, ed. Jan H. Blits, (Indianapolis: Focus Philosophical Editions, 2021), 2.2.26-29n

\(^{30}\) The murder occurred on a moonless, starless night, as requested in Lady Macbeth’s demonic prayer (1.5.45-61) and noted by Fleance (2.1.2) and Banquo (2.1.5-11).
explicit consent, Macbeth desires to “cancel and tear to pieces”\(^{31}\) the prophetic record that would wrench the scepter “with an unlineal hand” (3.1.68) from him to bestow it on the family of another. His part of the prophecy fulfilled, Macbeth wishes to change other aspects of the future set down by “the spirits that know/All mortal consequences” (5.3.4-5). But, in doing so, he fails to understand the nature of prophecy. If a part of the destiny foreseen by the Weird Sisters can be overturned, the entire revelation, and its source, falls.

Unfettered ambition more convincingly explains the manic development of the plot of Macbeth than insanity. Banquo warns Macbeth that the Sisters’ words “trusted home,/Might yet enkindle you unto the crown,” but that the path to kingship likely will prove more treacherous than anticipated, for “oftentimes, to win us to our harm,/The instruments of darkness tell us truths,/Win us with honest trifles, to betray ’s/In deepest consequence.” Banquo anticipates Macbeth’s incipient plan, and tries to educate him, moderating his expectations and characterizing the Sisters as demonic, in hopes of cooling the fire set by the prophecy. Of course, he failed. Enkindled by the spark of prophetic insight, Macbeth’s ambition (stoked by Lady Macbeth) flared so high that it led him to describe his brain as “heat-oppressed,” and cast before his eyes a “fantastical” vision of a dagger,\(^{32}\) leading him to the stage where he might play his part in “the swelling act/Of the imperial theme” (1.3.141-142).

He retained some level of rational control to that point. As noted, Macbeth hallucinates the dagger after making the very sensible decision to seek Banquo’s support in his bid for the throne. However, the following acts show his imprudent tirade against Banquo’s family, then

\(^{31}\) Lincoln used this reference and the logic that follows in his Peoria Address to argue against the chicanery of pro-slavery men who argued against the freedom of black men, while striving to maintain their own. As Lincoln noted, both groups’ freedom is secured in the same logic of natural rights, unless one is willing to deny black men’s humanity, which, when pushed, even the most ardent defender of slavery would generally refuse to do.

\(^{32}\) The vision of the dagger is curious, and Macbeth seems insane for paying it any heed. However, he had recently seen a vision of the Fates, and would soon see the ghost of his dead friend sitting in his seat at a banquet. The strangeness of Macbeth’s world accounts for the credulity with which he approaches seemingly unbelievable things.
Macduff’s, to say nothing of his mind-boggling lack of tactical and political foresight leading up to and during his final battle with Malcolm.

Macbeth demonstrates the height of his ambition in his attitude toward the Weird Sisters, the representatives of fate, or as he dismissively called it earlier “chance.” From the beginning, he trusts their sayings with regard to his fortunes as well as those of others. However, his gravest error comes from believing that he has the power to choose which aspects of their sayings to accept and reject. Macbeth seems to implicitly acknowledge the Sisters’ authority in his credulity toward their prophecies of which he is the subject. Yet, Macbeth presumes to exercise a plenary veto over the book of fate in seeking to overcome the less desirable aspects of their predictions. His achievement in usurping a King, legitimized and spurred by “fate and metaphysical aid,” (1.5.32) from “the spirits who know all mortal consequences,” engendered in the already extraordinary Macbeth a dangerously grandiose self-image.33 His hubris extended to the point of believing himself completely impervious to harm in battle, as the Sisters deceptively told him that the only person who could end his life is one “not born of woman” (5.3.4). Macbeth’s ambition ruled his soul unchecked at this point, or the deception might more readily have been detected. Instead, his ambition interpreted the prophecy as purely good, assuring Macbeth that he could overpower its unfavorable aspects.

Ambition, spurred by a quasi-religious fervor wrought these fatal excesses. The ambitious, in Hobbes’ account, are willing to exit the commonwealth and enter the state of war, preferring individual freedom and power over shared order and peace. For Aristotle, individuals

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33 While never seeing himself as godlike, Brutus’ role in the conspiracy against Caesar demonstrates a similar folly. Cassius overinflated Brutus self-image for the sake of getting him to join the conspiracy. Brutus makes the mistake of believing him. He insists on his own will over any others for every decision of the conspiracy for the remainder of the play, and gives his half-hearted argument-free eulogy before letting Antony have free-rein with the crowd. Like Macbeth, Brutus largely fell under the weight of his pride.
who spurn society in this manner are either beasts or gods, not men. Similarly, when doubting the plot against Duncan, Macbeth says, “I dare do all that may become a man./Who dares do more is none.” Lady Macbeth agrees, mockingly calling him a “beast” when he had first proposed to do the murder and then earnestly stating that “to be more than what you were, you would/Be so much more the man,” (1.7.51-58) that is, those who do things unthinkable to most men are greater, not less than other men; they transcend humanity and approach godhood. The Macbeths know what is at stake. Once resolved in his bloody path, Macbeth—characterized as a warlike beast (an eagle or a lion) at the beginning of the play—picks up on Lady Macbeth’s cue, wishing neither to remain a man nor to content himself as a vicious beast, but wills to become a god, by overpowering the words of the Weird Sisters, who Holinshed explicitly identifies as “the goddesses of destinie.”

Macbeth desires the omnipotence of the God of Christian theology, whose will translates into action with no chronological delay: “From this moment/The very firstlings of my heart shall be/The firstlings of my hand. And even now,/To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and done” (4.1.167-170). He thus abandons all consideration of earthly politics, with its cardinal virtue of prudence in his clamorous pursuit of “the be-all and the end-all” which would “trammel up the consequence” (1.7.1-7) of his violence, setting him upon the throne of a god.

While Macbeth remains the only Shakespeare play apparently referenced in the Lyceum, Julius Caesar also deserves some mention as the historical Caesar is the central figure in Lincoln’s list of members of “the family of the lion and the tribe of the eagle.”

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35 Lincoln’s familiarity with Julius Caesar is technically unknown, but reasonably accepted. For example, in Steven B. Smith’s recent article “Lincoln and the Politics of the ‘Towering Genius’” in American Political Thought Vol. 7 (Summer 2018).
presents Caesar in a godly status similar to that to which Macbeth aspired. Antony’s reverent statement, “When Caesar says ‘do this,’ it is performed” (1.2.13), Caesar’s decree, “The cause is in my will. I will not come,” (2.2.64-76), and, most potently, Caesar declaring himself immovable in his decrees, “constant as the Northern Star,” demonstrate the lofty heights on which Caesar wishes to be viewed. Also like Macbeth, Caesar rejects portents and prophecies warning of his death. When a soothsayer issues the now trite warning, “Beware the ides of March,” (1.2.21). Caesar dismisses him as a dreamer. When they meet again on March 15th, Caesar pompously notes, “The ides of March are come,” to which the soothsayer replies, “Ay, Caesar, but not gone” (3.1.1-2). Earlier, Caesar hears of many frightening omens from the night before; he sends priests to make a sacrifice, who find the bull has no heart; and Caesar’s wife Calphurnia recounts her dream in which Caesar’s statue spouts blood, showering the Roman citizens. He finds ways to dismiss all this. Finally, like Macbeth, Caesar speaks of his physical ability to withstand death and inflict it on others, drawing a direct comparison to the God of the Old Testament.\footnote{In Exodus 33:20-23: God states, “Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me and live.” God does grant however that Moses can see his “back parts.”}

Caesar shall forth. The things that threatened me
Ne’er looked but on my back. When they shall see
The face of Caesar, they are vanished (3.1.10-12).

Lincoln’s account of ambition also benefits from comparison to \textit{Coriolanus}.\footnote{Only the similarities to Lyceum presented here even aver confirmation that he ever read the play.} In \textit{Coriolanus}, a man of overwhelming ambition and superhuman military ability finds himself constitutionally unable to bow before the plebs with sufficient sincerity to receive his due honors in being elected consul of Rome. After being rejected, he physically exits Roman society, forms an army in alliance with the Volscians, enemies of Rome, and attacks his mother city. He shows
himself like a god, without need of a commonwealth, seeking to destroy Rome only in expression of his righteous indignation.

One thing common to each of these examples, is nominal success and eventual failure in their personal ambitions. Macbeth rose to the throne, became godlike in his own mind, and fell to his hubris. Caesar had many followers, but never mounted the throne. He too died because he misunderstood the nature of his relationship to his friends and countrymen. Coriolanus believed himself a god, had Rome in his grasp, but fell as the natural affection of his child, mother, and wife turned him from his purpose. He fundamentally stood self-sufficient, in need of no city, but he proved a beast, not a god as he was finally ruled by nature, not the other way around.

Shakespeare’s plays afforded Lincoln all he needed to contemplate deeply on the question of ambition. These plays present a view of ambition, as do the writings of Hobbes, that sits ill at ease with egalitarianism like that found in Lincoln’s America, and which he ever shown light upon in the Declaration of Independence. Indeed, Lincoln himself implicitly acknowledges the tension ambitious souls brought to light in an egalitarian nation in his Lyceum address. He himself seemed to have felt that tension in his own soul, as a lover of liberty and equality, and a man of lofty ambition. Lincoln’s insight demonstrates a careful, thorough examination of those concepts. Only a person who has fully considered the possibilities of politics can speak authoritatively on them, and only a person who has accepted and lived with the possibility of filling a role has fully considered it. The true philosopher will seek the best and highest, and thus must seek full comprehension of the worst and lowest, in order to combat it.38 If the philosopher

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38 As Plato describes them, the philosopher and the tyrant possess nearly identical souls. A political philosopher is one who has fully faced the tyrannical temptation, understood it, and nonetheless turned away. See Plato’s Republic, Book 6, 485b-494e, and Plato’s Alcibiades I.
is not careful, he will find himself consumed by what he seeks to understand.\textsuperscript{39} Lincoln intuited this warning.\textsuperscript{40}

Shakespeare’s plays lend themselves to a reading productive of such caution. The hero, the villain, the moral, the rhetoric, and the setting all cohere to send a clear surface-level message in opposition to disreputable things. After learning and internalizing this initial reading, the digging and struggling through the complicated depths of the plays can begin. Through this process, Lincoln faced Macbeth’s temptation and rejected it wholly in favor of something greater. He discovered, as Jaffa put it, “in the perpetuation of a republic based upon equal rights, a task equal to or surpassing in glory what future Caesars might find in the ruins of a republic.”\textsuperscript{41} However, to achieve the peculiar honor as the one who perpetuates the regime, just as the Founders received their peculiar honor in founding it, “both the founder and the preserver must transcend mere ambition.”\textsuperscript{42} Ambition is necessary, but insufficient to the highest tasks of statesmanship.

**Prudence**

Macbeth taught Lincoln about the fundamental danger of unfettered ambition. From his early reading of Shakespeare, and his practical participation in politics, Lincoln learned that

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\textsuperscript{39} Cf. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Aphorism 146, the epigram to this chapter.

\textsuperscript{40} Supported by John Channing Briggs in *Lincoln and Liberty: Wisdom for the Ages*, Lucas E. Morel ed., (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 40: “We can hypothesize with greater confidence that Lincoln’s immersion in Shakespearean tragedy allowed him—through a lifetime of rereading and the witnessing of many performances—to experience and reflect upon the temptations of tyranny through the inoculating prism of great drama. Lincoln seems to have been able and willing to put himself repeatedly into the minds, characters, and psychologies of different kinds of tyrants and thereby to undergo—by sympathetic proximity and the repose of distance—the intriguing rigors of those bound up in tyranny’s rigors and temptations.”

\textsuperscript{41} Harry Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959) 213

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 223
ambition requires modification and moderation to avoid its own or its regime’s ruin. Hobbes, of course, points obliquely to this necessity, but Aristotle explicitly offers a remedy.

Contrasting starkly with Hobbes’ account, although Aristotle views untempered ambition as an innate tendency of humanity, he presents it as a vicious tendency which moves those led thereby away from their telos, or natural end. Man’s political telos, for Aristotle, is safety and happiness, attained by a combination of virtue and external “equipment.” Prudence is the virtue of judgement and circumstance. Without prudence one cannot behave virtuously and thus fulfill one’s telos. Relevant to the context of this essay, without prudence one likely cannot overcome one’s ambition to the proper degree.

For Aristotle, ambition—the central entry in his list of the moral virtues\textsuperscript{43}—is not bad in itself, in fact it is both a virtue and a vice. It is a virtue when the love of honor is felt and pursued to the proper degree (as educated by one’s prudence). It is a vice when one gives ambition free rein. The same holds true for a lack of ambition. Those who reject the love of honor entirely are vicious because they choose “not to be honored even in the case of what is noble.”\textsuperscript{44} Circumstances dictate the status of ambition, and it never receives its full due as a virtue, according to Aristotle, because the limits of language have left virtuous ambition, nameless. However, ambition remains essential for Aristotle at any rate. In fact, without ambition the highest political life cannot be achieved. \textit{Megalopsychia}, magnanimity, or “greatness of soul,” is the highest political virtue. To become magnanimous one must be self-consciously great and

\textsuperscript{43} I follow the numbering of the virtues suggested by Bartlett and Collins in their outline of the work, which places ambition as number six in the list of 11 moral virtues. Others have suggested alternate numberings. Aristotle \textit{ Nichomachean Ethics}, Bartlett, Collins Trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., Book 4, Chapter 4, 80-81
seek one’s own rightful prominence. Without ambition the magnanimous man cannot come to be.  

Aristotle explores the nature of man, and in doing so establishes that a happy life necessitates the learning of and adherence to virtue. While practicing virtue is essential, to become truly virtuous, merely practical virtuousness is ultimately insufficient; one must be self-consciously virtuous, i.e. must live virtuously for its own sake, and therefore must intellectually grasp the virtues. Virtue, thus, requires knowledge as well as skill. Without the knowledge of what constitutes virtue generally, and each virtue particularly, one cannot be intentionally and efficaciously virtuous. On top of this, without the ability to know not only the meaning of a virtue, but the practice of it, one cannot become virtuous. This latter ability is called prudence. The prudent man can recognize in any given situation not only the appropriate virtue, but also what action the situation calls for to ensure adherence to said virtue. It is impossible to be happy without being virtuous, and being virtuous makes one good. It is also impossible, as stated before, to be virtuous without prudence. Furthermore, it is impossible to be prudent without virtue. Prudence without virtue becomes clever cunning, which can be used in any context the unvirtuous individual likes. Aristotle states the logical conclusion of these ideas: “it is impossible for someone who is not good to be prudent.”

Prudence, as with the moral virtues, develops through practical effort, not merely contemplation. However, Aristotle demonstrates the difficulty of becoming virtuous given the fact that one cannot be virtuous unless one understands virtue, and one cannot understand virtue

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45 Ibid., *Megalopsychia* is treated in Book 4, Chapter 3.
46 Ibid. Book 6, Ch. 1-7
47 Ibid., Book 1 Ch. 7, 10-14
48 The word is “phronesis” and is often translated “practical wisdom” as well as prudence.
49 ibid. Ch. 8-13
50 ibid. 1144a12-37, P. 131-132
51 ibid. 1144a37, P. 132
unless one behaves virtuously, which of course requires understanding virtue. He signals toward a resolution of this difficulty by suggesting that the best starting point in obtaining virtue lies in doing virtuous things “many times,” holding as the standard for determining what is virtuous whether one’s actions “are comparable in kind,” to those performed by a person who possesses the virtue one seeks.\footnote{Ibid., Book 2 Ch. 4, 31-32} This extremely practical, reasonable approach to the question of virtue suggests that obtaining any virtue begins with following a worthy individual who exemplifies the characteristic.

Something like Aristotle’s teachings on ambition, prudence, and perhaps magnanimity\footnote{The difficulty with the question of egalitarianism is here, again, brought out. Can the magnanimous man exist in America?} occurred to Lincoln. He recognized the danger of ambition, as noted in the Lyceum, but he also, in various places, repeatedly speaks of properly moderated ambition, as he recognized it in others and in himself.

In 1850 Lincoln was asked to eulogize the late President Zachary Taylor, for whose successful election Lincoln campaigned as a congressman. Lincoln spends the majority of the speech recounting and praising President Taylor’s military adventures, demonstrating his peculiar aspect as a military leader. A kind of ambition swelled in him, but his ambition bred a fortitude in the face of impossible circumstances. “It did not happen to Gen. Taylor once in his life to fight a battle on equal terms, or on terms advantageous to himself—and yet he was never beaten, and never retreated.” The battles he faced were not those “which would have been selected by an ambitious captain upon which to gather laurels.” Nevertheless, he approached
each situation with “a sober and steady judgement, coupled with a dogged incapacity to understand that defeat was possible.”

This determination and dedication to duty characterized Taylor throughout his years of military service, no less than during his time in the White House. Lincoln speculates that General Taylor “almost certain[ly] never thought of the presidency in connection with himself,” before it was suggested by others. Indeed, Lincoln surmises that the first suggestion of his running “rather amused than seriously interested him.” Yet, as Taylor demonstrated throughout his military career, a man of honor and duty can rightly aspire to greatness, even when introduced to a less than favorable or unfamiliar field of endeavor. “In my opinion,” said Lincoln, “the repeated, and steady manifestations in his favor, did beget in his mind a laudable ambition” for the presidency.

Ambition has earned a bad reputation from its most extreme proponents, like those examined in the Lyceum address. Therefore, phrases like laudable ambition and honest politician might seem as inherently contradictory as natural convention or married bachelor. Yet, for Lincoln, like Aristotle, ambition admits of modification. That of a President Taylor, who is accustomed to facing the unknown with fortitude, might permissibly be characterized as laudable, and would make a strange bedfellow with that seen in someone like Julius Caesar. Indeed, Taylor seems more like one of those “great and good” men who aspire to nothing more than the legislature or presidency. Nevertheless, to Lincoln’s mind, he offers an example of “laudable ambition,” which one might model on an individual level to combat a purer, more dangerous ambition.

54 Eulogy on Zachary Taylor (July 1850), 250-251
55 Ibid., 252
Continuing on the same theme, in 1863, after Lincoln entered the White House himself, he penned a letter to Major General Joseph Hooker explaining why he appointed Hooker to head the army of the Potomac and offering correction and advice. Lincoln explains that he felt promoting Hooker was the right decision, but that “there are some things in regard to which, I am not quite satisfied with you.” He applauds Hooker’s bravery, skill, apolitical approach, and self-confidence. Then, he brings up Hooker’s ambition. “You are ambitious, which, within reasonable bounds, does good rather than harm.” Note, Lincoln does not attribute to Hooker the reasonable bounds in which ambition should be held if one wishes to do good, but rather commends them to his use. “I think that during Gen. Burnside’s command of the Army, you have taken counsel of your ambition and thwarted him as much as you could, in which you did a great wrong.” Wherein had Hooker been ambitious without reasonable bounds? He had apparently been professing “that both the Army and the Government needed a Dictator.” Within Lincoln’s account of ambitious men in the Lyceum, if General Taylor can be seen as one of the “great and good men,” then Lincoln likely feared General Hooker might see himself as a “towering genius,” going so far as to (sarcastically) invoke the name of Napoleon in relation to Hooker’s mistakes. Lincoln avoids directly saying so, but Hooker unquestionably wished to see himself as the political and military prince of the United States in the midst of the Civil War. Lincoln drolly explained, “Only those generals who gain successes can set up dictators. What I now ask of you is military success and I will risk the dictatorship.”

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56 Letter to Joseph Hooker (January 1863), 434
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
Hooker’s ambition had thus far been a real liability, but Lincoln provides an understanding of ambition that might have redeemed Hooker’s excesses. Rather than imprisoning him for treasonous activities, as Lincoln infamously did with journalists engaged in less seditious rhetoric than Hooker, Lincoln promoted him. Ambition could prove Hooker’s ruin, or that of the United States given the opportunity. Lincoln knew this and chose rather to use Hooker than alienate him, but not without educating him. He chided Hooker and joked with him about his behavior preceding his promotion. Ambition, Lincoln well knew, could no more be eradicated in someone like Hooker than in the commonwealth generally. Instead, it must be controlled. Taking advice from ambition rather than endeavoring to advise it led to Hooker’s excesses. Holding the hot passion of ambition within reasonable bounds means subjecting it to the dictatorship of “Reason, cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason.”

Lincoln was equally circumspect about his own ambition. During his first run for the Illinois state legislature in 1832, he put out a campaign circular outlining his positions on various issues. In the conclusion of that document, he stated

Every man is said to have his peculiar ambition. Whether it be true or not, I can say for one that I have no other so great as that of being truly esteemed of my fellow men, by rendering myself worthy of their esteem. How far I shall succeed in gratifying this ambition, is yet to be developed.61

After acknowledging the colloquial universality of ambition, Lincoln reveals his greatest ambition. As he presents it, his ambition seems a case of self-flattery. He, like any ambitious

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61 To the People of Sangamo County (March 1832), 5
person, desires reputation, fame. But he specifies that the esteem he desires ties to his worth. By this account, if Lincoln gains esteem but fails to measure up to whatever standard of worthiness his fellow men set for him, he will have failed his greatest ambition. This standard of ambition might reveal something of Lincoln’s egalitarian modification of ambition. Besides it being moral, it must also be democratically verified; perhaps in the language of this document they equate somehow to the same thing.

