

King Lear: Kinder Casts for Goneril and Regan

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This essay considers ways in which readings and performances of *King Lear* can respond to some of the insights made available by feminist perspectives. ¹Passages from the play are placed in context with early seventeenth century opinions about women in order to enable challenging possibilities for interpreting the roles of Lear's older daughters, Goneril and Regan. Studies of *King Lear* have historically been preoccupied with Lear and his doppelganger, Gloucester. Does Lear really grow, or does he remain deluded to the end? And what of the impact and significance of Gloucester's blindness? Does his heart indeed 'burst smilingly', or does he die in despair over the loss of belief in 'spherical predominance' and the realisation that in relation to the gods, we humans are 'like flies to wanton boys'?

In puzzling over scenarios in which to interpret the actions and fates of the two elderly patriarchs, it is tempting to relegate the women in the play to fairly stable positions. This has conventionally been done by drawing on the Cinderella myth of the one true victim and her wicked sisters. (Mothers have never posed interpretive problems for *King Lear* either, as both Lear and Gloucester, with varying degrees of disgust and relish, refer to them only as spawning bastards.) However, if we consider Lear's daughters not as cameos but as characters who might themselves take centre stage, the focus can be diverted from the plight of 'universal man'. This is what Jane Smiley did in her 1986 novel, *A Thousand Acres*, writing about abused daughters who finally take a stand against their tyrannical patriarch.² It could be argued that while such recent re-workings as Smiley's might wrest *King Lear*'s characters away from conventional critical preoccupations, in place of these conventions they

provide equally stereotypical contemporary scenes of domestic violence and sexual abuse. But nonetheless they do encourage a deeper and more complex understanding of the female roles in this play.

Laws of Inheritance

I will begin my discussion of the roles of Goneril and Regan by outlining the laws of inheritance in early modern England. In this period in English culture, the customary conception of death included both the actual moment of death and an important liminal phase that preceded it. For the liminal phase, widowed parents could draw up a will that allowed them formally to retire, transferring property to their heirs in exchange for attendance on all their needs. This recalled the medieval practice whereby parents gave up property in return for the right to 'sojourn' in the houses of their beneficiaries.

In view of these conventions, Lear's situation is profoundly ambivalent. By the time of the early modern period the status of sojourner was conferred only on the poor and the wretched, not on the upper classes, much less on a king. One could argue either that as a particularly distinguished sojourner Lear deserves special treatment (as he himself expects); or, alternatively, that Lear is crazy in allowing himself to be left no better-off than a sojourner. Secondly, there is the issue of what Lear does indeed expect from his new position. On one hand he appears to have given the matter considerable thought prior to his appearance in 1.1. As Gloucester and Kent suggest in the play's opening lines, the King's intentions have already been the subject of anxious speculation amongst members of the court. Lear himself refers to his own prior considerations of 'Interest of territory, cares of state' (55), and to having thought to set his rest on Cordelia's 'kind nursery'(1.1.137-38). And later in 2.4 he reminds Goneril and Regan of the specific care he has taken in having '[m]ade you my guardians, my depositories,/But kept a reservation to be followed/With such a

number.’ (2.4.211-16) On the other hand, however, in dividing up his kingdom before the court in 1.1 Lear speaks with childish disregard for proportion: ‘even from this line to this’ [1.1.69]; ‘to thee and thine hereditary ever / Remain this ample third’ [1.1.88-89]). He thus leaves himself wide open to the abuses that are warned against in contemporary folklore. For example, an old Scottish rhyme runs:

Here is the fair mall [club]
To give a knock on the skull
To the man who keeps no gear for himself
But gives all to his bairns.

Likewise, a proverb warns: ‘To hand over is no longer to live’.³ The Fool calls on this lore in his own rhymes which instruct Lear about the stupidity of cleaving a crown in two and leaving nothing in the middle.

The Body of the State

In splitting his kingdom Lear wreaks devastating political as well as personal consequences. Jean Howard has convincingly read Shakespeare’s tragedies in terms of the implosion of the monarchy at the turn of the seventeenth century.⁴ With the discovery of new worlds, the authority of the British monarchy was both encouraged by a will to conquer and challenged by the threats of unknown lands and peoples. The mercantile class, too, was on the rise, shipping goods to new lands and bringing home stocks and spoils. This commerce disrupted conventional social and economic relations. In buying, behaving and dressing above their stations, merchants could forge a new social position for themselves that threatened old rank and money. And a third pressure to the monarchy was exerted by the political disruption that accompanied the importing of a Scottish King to the English throne.

King Lear, more than any other of Shakespeare's tragedies, represents the spectre of an uncertain and crumbling throne. Family ruptures in this play cannot be divorced from the chaos within the body of the state. Edmund, Goneril and Regan embody mercantilism, and it is clearly a system that neither the old king nor the Duke of Gloucester understands. The Duke mocks his bastard son while also depriving him of income. While allowing one's father's eyes to be poked out – not to mention stitching up one's brother – may be morally inadvisable, yet it is possible at least to understand Edmund's ambition to gain lands 'by wit' (1.2.191), since his father's sexual incontinence has meant that this son will himself receive nothing if he waits for 'spherical predominance' to give him his due. Similarly, Lear asks his daughters to vie for political power through protestations of love. In so doing he opens the way for his daughters to abuse him, since love is itself something he so clearly misunderstands. It is ironic, then, that when Lear later asks Nature to tell him how she has bred his daughters' hard hearts (3.6.81), Nature might well provide the answer: 'You yourself. You have paved the way for the dissolution of your own authority.'

In provoking the crumbling of his power, Lear initiates the dissolution of the body politic, the body of the State that, in early modern terms, finds its metaphor in the human body.⁵ But Lear clearly sees things the other way around, describing himself as *broken into* by daughters who are foreign to his blood:

But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter,
Or rather a disease that's in my flesh,
Which I must needs call mine. Thou art a boil,
A plague-sore, or embossèd carbuncle
In my corrupted blood (2.4.20-24)

Albany, husband to Goneril, supports Lear's perception of his 'unnatural' older daughter:

Were't my fitness
To let these hands obey my blood,
They are apt enough to dislocate and tear

Thy flesh and bones. Howe'er thou art a fiend,
A woman's shape doth shield thee. (4.2.78-82)

In his verbal image of torn flesh and bones, Albany conjures the exposure of his wife's devilish heart that is masked by her womanly graces.

Elsewhere Lear cries of Regan: 'Let us anatomize Regan, see what breeds about her heart' (3.6.80-81). In this line he offers an image of the early modern inquisitor who digs out a person's organs in search of the workings of the mind: the 'body is turned inside out, revealing the most inward and secret parts of him'.⁶ The subject of anatomy was at that time being received with fascination throughout Europe, following the precise anatomical dissections done by the Belgian physician Andreas Vesalius, who had even invented new tools for the purpose of laying bare the vascular, the neural, and the musculature systems of the human body. In considering what 'breeds' about his daughter's heart, Lear speaks not as one who has *himself* bred Regan, but as one in search of what corruption that breeds there.

*The breeding at the heart of things: women's eyes and
tongues*

The king's perception of Goneril and Regan can usefully be contextualised by looking at early modern beliefs about women's bodies. In this period women's wombs – regulating the passing-on of family names, goods and properties – were anxiously scrutinised by men suspicious of their carnal lusts.⁷ Because marks of infidelity were so difficult to determine, more obvious expressions of sexual misconduct were sought outside the womb.⁸ Eyes and tongues thus became the locus of women's chastity. In *A Looking Glasse for