24 years later, as recorded in a note to himself, Lincoln declared “With me, the race of ambition has been a failure—-a flat failure.” Never successfully having gained any achievement large enough to feel meaningfully distinguished, compared with the famous Stephen Douglas, Lincoln’s felt let down. He went on to confess that, despite his failure and Douglas’s success, he did not pretend to hold honors like those Douglas had received in contempt. His reason for continuing to yearn for the power and position Douglas had earned, however, demonstrates the true character of Lincoln’s ambition. If Lincoln could achieve Douglas’ prominence, he desired “that the oppressed of my species, might have shared with me in the elevation, I would rather stand on that eminence, than wear the richest crown that ever pressed a monarch’s brow.”

In Lincoln’s statement on ambition in his campaign document from 1832, he spoke in terms that cast his ambition in a favorable light. Nearly a quarter century later, in a fragment composed in a moment of private reflection, never shared with another living soul as far as the historical record tells us, Lincoln demonstrated that his ambition apparently resembled that positive presentation from many years before. He desired political distinction not only out of

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62 On Stephen Douglas (C. December 1856), 384. The reader’s mind, given the timing of the quote, immediately identifies these “oppressed” creatures as the black Americans held in subjection, for whom Lincoln had already publicly begun the process of rhetorical battle over their status as rights-bearing human beings, as seen especially in his famous Peoria Address.
pride (though that surely was a factor), but also for the good of his fellow men. This private
moment of yearning reveals the moral nature of Lincoln’s ambition.

Some psychologizing on Lincoln’s desires might reveal a process of sublimation and self-
justification at play here. Even assuming that were the case, some imagined categorical good will
need not motivate an individual’s righteous actions—particularly political actions—to make
them worthy. Lincoln’s crusade against American slavery need not have emerged from a self-
conscious honest desire for nothing more than the good of other men. That Lincoln might
consider the eternal glory such a crusade for justice could bestow on him, in addition to
considering the good which would redound to a suffering class of people and others, does not
take away from the goodness of the cause.

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Although Lincoln’s writings often address the topic of ambition, he also demonstrated in
his politics his careful application of those ideas about which he wrote so well. Unsurprisingly, a
most potent example comes in Lincoln’s rhetorical approach to the slave question.

Slavery animated Lincoln’s politics from the beginning. Apocryphal tales of a very young
man wanting to “hit that thing [slavery], and hit it hard,” oblique references to abolitionist
printing presses in his early oratory, the Lincoln-Douglas debates on slavery in the territories,
and the ultimate abolition of slavery (to name a few examples) all demonstrate that from first to
last that peculiar institution had an outsized influence on Lincoln’s politics.

Someone familiar with Lincoln’s political era might expect that, given the importance his
views on slavery had for him, he would eventually end up in the political company of the likes of

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publication info, 1888), 137
64 Lyceum, 31
John Brown, William Lloyd Garrison, or other abolitionists. But Lincoln never seemed terribly tempted by the often politically oblivious abolition movement of his day. His distinctive approach to slavery pursued realistic political objectives given the constraints of contemporary public opinion and legal structures, while never compromising on the moral principle animating his approach. This prudent tact let Lincoln avoid the extreme folly of popular abolitionism (to say nothing of the advocacy of slavery as a positive good) while always retaining his staunch anti-slavery position.

The Lincoln-Douglas debates demonstrate the difficulty of moderation on the slave question. In fact, one might accurately characterize the debate as a dispute over the meaning of moderation in approaching slavery. With the two poles of positive good vs. abolitionism, what position relative to each epitomized real prudence?

Anyone familiar with the debates knows that Lincoln consistently presented Douglas as a crypto slavery apologist. However, Douglas presented himself as a moderate. While not extreme in his opposition to slavery, he was always emphatic in his claim of indifference toward it. Douglas sought to cultivate a moderate reputation by taking slavery off the table, throwing the question to the authority of the individual states. When looking at the issue disinterestedly, Douglas’ position facially appears the most logically moderate: neither for slavery, nor against it, but merely for the constitution and the principles upholding it. Let slavery be what it will, men like Douglas wished to put it out of the public eye and move forward.

Lincoln claims to see through Douglas’ pastiche of ambivalence. As he famously said, “This declared indifference, but as I must think, covert real zeal for the spread of slavery, I can not but hate.”65 In Lincoln’s view, only someone who desires the spread of slavery could

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65 Peoria (October 1854), 315
advocate for Douglas’ approach. From Lincoln’s perspective, taking no position on slavery was as good as supporting it because both the legal apparatus and successful political movements of the day tended toward its spread, not its stasis nor its ultimate demise. Douglas was no moderate, he was esoterically pro-slavery, despite his public presentation.

In Lincoln’s view, genuine moderation could never yield policies like those Douglas advocated if one fully appreciated the situation. Despite Douglas’ characterization as such, slavery differed not only in content, but in kind from “the oyster laws of Virginia, or the cranberry laws of Indiana.” Lincoln compared the example of slave property with the seemingly more relevant area of livestock laws:

Equal justice to the south, it is said, requires us to consent to the extending of slavery to new countries. That is to say, inasmuch as you do not object to my taking my hog to Nebraska, therefore I must not object to you taking your slave. Now, I admit this is perfectly logical, if there is no difference between hogs and negroes.

Lincoln goes on to draw out the obvious implication: there is a world of difference and everyone (including slaveholders and those advocating for their interests) knows it. Had Douglas reasoned rightly and understood the nature of the slave question he would have joined “the great mass of mankind” in firmly and durably considering “slavery a great moral wrong.” Douglas’ practiced quasi-scientific disinterest led him to make a misjudgment of the political reality of the situation, to say nothing of the “moral obtuseness” such an approach necessarily inculcates.

Whether one finds Lincoln’s assessment of the popular view of slavery as a moral evil convincing or not, that presentation of the issue proved quite rhetorically effective. At Peoria

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66 Ibid., 327
67 Ibid., 325-326
68 Ibid., 346
Lincoln said, when pointing to a very different tendency in popular opinion on the question of the natural rights/humanity of blacks, “A universal feeling, whether well or ill-founded, can not be safely disregarded.” In this speech, Lincoln makes a strong moral case against slavery, but the real political utility of that argument rises and falls with public approbation. Whether any “feeling accords with justice and sound judgment, is not the sole question, if indeed, it is any part of it,” politically speaking. Public opinion implicitly sets the limit on the possible and the permissible in American democratic politics. Douglas’ indifference to slavery, according to Lincoln, did not match the public’s moral compunctions against it. A successful strategy of “moderation” on any topic requires an accurate sense of popular opinion. In this almost vulgar political sense Lincoln knew he had a winning strategy if he could convincingly express the public sense on slavery in his oratory, even if he did not do so with strict accuracy.

Douglas thought moderation meant a mathematical middle point between the two extreme positions. However, Aristotle teaches that the so-called golden mean requires greater

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70 Peoria, 316
71 Here Lincoln’s ambition must, again, pay its toll to egalitarianism.
72 Making a similar point, Edmund Burke said, “Circumstances (which with some gentlemen pass for nothing) give in reality to every political principle its distinguishing color and discriminating effect. The circumstances are what render every civil and political scheme beneficial or noxious to mankind.” In Select Works of Edmund Burke: Reflections on the Revolution in France (Carmel, IN: Liberty Fund, 1999), 119

Something else worth considering in this connection: a great man of ambition could try as he might to obtain the power he naturally deserves and still fail. Coriolanus, mentioned above, never became consul because he failed to bow, even symbolically, to the opinion of the plebs, then never conquered Rome because of his natural affection for his family. Lincoln operates within the American context. He openly holds that equality is eternally right and true. However, even if it were not, a great man in America, if he wishes to gain power at all, and not risk simply being undone by the great mass of mankind he might find himself in opposition to, must make his ambition somehow compatible with egalitarianism. Thus, for Lincoln, one cannot safely disregard public opinion because it is a political mistake, and of profound danger to the great man who wishes to do something outside the bounds of permissible action in a democracy. If, for example, the great man miscalculates and disregards public opinion in trying to overthrow the popular government, to gain power for himself, he will likely lose his liberty (if not his life) for his trouble, gaining no power in the bargain. Compare the actions of Lincoln to those of John Brown.
73 Politicians today likely lack the vision to attempt this kind of public molding since they rely, almost without exception, on the results of public opinion polls, tailoring their rhetoric and approaches to these narrowly sampled stilted presentations rather than seeking to lead public opinion with their rhetoric. Those funding, producing, and publicly presenting such surveys find themselves in a position similar to the one Lincoln attempted to fulfill in his rhetorical prodding of the public.
circumspection than mere arithmetic. Lincoln’s approach to moderation took into account circumstances beyond mere calculation. He knew that the winning political approach, regardless of his own opinions, must take a stand on a hot moral issue like slavery. Ambivalence on such issues proves only the weakness of its proponent.

What position on slavery did Lincoln finally take in opposition to Douglas, and how did he characterize it? Lincoln’s lively, political take on the slave question shared certain similarities with Douglas’ professed position. Douglas claimed he wished to have nothing to do with slavery at all beyond allowing for its theoretical spread into the territories by granting “popular sovereignty” to the territorial and state inhabitants contemplating implementing a slave constitution, on the principle that slavery is a factual reality, not a subject fit for his moral judgement. And even if it were, the sacred right of popular sovereignty dictates that such decisions must remain in the hands of the people. Beyond this, he did not care what happened with slavery.

Lincoln broadly took his bearings on the slave question from the emergent position of the Republican party of his day but presented their approach with such rhetorical delicacy and political skill as to express the program in its most elevated possible articulation. Lincoln, like Douglas, wished to leave slavery alone, at least where it existed; however, he wanted to continue all historical compromises and measures which tended to slow the spread of slavery—particularly in claiming the federal government had the political right (and moral duty) to prevent slavery’s spread into the territories—on the principle that slavery is wrong. He claimed to wish no immediate legal harm to the existing institution, with the open confession that he desired to

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74 Nicomachean Ethics, Book 2, Ch. 6, 32-33.
75 Lincoln gives his most complete legal argument for this case in his 1860 “Address at Cooper Institute, New York City.”
see the gradual abolition of slavery, supporting its current practice only as required by the
constitution, and encouraging, without commanding, slaveholders to end the practice voluntarily.

Lincoln’s brand of anti-slavery, by his account, revived the Founders’ approach. With
evidence found in the Constitution—where slavery is never once mentioned by name and is only
found through substantial historical contextualization on the part of the reader—Lincoln noted
the concern and embarrassment the Founders displayed on the question, especially noting the
influence necessity played. Slavery was an evil, on this the Founders are univocal, but an evil
that must be borne with, at least for a time. The creation of a new nation conceived in liberty and
dedicated to a proposition which would logically condemn slavery took precedence in the minds
of these principled, practical men. “Thus, the thing is hid away, in the constitution, just as an
afflicted man hides away a wen or a cancer, which he dares not cut out at once, lest he bleed to
death; with the promise, nevertheless, that the cutting may begin at the end of a given time.”
Lincoln characterizes this action as the bare minimum an anti-slavery coalition in the Founding
could do. However, he then presents an impressive legislative record of America limiting the
slave trade in the states and territories and eliminating the import or export of slaves.

The reality of the Founding generations’ various view of slavery is less unanimous than
Lincoln presents it. Unless one views only those from the Northern states as Founders, an entire
contingent of those who signed both the Declaration and the Constitution forwarded strong
opposition to language condemning slavery in any respect. The Constitution does offer clear
evidence that the accepted position condemned at very least the practice of importing slaves, but
beyond this a great deal of variety existed. Lincoln’s choice to rhetorically unify the Founders
provided his argument an authority few would be willing to question without very good reason.

76 Peoria, 338
Of course, Douglas himself attempted a similar argument, for his position. Despite his rhetorical liberties, Lincoln nevertheless more accurately characterized the Founders than did Douglas’, as a matter of history.

The assumption in favor of slavery Lincoln read in his opponent’s position betrays the nature of Douglas’ centrism. On a moral question, as noted above, taking no position means accepting a default position, whether or not one likes it. Douglas’ moderation defaulted to mixing the extreme of pro-slavery beliefs with the tempering effect of factual political circumstances. Lincoln’s moderation is a mirror image: partaking in the principle of abolitionism tempered by contemporary reality.

The fact is, sticky moral issues usually elude easy solutions. In consequence, most politicians, given the practical nature of their work, ignore them to the greatest extent possible, unless use can be made of such issues. Douglas saw, as he claimed, in the Nebraska question a means of removing the slave question from national politics forever, and an opportunity therein for durable fame in connection with the legislation. Lincoln also desired fame but would not have it on terms that compromised his principles, would not satisfy an ambition that did not have the merit of an earned esteem from his fellow men.

Lincoln’s success in presenting his and Douglas’ positions as he did came in large part because Douglas’ record predated Lincoln’s participation in the debate. He was able to analyze and deconstruct Douglas’ approach before carefully crafting his own as a politically calculated moral foil. He saw the danger Douglas’ position posed, and crafted his position in response, partaking in Douglas’ politically salutary rhetoric of nonintervention, while vociferously condemning the moral and political error of permitting, and promoting, the spread of slavery. Absent Lincoln and the Republicans’ principled opposition to Douglas, the only openly anti-
slavery approach on offer came from the abolitionists, and no politically conscious person wished to be associated with them. Douglas was the “moderate” on the issue, when compared to the abolitionist and pro-slavery movements. Lincoln made prudent moderation as an approach to slavery morally defensible and politically tenable.77

With a mind educated in the limits of ambition and the necessity of prudence Lincoln saw in Douglas’ tactical-moral error “the opportunity of his life” and seized upon it, expressing himself “in a policy of deadly moderation.”78 In the senate election around which this debate occurred, the incumbent Douglas won the day. However, in the long run Lincoln won the political debate, to say nothing of the war, over the question of slavery.

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*Macbeth* is a powerful allegory on the danger of ambition. This aspect of the play alone might provide much of the impetus for someone of Lincoln’s disposition to moderate his ambition and gain prudence. However, the play also contains a positive example of how a statesman ought to conduct himself. This teaching concerning prudence and moderation requires closer attention than the more evident warning on ambition. These twin aspects of the Scottish Play reveal Shakespeare’s depth and breadth available to a diligent reader like Lincoln.

Macbeth and his wife both state the political importance of caution in carrying out the bloody acts supporting their climb to the throne. Even as Lady Macbeth strives to spur the immoderate ambition that drove Macbeth to the throne, she advises him “Bear welcome in your eye,/ Your hand, your tongue. Look like th’ innocent flower,/ But be the serpent under ’t” (1.6.77-78).

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77 The glaring omission of Lincoln’s later more direct approach to slavery embodied in the emancipation proclamation is treated in minute detail in the chapter on Lincoln, Religion, and Natural Right. Let it be said, Lincoln won the nation with the position on slavery presented here, but he defeated slavery with a very different approach. What the two approaches share is an unwillingness to legislate, or speak, in favor of slavery in any regard. Lincoln ever regarded slavery as an unconscionable evil, and destroyed it when the opportunity to do so presented itself.

78 Lord Charnwood *Abraham Lincoln* (Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing inc, 1917), 153
Macbeth too accepts the necessity of this Machiavellian cunning when he says “Away, and mock the time with fairest show./False face must hide what the false heart doth know” (1.7.94-96). Needless to say, these examples point toward Aristotle’s account of clever cunning rather than prudence. However, subjecting the violent passions supporting one’s self-proclaimed worthiness to the throne to the calm machinations of the intellect still places the impulse toward this cunning under the same category as prudence. They differ in quality, not in kind.

Macbeth’s burning ambition proved too hot for the moderate effects of such cooling. He grew wild with hubris as he sought perfection in his rule through the “Absolute Act.” This manic descent into chaos was urged on by the sayings of the Weird Sisters, which Macbeth understood as a deep foundation of unquestionable soundness supporting his cause. Macbeth’s ambition violently pulled him far outside the reach of any moderating principle.

From Macbeth’s example, a man of great ambition observes how dangerous his path may become. However, Macbeth also includes a commendable example of a statesman who discovers a model for taming his ambition through moderation and quietly applies it with impressive results: the story of Malcolm, Prince of Cumberland.

Malcolm plays the role of the “step/ On which [Macbeth] must fall down or else o’erleap” (1.4.55-56). So at first, he appears to serve primarily as a Macbeth’s one-dimensional counterpart, but not much more. Yet, Malcolm proves more than a moralistic foil to Macbeth. He fills the moderate role of a true statesman, rhetorically blending Macbeth’s decisive strength with Duncan’s Christian gentleness, saving Scotland from the grips of a deranged tyrant by virtue of his rhetorical and strategic prowess.

From the outset, Malcolm does not appear terribly impressive. He begins the play in the King’s camp, revealing with his first lines that he had been involved in the same battle in which Macbeth and Banquo won glory, but, for himself, had required rescue from inevitable capture (1.2.4-6). A lack of martial virtue does not, however, necessarily indicate a lack of prudence. Malcolm possessed enough sense to flee Scotland following word of his father’s murder. In the shock of that news, Malcolm and his younger brother Donalbain had neither time nor space to process the event. In consequence, their initial public reaction looked indifferent, or worse. Fearing the response their dry eyes might provoke, as their “tears are not yet brewed,” Malcolm and Donalbain wisely avoid the difficulty honest men experience of showing “an unfelt sorrow,” by fleeing to England and Ireland respectively (2.3.140-145, 160-172).

A full account of Malcolm’s exile in England falls outside the play’s scope. However, Holinshed tells us that Macbeth ruled for 17 years, meaning Malcolm lived under England’s protection for about that long. Whatever the length of time, the man who retakes Scotland proves a formidable statesman, a stark contrast to the boy who fled his homeland. The play offers some clues about the growth he experienced in the interval.

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80 Malcom says very little for most of the play. He serves as herald for his father, King Duncan, in their camp during battle at 1.2.4-8, 50, and 1.4.3-12, he also appears without any lines in Act 1 Scene 6; he says a few lines immediately following his father’s murder at 2.3.118, in the exchange at 140-146, and plotting an escape with Donalbain at 160-172; and then he is not seen or heard from until Act 4 Scene 3. Of course, Malcolm’s most important role in the early action of the play comes in Act 1 Scene 4, when Duncan declares him “The Prince of Cumberland,” announcing Malcolm as his heir. This proclamation confirms in Macbeth’s mind the necessity of murder if he wishes to mount the throne.

81 Of course, the innocent ideally have nothing to fear, but Macbeth indicates repeatedly the naivete of such thinking. Duncan, Banquo, and Macduff’s family all attest to the foolishness of trusting righteousness as a shield “in this earthly world, where to do harm/Is often laudable, to do good sometime/Accounted dangerous folly.” Malcolm did not stick around to become one in a list of many innocent victims.

82 Boswell-Stone follows P.A. Daniel in setting Macbeth’s dramatic time at no more than two months (Shakespeare’s Holinshed, 32). A similar chronological elision occurs in Julius Caesar in the question of the interval between Brutus’ departure from Rome and Brutus and Cassius’ war with Antony. According to Plutarch, Shakespeare’s source, Brutus fled to Lucania, then Athens. Shakespeare removes Brutus’ travels altogether, shrinking the true timeline (about 2 years) down to a month or so (Daniel, 198-201, cited by Boswell-Stone). Plutarch says that Brutus studied philosophy while in Athens, and that he spent long enough doing so “was thought to be wholly given up to literary pursuits. But without any one's suspecting it, he was getting ready for war.” I suggest something similar about Malcolm.
A primary transformation the play shows in Malcolm is a change in perspective on the role of Christianity in politics. Christians stereotypically give preference to the afterlife over this life when weighing their decisions in and out of the public realm. Righteous obedience, even if imprudently applied, is worth far more because it will bring eternal rewards in the life to come, regardless of the consequences in this short mortal life. Early in the play, Malcolm does not apparently subscribe to this ethos. He expresses amazement at the death of Macbeth’s predecessor as Thane of Cawdor. The rebellious thane confesses his crimes, begs the King’s pardon, and sets “forth a deep repentance.” Cawdor “died/As one that had been studied in death,”83 giving him the astonishing ability “To throw away” his life, “the dearest thing he owed/As ’twere a careless trifle” (1.4.3-12). For Malcolm, this Christian approach to repentance, death, and the afterlife is unthinkable, because life is “the dearest thing,” not to be traded for something so uncertain as hope for eternity.84

Although the source of Malcolm’s skepticism cannot definitively be known, the negative impact Christianity had on his father’s reign appears the likeliest cause. Holinshed shares the contemporary assessment of Duncan’s rule by the rebellious Makdowald, “calling him a faint-hearted [milk sop],” better suited to rule “idle [monks] in some cloister than to [have] the rule of such [valiant] and [hardy] men of [war] as the [S]cots were.”85 Shakespeare reorients the critique, having Macbeth say, “this Duncan/Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been/So clear in his great office, that his virtues/Will plead like angels” (1.7.16-20). This passage constitutes part of Macbeth’s conflicted soliloquy, doubting whether he should carry out the murder. His

83 An interesting parallel to Socrates’ claim “that those who happen to have gotten in touch with philosophy in the right way devote themselves to nothing else but dying and being dead,” (Phaedo 65A) perhaps seeing in Cawdor something of the philosopher, and perhaps identifying him with a kind of reduction of Socrates’ interesting claim to a default stoicism. However, since Malcolm makes this assessment, it seems he is the one approaching philosophy.  
84 See Timothy W. Burns Shakespeare’s Political Wisdom, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 67-68  
85 19-20. I bracket all words whose spelling I have modernized.
comment on Duncan’s qualities reveals common opinion of the King’s character. The people, according to Macbeth, will not support him if he is known to have killed so righteous a man. However, these comments do not necessarily argue that Duncan was a wise or effective ruler, only that in his rule he retained his Christian virtue. Similarly, Macduff refers to Duncan as “a most sainted king,” but, again, does not speak to his political effectiveness. The practical evidence suggests Duncan lacked judgement in choosing those on whom he would rely, particularly the last two successive Thanes of Cawdor.86

Malcolm’s early comment on the Thane of Cawdor’s death appears at very least incredulous of Christianity, and particularly of its role in politics. However, a transformation occurs in England. Malcolm explicitly reveals his military preparations for retaking Scotland,87 however his less obvious, but equally essential preparations are educational.

In Malcolm’s months (or years) in England he observed firsthand the work of a successful Christian monarch. The skeptical Malcolm admits that he had “often…seen” King Edward miraculously heal an illness called “the evil” and furthermore claims that Edward “hath a heavenly gift of prophecy,/And sundry blessings hang about his throne/That speak him full of grace” (4.3.168-181). Although Macduff called Duncan “a most sainted king,” Edward has greater claim on that epithet. Malcolm witnessed the deleterious effects of his own father’s

86 It is fascinating to note that, when lamenting his poor judgement concerning Macbeth’s predecessor, “on whom I built/An absolute trust,” Duncan says “There’s no art/To find the mind’s construction in the face,” (1.4.13-16) but he demonstrates on two occasions earlier in the play that his literal eyesight is apparently not very good, as he fails to recognize both the sergeant reporting Macbeth and Banquo’s performance in battle (1.2.1), and Ross and Angus when they approach (1.2.49). In both cases Duncan’s son Malcolm’s eyesight proves sufficient to see what the King cannot. Malcolm also possesses sufficient vision to see wherein the King proved deficient, considering especially Christianity’s hold on his rule.

87 Malcolm informs Macduff that he is not only ready to return to Scotland, but before Macduff even approached him, Malcolm had commissioned his uncle Siward to gather 10,000 English soldiers for the mission. Malcolm knows what Macbeth is capable of on the battlefield and as a commander, so he has been preparing. He evinces some skill in military command by fulfilling the Weird Sisters’ prophecy, craftily advising his men to shield themselves behind bows of trees as they march toward Dunsinane.
Christianity and thus begins the play with a dim view of Christian politics. However, Edward showed him that Christianity rightly applied works to the advantage of the ruler. Among the refined, civilized “English epicures,” (5.3.9) Christianity’s influence proves so thoroughgoing that a sainted king claiming spiritual gifts, leading under the name of God meets the regime’s needs.

But Scotland is not England. Duncan lost the throne because of his trusting, meek nature among a nation of manly warriors with an ethos heavily influenced by the nation’s pagan past. However, the trouble with Duncan’s rule was not his Christianity, but his credulity and imprudence. Aside from ruling “meekly,” he unwisely sought to force brutal Scotland into a premature political alignment with sophisticated England, attempting to overthrow Scotland’s elective monarchy by establishing hereditary rule through naming Malcolm his heir. This, of course, resulted in his murder. Malcolm, seeing the virtue of Edward’s Christian rule, applies his observations upon returning to Scotland, modified based on his father’s mistakes, as well as on Macbeth’s. Neither the primitive warrior nor the Christian saint suited Scotland; what she needed was a prudent blend of the two.

Two details in the concluding scene of the play evince Christian England’s influence on Malcolm. First, Malcolm’s uncle Siward upon hearing of his son’s death wants to know if he died running toward or away from danger. Siward learns his son’s injuries were in the front, not the back. To this he abruptly replies, “Why then, God’s soldier be he! Had I as many sons as I have hairs, I would not wish them to a fairer death; And so his knell is knolled.” Malcolm does

88 Paul Cantor’s treatment of this theme in “Macbeth and the Gospelling of Scotland,” is excellent. He goes so far as to claim that Scotland is a nation in transition (from pagan to Christian). Jan Blits takes historical issue with this claim in the introduction to his edited edition of Macbeth. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that the transition was in the sentiments and ethos, not in the literal religion. Indeed, Macbeth evinces familiarity with Christianity and self-consciously sacrifices his soul to the devil, foreclosing any claim on eternal life in exchange for earthly glory. Regardless of the framing, that Scotland shows itself more brutal and not thoroughly Christian in the play seems undeniable.
not seem to agree with Siward’s pious brevity, and gently corrects him, “He’s worth more sorrow, and that I’ll spend for him” (5.8.53-64). Note, although like in the earlier case of Cawdor he still disputes the Christian attitude toward death, he moderates his response. In the former example, Malcolm openly marvels at Cawdor’s approach to death. In this latter, he instead expresses how highly he valued his cousin, and his intent to mourn him for longer than his uncle. Rather than open skepticism, Malcolm provides a positive example.89 Malcolm demonstrates that men deserve more honor in their death, regardless of the beliefs of the living. This careful rebuke balances the extreme of the Christian ethos toward death without questioning its very premises. One might plausibly believe Malcolm a Christian, but one cannot credibly call him a heathen.

Immediately after this episode, Malcolm triumphs in battle and is universally hailed as King. Malcolm immediately aligns Scotland with England by centralizing and modernizing Scotland’s landed nobility, changing their titles from thanes to earls.90

In addition to these direct influences of Christianity and the British court, Malcolm’s time in England also bolstered his skill as a statesman. He demonstrates as much in his initial meeting with Macduff.91 Ross interrupts Malcolm and Macduff’s interview to inform them that Macbeth has brutally murdered Macduff’s family. Malcolm encourages Macduff to voice his profound grief, in hopes of saving his warrior heart from breaking, then hastily advises him “be comforted/Let’s make us med’cines of our great revenge/To cure this deadly grief” (4.3.252-254). The Christian Macduff must first, however, reconcile himself to deaf heaven’s stolid witness to the unthinkable deed before he can harden his resolve as Malcolm demands. Once the

89 Timothy W. Burns seems to see equivalence in Malcolm’s two responses to death, but the difference between the two is important and demonstrates Malcolm’s growth.
90 This is an oft-noted dramatic detail. I first encountered it in Paul Cantor’s essay “Macbeth and the Gospelling of Scotland.”
91 I leave off an extended discussion of Malcolm’s false accusations against himself. However, it should be held in mind as contextual evidence of Malcolm’s growth.
grief has passed, Malcolm seizes the moment to anchor and aim this potential loose cannon. If Macduff turns not into an uncontrollable violent flurry, he might, like a Christian, grieve, forgive, and move on; he might, as was suggested to Job “curse God and die”; Malcolm does what he can to prevent these alternatives, offering a third path, “Be this the whetstone of your sword. Let grief/Convert to anger. Blunt not the heart; enrage it” (4.3.268-269). Malcolm knows that if he can focus Macduff’s grief in the proper direction it might redound to both the revenge his new ally needs as medicine to his grief, as well as to the benefit of all Scotland. Macduff came to England to win Malcolm to his cause, but in the end, Malcolm tested Macduff’s devotion, guided him through the process of grief, and successfully won him to his own cause, directing his sword toward Macbeth.

Macduff’s skill in battle certainly surpasses Malcolm’s, as demonstrated in the early account of Malcolm’s near capture, and Macduff’s receiving the warlike epithet “Bellona’s bridegroom.” Malcolm knows his strengths lie elsewhere, and instead applies himself to the art of statesmanship. It pays off: Macduff kills Macbeth, at Malcolm’s behest. Were military prowess the only thing needed to qualify for the throne, Macduff earned it without question. Perhaps Macduff might otherwise, with some right, have claimed the throne after unseating Macbeth without Malcolm’s efforts in this scene. Instead, the play ends with Macduff entering the scene triumphantly holding Macbeth’s head, calling to Malcolm, “Hail, King! For so thou art” (5.8.65).

At the beginning of the play, Malcolm finds himself usurped of rule by one more cunning and interested in the throne than he. Malcolm took his exile as an opportunity to educate himself

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92 In his presentation of the false vices.
93 This is often attributed to Macbeth, but Paul Cantor points out in his video series on Macbeth that it could not refer to Macbeth because he was not at Fife (Macduff’s home); the battle at Fife is reported by Ross after the Captain reports on Macbeth and Banquo’s battle.
and returns to his homeland having learned the art of statesmanship and successfully unseats the mendacious despot.\textsuperscript{94}

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A careful reader of \textit{Macbeth}, as Lincoln evidently was, finds a wealth of political wisdom, including insights rivaling the teachings of Hobbes and Aristotle. Both Macbeth and Malcolm demonstrate ambition for rule and are involved in the killing of a king to mount the throne, yet Malcolm’s contrast to Macbeth could hardly be more extreme. But they are far from mirror images. Malcolm does not simply possess unfettered ambition toward righteous goals, while Macbeth has such for wicked ones. Macbeth demonstrates the danger of unconstrained ambition individually and for the political community as a whole. His ambition leads him to eventually leave off believing in sensible political considerations in favor of pleasing demonic remonstrances. Malcolm displays the necessity of prudence to moderate such ambition in all good rulers, exposing Macbeth’s root problem. Macbeth’s zealous fatalism contrasts with Malcolm’s prudent statesmanship. Furthermore, Malcolm did not fall into the same trap his father did, credulously embracing an unreflective Christian ethos in ruling. Rather, he balanced the gentleness and spiritual power of Christianity with the brutal vitality of Scotch warrior culture.

To this final point, much like Malcolm, Abraham Lincoln found himself stuck between two political worlds. Although the pro-slavery crowd held no significant appeal for him, he could conceivably have walked the path of the abolitionists. That path was dangerous, bloody, and politically impossible to traverse. However, if the only other choice on offer were the path of Alexander Stephens and Stephen Douglas, Lincoln would likely have found himself in the

\textsuperscript{94} Strikingly similar to Prospero in \textit{The Tempest}, and perhaps also evoking the contrasting examples in \textit{King Lear} of Lear and Edgar.
fanatical company of the other extreme. Instead, Lincoln surveyed the political landscape and decided, like Malcolm, to forge a new road. By blending the political realism of those who assiduously ignored slavery with the powerful moralism of the abolition movement he successfully traversed the narrow pass between Scylla and Charybdis, between Macbeth and Duncan, wrecking on neither obstacle.

This chapter evokes an irresistible image of a young Lincoln carefully forming his mind by endlessly pouring over *Macbeth*. The swelling hum of his “little engine” leading him forward as he consciously seeks to control it, directing it toward the laudable achievements on which he set his sights. Avoiding the folly of Macbeth while coming to understand him deeply, seeking to model himself after Malcolm, and observing examples of those around him who attempted the same with various levels of success. He demonstrated the depth at which he came to understand the lessons explored here throughout his life in word and deed. The writings of Hobbes and Aristotle bring the profundity of Lincoln’s understanding of laudable ambition into sharp relief. This striking perspective developed in a remarkable mind, ever engaged with Shakespeare’s poetic dialogue on ambition and its limits.

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95 The comparison with Malcolm’s Christianity to Lincoln’s situation is complicated and interesting. It might be stated reductively as follows: as Christianity is to Malcolm so equality is to Lincoln. Learning the importance of the givens, the sincerely held and binding beliefs of a polis is essential to all effective statesmen. Furthermore, the question of Christianity comes in directly with Lincoln’s attachment to his anti-slavery principles. The abolition movement was intimately tied up with Christianity in Lincoln’s day.
CHAPTER 3

“My Dearest Partner of Greatness”:
Lady Macbeth and Mary Todd Lincoln

*House and riches are the inheritance of fathers: and a prudent wife is from the Lord.*

*Proverbs 19:14*

One essential element in both the story of Macbeth and the life of Lincoln appears missing from the picture of ambition presented in the previous chapter: the influence of an ambitious wife on her husband. This chapter fills that glaring lacuna.

From the time of Shakespeare to that of Lincoln, women lacked public means of satisfying political ambition. The adage “behind every successful man stands a strong woman,” in the past described the only path a strong woman could take to have any real influence outside of the home, with some notable exceptions like Queens Elizabeth, Queen Victoria I, Catherine the Great, and Maria Theresa. These few exceptions notwithstanding, the general case in the past had it that women like Margaret Thatcher or Hillary Clinton, were they born in earlier times, would have had to content themselves with a supporting role.

Shakespeare accounted for this reality in various ways with a cast of impressive women. From Brutus’ wife Portia in *Julius Caesar* to Antony’s paramour Cleopatra in their play, from the clever women of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* to Helen in *All’s Well that Ends Well*, and beyond, these female figures demonstrate the role ambitious women might play in a world that rejects their direct political participation. Women might find great inspiration and education in these
sources, but they are not alone. A man seeking political power would do well to learn how his wife might help him on his path to greatness.

This chapter explores the influence such a reading of Shakespeare might have had on Lincoln’s marriage, and in turn his career. A comparison of the character and roles in marriage of Lady Macbeth and Mary Todd Lincoln reveals what Lincoln likely learned and how he acted on it.\(^1\) To establish a theoretical understanding of marriage, we begin with an analysis of the subject in Aristotle’s *Politics* and Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America.*

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Aristotle’s infamous account of women in the *Politics* seems to paint a picture of inferior, second-class citizens (at best). Aristotle’s male “is by nature more expert at leading than the female.”\(^2\) His female is likened to the “ruled by nature,”\(^3\) grouped in with children for comparison with natural slaves. Women and children do hold some distinction over the “irrational element,” that is ruled by nature, yet, by analogy, as a slave’s virtues are to a master’s so are a woman or child’s virtues to a man’s. Nevertheless, “the free person rules the slave, the male the female, and the man the child in different ways.”\(^4\) Women, unlike slaves, do not completely lack the deliberative element in their souls, “but it lacks authority,”\(^5\) that is to say, “the deliberative element in women is weaker relative to their own passions.”\(^6\)

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1. Of the many impressive women in Shakespeare’s plays, we have selected to primarily treat Lady Macbeth with good reason. Without Lady Macbeth, there is no *Macbeth.* Her contribution to the story is indispensable and speaks to the nature of Macbeth’s ambition. I assert that when Lincoln read *Macbeth* and learned both the danger and the potential of ambition, but he also learned a similar lesson on the role of a politically minded, ambitious wife and partner. *King Lear* receives some comment below in a footnote, in support of the general point of the essay, as Lincoln read that play too. However, *Macbeth* was Lincoln’s favorite play, and features not only an ambitious woman, but an ambitious couple seeking a shared goal. Furthermore, Mary Todd’s brilliance matches that of Lady Macbeth more than it does the folly of Regan, Goneril, and Cordelia.
3. Ibid., 1259b34
4. Ibid., 1260a5-11
5. Ibid., 1260a13-14
6. Ibid., Lord’s note, 22n60
This oft-repeated, apparently dim view of women does not do full justice to Aristotle’s understanding of the relationship between wife and husband. Slaves relate to the head of the household as a master and children to their father as kings, but wives are by her husband “ruled in a political…fashion.” Aristotle says earlier in Book 1 that “political rule is over free and equal persons,” and defines political rule in Book 3 as a free and equal citizen’s ability “to be ruled and to rule,” that in political rule one must, by the experience of being ruled before ruling possess “knowledge of rule over free persons from both points of view.” This latter definition echoes Aristotle’s comment in Book 1 on the political relation between men and women, that “in most political offices, it is true, there is an alternation of ruler and ruled, since they tend by their nature to be on an equal footing and to differ in nothing.” He adds a caveat with an unusual example of Amasis, King of Egypt immediately after this comment to reassure the reader that despite the apparent equality between men and women “the male always” seeks “to establish differences in external appearance, forms of address, and prerogatives,” in order to maintain the hierarchy as it falls out with man as the natural ruler. Within the equality in political rule men and women share, Aristotle does provide distinct roles, assigning (ambiguously) the husband the duty “to acquire,” and wife “to guard.”

These caveats notwithstanding, if Aristotle did not descry equality in the marriage relationship, he need not have associated women with the form of rule that conflates the ruler and the ruled. He need not have classified women as free and equal, both in their household, and as “amounting to a half of free persons…in the regime.” Indeed, Aristotle first clarifies the

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7 Ibid., 1259b1
8 Ibid., 1255b19
9 Ibid., 1277b15-17
10 Ibid., 1259b5-6
11 Ibid., 1259b8-10
12 Ibid., 1277b24-26
13 Ibid., 1260b18-20
meaning of political rule itself in the relationship between husband and wife, and only later associates it with the city. In this first definition all qualifications stand subordinate to the basic sense. Furthermore, his articulation of the different duties within the political unit of the household noted above comes as a part of his discussion of regimes animated by political rule. Apparently, the relationship between men and women is in some sense paradigmatic of political rule. So it is, though they may rule differently, they rule and are ruled in turn as free and equal citizens of the household, though perhaps not the regime.

A final important note on the relationship between wives and husbands comes in Aristotle’s attempt to articulate the relativity of the virtues to each type of person. He reasons that just as there is a distinction in the various relationships, there is a virtue of the master and a different virtue of the slave, a virtue of the father and a complimentary virtue of the child, as well as a virtue of the husband and one of the wife. Thus, seeking to define virtue universally proves at best unhelpful and at worst deceptive. Aristotle’s evidence of the differing virtue of these various classes of people comes in a quote, “to a woman silence is an ornament.” This, he explains, illuminates how “the matter stands with everyone.” Silence, according to the quote from “the poet,” is a virtue in a woman, “though this is not the case for a man,” and the case might differ somewhat for a slave or child as well.¹⁴ This would perfectly support Aristotle’s larger point about difference in virtue and women’s exceptional status within the concept of political rule, except that the quote is taken from a context that supports precisely the opposite point.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid., 1260a29-34
¹⁵ The idea for the following was inspired by a conversation with Casey Wheatland.
Carnes Lord identifies the source of the quote in a footnote as Sophocles’ *Ajax*. The play follows Ajax as he seeks revenge on the Greek rulers for granting Odysseus and not himself Achilles’ armor after they recovered his body from the Trojans. In Ajax’s frenzy for blood, he is made mad by Athena, and variously attacks, kills, captures, and tortures shepherds and plundered flocks of cattle and sheep, mistaking them for Odysseus and the other Greek captains. Before he ever leaves his tent, his war bride Tecmessa gently suggests the folly of his course, to which Ajax replies “woman, to a woman silence is an ornament.” Tecmessa describes this proverb as “curt,” and “trite,” but follows the well-worn advice, leaving Ajax to his fate. Later, while mourning his monstrous deed Ajax takes his own life. Perhaps it goes without saying, but had Ajax listened to his wife the disaster animating this tragedy would never have occurred.

Aristotle’s contradictory presentation of women as both inferior and equal to men, combined with this misapplied example perhaps clarifies his understanding of a wife’s role in marriage. While Aristotle might think it is true that women should speak less than men, Tecmessa’s assent to that idea in her particular setting had disastrous results. Ajax “acquired” Tecmessa, as is a husband’s duty, making her a part of his household. When he seeks to do something which she foresees might harm the household, she takes upon herself the duty “to guard,” striving to turn him from his destructive purpose. The wife must sometimes rule the husband after the manner she has learned from being ruled by him. A husband, if he has performed his duty as a political ruler in the relationship well, should listen to wise counsel from his wife as from a ruler. This situation does not characterize most circumstances for Aristotle, as should be evident, but such demonstrative cases clarify the practical details of Aristotle’s unusual

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16 Lord, 23n62  
18 As suggested again at 1277b22-25
treatment of the politics of marital rule. Aristotle’s understanding of the marriage relationship in some ways accords with that of Tocqueville.

As Tocqueville observed them, the contractual and practical conditions of marriage in American democracy did not differ tremendously from those he found in Europe, except that they were perhaps stricter. Women submitted in marriage, surrendering whatever their former life consisted in, on both continents. The main distinction that Tocqueville noticed was the quality of American women. He went so far as to say, “if one asked me to what do I think one must principally attribute the singular prosperity and growing force of [America’s] people, I would answer that it is to the superiority of its women.” The respect in which he found them superior was their effect on the country’s mores. Much could be said on this, but this bears less on the subject of this chapter than does the education that creates these democratic paragons of their sex.

Tocqueville noted that in those Protestant nations “which have preserved or acquired the right to govern themselves,” that freedom reigned with greater sway than in either less free Protestant nations or in Catholic nations. Through Protestant “religious beliefs,” freedom “penetrates the family,” and this is reinforced in nations like England through “political habits.” In Tocqueville’s time, this meant Americans (on average) experienced the freedom introduced by Protestantism, bolstered by a “very free constitution and a very democratic social state.” The result is that American children, but particularly the American girl, from a very young age, is “completely left to herself,” to work out the purpose of this extreme liberation.

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20 Ibid., Ch. 12, p. 576
21 Ibid., Ch. 9, p. 563
In America girls are educated specifically for this context. That education calls not for cloistering and preservation of innocence, but for a steady revelation of “the great picture of the world,” an exposure to “the vices and perils that society presents.” The purpose of this exercise is not an anachronistic feminist liberation, but rather to “teach her to consider [the world] with a firm and tranquil eye.” She sees clearly the evils of the world, “judges them without illusion, and faces them without fear.” Her education aims to fit her for the state into which she is born. If she is released into the free democratic world, left alone in the presence of temptation and wickedness without an understanding of how to stand firm, she could very easily destroy herself before she even grew into a woman.

Tocqueville saw in the education of American girls an important insight. Americans knew the everchanging and morally challenging nature of the democratic social state, and therefore reasoned that “it is surer to teach [the American girl] the art of combatting [the most tyrannical passions of the human heart] herself,” rather than impotently seeking to repress those passions in an environment that everywhere seeks to draw them out. Intellectual innocence in the girl was impossible in the social-political-religious environment of America. Instead, Americans “have hastened to give her precocious knowledge of all things.” The American girl learns early about the “corruptions of the world,” so that she can quickly learn “to flee them,” she learns to trust herself, “to increase her confidence in her own strength,” rather than to fear her weakness.

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Tocqueville contrasts this with France, where they hold on to the vestiges of a lost education from “aristocratic times,” forcing an incongruous experience upon their young women, who learn nothing of the world, but then they “suddenly abandon them, without a guide and without assistance, in the midst of the disorders inseparable from a democratic society.” Ibid., 564
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 563-564
Tocqueville admits that this education is “not without danger.”\textsuperscript{28} What if in exposing a girl to vices one fails to successfully strengthen her against them but succeeds only in introducing her to a dangerous world she had not previously conceived? For Tocqueville, this danger does not compare with that of pretending a traditional education prepares girls for the context of democracy. They will soon enough learn about all the evils of the world; the question is only whether they will have been properly equipped to handle them.

The intellectual and social deftness displayed by the young women so educated “often surprised and almost frightened” Tocqueville. Their worldly experience gave them a talent in banter allowing them to cheerfully traverse the pothole-ridden road of “playful conversation” without so much as a minor misstep. “A philosopher would have stumbled a hundred times on the narrow path that they traveled without accident and without trouble.”\textsuperscript{29}

Tocqueville made clear that this cheerful, charming, sometimes mischievous girl cannot forever remain in this state of blissful, puckish independence if she wishes to grow into a wife and mother. She eventually leaves her “paternal home,” a “place of freedom and pleasure,” to arrive “in her husband’s dwelling” where she lives “as in a cloister.”\textsuperscript{30} But for Tocqueville these two states prove less contrary than they seem.

The firm, self-assured reason provided by her unique education informs the young American woman of the stakes and the sacrifices necessary for her next step in life. Only when this reason has fully developed—and that it does early due to her education—does she solemnly put away the childish things of female adolescence and cross the threshold to her new domestic life. Here her reason tells her that the “light and independent spirit” that has animated her

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 565
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 564
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., Ch. 10, 565
throughout her youth “is a subject of eternal trouble” for a married wife. She reasons that “the amusements of a girl cannot be the relaxations of a wife.” Her whole life becomes circumscribed within the narrow walls of the home, and to this she willingly, if solemnly, submits.31

The energy and power of her mind becomes focused on the maintenance and support of her husband and home. If the husband displays a spirit of adventure and wishes to travel to the edge of civilization, she joins him. The stark change from social debutante to stoic, frontier housewife perhaps cracks but does not break her heart. Her features are “altered and faded,” she is “at once sad and resolute.”32

To conclude this discussion on Tocqueville, some criticisms. The education Tocqueville described, although technically available to all likely was not received by all. Education was not so much a public, but family matter in those times. If a family did not value formal education, or else could not spare their child from daily labor to permit schooling, then children were simply not educated unless they chose to do so for themselves. For example, had Lincoln not taken it upon himself to study Shakespeare, the Bible, Euclid, and the law he would not have become Lincoln. The fate of his brothers and sisters, to say nothing of that of anonymous thousands of others, testifies to this. Perhaps then it goes without saying that Tocqueville observed not a democratically emergent phenomena—it was not necessarily happening among the demos as a whole in his day—but rather that it was democratically influenced. The economic, political, and social elite, as is always the case, received a better education than everyone else in 19th century America. In this sense, vestiges of aristocratic ideas of education persisted and persist.

31 Ibid., 566
32 Ibid., 567
Furthermore, this education, despite Tocqueville’s observation, cannot always lead to the simple outcome of the sad housewife in the wilderness. These firm, brilliant women could not have universally cast off the social life to which they had grown accustomed. Perhaps doing so brings certain domestic blessings to the home and the nation, but even granting that, Tocqueville describes a strait, narrow path that not everyone would be willing to follow in practice. Instead, channeling their energy and brilliance into their domestic life might manifest in other ways. Some of these women—made shrewder and more ambitious by their education—became domestic politicians as well as domestic empresses, often engaging in the contest for household sovereignty implied in Aristotle’s view of marriage as a regime of political rule. Mary Todd fits this exceptional description, as an educated American aristocrat with little desire to submit meekly to her husband in marriage, but great desire to lift him to the highest status possible.

Mary Todd Lincoln has taken quite a rhetorical beating over the years. Beginning with William Herndon, critics decry her well-documented temper and neurotic excesses. From the beginning of their courtship and marriage, Mary Todd and Abraham struck an odd pair: an attractive, aristocratic socialite coupled with an uncomely, backwoods lawyer. The tension in their marriage, from that perspective, follows. One attribute Mrs. Lincoln often takes abuse over is her political ambition. This chapter seeks to inquire as to whether that served to directly guide Lincoln’s ambition, and (for better or worse) influence his political career.

33 Perhaps his general statement is informed in great measure by the personal encounter he had with one “sad and resolute” wife, described in Tocqueville’s note XX, 699-701 in Mansfield/Winthrop edition.
The rocky beginnings of the Lincolns’ relationship are generally known. They courted and (perhaps) got engaged in 1840.\(^{34}\) Lincoln decided he did not love Mary, upon meeting her younger, prettier roommate.\(^{35}\) In the interim, tradition holds that Lincoln left Mary at the altar, although that is probably not accurate.\(^{36}\) At any rate, he broke off their courtship, and Lincoln grew ill under the weight of the decision. He felt as if he had broken a promise and in so doing had betrayed his morals.\(^{37}\)

Lincoln prided himself on his firm resolve, going so far as calling it “the only, or at least the chief, gem of my character.”\(^{38}\) His decision to end his relationship with Mary shook him to the core. It seems that he felt duty bound to marry Ms. Todd, despite her sending a letter releasing him of all obligation to her. The reason for this peculiar episode cannot fully be known in absence of a detailed explanation by either party. However, we can surmise that Mary played an active role in sowing the seeds of doubt that bore fruit in Lincoln’s illness and that eventually led to their reconciliation and marriage, that Mary “released” Lincoln from obligation, but had sought throughout the process to undermine his confidence.\(^{39}\)

Mary began the relationship from a position of “power,” relative to Lincoln. Her social status and natural endowments afforded her the upper hand from the very beginning. The attractive, popular, aristocratic Mary entertained a parade of suitors during her single life, and

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\(^{34}\) This section draws heavily on Douglas L. Wilson’s excellent account of Lincoln’s early life, including his education, interactions with women and friends, courtship, and marriage in *Honor’s Voice: The Transformation of Abraham Lincoln*. 238

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 221-225, 242

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 225-227. However, it does seem as if he embarrassed her by skipping a planned party of some sort she was hosting.

\(^{37}\) This is an odd and drawn out story requiring careful examination. Wilson treats it in great detail from 223-245, dealing with it on and off throughout all of Ch. 7-8.

\(^{38}\) Letter to Joshua Speed (July 1842), Wilson, 288

\(^{39}\) Wilson avers from Mary’s playful, vague manner of speaking and writing during the time that “she actually played her cards very close to her vest,” both with her suitors and her friends as she sought to control the situation.
apparently made them compete for her affections with great relish. Lincoln found himself involved in this game, likely unaware that he was Mary’s primary target. Upon winning out over the other suitors, he came to believe that he had made a mistake. However, even after he realized as much and tried to break off the relationship, Mary’s response, whatever that may have been, drew from him not resolution in his purpose, but an embrace and a kiss! As Joshua Speed noted at the time, kissing someone when trying to break up with them seems more like a renewed commitment to the relationship, not a definitive end. If Mary could draw this kind of response from Lincoln at his first attempt to break up, one can only imagine the manipulations she affected elsewhere that might have caused Lincoln’s fit of mental anguish.

This, of course, is mild conjecture. Any attempt at fully explaining the dynamics between Mary and Abraham in these early episodes would require speculation beyond a reasonable standard of verifiability. However, that Mary quite successfully and self-consciously controlled the situation is evident. Orville Browning, one of Lincoln’s close friends at the time of his courtship and marriage to Mary was not alone in the opinion that “There is no doubt of her exceeding anxiety to marry him.” This attitude animated their relationship, despite Lincoln’s misgivings, which caused him to say that he reckoned himself headed to hell on the day of his wedding. She “released” Lincoln from their courtship, but Lincoln somehow felt he was not quite free. In the end, whatever Lincoln’s final feelings might have been, whether he married with love in his heart (as Randall suggests) or sheer determination and “honor,” Mary’s wish

40 Ibid., 229, 243
41 Ibid., 243-245
42 Ibid., 221-222
43 Ibid., 290
44 Ibid., 292
came true. Indeed, her ancient wish. Mary’s sister Elizabeth Edwards reported that from an early age Mary bragged “that she was destined to marry a president.”

Whatever the nature of their relationship’s beginning, it can be little doubted that Mary controlled matters to an astonishing degree. However, Lincoln was no fool. Although Mary held heavy sway over the dynamics of their relationship, Lincoln need not have courted her to begin with. If the marriage would not have suited, he might have found his way past his misgivings about its end and moved on. However, his marriage brought political benefits, both in his reputation and in the brilliance of his new spouse. That the match was a clever one, if not a romantically sound one was generally believed. As John T. Stuart said, “the marriage was a policy match all around,” that is to say “expedient, prudent, and advantageous.” Their marriage, from the beginning, seems perhaps more than Aristotle even intended, to be a regime of political rule. The question remains, to be answered, how did Mary influence Lincoln’s political life?

In 1849, after his single congressional term, having stumped for Zachary Taylor’s successful presidential bid, Lincoln was offered the governorship of the Oregon Territories by President Taylor’s administration in gratitude for his service. This position was more prestigious than any Lincoln had held before. Furthermore, it offered the opportunity to participate actively in the westward expansion of the United States. And when Oregon in the future inevitably became a state, most supposed that Lincoln, as the territorial governor, might become the state’s

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46 Elizabeth also described her as educated, sharp, witty, possessing “a quick intellect but intuitive judgement of men and their motives,” and as “a very shrewd observer.” She also said Mary “was the most ambitious woman I ever knew.” Reported by William H. Herndon Abraham Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life, Vol. 1, (1888). 288-291
47 Wilson, 292
first senator. Manifest destiny, progress in politics, ambition, and flattery must all have called Lincoln to accept the offer. What reason could he have had to reject it?

Yet reject it he did. By Herndon’s account, Lincoln indeed wanted to accept it, “but when he brought the proposition home to his fireside, his wife put her foot squarely down on it with a firm and emphatic No.”\textsuperscript{48} Ruth Painter Randall, ever the opponent of Herndon’s presentation of Mrs. Lincoln—and one possessing a clear, sympathetic view of the woman—says of Herndon’s account of this episode, “that is probably just what happened.”\textsuperscript{49} Contrary to Tocqueville’s image of the brilliant wife submitting to her husband’s wishes to pursue a pioneer dream, Mrs. Lincoln absolutely refused.

It is tempting to chalk up Mrs. Lincoln’s opposition to the Oregon post merely to her conventionally acknowledged severity. Herndon seems to imply this when he stated that such a refusal “always ended it with Lincoln;” he dared not argue back.\textsuperscript{50} Whatever her reasons, Mrs. Lincoln’s control of the domestic situation drew reverence from Abraham. Even Herndon acknowledged that “the result of the whole thing proved a fortunate deliverance for him.”\textsuperscript{51} For, although Lincoln thought he had already committed political suicide in congress (according to Herndon), accepting a voluntary exile to the west coast of the continent, removed entirely from the active political scene would have proved the real death of his career. His ambition for a better post and desire for fame might still have called him thitherward, but his wife knew better. Like Tecmessa, Mary saw the danger in Lincoln’s proposed course and warned him away. Unlike Ajax, Lincoln found success because he had sense enough to listen to his wife.

\textsuperscript{48} Herndon, Vol. 1, 446
\textsuperscript{49} Randall, 135
\textsuperscript{50} Herndon, Vol. 1, 446
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
Most writers on the subject give Mrs. Lincoln her due in this crucial moment. Richard Carwardine states that Lincoln declined the position because “he (and his wife) judged [it] a political dead end.” Lord Charnwood offers Mary Todd all the credit for not letting Lincoln “cut himself off so completely from politics.” Randall, after stating that Mrs. Lincoln likely did prevent her husband from taking the position adds “the country can well be grateful to her, for she saved him thereby for the presidency. The political wisdom of remaining in Illinois was a factor which she undoubtedly recognized.” Had Lincoln been allowed to accept the position it would “have kept him far away when the opportunity of his life came,” in the form of the 1854 repeal of the Missouri Compromise, his attendant run for the senate, and his now famous debates with Douglas during that campaign. That series of events brought Lincoln to the national stage, and to the prominence necessary to elevate him to the position he soon attained in life, and the honorable status he enjoys in history.

Shakespeare regularly wrestled with the role of ambitious women. In *Merchant of Venice*, Portia disguises herself as a man and pretends to be a judge in a court of law to (illegally) exonerate her generous husband and condemn his vicious creditor. In *Othello*, Desdemona—unwitting of Iago’s machinations—takes up Cassio’s cause, pleading for Othello to forgive and reinstate him. Furthermore, she insists on joining him on that military campaign to begin with (after he expresses a willingness to leave her behind), making possible the entire political and personal disaster orchestrated by Iago. In the *Henry VI* plays, Shakespeare shows the plotting of

54 Randall, 135
55 Charnwood, 96; See Autobiography Written for Campaign, in *Speeches and Writings: 1859-1865* (New York: Library of America, 1989), 167, where Lincoln says of himself that “In 1854, his profession had almost superseded the thought of politics in his mind, when the repeal of the Missouri Compromise aroused him as he had never been before.”
Queen Margaret and Suffolk to control the throne, unbeknownst to Margaret’s husband King Henry. Furthermore, that same Margaret eventually settles into her life with Henry but is outraged at his unmanly response to treasonous activities divesting his son, Prince Edward, of the throne. She raises an army herself and seeks to tear down the rebellion, though ultimately her cause fails. These examples are a few among many. Macbeth, a play for which Lincoln expressed particular affinity, is the best example.

The list goes on to include nearly every Shakespeare play. For example, the Roman plays each contain interesting examples as well. In Antony and Cleopatra, Cleopatra turns Antony from his purpose in war with imperial Rome, in Julius Caesar Portia struggles under the weight of Brutus’ secret as he seeks to save the republic from the advent of the empire and eventually takes her own life contrasted with Calphurnia pleading with Caesar to stay home on the day of his assassination and he assenting to then ignoring her advice, and perhaps most notable, in Coriolanus the virtuous Volumnia proves the successful deliverer of republican Rome, the only person able to control her great-souled and terrible son. King Lear, another of Lincoln’s favorites, also offers a worthwhile perspective on the subject, but the women’s roles do not focus directly on a wife supporting a husband. Lady Macbeth is a closer parallel to First Lady Lincoln, so she is the focus of this essay. However, I include some notes here on the role of women in King Lear for reference:

At the beginning of King Lear, the King, whose wife has since passed on (2.4.146), puts the fate of his kingdom into the hands of his three daughters: Regan, Goneril, and Cordelia. Two of them are married and one is in the late stages of courtship with two men, awaiting the King’s choice. Lear infamously decides to divide his kingdom in three, to give full control of a portion to each child immediately, rather than name a single successor over the whole land to reign after his death. He demands a confession of love from each daughter before he will execute his premeditated plan of division. Regan and Goneril disingenuously bow to his requirement, Cordelia, who loves him, does not. The King divides the kingdom in two rather than three, exiling Cordelia without inheritance.

Regan and Goneril scheme together to remove the small amount of power their father retains in his retirement, causing him to lose his mind and physically flee to untamed nature. They have no regret or concern. Their only desire was to take power. Their husbands play almost no role in the action of the play, one being fooled into supporting his wife and another too impotent to resist his. Both husbands were potential or practical cuckolds to Edmund. Edmund’s involvement eventually leads to the death of both Regan and Goneril, as they attack each other in a jealous rage.

Cordelia probably should have gone along with the King’s game, even if it meant being in the disreputable rhetorical company of her wicked sisters. Instead, she makes the mistake of being “too” honest with her father and suffers for it. She accepts a marriage proposal from France and disappears from the play until near the end. During this time, she does not sit on her hands. When she reemerges, she comes with an army, but her husband is nowhere to be seen. Perhaps he was present for the invasion of Britain, but he has no visible role in the rest of the play. Cordelia seems the driving force.

Lear learned of his folly by returning to nature. Cordelia evidently learned of her folly. By what means she takes control of an army and returns to rescue her father from the conditions he brought on himself, we do not know. But, that she was a driving force in this impressive political action cannot be denied. In Cordelia’s case, it should be noted, she does not succeed. Indeed, like her sisters, she too dies. No person successfully dominates the political scene for long. Both the potential and the danger of pairing oneself with an ambitious woman is evident in the play.
All credit to Macbeth’s natural ambition, the regicidal impulse occurred to him before he conferred with Lady Macbeth. He himself saw the necessity to either trip upon or “o’erleap” the Prince of Cumberland in pursuit of the throne. Meditating on this, he described his inmost, murderous, thoughts as “black and deep desires,” (1.5.55-60). By the time Macbeth reached his wife, just after his letter did, those dark hidden intents seemed to have lightened considerably. Lady Macbeth predicted the softening of his resolve given that, in her assessment, Macbeth’s nature “is too full o’ th’ milk of human kindness,” to follow the “nearest way,” to the consummation of the Weird Sisters’ prophecy. Of Macbeth she says,

…Thou wouldst be great,
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it. What thou wouldst highly,
That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false
And yet wouldst wrongly win. Thou ‘dst have, great Glamis,
That which cries “Thus thou must do,” if thou have it,
And that which rather thou dost fear to do,
Than wishest should be undone. (1.6.16-28)\(^58\)

Lady Macbeth thinks that although Macbeth has ambitious potential, he lacks the spark to light the fuse, or, as Macbeth later says, the “spur to prick the sides of mine intent.” Without which, he predicts, as Lady Macbeth stated above, his ambition will become a “vaulting ambition, which o’erleaps/Itself and falls on th’ other,” (1.7.25-28).

The cure for this potentially impotent ambition, as Lady Macbeth sees it, is her own encouragement. She has the necessary “illness,” that Macbeth lacks; she need only infect him. She notes, “fate and metaphysical aid,”\(^59\) favor Macbeth’s wearing the crown, her ambitious

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\(^58\) The similarity to Niccoló Machiavelli’s comments on good and evil in *The Prince* to those of Lady Macbeth here is noteworthy. See for example his comments on Agathocles in Ch. 8, 37-38 in Mansfield Trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), and most clearly in Ch. 15 (61-62). Expressed as a necessary illness by Lady Macbeth, the ability to self-consciously act immorally is expressed as a factual necessity attendant to maintaining power by Machiavelli in Ch. 15: “it is necessary to a prince, if he wants to maintain himself, to learn to be able to not be good, and to use this and not use it according to necessity.”

\(^59\) This is the only appearance of the word metaphysical in any Shakespeare play.
spirit, once poured in Macbeth’s ear, stands as the final necessary element to actualize the ambitions only whispered and imagined thus far (1.6.28-30).

Macbeth’s doubts remain with him until the moment of Duncan’s murder. Upon the King’s gracing Macbeth’s home, Macbeth already expresses substantial misgivings. Lady Macbeth, for the first time clearly demonstrated in the play, asserts her role as his ambition’s spur. Almost as if he summoned her, the sharp prick in the sides of his intent comes only a few lines after he bemoans his lacking that motivation.

In that conversation, Macbeth expresses his desire to abandon their murderous plot against Duncan, wishing instead to maintain the newly minted “golden opinions” he has earned by his actions in war and recent promotion. That approach, Lady Macbeth protests, brings only hopeless thoughts of what could have been. Macbeth’s initial impulse to violence, she argues, was the right one. Were it up to her, and she had to perform some grizzly act to bring about their highest ambitions, Lady Macbeth would not have hesitated to have “dashed the brains out” of her own suckling child. Macbeth still fears failure, but Lady Macbeth’s persistent encouragement convinces him of their conspiracy’s soundness. Macbeth then screws his “courage to the sticking place,” and consents to the plot (1.7.23-96).

Macbeth is dissuaded from a path of passive obedience and convinced of a path of active aggression. The path of passive obedience has several possible termini, none of which satisfy the mind of Lady Macbeth. Playing the lackey to the King who sits upon a throne supernaturally promised to oneself can hardly help one gain the throne, especially given a newly appointed heir. Lady Macbeth believed that the active path of murder, deceit, and the forcible taking of power had greater potential for success than the passive path of serving, kowtowing, and the humble requesting of power. By her calculations, she helped Macbeth reach his full political potential.
He wished to content himself with what he had, and to exercise patience for what might come. She wished for him to take what, by demonic right, belonged to him.

Lady Macbeth’s role in the actual murder, although only as a co-conspirator and not a murderer, seals their black covenant. They are both involved entirely, and both beholden to their actions. For a time, Macbeth seems unsteady, with Lady Macbeth appearing firm and capable. By the final act of the play, however, Lady Macbeth loses control. The blood in which her hands had once been drenched seemed to have left the trace of a single spot. In her sleep she washed and washed and could never satisfy herself that it was removed. Her somnambulist performance betrayed their plot on Duncan’s life. Ultimately her insanity led to her apparent suicide.

Macbeth’s ambitious wife solidified his resolve. She believed she could focus and steer him, but he slipped from her control, tragically seeking a perfect sovereignty enjoyed only by God. The impotence of watching the scene she had set unfold into an unaccountable, self-destructive course beyond the throne into a dreamless eternal darkness led her to lose grip on reality.\(^6\)

Comparing Lincoln’s relatively anodyne Oregon episode with the breathtaking violence and brutality of *Macbeth* almost seems absurd. Lincoln never personally killed anyone, and he did nothing unjust or unnatural in rejecting the Oregon governorship at his wife’s insistence. Macbeth, on the other hand, killed his king in both unjust and unnatural fashion at his wife’s insistence. The actions are hardly comparable. The role of a politically savvy and ambitious wife, however, in both cases proved the decisive factor in pivotal moments of the careers of both

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\(^6\) See my article “Macbeth’s Demonic Right Monarchy,” forthcoming in *Political Science Reviewer.*

\(^6\) It is worth mentioning that Mrs. Lincoln also lost her mind and found herself wandering in dark spiritual paths (seances, mediums, and other spiritualists) later in her life. However, this was not due to her involvement in politics, but the tragic death of her two sons, later compounded with the shock of her husband’s assassination. Nevertheless, the mental anguish the two impressive women share is noteworthy.
aspiring men. As demonstrated in the discussion above, Macbeth’s ambition already welled and raged before his wife helped him carry out the black deed. Indeed, it continued well after the deed was done, even after his wife died. Similarly, as Randall puts it, “Lincoln’s ‘little engine’ of ambition was running full tilt before he ever met Mary.” The point here, however, is not to prove that Mary made Lincoln ambitious, but that, like Lady Macbeth, she provided a “spur to prick the sides of [his] intent.” Indeed, Randall also notes that although Lincoln’s engine of ambition ran full tilt before Mary came along, “Mary had her own little engine of ambition that ran side by side with his.”

The difference between Macbeth and Lincoln, even granting the difference of setting, should be noted. Macbeth lacked prudence. He did not know where to stop. In a way, Lady Macbeth pricked the sides of his intent, but he broke his bridle, running out of control, and she had no means of stopping him. Macbeth’s obsession with “perfection” in his sovereignty led him down an inexorable path of escalating, imprudent violence. Lincoln succeeded with the help of his wife because he had educated himself in the example of Macbeth, among others. Lady Macbeth’s influence, though demonic, was adequate to the moment, however, Macbeth’s political talent did not measure up. Mary Todd’s influence was also fit for its purpose, but Lincoln’s ability proved sufficient to the task. The Macbeths avoid the folly of Tecmessa and Ajax: Macbeth obeys his wife and she persists when he tries to contradict her plan. But the extremes to which her suggestion led him proved his downfall. Mrs. Lincoln’s virtue is in

62 Randall, 110
63 Ibid., 104
64 Some might also characterize Lincoln’s own course in pursuing the civil war as the aggressor (from the southern perspective) with this same description. Though Lincoln never killed anyone, he himself was “steeped” in blood, and indeed far more blood than Macbeth if one attributes to him some large portion of the 750,000 deaths in the war. From the perspective of a John Wilkes Booth who explicitly assassinated Lincoln under the belief that he was a tyrant, Lincoln as much as Macbeth found himself so deep “in blood,” that wading through to the other side felt as viable as turning back.
avoiding both the tragic passivity of Tecmessa and the brutal excess of Lady Macbeth, while still achieving the authority of Lady Macbeth and some measure of the submission of Tecmessa.

Mrs. Lincoln’s aristocratic access to a Tocquevillian democratic education certainly acquainted her with Shakespeare, and her association with Abraham\textsuperscript{65} meant he no doubt often wearied her with repeated readings aloud from \textit{Macbeth}. This essay, however, seeks not to analyze Mary Todd’s reading habits, nor her familiarity with \textit{Macbeth}. But rather to establish that Mrs. Lincoln, like Lady Macbeth, had both the influence over her spouse and the personal ambition to the degree necessary to fill a comparable role. If anything is to be said of her education, it is that Tocqueville’s account of American education, although it does not point directly to someone like Mrs. Lincoln, seems to describe the kind of teaching she received. Indeed, his account of the almost frighteningly talented conversationalists he found among American young women seems like a description of the sly Mary Todd deftly navigating her parade of suitors to her ultimate triumph in getting Lincoln. Afterwards, that same spirit enabled her to guide him, by her politically sound judgement away from the diversion of Oregon and onward, eventually to the presidential chair.

Lincoln could have ended up married to Anne Rutledge, Mary Owens, Matilda Edwards, Sarah Rickard, or some other woman. Yet, despite his various love-interests over the years, Lincoln chose to marry a political woman, described to Herndon by Elizabeth Edwards as “a very shrewd observer,” and “the most ambitious woman I ever knew,” one who stated as a young girl “that she was destined to marry a president.”\textsuperscript{66} The view of Herndon, among others, was that marrying her was a choice of politics over love. For, their home life, by all accounts, was rarely

\textsuperscript{65} Lincoln was notorious for reading aloud, and particularly from Shakespeare.

\textsuperscript{66} Herndon, \textit{Vol. I}, 288-291
settled and happy. Lincoln’s “strange disinclination to go home,” noted by Herndon, seems to have encouraged and enlivened his career, as he spent his time in discourse and interaction with friends, neighbors, colleagues, and constituents rather than “warming his toes at his own fireside.”\(^6^7\) Even discounting this conventionally accepted story of domestic strife, Mrs. Lincoln’s clear political inclinations, and evident influence on Abraham made its mark. Perhaps Mary Todd and Abraham Lincoln did, indeed, marry for love. But the political calculations that must have animated Lincoln’s courting and marrying one so politically ambitious cannot be ignored. Lincoln’s life demonstrates that he learned from \textit{Macbeth} the role and importance of a politically alert and ambitious wife, while also heeding the warning attendant to the lesson.

\(^6^7\) Herndon, \textit{Vol. 2}, 204-206
CHAPTER 4

“Thou, Nature, art my goddess”:

Lincoln and Shakespeare on Divine and Natural Right

Be not afraid nor dismayed by reason of this great multitude; for the battle is not yours, but

God’s.

-2 Chronicles 20:15

The strong do what they will and the weak suffer what they must.

-Thucydides

Lincoln experienced a sovereignty crisis in the Civil War unequaled by any other US president. The legitimacy of the Founders’ *fiat lex* that first formed the nation under the Constitution came under direct attack as the United States fell out of unity. The conditions surrounding that internal conflict led Lincoln repeatedly to contemplation on the nature of sovereignty, as evinced by his frequent comments on the topic in his speeches throughout his career.

Divine right and natural right are intricately connected, but adamantly opposed. The doctrine of natural right rose to political prominence during the 18th and 19th centuries in response to the excesses of divine right, broadly construed. Lincoln’s perspective was colored by this context, and he spoke regularly on divine right and its opposition to natural right. The question, of course, is how to understand Lincoln on these subjects. This chapter proposes to demonstrate that in both cases Shakespeare influenced Lincoln.
Harry Jaffa spent hundreds of pages exploring Lincoln's understanding of nature. He famously changed his mind on the question between the time when he wrote his first work on Lincoln, *The Crisis of the House Divided* (1959), and his second, *A New Birth of Freedom* (2000). Initially Jaffa believed that Lincoln transformed the meaning of nature in the Founding into something higher, but essentially foreign to the view of the Founders, that Lincoln transcended Jefferson’s Lockeanism to achieve his peculiar strain of American Aristotelianism.¹ In his revised understanding expounded in *A New Birth of Freedom*, Jaffa makes an explicit association between “Aristotle, Locke, and the Founding Fathers,” descrying a state of nature in Aristotle, overall presenting his peculiar view on the subject that has sarcastically been termed “Lockistotle.”² Herein lies the answer to Lincoln’s view of nature: it is merely a newly articulated vision that aligns with the Founding, which itself is inherently Aristotelian in its connection to John Locke. In these opposed, ingenious perspectives, Jaffa uncovers important truths about Lincoln and the Founders.

Whatever one makes of the Founders’ view of rights—Lockean, Aristotelian, classical, Christian, modern, deist—the expression of natural rights in the Declaration of Independence apparently remained Lincoln’s primary touchstone on the Founding view of nature. Even supplementing the Declaration with various comments by the Founders on the topic proffers only the beginning of the peculiar, intricate understanding of nature that Lincoln apparently held, despite convincing arguments (like that in *New Birth*) that his understanding comports with the robust philosophical background against which the Declaration stands. Even accounting for the

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¹ All of *Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln Douglas Debates* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), Ch. XIV is relevant, but particularly 319-329.
astonishing insight of Lincoln’s incomparable intellect, his unique articulation of the concept of nature evinces direct influences beyond the Declaration, but philosophically in line with it.

No discussion of divine right of kings appears in Crisis, but in his second book on Lincoln, Jaffa took up divine right of kings and Shakespeare’s history plays. He saw in Shakespeare’s treatment of divine right a window into Lincoln’s understanding of slavery as opposed to freedom. Slavery, symbolically portrayed by the divine right of kings, represents the impulse over all the world of one man seeking to rule over another, and the arguments that support such arrangements. This, of course, is set in opposition to freedom, portrayed quite directly by natural right. Jaffa’s treatment of divine right offers tantalizing glimpses into Lincoln’s mind on the subject, as well as helpful background on the way divine right was viewed through history. The opening section of this paper seeks to work out in greater detail how Lincoln saw divine right and what that has to do with Shakespeare.

This chapter looks at Divine right in Shakespeare primarily as it compares with Lincoln’s view of slavery and religion in politics, in Richard II, and (perhaps surprisingly) in Macbeth. Nature in Lincoln is less straightforward than divine right, but its intricacy demonstrates his depth of thought and the necessity of inspiration in his view external to the Declaration. King Lear, one of Lincoln’s favorite plays, presents nature from several perspectives, including one that seeks to unite divine and natural right or perhaps to redeem nature through theology. Both sections, as is customary in this project, begin with a theoretical section. For divine right this includes a look at John Neville Figgis, and King James, and for nature, a short summary of Leo Strauss’ account of the concept.

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3 The short, unusual section from 127-135 invokes or discusses at length King John, Macbeth, Richard II, Henry IV I and 2, Henry VI, Richard III, Henry VIII, and includes most of all a detailed look at sections of Henry V. References to those pages and surrounding discussion of divine right of kings appear throughout this chapter, which in a way is an attempt to uncover what Jaffa saw in divine right, Lincoln, and Shakespeare.
These two topics each present differing conceptions of sovereignty, opposed paradigmatic views of political reality. Comparing them in Lincoln and Shakespeare exposes the shared stakes, resonances, and fundamental differences in the theories. One of the main ways in which this comes to light in Shakespeare is through a shared affinity, in both would-be natural and divine sovereigns, for trial by combat in various forms. Lincoln invokes the question underlying these physical contests with his famous injunction to have faith that “right makes might.” No decisive answer to this foundational conflict appears in this chapter, but the meaning of the struggle emerges with new clarity.

The Divine Right of Kings

The divine right of kings came about in two phases: organic development and post facto justification. John Neville Figgis treats the history of the doctrine’s development in his 1914 work *The Divine Right of Kings*. In the introduction of that work, he articulates four necessary principles to divine right:

1. Monarchy is a divinely ordained institution
2. Hereditary right is indefeasible…
3. Kings are accountable to God alone…
4. Non-resistance and passive obedience are enjoined by God.4

One of the most systematic thinkers on divine right of kings is also among the historical subjects of Figgis’ book. Figgis explains how the circumstances surrounding King James VI and I’s rise to the throne of England demonstrate why he “should hold the Divine Right of Kings in

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4 John Neville Figgis *The Divine Right of Kings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914), 5-6
its strictest form.”5 King James was a political thinker as well as a King. In James’s work *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies*, Figgis finds “the doctrine of divine right in every detail.”6

Selections from James demonstrating Figgis’s view follow.7

*The Trew Law of Free Monarchies*’ first argument’s conclusion demonstrates James’s support for Figgis’s first, third, and fourth principles. Of principle one (monarchy as divinely ordained), James states that the subjects’

obedience…ought to be to [the king], as to Gods Lieutenant in earth, obeying his commands in all things, except directly against God, as commands of Gods Minister, acknowledging him a Iudge set by GOD over them.

Of principle three (royal accountability), James says the people must remember the King as hauing power to iudge them, but to be iudged onely by GOD, whom to onely hee must giue count of his iudgement; fearing him as their Iudge, louing him as their father; praying for him as their protectour; for his continuance, if he be good; for his amendement, if he be wicked.

Of principle four (passive obedience), James avers the people must ascent to following and obeying his lawfull commands, eschewing and flying his fury in his vnlawfull, without resistance but by sobbes and teares to God.8

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5 Figgis lists the following reasons: “His claim to the throne of England rested upon descent alone; barred by two Acts of Parliament, it could only be successfully maintained by means of the legitimist principle. Further, it was disputed by the Roman controversialists, who had not sufficient hope of converting James to make them love his title. Doleman’s attack on the hereditary principle is written from the Papalist standpoint. But it was not only from the Roman side that the position of James was threaten. Presbyterianism in Scotland, as expounded by Knox or Buchanan, and inwoven with politics by Murray and Morton, was a system of clericalism as much more irritating and meddlesome as it was stronger and more popular in its basis than that of the Papal sovereignty.” *The Divine Right of Kings*, 137

6 ibid., 138

7 The portion on King James contains research and writing used in another essay by the author “Macbeth’s Demonic Right Monarchy,” forthcoming in *Political Science Reviewer*.

8 *King James VI and I Political Writings*, Johann P. Sommerville ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 72. Quotes from James are rendered verbatim.
Though not in the same section as the three examples above, James demonstrates support of principle two (hereditary right) as well: “the duty and allegiance, which the people sweareth to their prince, is not only bound to themselues, but likewise to their lawfull heires and posterity.”

These examples suffice to show James’s support in writing for divine right as defined by Figgis.

James’s rhetorical approach and methodology emphasize divine right’s centrality in his thought. He often conflates kings with gods. At the beginning of Trew Law, James says monarchy “which forme of gouernment as resembling the Diunitie, approcheth nearest to perfection, as all the learned and wise men from the beginning haue agreed vpon; Vnitie being the perfection of all things.” Then, when introducing the argument, he says “Monarchie is the trew paterne of Diuinite.” Soon thereafter he states, “Kings are called Gods by the propheticall King Dauid, because they sit vpon God his Throne in the earth, and haue the count of their administration to giue vnto him.” Similarly, James introduces Basilicon Doron, another of his works on kingship, with two sonnets. The second sonnet begins:

God giues not Kings the stile of Gods in vaine,
For on his Throne his Scepter doe they swey:
And as their subiects ought them to obey,
So Kings should feare and serue their God againe

James’s writings depend principally on arguments from scripture. This follows, considering James’s introduction to the argument from scripture in Trew Law: “First then, I will set downe the trew grounds, whereupon I am to build, out of the Scriptures, since Monarchie is

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9 King James, 82
10 ibid., 63
11 ibid., 64
12 ibid.
13 ibid., 1
the trew paterne of Diuinitie, as I haue already said.” The foundation of his argument is established in scripture because only the pattern established by God’s word can adequately express the truth of James’s view of monarchy, the King being like God to his people.

The principles James explicates and Figgis records were not created and implemented as the foundation of some regime animated by them. Rather, they emerged by the invention of necessity through a series of historical accidents and conflicts. The fundamental key to such conflicts, Figgis says, was a Protestant reaction to papal authority in the Reformation, and thus “the theory must be largely concerned with the political side of the Reformation struggle.” Fundamentally, what the nations involved in that struggle sought was independence from Rome. This situation was preceded by the suggested possibility of “the divine right of secular government to be free from Papal control,” evident “in the contest of the Popes and the Emperors,” in the time of the Holy Roman Empire. These early conflicts laid the groundwork for the historical development of the later doctrine.

Divine right should not, therefore, primarily be understood theoretically. The post facto justifications, like that of King James, serve to systematize what is essentially a reactionary political movement possessing only the level of coherence necessary to compel the allegiance of its proponents and sow doubt about papal supremacy. Then later, as necessity required, the doctrine provided clear opposition to natural rights republicanism. No writings and debates on

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14 ibid., 64
15 Until the American Founding no regime established its principles before its official beginning in such stark order. Only to those living after that event is such an idea likely.
16 Figgis, 14-15. He goes on in the same section to assert “That to the reformation was in some sort due the prevalence of the notion of the Divine Right of Kings is generally admitted.”
17 In New Birth Jaffa notes of this development that at times “divine right of kings served the popular cause, while the doctrine of tyrannicide actually promoted tyranny,” (p. 125) as in the case portrayed in Shakespeare’s King John.
18 Figgis, 44
19 Figgis spends the remainder of his book working through various eras of English Kings explain this development.
the relative meaning and merits of the doctrine inform its chief practical applications. The doctrine as it was understood by both opponents and adherents relies on the context of its use.

This historical and theoretical context underlies the discussion that follows. Both Lincoln and Shakespeare engaged the doctrine of divine right, but neither did so in theoretical terms. In Lincoln’s case, he understood the doctrine “in the comprehensive sense of the right to rule others without their consent,” which demonstrably “predominated within western civilization until the American revolution.” Shakespeare, on the other hand, engages more directly with the practical use of the doctrine in English history, tracing its development through the phases Figgis identifies. Both men unquestionably share an understanding of the character and dangers of divine right and thus focus on its practical meaning and purpose rather than theoretical justifications.

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William Herndon rightly said of Lincoln’s manner of contemplating the natural world, “his mind, working in its accustomed channel, heedless of beauty or awe, followed irresistibly back to the first cause.” So too with the political world, in this case divine right. Lincoln drilled down past the accumulated layers of elaborate sophisms to the bedrock foundation on which the thing rested: one man ruling another against his will. He made use of the focused understanding he had developed of the theory to create a powerful analogy to arguments supporting slavery.

At Peoria, Lincoln replied to Stephen Douglas’ semi-scriptural argument that “the principle [of] the Nebraska bill… originated when God made man and placed good and evil

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20 See Jaffa New Birth, 122
21 Jaffa, New Birth, 127
22 Jaffa registered this connection, noting that Lincoln seemed to understand his own Civil War in terms of those presented in Shakespeare and undergirded by divine right since “Lincoln himself equated the divine right of kings and the positive good theory of slavery,” (New Birth, 128).
before him, allowing him to choose for himself.” Lincoln corrects Douglas’ account, pointing out that God did not merely place the decision before man to choose for himself, but rather told him “there was one tree, of the fruit of which, he should not eat, upon pain of certain death.” Lincoln found the argument astounding in its dishonesty, but even more astounding,

in its strong resemblance to the old argument for the “Divine right of Kings.” By the latter, the King is to do just as he pleases with his white subjects, being responsible to God alone. By the former the white man is to do just as he pleases with his black slaves, being responsible to God alone. The two things are precisely alike; and it is but natural that they should find similar arguments to sustain them.24

At Peoria Lincoln held divine right as a symbolic representation of the politics of subjugation. Slavers and monarchs partake in the same basic principle used in arguing for “king-craft,” which allow monarchs to claim they “always bestrode the necks of the people, not [because] they wanted to do it, but because the people were better off for being ridden,” and (again invoking the Garden of Eden) it “is the same old serpent [Rev. 12:9] that says you work and I eat, you toil and I will enjoy the fruits of it.”25

In those earlier instances Lincoln allows the interpretation that the theory worked as a shallow justification for the wickedness of base human nature. In the final formal debate with Douglas he went further, explicitly identifying the theory of natural right with right simply, and that of divine right with “wrong.”

It is the eternal struggle between these two principles—right and wrong—throughout the world. They are the two principles that have stood face to face from the beginning of

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24 Abraham Lincoln, *Speeches and Writings: 1832-1858* (New York: Library of America, 1989), Peoria Address (Oct. 1854), 342. Unless otherwise noted, all references to Lincoln’s speeches are to that volume, or its companion 1859-1865.
25 Chicago (July 1858), 437
time; and will ever continue to struggle. The one is the common right of humanity and
the other the divine right of kings. It is the same principle in whatever shape it develops
itself.26

Lincoln finds no difficulty in explaining the opposition between anti- and pro-
slavery thought. He begins with the text of his “ancient faith,” the Declaration of Independence, which proclaims
“all men are created equal.”27 The rights in the Declaration, Lincoln makes clear repeatedly in
the debates as exemplified in the quote above, are right itself and one “cannot logically say that
anybody has a right to do wrong.”28 Granting, as Lincoln does, the truth of the Declaration, he
transplants its principles into the context of divine right, with its claim of a right to do wrong.
Finally, he puts the argument back in the Garden of Eden, where all good and evil entered the
world. Douglas and his party have become the serpent tempting mankind to do evil, to claim they
are “good enough to govern another man, without that other’s consent.”29

One early scriptural example on which Lincoln drew during his time in the Illinois state
legislature helps illuminate further his perspective on not only divine right’s deepest principle,
but also the status of its claim to sovereignty: God’s discernible approbation of political rulers.

In 1839 the Whigs (of whom Lincoln was a chief member in Illinois) made opposition to
the newly proposed subtreasury a central plank in their platform, as opposed to the “Locofoco”
Democrats who approved of the subtreasury. The speech, surprisingly lengthy and passionate30

26 Seventh debate (Oct 1858), 810-811. Jaffa’s comment on Lincoln’s reductive argument is helpful here: “It is
certainly an oversimplification to reduce all political theories to the equal right of mankind, on the one hand, and the
divine right of kings, on the other. Yet...this is Lincoln’s perspective. As a stump orator, which he was through
much of the 1850’s, he did not deliver academic lectures on the history political doctrines. Within the rough
vernacular of the political arena, however, Lincoln penetrated, as nearly as anyone has ever done, to the heart of the
problems of the great alternatives within the human condition.” New Birth, 122.
27 Peoria, 328
28 Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh debates (Oct 1858) on pages 708-709, 743, and 810 respectively
29 Peoria, 328
30 The melodramatic peroration deserves particular note. Only a born politician could summon such rhetorical
exuberance over proposed procedural shifts in economic policy. Speech on the Sub-Treasury (Dec 1839) 64-65.
given the apparent bureaucratic shuffling nature of the subject under consideration, contains several extended, careful arguments. Among them, Lincoln argues against the claim that Whigs implicitly believe in the honesty of “Bank directors and Bank officers,” over that of “sworn officers of the Government,” by supporting the latter over the former as (according to their opponents) the primary change from the national bank to the subtreasury. Lincoln and the Whigs claim no such thing. In fact, “The experience of the whole world, in all by-gone times, proves” the plausibility of the dishonesty of any particular man selected for office. With what at first seems a curious and extreme example, Lincoln invokes “The Saviour of the world,” who “chose twelve disciples, and even one of that small number, selected by superhuman wisdom, turned out a traitor and a devil.” The somewhat incongruous example comes in for a powerful, humorous punctuation when Lincoln reminds his audience “Judas carried the bag—was the Sub- Treasurer of the Saviour and his disciples.”

Lincoln’s apt example contains in it a two-edged meaning. According to Christianity, Jesus’ death was necessary for the salvation of mankind. Judas’ betrayal serves as a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and brought about Christ’s arrest. For Christians, Judas was selected, as Lincoln implies, by the will of God. That he betrayed Christ presents no difficulty for the believer since this was the ordained manner in which Christ was to be delivered up to suffer death. Lincoln’s use of the example, however, dismisses this context, instead favoring the interpretation that “with however much care selections may be made, there will be some unfaithful and dishonest.” Judas was chosen carefully, “by superhuman wisdom,” and yet he “turned out a traitor and a devil.” So too with the subtreasury, or any political position. Lincoln

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31 Sub-Treasury, 51
32 Apropos of Lincoln’s religious skepticism, this interpretation also assumes that Christ’s betrayal was a mistake Christ made, not a fulfillment of prophecy and a necessary step to his sacrifice for the sins of the world.
implies that even if Jesus Christ himself selected the officers of government, “the experience of the whole world,” demonstrates that there would still be some who would not exercise their duties as they should.

The young Lincoln did not explicitly treat problems of the divine right claim to sovereignty in this short comment. However, implicit in his observation about the fallibility of any and all political appointees is a claim about earthly politics. “Human nature, which is God’s decree, and can never be reversed,”⁴³ even overpowers the dictates of God’s Son in the selection of his earthly companions and administrators. If a ruler is selected by God himself that ruler might still prove fallible.⁴⁴

About a year after the Lincoln-Douglas debates Lincoln found another political application for his peculiar conception of divine right in the case of John Brown. Though Lincoln always sought the end of slavery, his commitment was imperfect in the mind of many abolitionists because he gave quarter to slavery at all. His acknowledgment of the laws of the country and the culture of the south disgusted abolitionists with more extreme views of the issue. None illustrates the difference in approach between the two better than John Brown, the great martyr for abolitionism. Brown embodied William Lloyd Garrison’s famous motto “no union with slaveholders.” Other violent abolitionists lived, but none lived and died in his cause as confidently and spectacularly as did Brown. His life was ended because of an ill-advised raid on Harper’s Ferry attempting to stir up a slave revolt. The revolt was a failure and Brown was captured and sentenced to death. But like Jesus Christ stopping the intervention of Peter against

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⁴³ Temperance, 83
⁴⁴ One need only consider the example of King David for scriptural support of Lincoln’s somewhat curiously asserted position.
his captors on the eve of his execution, Brown refused rescue. He decided that he was “worth inconceivably more to hang than for any other purpose.,”

For Lincoln’s part, he agreed with Brown on the evils of slavery, even going so far as calling him courageous. Lincoln never denied this agreement, but he firmly disagreed with Brown’s illegal, violent approach. According to Lincoln, “We cannot object,” to Brown’s execution “even though he agreed with us in thinking slavery wrong. That cannot excuse violence, bloodshed, and treason. It could avail him nothing that he might think himself right.” Self-righteousness could never justify Brown. Indeed, righteousness as such could not, as Lincoln believed the principles animating anti-slavery to be. Even if something is right, Lincoln made clear in the Lyceum Address that it must also be lawful. He condemned Brown, and said he was “no Republican.” Lincoln meant that Brown was not a member of the Republican Party and thus the party deserved no blame for his actions. However, the statement holds in the broader sense of the word republican. Brown sought a solution outside of the principles and practice of American republican government. For Lincoln, the American republic, in principle and practice, was good. Such formed the foundation of much of his political-moral thinking. To make explicit Brown’s unrepublican tendencies Lincoln went on to say,

John Brown’s effort was peculiar. It was not a slave insurrection. It was an attempt by white men to get up a revolt among slaves, in which the slaves refused to participate…That affair, in its philosophy, corresponds with the many attempts, related in history, at the assassination of kings and emperors. An enthusiast broods over the

37 Speech at Leavenworth, Kansas, December 3, 1859, ibid., 502.
38 “Cooper Union,” Speeches and Writings: 1859-1865, 123.
oppression of a people till he fancies himself commissioned by Heaven to liberate them.

He ventures the attempt, which ends in little else than his own execution.\textsuperscript{39}

To Lincoln’s mind, Brown’s effort resembled similar coups by those feeling a supernatural commission, a divine right to act against a prevailing evil in the existing government. For Lincoln, Brown’s fundamental assault on slavery outside of the laws and institutions of the United States disqualified him as a republican, even if he sought to actualize the principles of equality and liberty in the Declaration by his actions. Nevertheless, he and Brown shared the same fundamental goal: freeing the slaves. But Brown believed he had supernatural support for his cause. He was a warrior for God, and so his mission had an undeniable mandate.

John Brown resembles, in this peculiar sense, both a divine right monarch and a king killer. He feels inspired by heaven like a divine right monarch and wishes to overturn the government like a king killer. Lincoln’s understanding of Brown suggests that divine right thinking rarely produces righteous results. Faulty as human nature often proves to be, demonstrated in the example of Judas and the subtreasury, even if God himself spoke to Brown he might still fail to square his commission with the principles of right expressed in the Declaration. However, as Lincoln noted later in his life when contemplating the righteous act of emancipation, most humans should not “expect a direct revelation.”\textsuperscript{40} The firmest ground to rest a genuinely divine kingship, like those of the Old Testament would of course be a direct revelation from God to the king.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 135
\textsuperscript{40} Reply to Emancipation Memorial, 361
\textsuperscript{41} Often given through a prophet. Even in those cases, the kings still sometimes came to ruin, like in the case of Saul.
In his history plays, Shakespeare makes no sustained attempt to valorize the English monarchy with its claims to heavenly approbation. However, a republic does not appear as his unequivocal preference. As Harry Jaffa put it, “Shakespeare presents us with [divine right] monarchy in all its human failings,” however, “there does not, on the horizon of the plays, appear to be any alternative theory of political obligation.”\(^{42}\) Granting this necessary caveat, Shakespeare provides many critical perspectives from which an opponent of divine right, like Lincoln, might gain insight. This section focuses on those found in *Richard II* and *Macbeth*.\(^{43}\)

*Richard II* presents Shakespeare’s most obvious example of a monarch who lost his throne due (in some large measure) to his claims of divine right sovereignty. The play finds King Richard repeatedly being imprudent, verging on reckless, apparently unaware of his mistakes until the middle of the play, wherein the explanation of his behavior is exposed when everything begins to fall apart.

The King starts the play by failing to mediate a conflict between his cousin Henry Bolingbroke and Thomas Mowbray, a member of his court. He suspends direct judgement on their case, instead deferring to the traditional practice of trial by combat, to which the two appeal with an agreement to duel (see 1.1). The King could have prevented all that followed in the play at this choke point, but he temporized.

Richard’s difficulty in that moment likely related to Bolingbroke’s attempt to stick his thumb in the King’s eye. Bolingbroke accuses Thomas Mowbray of murdering his and the King’s uncle, the Duke of Gloucester. Gloucester was no fan of the King’s and had been taken into custody for his subversive words and actions. Mowbray oversaw Gloucester’s confinement

\(^{42}\) *New Birth*, 127

\(^{43}\) All Shakespeare references are to Folger Shakespeare Library editions.
before his death in the King's custody. Whatever Mowbray’s role in Gloucester’s death as a subject, the King’s role as ruler was greater.\textsuperscript{44} By charging Mowbray with the death of Gloucester, Bolingbroke brought the source of the killing into question; the King’s centrality in the matter came into public view. At the proposed day of the duel, the King faced a potential solution to his problem in the death of Bolingbroke. If he was killed in the duel, then Gloucester’s death would lose its public champion and suspicions against the King would die too. However, the King did not allow the duel to take place.

This episode offers early evidence of Richard’s sincere faith in God’s direct providential role in politics. Dueling, as Shakespeare presents it, serves to “in battle prove,” (1.1.94-100) the truth and rectitude of one’s cause, words, or actions.\textsuperscript{45} The result of the duel removes the conflict from mortal hands, trusting judgement to “God, who only knoweth the secret thoughts of all men, [and who] would give victory to him that justly adventured his life, for truth, honour, and justice.”\textsuperscript{46} Richard surely knew Bolingbroke’s death in a trial by combat could quiet the question of Gloucester’s murder. Popular opinion would turn against Bolingbroke’s claims and toward those of Mowbray and the King. But Richard sincerely believed in God’s direct hand in politics, as made very clear later in the play. If trial by combat was a legitimate, reliable means of discovering the truth by the providence of God, then Bolingbroke would undoubtedly win and

\textsuperscript{44} When speaking with Gloucester’s widow, John of Gaunt (Gloucester’s brother) admitted that the king “caused [Gloucester’s] death.” While noting his own inability to dissect the moral or legal ramifications of the killing, Gaunt stated the case unequivocally (1.2.37-42).

\textsuperscript{45} The use of the word “prove” in conversations surrounding questions of honor and combat is important throughout Shakespeare’s plays. King John has the citizen of Angiers promising fealty to the one who “proves the King” at the conclusion of the battle between France and England (2.1.279-281). In Comedy of Errors Antilochus promises to “prove mine honor and mine honesty” against the calumnies of “Second Merchant,” (5.1.29-31). King Lear’s concluding scene includes Edgar dueling his half-brother Edmund to “prove upon [his] person” (5.3.108-111) the many true accusations against him. A further treatment on the meaning of trial by combat in an account of divine or natural right sovereignty appears later in this essay.

reveal the King’s complicity in their uncle’s death. Therefore, in his guilt Richard, likely fearing
the possible exposure he faced, exiled both men.

Bolingbroke’s father (John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster) pleaded with the king to
forgive Henry and allow him to stay. Richard refused, instead shortening the original ten-year
exile to six years. Gaunt, however, knew that he would not live to see his son again even with the
shortened sentence (1.3.212-238). He made good his morbid prediction when in the next scene
he fell ill and died. Upon hearing of Gaunt’s illness, the King openly hoped for Gaunt’s speedy
demise, earmarking the fortune of his family’s estate as payment for soldiers’ coats (1.4.60-65).
The result of Richard ransacking Gaunt’s treasury was, of course, a mark against him and in
favor of Bolingbroke. The Duke of York, the King’s uncle and Gaunt’s brother, stated the
heaviness of these many grievances succinctly and with feeling:

    How long shall I be patient? Ah, how long
    Shall tender duty make me suffer wrong?
    Not Gloucester’s death, nor Hereford’s\(^\text{47}\) banishment,
    Nor Gaunt’s rebukes, nor England’s private wrongs,
    Nor the prevention of poor Bolingbroke
    About his marriage, nor my own disgrace,
    Have ever made me sour my patient cheek
    Or bend one wrinkle on my sovereign’s face…
    Now afore God—God forbid I say true!—
    If you do wrongfully seize Hereford’s rights…
    You pluck a thousand dangers on your head,
    You lose a thousand well-disposèd hearts,
    And prick my tender patience to those thoughts
    Which honor and allegiance cannot think (2.1.171-217).

York condemned the King on the basis of his growing list of grievous actions in terms
that question his very legitimacy. Richard, for his part, heard York’s entreaty and replied frankly
with his intention to crown his various misdeeds with the confiscation of Bolingbroke’s
inheritance. Heaping folly upon folly, immediately after ordering the looting of the Lancaster

\(^{\text{47}}\) Bolingbroke was also the Duke of Hereford
estate, Richard determines to depart in person to oversee the Irish war and names “Our uncle York Lord Governor of England,/For he is just and always loved us well,” (2.1.229-30). The man who openly expressed embryonic thoughts of treason against his imprudent King is chosen by that same King as the ruler of England while he is away. That York turned his loyalties to Bolingbroke when he landed should hardly come as a surprise.

However, Richard seems surprised by everything that follows. He returns and, having heard news of Bolingbroke’s treasonous exploits in England, calls on the physical land to rise and defend itself and him against the treachery. His advisor the Bishop of Carlisle wisely reminds him first “Fear not, my lord. That power that made you king/Hath power to keep you king in spite of all,” confirming Richard’s divine appointment. However, he does not leave it at this. He insists that Richard must embrace “The means that heavens yield,” to assist his cause, or else he endangers his enterprise by forgoing actions which might bring it success (3.2.37-31). Stated otherwise, Richard indeed has divine approbation, but he must move forward seeking to solve his problems with what heaven has already put in his hands, not “stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord,” (Exodus 14:13). Richard seemingly hears only the beginning of Carlisle’s words. He responds with confidence in the firmness of his grasp on the scepter: “Not all the water in the rough rude sea/Can wash the balm off an anointed king,” (3.2.55-56). Indeed, by the King’s account, God has an army of Angels to match Bolingbroke’s earthly force.

By this point in the play Richard’s strange call for the support of the soil and serious expressions of hope for God’s direct assistance might be all he can cling to. As the scene progresses his earthly hopes evaporate. He learns his Welsh force has abandoned him, his court and subjects are joining Bolingbroke’s cause, and York—to whom he had given the rule of

48 Carlisle repeats similar advice at 3.2.183-190
England in his absence—has thrown his support to the usurper. Richard should never have gone
to Ireland, he should never have stolen the Lancaster fortune, he should never have scheduled the
duel between Mowbray and Bolingbroke, and in the process of doing all these ill-advised things
he, unsurprisingly, did not prepare for the eventuality that his kingship might meet an insoluble
challenge.

Richard’s behavior throughout the play seems only explicable by the revelations
beginning in Act 3, and hinted at in the duel scene, of his understanding of sovereignty. A man so
confident in his role as “God’s substitute,” (1.2.39) that he refers to himself as “[God’s]
Richard,” (3.2.61) lacks sufficient political vision to correctly assess his situation. Richard’s
Kingship fell because of his imprudence, founded on an unsupportable faith in God’s blessing on
the legitimate king of England. He seems throughout the play to have believed that no matter
what he did God would uphold him. Only after his world begins to collapse does he admit that
not only “the hand of God” can dismiss a king, but a “hand of blood and bone/Can gripe the
sacred handle of our scepter,” through nefarious means (3.3.74-83). This realization comes too
late.

The Scottish play rarely comes under consideration in scholarship on divine right and
Shakespeare. On its face the play has nothing to do with such matters. However, as I argue
elsewhere, this play contains in it a satire and critique of the divine right of kings aimed
primarily at King James, for whom the play was first written and performed.49 The story of
Macbeth’s demonic right monarchy provides essential perspective for one like Lincoln, so
critical of the practice at root. Macbeth demonstrates the logical conclusion of divine right:

49 “Macbeth’s Demonic Right Monarchy,” forthcoming in Political Science Reviewer. No element of what follows is
quoted verbatim, but many of the ideas in this section came from the research which furnished that article.
absurdity in theory and nihilism in practice. To demonstrate this, I will begin with an unorthodox summary of Macbeth’s rise to the throne.

After a great victory on the battlefield, an outstanding soldier called Macbeth and his companion Banquo are greeted by three gods who speak with perfect unity of purpose and thought, finishing each other’s sentences, and speaking always with the authority of all three in each word, as if the three were one. These beings greet the men with statements of the past, present, and future of which they could naturally know nothing, demonstrating “by the perfect’st report they have more in them than mortal knowledge,” (1.3.2-3). They speak prophetically to both men, promising each the throne of Scotland, either personally or in his posterity. When asked to stay longer and offer more insight into their oracular pronouncements, the gods, having unshakeable wills within themselves, refuse even an answer and miraculously disappear “as breath into the wind,” (1.3.85).

That weird trinity of uncertain gender (1.3.47-49) said that Macbeth “shalt be king hereafter,” (1.3.53). This revelation, he reasoned, was equivocal. They had offered other prophetic intelligence with immediate fulfillment, so the gods spoke true. However, to tell an ambitious noble, a man of war that he will be king is as much as to command him to murder. Thither went the soldier’s thoughts, and he quaked to consider what he felt called to do. But could he question it? Could he gainsay the prophetic words of the gods who prophesied truly and to his apparent good? His future kingship had “metaphysical” (1.5.32) sanction, the seal of “supernatural solicit[ors]” (1.3.143) who command unearthly power. In such a case, surely one cannot fail! And so, Macbeth succeeds in unseating his King and gaining the crown for himself. His gods, once again, told him the truth.
Understood in these terms, *Macbeth* is the story of a monarch whose claim to the throne is directly predicated on the will of supernatural providence of some sort. Macbeth is a “parody” of a divine right monarch. Rather than gaining divine support under the basic standards laid out by John Figgis, Macbeth receives his commission by direct, face-to-face revelation from a satire of the trinitarian God. Viewed in this light, the question is what becomes of his reign.

Macbeth’s tenure on the throne was neither settled nor happy for even a moment. Upon withdrawing the knife from his former Lord, the new King encountered chaos, guilt, and fear at every turn. He suspected treachery from his friend Banquo who originally encountered the gods with him in the field. The Weird Sisters had promised Banquo that his sons would be kings. The new King reasoned, from his own cruel actions, that his friend had plans to unseat him, and thus murdered Banquo. He committed the shocking murder of Macduff’s family, (correctly) suspecting him of conspiring with Malcolm, the dead King’s son to reclaim the throne. Not only this, but he began to encounter supernatural things that promised him no good, but only torment. Ghosts and apparitions drove him (and his wife) insane, further destabilizing his hold on the throne.

In this state, he turned to his gods again to seek counsel. They had led him right before, perhaps they would do so now. They offered him several prophecies of equivocal meaning, the most important to Macbeth being the promise that “none of woman born shall harm Macbeth.”

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50 Paul Cantor wrote “What the witches teach Macbeth is after all a lesson in providence. The providential order they represent may be demonic and lead Macbeth to his damnation, but the fact remains that their prophecies embody for Macbeth a form of religious teaching, that earthly events are governed by higher powers.” (Cantor “Macbeth and the Gospelling of Scotland,” in *Shakespeare as Political Thinker*, 333)

51 ibid., 333 and 338 for two examples: “a demonic parody of religious faith,” and “a demonic parody of the crusading Christian warrior,” assured of the success and justice of his cause. On 327 Macbeth himself is called a “demonic counterpart,” to the “happy synthesis of pagan and Christian,” contemplated by Holinshed in Shakespeare’s historical source for the play.

52 Like Moses in Exodus 33:11
This prophecy overshadowed the confusion and peculiarity of the other revelations in the scene, though the promise that he would never fall until “Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill/Shall come against him,” offered similar peace of mind (see 4.1.91-92, 105-107, etc.). That apparent promise of imperviousness in battle produced in Macbeth a similar effect to the original revelation that led him to the throne. He was driven forward, assured of his supernatural commission and protection. He knew he would prevail and that no man could kill him. He knew this with all his heart and mind. It had been spoken to him by the gods, why should he doubt it?

The play, of course, ends with Macbeth seeing a walking forest and proclaiming “I pull In resolution and begin/To doubt th’ equivocation of the fiend,/That lies like truth,” (5.5.48-50). Soon thereafter he meets Macduff, the man born by C-section, and thus not conventionally born of woman, who kills him.

Macbeth received a revelation from his gods and felt himself called to act on that basis. What follows in the play demonstrates that even if a god speaks directly to the king, he will only ever imperfectly understand the meaning of the revelation. Even if a king received his commission from God himself, he may just as likely fall as any other, for that is the nature of earthly politics, whatever providence might seek to interpose.

There is one last peculiarity worthy of note in both the case of Richard and Macbeth. Each falls from the throne in large part because of his mistaken understanding of sovereignty. Before losing grip on the scepter, but after coming to see the awful reality of his situation, each lame duck king descended with surprising speed into nihilism.

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53 This recalls the reassuring words that God can uphold Richard spoken by Carlisle, which overshadow his advice to actively engage with Bolingbroke, mentioned above.
Macbeth displays the darkness in his heart during his most famous speech, that follows on his wife’s untimely death, in which he declares the world nothing but an inexorable progression of tomorrows. Every day’s myopic tottering only lights “fools the way to dusty death,” extinguishes the “brief candle” of each life, and that life is nothing more than a “walking shadow,” an actor pretending on a stage for an hour. “It is a tale/ Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury/Signifying nothing,” (5.5.22-31). When Macbeth sees his sovereignty unraveling as the Sisters’ prophecies obtain their semantic fulfillments, with his “dearest partner of greatness” (1.5.11) dead on the ground, Macbeth concludes that nothing is true. Accepting another explanation would require him to reevaluate his relationship with the creatures that blessed his kingship, and perhaps confess with his whole heart what he suggested earlier in the play, that he has surrendered his “eternal jewel/…to the common enemy of man,” (3.1.74). This he will not do, but instead embraces the darkness. If his metaphysically promised kingship falls, all meaning falls with it. To Macbeth’s credit, he nevertheless chooses to die “with harness on our back,” (5.5.59) rather than lying in the dust, unlike Richard.

Richard felt himself teeter on the edge of nihilism throughout the beginning of Act 3 Scene 2. His companions pull him back from the brink several times, but eventually the darkness swallows him in his famous “hollow crown” speech. Richard’s speech is less succinct than Macbeth’s, but it means essentially the same thing. He refuses comfort and wishes to speak only of death and destruction, to “sit upon the ground/And tell sad stories of the death of kings.” The crown itself, rather than a blessed sign of God’s hand on the “anointed king,” is where “Keeps Death his court.” The crown fills the king “with self and vain conceit” that he is something special, chosen by God. But he is not. For Richard, a king seemed something more than mortal, but he now wishes to disabuse his followers of this (though only he expresses the belief). “For
you have but mistook me all this while./I live with bread like you, feel want,/Taste grief, need friends. Subjected thus./How can you say to me I am a king?” (3.2.149-182). Richard’s descent into the darkness of shattered belief colors the remainder of the play. He does not fight Bolingbroke. He does not argue his side. He, essentially, continues to sit upon the ground in mourning, only mustering fight at the very end of his life, killing two of his murderers. Richard’s fall from the throne represented a fall from a solid foundation in truth into a bottomless pit of darkness and doubt.

If the divine right of kings does not live up to its promises, it opens the door to “the basement” underlying such absolutist theories. There one discovers an abyss “which now appears bottomless,”54 and both Macbeth and Richard could not help but stare.

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Richard demonstrates the attitude divine right inculcates in a king. He felt justified and protected in trampling the rights and dignity of his people and court in service of his prerogatives. God would always be Richard’s rearward. Bolingbroke’s successful coup reveals the falsehood of such thinking. Lincoln’s view of divine right as a rhetorical justification for subjugating the people receives strong support on this account. Richard, like a slave master, felt himself superior to his people fundamentally. The conclusion of the play, with the pathetic Richard dethroned and humbled finds him confessing his mortality and insufficiency. The play works well as a parable for self-righteous slaveholding and the deceptive, dark foundation on which it rests.

The startling satire of divine right in Macbeth, however, proves even more to Lincoln’s taste. The example of Judas being selected by Christ but still proving a disappointment mirror’s

Macbeth’s receiving a revelation from “superhuman wisdom” himself and ultimately failing. Furthermore, the story he tells of John Brown, fancying himself inspired by heaven to liberate the people and failing nonetheless again reminds of Macbeth. Macbeth thought providence willed his actions and thus would support him therein. The whole enterprise ended in miserable failure due in large part to the peril of introducing the precedent of supernatural revelation into the tumultuous world of politics.

Nature

Leo Strauss’s treatise Natural Right and History remains the classic account of the various historical ideas of nature. His primary distinction between the ancient and modern conception of nature is crucial for grasping the meaning of the word in political thought. A shorter essay in Strauss’ Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy called “On Natural Law,” offers a clear statement of this distinction, and provides the main source for this section.

In ancient Greece the concept of nature (physis) emerged in contradistinction to convention (nomos). Its discovery preceded the advent of Christianity, and thus the more systematic understanding of the doctrine of divine right premised thereon. However, “nature is not coeval with human thought,”55 convention existed before nature was discovered, and with it were civil orders premised on divine right of a sort, like that found in the kingdoms of the Old Testament,56 or in other ancient cities.57 What men experience in a normal society at any time in any place are laws and customs born of convention.58 The philosophers who introduced the idea

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56 Ibid., 138, indeed the concept of nature does not appear in the Old Testament, according to Strauss.
57 See Fustel De Coulanges The Ancient City, particularly the opening chapters on the sacred fire and the founding of the ancient cities, born out of the religion of the family.
58 "On Natural Law," 138
of nature sought a standard outside of any particular society, above it and before it, which applies universally to all societies. It is a “higher law which has power or is valid by nature, inherently, hence everywhere and always.”

In its most primitive form, nature promotes natural hierarchy of the most powerful. This proves an insuperable problem for the philosophers seeking the rule of wisdom, for “the body [is] the only thing which is by nature private (Laws 739c; Republic 464d) or wholly incapable of being common.” Thus, a wise person might by nature find themselves overruled by the powerful, their claimed natural right to rule based on wisdom to the contrary notwithstanding.

“Accordingly, sheer bodily (‘brachial’) force must be recognized as having a natural title to rule—a title indeed inferior to that deriving from wisdom but not destroyed by the latter.” Might makes right is natural in its way, but it is not the ultimate standard of the philosophers, of course.

Nature as a universal standard to which one might apply introduces a dangerous element of abstraction into the provincial context of individual cities. Rather than accepting the authority of one’s chief or priest, an individual is liberated by nature to apply to a rule of action that demands the adherence of his ruler as much as himself. As Strauss put it, “Natural right would act as dynamite for civil society.”

While a sudden explosion does not accurately characterize the movement from ancient society to modern, the introduction to and transformation of society by nature was unquestionably extreme. The modern world of equal natural rights could not exist without the ancient standard of nature, but its subversion and subsumption of the ancient concept into something new and much less idealistic deserves particular note.


59 Ibid., 137
60 Leo Strauss, Natural Right and History, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 153
61 “On Natural Law” 143
Strauss credits Machiavelli and Descartes with the new idea of nature which removes man’s vision from higher standards to instead focus on observed political reality. Thomas Hobbes most readily embodied this when he articulated the law of nature, which emerged not “from the hierarchic order of man’s natural ends but from the lowest of those ends (self-preservation).”

John Locke followed Hobbes and made his teaching more politically actionable.

Modern natural right, via John Locke, found its embodiment most potently in the American Founding, particularly the Declaration of Independence, penned by Thomas Jefferson, who stated that “all it’s (sic) authority rests then on the harmonizing (sic) sentiments of the day, whether expressed, in conversns (sic) in letters, printed essays or in the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney Etc.” In that document he invokes “the laws of nature and of nature’s God,” identifies men as “created equal,” and enumerates “certain unalienable rights,” including “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” these shared rights being the substance of man’s natural equality. These words and phrases are without a doubt the most widely known and proliferated statements of the doctrine of nature in history. Through the Declaration a thoughtful reader finds a gateway to the full traditional understanding of nature. Any inquiring mind may peer back into the historical record through its words and consider the meaning of nature since its discovery, up to its implementation in the American regime.

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62 Ibid., 144
63 Ibid., 143
Nature, complex as it is, proves particularly slippery in Lincoln’s thought. The Declaration is the first important key. Lincoln said, “I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence.”\(^65\) In this sense he was a Jeffersonian: “All honor to Jefferson,” Lincoln once wrote, he “had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times.”\(^66\) Lincoln did provide his own spin on Jefferson’s view of natural equality, giving an account of rights that aligns well with the position of the Founders, as well as elaborating a new way of conceiving natural equality from a biblical perspective. Finally, he offered the occasional comment that suggests his understanding of nature was also influenced by something else entirely.

Lincoln’s statements reflect a belief in nature as expressed by the Declaration of Independence, particularly affirming equality, not listed as a right, but held as a self-evident truth and a station to which any given people is entitled by “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God.” Lincoln affirmed equality in two senses. The first sense mirrors the perspective of the Founders. “[The Founders] defined with tolerable distinctness, in what respects they did consider all men created equal,”\(^67\) not that they were equal in all respects, but “all men are equal in some respects;” particularly, “they are equal in their right to ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’”\(^68\)

He goes beyond this basic sense of equality to establish another, still natural, concept of equality: “Certainly the negro is not our equal in color—perhaps not in many other respects; still,
in the right to put into his mouth the bread that his own hands have earned, he is the equal of every other man, white or black.”⁶⁹ This latter form of equality raises a favorite biblical reference of Lincoln’s. Beginning as far back as 1847⁷⁰ Lincoln regularly invoked Genesis 3:19, wherein the Lord curses Adam and Eve for partaking of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil as follows: “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground.” Before the fall in the Garden of Eden it seems that food grew spontaneously from the ground, for Adam did not plant the Garden, but rather “the LORD God planted a garden…And out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food,” (Gen 2:8-9). The requirement to work for one’s subsistence in Genesis 3:19 shows the withdrawal of a certain amount of divine approbation. God no longer provides for man without man’s effort. This curse describes the natural conditions of mankind after the fall of Adam, the conditions that all men since the fall have been born into. Lincoln reappropriates this curse, turning it into a privilege. To partake of the bread a man earns with the sweat of his face is a just reward. No man may take that bread from him. All men, black or white, are equal in this. Lincoln’s elevation of an ostensibly base element of man’s nature, a punishment from God, to the status of a right fits in with his reflections on nature throughout his career.

In his speech known as the Temperance Address Lincoln reflected on “human nature,” which he called “God’s decree,” declaring positively that it “can never be reversed.”⁷¹ The content of that human nature is not terribly inspiring, however. He first describes human nature as stubborn and independent. No one responds well to being “driven to anything.”⁷² Men, as this

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⁶⁹ Ibid.
⁷⁰ His first recorded time quoting the verse was in “Fragments of a Discussion,” dated by Nicolay and Hay as December 1, 1847.
⁷¹ Temperence Address (Feb 1842), 83
⁷² Ibid.
statement notes, are not like mere animals, liable to be goaded and pushed against their wills.\textsuperscript{73} Man’s unwillingness to be driven is compounded when it deals with “that which is exclusively his own business,” as in the case of the decision to drink alcohol (the subject of this speech). Stubborn and independent as man is by nature, he thus resists external pressure to make him act. Finally, Lincoln notes that man will resist even more an external pressure which seeks to make him act “at the expense of pecuniary interest or burning appetite.”\textsuperscript{74} Most of all it seems man will refuse to be driven to act against his own interests or desires.

The next movement in this account of human nature, however, provides an alternative to driving men. Lincoln says, “when the conduct of men is designed to be influenced, persuasion, kind, unassuming persuasion should ever be adopted.” Men will not be driven, but they will be persuaded. “If you would win a man to your cause,\textit{first} convince him that you are his sincere friend.” This beginning step changes the flavor of all suggestions that follow. Man will not be driven by a master, he will not have you “dictate to his judgement, or to command his actions,” but if you win him first as a friend you will catch “his heart, which, say what he will, is the great high road to his reason.”\textsuperscript{75}

In the Temperance Address, in a similar manner to his account of natural equality in Genesis, Lincoln acknowledges the inherence of vice and passion in human nature. His goal with the speech is not, however, to leave these vices as he finds them. Instead, the very purpose of the address is to encourage people to join a temperance society, a self-improvement movement that seeks to conquer the passions. Lincoln’s ultimate aim, as explicitly stated in this speech, is to bring about the “happy day, when, all appetites controled (sic), all passions subdued, all matters

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 82-83. Then again, man might as easily be characterized with this statement to be as stubborn as a jackass.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 82.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 83.
subjected, *mind*, all conquering *mind*, shall live, and move the glorious monarch of the world.”

Human nature remains inexorable, as Lincoln stated earlier in the speech, but the world can and should be ruled over by reason, and this can be brought about if individual men are made to rule *themselves* by reason. Changing one man at a time by convincing him you are his friend and leading him in the path of virtue which perfects nature results in the dethroning of the passions as the ruling element of mankind, despite their foundational status as unchangeable elements of human nature. For Lincoln, the reasoning element should rule and subject the appetitive and spirited elements of the soul and society.

Lincoln affirms, as noted in both the example of earning bread by the sweat of the brow and in his understanding of human nature in the Temperance Address, something like the position of various social contract theorists on human nature. His theory spun out of Gen 3:19, for example, resembles John Locke’s labor theory of value, that man owns that which he improves by combining it with his labor. Lincoln provides further evidence of his support of this sort of understanding of nature in his “First Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions.” As he puts it, “all creation is a mine, and every man, a miner,” the extent to which he prospers in the world depends upon man’s ability to dig into the mine of “the whole earth…including *himself.*”

Lincoln concludes his opening philosophical statement by noting, “Man is not the only animal who labors; but he is the only one who improves his workmanship.” Not only is the earth and its material enriched by man, but man *himself* becomes greater by mixing his labor with the base elements he naturally receives in his own person. That which is natural is imperfect but might be improved.

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76 Ibid., 89-90.
Complicating this picture further, at Peoria Lincoln stated, “Slavery is founded in the selfishness of man’s nature—opposition to it, is his love of justice.” Selfishness is natural to man. The love of justice is not clearly described as natural. Lincoln goes on to say “you can not repeal human nature. It still will be the abundance of man’s heart, that slavery extension is wrong; and out of the abundance of his heart, his mouth will continue to speak.” Note, as in the case of the equality of man in eating bread by the sweat of his brow, this conclusion is supported by scripture, Luke 6:45. The love (born of man’s heart) that compels him to speak is also part of human nature; what he speaks is determined by the content of his heart, not necessarily human nature. Lincoln seems to suggest, however, that the love of justice specifically arises naturally. On this point he is unclear.

These two parts of man, his heart and his stomach one might (with C.S. Lewis\textsuperscript{79}) call them, “are an eternal antagonism,” as any must acknowledge. Lincoln seems in this speech, like in the Temperance Address, to suppose that although the heart and the stomach war for precedence, that if the heart wins it might be the path to the head, the \textit{logos}, in the form of speech, which is the ideal ruler of the body. All that said, the passion of selfishness which animates man cannot be destroyed simply, only subjugated to higher faculties.

The best example of Lincoln’s approach to low nature and his high goals for politics was at his 1860 Cooper Institute Speech following his nomination for the presidency. In that speech he repeats his sense that human nature holds firm to the sentiments at which the heart arrives. The sentiments of anti-slavery had entered the hearts of 1.5 million Americans as evinced by their votes. “[H]uman nature cannot be changed… You cannot destroy [a] judgment and

\textsuperscript{78} Peoria, 334.
\textsuperscript{79} See \textit{The Abolition of Man}, Ch. 2
feeling—[a] sentiment—by breaking up the political organization which rallies around it.” As he was fond of repeating, human nature does not and cannot change. However, the sentiments to which the heart attaches receive the support of this firm nature, despite the evident changeability of such sentiments. Lincoln argues in these terms leading to his famous injunction that we must “HAVE FAITH THAT RIGHT MAKES MIGHT, AND IN THAT FAITH, LET US, TO THE END, DARE TO DO OUR DUTY AS WE UNDERSTAND IT.”

In observing nature (human and otherwise), most grasp the hierarchical logic which produces the trite formulation “might makes right.” The powerful possesses the capability to do as they wish and thereby gain license, liberty, or right to do so. Might makes right tracks logically, but this form of natural hierarchy is the basis on which slavery rests. If the strongest, cleverest, and cruelest always succeed, then our politics will be rife with tyranny and other vicious enormities. That the fact of this hierarchy produces undesirable or evil results, however, does not free one to deny that such is a natural condition observed everywhere in the world. As Lincoln notes, our human nature tends toward all sorts of wickedness.

Lincoln flips the idea on its head, not claiming that by nature right makes might, but requesting the faith of his audience, “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen,” (Heb 11:1) that right makes might, and to act in the world in accordance with the duties concomitant with that faith. As in the case of equality via Genesis, stubbornness in the Temperance address, and selfishness at Peoria, Lincoln has again taken the natural principle which seems low and used it to lift the vision of his audience. Right does not necessarily make might by nature, but political blessings follow from affirming this faith.

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80 Cooper Institute, 125
81 Ibid., 130
Lincoln’s view of nature seems something like an understanding taken from the classical world applied to the modern “enlightenment” approach that Leo Strauss famously characterized as “low but solid,” modified by Biblical teachings. Lincoln sees selfishness, stubbornness, cruelty, and immoderation as fundamental human nature. However, man might subject these lower appetites by ascending through the feelings of the heart—like justice, sincere friendship, and faith—to the mind where the passions are subjected to reason. Lincoln lifts men from selfishness to justice using Luke 6:45 to punctuate his conclusion, just as he redeems the curse of a barren earth requiring our sweat to bring forth food In Genesis 3:19. He saves men from the tyranny of the mighty in the spirit of Christ’s famous reversal “many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first,” (Matthew 19:30) asking all to affirm his religious teaching that right makes might. Lincoln’s view of human nature acknowledges the low and lifts the vision to the high.

Most of Shakespeare’s plays can be said in some broad sense to be “about” human nature, but in *King Lear* Nature makes an early, explicit appearance and refuses to leave the stage for the balance of the play, and it was one of Lincoln’s favorite plays. The character most associated with nature in the play is Edmund, but Edgar, King Lear, and Gloucester all return to nature for a harsh education in certain truths. The complexity of nature as presented in this play is well worth exploration, but this section will focus on bastardy, trial by combat, and “fundamental” human nature. Before turning to the play, however, one final note from Lincoln exposes an evident resonance between *Lear* and Lincoln’s own view of hereditary nature.

In 1870 Herndon recorded a unique conversation he once had with Lincoln, who requested he “keep it a secret while I live.” Lincoln said the following:
My mother was a bastard—was the daughter of a nobleman—so called of virginia. My mother’s mother was poor and credulous &c. and she was shamefully taken advantage of by the man. My mother inherited his qualities and I hers. All that I am or hope ever to be I get from my mother—good (sic) bless her.—Did you never notice that bastards are generally smarter—shrewder & more intellectual than others? Is it because it is Stolen?\textsuperscript{82}

This conversation arose because the men were in their carriage preparing to argue a case “which required a discussion of the hereditary qualities of mind—nature &c.”\textsuperscript{83} Herndon affirms his memory of this episode vividly, recalling the precise location through which they travelled as Lincoln spoke, and the precise sense (if not identical wording) of Lincoln’s account. So strong an impression did this memory make that, unlike some reminiscences which Herndon excluded, Herndon reproduced this story in a milder form in the first volume of his biography of Lincoln in 1888. In that account he adds the greater detail that from the obscure Virginia aristocrat who illegitimately sired Lincoln’s mother “came his power of analysis, his logic, his mental activity, his ambition, and all the qualities that distinguished him from the other members and descendants of the Hanks family.”\textsuperscript{84}

Lincoln despised his low beginnings. Herndon reports Lincoln’s response to John Scripps’ wishing to prepare a biography of him,

It is a great piece of folly to attempt to make anything out of me or my early life. It can all be condensed into a single sentence, and that sentence you will find in Gray’s Elegy,

\textsuperscript{82} Letter from Herndon “To Ward Hill Lamon,” dated March 6\textsuperscript{th} 1870. It is the second letter to Lamon on that same date. The letter is listed as letter 96 in *Herndon on Lincoln: Letters*, ed. Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O Davis, (University of Illinois Press: Chicago, 2016), 99-105. I quote exclusively from p. 100.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., Herndon’s emphasis

\textsuperscript{84} *Abraham Lincoln: True Story of a Great Life, Vol. 1*, 45
‘The short and simple annals of the poor.’ That’s my life, and that’s all you or anyone else can make out of it.85

He did not wish to dwell on his ignoble roots. However, Herndon’s recollection of Lincoln’s story related about his mother demonstrates a curiosity he experienced. The question has been asked, how could someone with Lincoln’s background become Lincoln? His heritage seems unremarkable, his education poor, his opportunities limited. The total man seems greater than the sum of his parts. Lincoln himself had apparently dwelt on the question sufficiently to seek out and find for himself the beginning of an answer to the question. In that answer he provides a last look at his peculiar understanding of nature.

One engages in pardonable elitism when wondering how Lincoln could have become all he did given his background. Lincoln himself proved an elitist of some stripe when, in accounting for his own impressive attainments he did not credit himself, but his illegitimate maternal grandfather. He demonstrates a belief not only in the heritability of intellectual traits such as ambition and intelligence, but also in the passing of such traits by means of a traditional aristocracy. When seeking to understand himself, Lincoln determined that his own attributes must have come from a different descent than that of the rest of his family. Furthermore, he offers a clear theory of bastardy as it relates to heritability of traits which was stated so confidently and starkly that Herndon said “I have sometimes thought Lincoln intended to include himself,” that is, Herndon suspected Lincoln might believe himself a bastard.86 Lincoln’s perspective on the subject mirrors that expressed in the second scene of *King Lear*.

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85 Ibid., 31.
86 If Lincoln indeed believed what is written here about bastards, then including himself among the impressive bastards of the world would not be a denigration to his already unimpressive pedigree, but it would offer an additional explanation of his peculiarity among his family members. His mother was remarkable and had the qualities that he gained, but none of her other children did. Perhaps Lincoln did because he “stole” her attributes by means of an infidelity in his conception. There is a logic in Herndon’s conclusion from his report of Lincoln’s
“Thou, Nature, art my goddess. To thy law/My services are bound,” Edmund proclaims at the opening of act 1 scene 2. What does Edmund mean by Nature? The speech makes clear that he seeks an escape from convention, from the “plague of custom…/The curiosity of nations.” Edmund wants access to the “dynamite” known as natural right to explode the false premises on which “civil society” is founded. The question for him is not theoretical or merely political but intimately personal. Edmund is a bastard, born to his father’s (Gloucester) mistress one year after his elder brother Edgar was born to his father’s wife. He is not legally recognized as Gloucester’s son, despite his father’s apparently sincere affection and public acknowledgement (see 1.1.1-25 and 1.2.18-19), and is therefore disinherited, unable to hold land or title in his father’s house, or elsewhere among the nobility. By convention Edmund loses access to society and all it can offer a son of noble birth. Even though Edmund is not “conventionally” noble, his accounting of his attributes proves him his half-brother Edgar’s equal in “dimensions,” generosity of mind, and “shape.” Furthermore, he and all other bastards “in the lusty stealth of nature, take/More composition and fierce quality” than their “legitimate” counterparts, whom he calls “fops,” all made “within a dull, stale, tired bed,” (1.2.1-19).

By convention, men performatively impregnate their uninspiring wives in the monotonous scenery of their accustomed bedroom. By nature, men copulate according to desire, by the dictates of lusty nature “pell-mell,” (4.6.135) without thought of a resulting child or the rules of society. By convention, men are controlled, weak, dull, cautious, tired. By nature, men are mischievous, excitable, impulsive, aggressive, lively. As children born according to words. The theory of Lincoln as a bastard is roundly rejected in the literature, and I make no attempt to defend it here, merely to mention and observe the intellectual foundation for the claim.

87 Leo Strauss Natural Right and History, 153
convention take on the attributes of their begetting so too do children born according to nature. In Edmund’s estimation, bastards are superior to legitimate children and are maligned against natural justice.

Edmund believes in a form of meritocracy. Since he finds himself excluded from the customary hierarchy of society, his father has sent him off (1.1.32-33), allowing him the chance to stand out in the military, where any with talent might prosper to a greater degree. Unfortunately, talented men who believe themselves natural meritocratic leaders get passed over in the military for unjust reasons too. The play does not give details as to Edmund’s military service, but that he is discontented with it is evident from what follows. He starts the play intent on obtaining his father’s title, despite society’s refusal to grant it. His plan to overcome his legitimate half-brother relies on (what he sees as) his natural superiority of mind. Edmund’s cleverness ultimately proves insufficient to its task. Or, perhaps more accurately, his high estimation of his own intelligence and his low estimation of that of everyone around him leads to his demise.

88 Were it not so, Iago might never have become the monstrous villain he did Othello 1.1.9-40. However, in King John Richard the Lion Heart’s bastard, Philip Faulconbridge, is renamed after his illegitimate father and given great advancement in the military, where he proved himself an impressive soldier, challenging and beheading the duke of Austria, among other things, 3.2.1-4.

89 Undoubtedly clever, Edmund pulls off many impressive schemes in his bid for power. Edmund convinces Gloucester that Edgar plans to kill him. Then he tricks Edgar into believing himself in mortal danger of his father’s wrath, thereby convincing him to run away not just from home, but from society into nature. Accomplishing these key deceptions, Gloucester is convinced of Edgar’s fundamental rottenness, and therefore elevates Edmund, his “Loyal and natural boy,” to the status of a legal son, promising to make him “capable” of inheriting his title and lands (2.1.97-99). Gloucester, trusting Edmund, confides in him about his continued support for King Lear, despite Lear’s newly empowered daughters’ official decrees (following on Lear’s flight into nature) against such support. Edmund betrays Gloucester to Regan and Cornwall using this information, leading them to rip Gloucester’s eyes out and exile him to wander the land, like Edgar and Lear. Even before his father is blinded, Edmund is named Earl of Gloucester by Cornwall for revealing his father’s “treachery,” (4.2.7-8). Finally, he wishes to ascend beyond his newly obtained station as earl to that of king. To accomplish this, he courts both Regan and Goneril, allowing him the freedom to have either or both and obtain the highest status possible when the conflicts over sovereignty in the kingdom finally settle.

90 Were his father and brother thinking rationally and not reacting emotionally when he began his plot, Edmund probably would not have pulled it off. His entire plan hinges on his father and brother never speaking in person. A short conversation between them after Edmund’s meddling might well have ended his bid for power before it started. Happily for Edmund, both his father and brother react emotionally, not calmly. Edgar takes a sword and runs
Approaching the final scene in which the meritocratic natural right on which Edmund relies fails him requires first some analysis of Edgar, Lear, and Gloucester’s return to nature. The play essentially provides two plausible explanations for Edmund’s failure by way of two views of nature Edgar uses in educating Lear and Gloucester: one low (presented to Lear) and one high (presented to Gloucester).

Edgar, Lear, and Gloucester all find themselves outside of civil society in nature. None is explicitly sent there, but all are driven there: Edgar by the accusations of turning against his father (that is: behaving unnaturally), Lear by the “unnatural” (2.4.319) behavior of his daughters, and Gloucester after having his eyes removed by Lear’s daughter (with the explicit, unnatural consent of his illegitimate son Edmund) for helping Lear. Each has some need to return to nature to seek out its meaning. Each has become unmoored in society and lacks proper grasp of what is true. Therefore, they seek to understand nature by literally exiting the city and entering the natural world. Chronologically Edgar leaves society first, then Lear, and Gloucester last. Edgar, the youngest and most seasoned citizen of nature among them, disguises himself and serves as a guide and teacher to both Lear and Gloucester in their harsh educations.

away with Gloucester’s men in pursuit. Gloucester allows Edmund to play messenger, never speaking to Edgar before he fled. He does several things which raise suspicion of his words and actions. For example, after his father expresses apprehension about astronomical events and their effect on the shocking events that day in Lear’s court, Edmund mocks him in severe terms in soliloquy before turning to his brother and invoking those same signs. Edgar is surprised by this, probably because he knew his brother’s accustomed way of thinking and found it odd to hear his usually rational brother invoking the superstitions of their old-fashioned father. Edgar asks for clarification on the matter twice before Edmund abruptly turns to his father’s supposed wrath. Edmund likely did not expect any resistance to his pretended faith in signs in the heavens because he thinks Edgar “a brother noble,/Whose nature is so far from doing harms/That he suspects none; on whose foolish honesty/My practices ride easy.” Nevertheless, his incaution in invoking astronomy demonstrates an untenable level of arrogance in Edmund. He did not need to do it for his plan to succeed, but he seemed intent not only on ruining his brother, but also on entertaining himself in the process. His imprudent decision to court both Regan and Goneril which led eventually to the death of both is another example. Finally, his unsupportable arguments by which he tries to conceal his impatient insistence on killing Lear and Cordelia immediately, not permitting Albany access to his rightful prisoners.

91 For an ironic exchange on unnaturalness between Edmund and Gloucester which leads to Edmund’s betraying his father, see 3.3.1-25
Edgar takes on the identity of an insane beggar “Poor Tom” or “Tom o’ Bedlam.” He is dirty, ill-clad, and apparently incomprehensible in his wild statements. Edgar, as far as the play shows, is merely acting. There is no evidence he is legitimately insane. Lear, on the other hand, encounters Poor Tom right after his mind, of which he has repeatedly sought to keep hold (see 1.5.45-46 and 2.4.62-63), slipped into madness. Edgar never breaks character. Though Edgar seems intent on guiding Lear through the process of regaining his wits, Lear is unable to truly hear him.\footnote{Much could be said about Poor Tom’s lines in the play. They are often dismissed as pure madness without any purpose or meaning. I reject that view in strong terms. However, this already lengthy chapter cannot bear the weight an ancillary diversion into a careful analysis of those baffling words would add.}

What Lear learns from Poor Tom is a lesson about fundamental human nature. Upon observing the wild beggar, Lear exclaimed “Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art,” (3.4.113-115) before stripping off his clothes to learn at the feet of this natural philosopher (3.4.162-163). Much has been made of these words.\footnote{Many interesting treatments of Lear on this subject exist. Paul Cantor’s videos on Lear (particularly: \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2YKGy1f6W88}, but the whole series of lectures is excellent) were influential for my understanding of the view explicated (though not completely accepted) below.} It is said that Lear, hereby, discovers what man is by nature, man without the accoutrements of society. In a certain sense this is true: without technology and civil society man would be a poor animal. This accords with the views of Rousseau and Hobbes. However, the ostensible “poor, bare, forked animal” from which Lear derives his insight is the creation of a brilliant nobleman named Edgar, not the natural result of a human being abandoned by society. Edgar had fine clothes and all his wits about him, but he shed both in order (initially, in Hobbesian fashion) to save his life. The half-truth from entering nature and finding an ostensibly natural man sticks with Lear.
When Lear emerges again from nature he is decorated in wildflowers and weeds, behaving manically, but filled with happiness and a new political vision. The most striking feature of the reformed Lear’s beliefs are his views on justice. Stealing and adultery will both notably go unpunished under any new regime with this King of Nature at its head. These are crimes for which the poor are usually punished, being without means to protect themselves legally or socially. But more horrid crimes are hidden by the fine clothing of the upper class. For the new Lear, these do not merit less consideration than the petty crimes of the poor. Rather than devote himself to punishing all equally, he determines to leave off punishment altogether (4.6.127-191). Upon learning about his shared humanity with the decrepit Poor Tom, Lear became a gentler, more egalitarian statesman, almost certainly to a fault. Kant said that on the question of human dignity and equality “Rousseau set me straight.” Poor Tom did the same for Lear.

Gloucester, unlike Lear, came upon Edgar with his wits still largely about him. His blindness and the betrayal it represented, however, found him in unfathomable despair. Gloucester leaves the company of a well-meaning old man in exchange for the guidance of Poor Tom, who the old man describes as a “Madman and beggar too,” (4.1.32-33). Once Gloucester convinces his original guide to leave him with his new companion, he asks Poor Tom to lead him to the edge of the Cliffs of Dover, stating darkly “From that place/I shall no leading need,” (4.2.87-88). Gloucester had already planned his suicide by the time he met his disguised son. Edgar, for his part, was left to conceive of a plan to save his father’s life and soul.

Edgar does not take his father to the cliff. He deceives him, changing his voice from the Poor Tom character to something more sensible seeming, pretending he is at the cliff, and walking away allowing him to “jump” from the “precipice.” In the staging of the play this scene
cannot but seem a farce. Edgar himself is aware of the absurdity of the proceedings, to say nothing of the indignity to which he subjects his father. In his words, “Why I do trifle thus with his despair/Is done to cure it,” (4.6.42-43). After Gloucester “falls” Edgar returns again, once more donning a new identity in addressing his father. The poor blind man moans “Is wretchedness deprived that benefit/To end itself by death?” (4.6.74-76) To which Edgar’s new character replies that he saw Gloucester jump from the cliff, and that, rather than fall, watched him float gently down like “gossamer, feathers, air.” He then tells Gloucester he saw him on top of the cliff with a demon (referring to Poor Tom with a more sensible voice—that is himself). Above all else, Edgar informs Gloucester “Thy life’s a miracle,” (4.6.69). This blind father accepts the gift of his life, “Henceforth I’ll bear/Affliction till it do cry out itself ‘Enough, enough!’ and die,” (4.6.93-95).

Combining this supernatural encouragement with a different view of nature than that adopted by Lear, Edgar seeks further to unburden his father’s mind. When despairing again in the face of apparent defeat, in response to Edgar’s attempt to rescue him from harm, Gloucester says “No further, sir. A man may rot even here.” Gloucester’s misery reframes life as nothing but a process of rotting. Viewed that way, one might as well rot in one place as another. Edgar chides him, “What, in ill thoughts again? Men must endure/Their going hence even as their coming hither./Ripeness is all. Come on,” (5.3.9-12). Edgar shifts the rhetorical ground while staying in the language of natural fruition his father invoked. He changes the image from rotting to ripening. Rotting is itself nothing more than ripening beyond a wholesome standard. If life is rotting, slow decay, then it might as well be viewed as ripening, a process of gradual

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94 Despite Edgar’s remarkable efforts, Gloucester never regained a zest for life. Though he never again attempts suicide, Gloucester embraces death before necessity required him to do so. When Oswald attempts to stab him and Gloucester offers his chest to the sword: “Now let thy friendly hand Put strength enough to ‘t,” (4.6.258-259).
improvement. Indeed, in some sense it must be viewed this way. For, the purpose of a fruit (itself the purpose of a plant)—the good it brings to the world—is not to fall to the ground in useless rotting, but to ripen and provide nourishment. If our coming hither leads inevitably to our going hence, then life should be pursued to greatest advantage, plucked at the moment of perfection—the fulfillment of telos—rather than allowed to complete its course by dying on the vine or falling uselessly to the ground. Perhaps the supernatural myth of Gloucester’s miraculous life was required to arrive at this optimistically framed sense of nature.

Edgar provides both Lear and Gloucester a natural understanding of the world, Gloucester’s being premised on supernatural intercession. Lear learns that by nature men are equal—because they are equally wretched—and by convention they find themselves in arbitrary power relations. Gloucester learns that providence plays a role in this world, and that our lives have a *finis ultimus*, a ripeness which we should strive to attain. Lear’s understanding comes by way of a modern anthropology that makes men no more than animals. Gloucester’s view is born of a religious myth (which might be based in truth but certainly requires falsehood in the case of the poor blind father) combined with a teleological view of the natural world.

With these two views of nature expounded, we can turn to the play’s final adjudication of nature. The last scene of the play in which Edmund duels his brother Edgar seems to raise the question of teleological nature with providential justice versus low nature wherein men are born equal and thrive according to their genius. To say that Edgar represents the first in the battle is an oversimplification, however Albany certainly supports this view and Edgar speaks in favor of it. Edmund, on the other hand, explicitly sees himself as a man of merit, one able to naturally prosper through his superiority.
Edgar arranges the duel ahead of time, asking Albany to accuse Edmund of treason and call for a champion to prove the charge in trial by combat (5.1.46-52). Albany, unsure of the appearance of such a champion, throws down a glove as a “pledge,” to “prove” the charge on Edmund’s body himself if none other steps forward to do so. Edmund throws his glove as well, in response. Edgar, of course, does appear (5.8.108-122). Edmund denies all allegations against him, and upon meeting the disguised Edgar (what disguise he wears at this point is unclear) does something very important: Edmund agrees to fight Edgar despite not knowing his identity.

Edmund acknowledges his waiver of this formality, noting “in wisdom I should ask thy name,” for not knowing his competitor allows “safe and nicely I might delay,” but he wishes not to stand on ceremony, not in this instance. He wants to prove himself noble. He wants to stand on his own merit, and thus “By rule of knighthood,” he stands toe to toe with his brother (5.3.170-179). Edmund is clever, and knows that he could preserve his life, possibly even avoid this trial by combat altogether. Yet, he seems determined to stand on his own two feet and not survive due to a mere technicality in this important final moment. But Edmund falls at Edgar’s hand.

Albany posits his position in favor of the kind of nature Edgar taught Gloucester, when he declares “This shows you are above,/You justicers, that these our nether crimes/So speedily can venge,” upon hearing of Cornwall’s death after blinding Gloucester (4.2.95-97). Edgar, after fighting Edmund and revealing his identity states, “The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices/Make instruments to plague us,” (5.3.204-205) before joining with Edmund in recounting how justice was served on Gloucester for his adultery and Edmund for his treachery. The

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95 Goneril confirms this after Edmund has been mortally wounded, stating that “thou wast not bound to answer/An unknown opposite. Thou art not vanquished,/But cozened and beguiled,” (5.3.181-184).
96 Hamlet expresses a similar thought: “Our indiscretion sometime serves us well/When our deep plots do pall; and that should learn us/There’s a divinity that shapes our ends,/Rough-hew them how we will—“ (Hamlet 5.2.8-12).
97 An argument that justice is served in the case of all the deaths and punishments in the play can be made. Stated briefly: Cordelia is punished for the sin of imprudence, Edgar for imprudence, Lear for the sin of delusion and severity, Goneril and Regan for harming Lear, Gloucester for adultery, Cornwall for blinding Gloucester, and
victory is declared in favor of Gloucester’s telos-driven, supernaturally influenced view of nature. By Edmund’s defeat his view, and that of Lear, suffers a substantial practical defeat.

It remains to be noted that Edgar is a clear proponent of neither Lear’s nor Gloucester’s view of nature. He is the source of both. He presented neither position with preference to the other. Lear learned his view of nature not by Edgar’s explicit teaching, but by observing him in the character of Poor Tom. Still, Lear seems to have grasped something essential about man’s shared attributes and fundamental equality. Gloucester is educated using some level of falsehood and a deliberately implemented rhetorical strategy, yet the nature Edgar provides him wins out in the end. Edgar’s incredible political skill enables him to guide these two broken men through their difficult circumstances. He demonstrates his skill in rhetoric and controlling circumstances in his embodiment of several characters. He shows his prowess in battle defeating his brother. All of this is rewarded with his being named the King of Britain at the conclusion of the play. Edgar, it seems, controlled events and rose to power on the back of his own outstanding ability, whatever the truth of nature might be.

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Lincoln read and understood much from King Lear, as can be seen in my earlier chapter’s discussion of his reference to the play at the Republican Banquet. Furthermore, he expressed opinions on bastardy that are an apparent summary of the view expressed by Edmund in Act 1 Scene 2 of the play. This latter fact introduces the fascinating idea that Lincoln’s own understanding of nature was influenced directly by his reading of King Lear. What exactly does that influence mean, outside of his appreciation for the plight of bastards?

Edmund for his many crimes. Some of these are, of course, controversial, but from a certain perspective it can be said that justice (of some sort) is served in the play.
The battle between high and low nature in *Lear* resembles Lincoln’s own presentation. Lincoln seeks from his understanding of depraved human nature to lift men beyond themselves to a higher understanding, like Edgar’s religious myth and teleological account provided to Gloucester, while still acknowledging Lear’s dark insights learned from Poor Tom. Like Edgar, Lincoln understands a foundation in low nature is insufficient by itself and requires religious aspirations to elevate it beyond this world to something higher. He grants the base natural equality of man learned by Lear, but does not stop there. Using religious language, he seeks to engage the heart and mind to bring greater, higher equality into being. At the end of the play the principle of divine justice seems ascendant. In the final battle it was not merely the ever-successful deceiver Edmund who won, in his evident might. Instead, Edgar triumphed. Those who have “faith” that “right makes might” as Lincoln requests, find vindication at the conclusion of *King Lear*, just as they do at the end of the Civil War, the anti-slavery North defeating the pro-slavery south. However, as noted above with regard to Edgar’s plausible natural right of triumph over Edmund, Lincoln’s own victories may plausibly exemplify “might” triumphing. In both cases the language of right lends salutary rhetorical support for the cause, and, as Jaffa noted “there is no time in which the truth may not require a bodyguard of lies.”

The dissection of divine right in Shakespeare and Lincoln cuts sufficiently deep to render the case critical for any politically minded person in the modern world. John Figgis himself acknowledged on the first page of his work on the subject “that the doctrine is absurd when judged from the standpoint of modern political thought.” Disposed as we moderns are against such superstitious, anti-democratic nonsense, we find Lincoln and Shakespeare emerge

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98 *New Birth*, 125  
99 *Divine Right of Kings* 1
unquestionably triumphant in the contest with its teachings. However, this chapter does not primarily serve to join in the many victorious attacks against the much-maligned theory. Instead, it seeks understanding of these two writers—one poetic, the other political—on the historically contingent, complex set of beliefs that gave rise to such apologetic writings as those of King James. The doctrine lost its power in the face of natural right, a stronger political argument, appealing to the mind of a greater number.

In the greater context of this chapter, the question must be asked: does trial by combat reveal—as King Richard apparently feared and Albany seemed to trust—truth, justice, and divine approbation, or does it instead uphold the more natural conclusion that the mighty triumph in battle—as supported by Edmund (and possibly proven by Edgar)? Stated in Lincoln’s terms, in such circumstances does might make right or should we have faith that right makes might? Did Lincoln win the Civil War from faith in the right, or natural might? Did Edgar and Bolingbroke triumph by the goodness of their cause or the weakness of their foes? Unless God reveals the answer, both might plausibly maintain their self-righteousness. Even revelation, as Lincoln avers and Macbeth demonstrates, likely would not settle this deeply human dispute. Perhaps that fact offers a tentative political, though certainly not a spiritual answer to the question.
Conclusion: Shakespeare’s Lincoln

Observing Shakespeare’s direct influence as quoted in Lincoln’s speeches in the first chapter provides proof of concept enough to justify the explorations in the subsequent chapters. It reveals in rudimentary form Lincoln’s Shakespeare, as well as Shakespeare’s Lincoln. In the first case, Lincoln’s Shakespeare emerges as a teacher, guide, and consistent source of political wisdom. In the second, Shakespeare’s Lincoln proves a man marked with the unmistakable impression of Shakespeare’s language, complexity, and vision. Each of these elements in both cases gain depth and breadth in the topical studies making up the balance of this project.

The light of Shakespeare’s genius serves to increase the brightness of Lincoln’s own flame. Joining them as this project has done improves our understanding of Shakespeare’s political thought as we learn from Lincoln’s approach to reading and using him. Other students of politics benefit from Lincoln’s example, and the reader gains greater appreciation for Shakespeare as a teacher of statesman.

This compounded source of light also enhances our view of Lincoln. Studying the key texts in which Lincoln expressed interest enriches our understanding of his ideas. Lincoln’s view of human nature (including ambition and prudence), his understanding of marriage, and his conception of divine and natural right sovereignty benefit from the light of Shakespeare’s insight. The result is not merely greater knowledge of those ideas, but an increased appreciation for his legacy as a whole. The discreet topics of the chapters coalesce, disclosing new points of interest in their relationships and an emerging coherence in the legacy of Lincoln. The man emerges in greater complexity and power. His rhetoric and manner of thinking take on a distinctly Shakespearean caste, endowing his already estimable life and thought with greater dignity.
One need no longer tritely repeat that Lincoln read Shakespeare with but little thought of worth beyond the laconic statement. This project opens the door to understanding Lincoln’s education at a level not previously possible to a lay person insufficiently familiar with one or the other thinker. That Lincoln read Shakespeare can now provide a path of study, principle, and action to any wishing to “tread in the footsteps” of so “illustrious” a “predecessor” as he. And to those who “scorn” such prosaic plodding, this dissertation offers an educational account of the means by which that same man transcended our “narrow world, like a colossus,” (Julius Caesar 1.2.142-143) to join the ranks of “Tower ing genius” with Alexander, Caesar, and Napoleon.¹

¹ Abraham Lincoln, Lyceum Address, 34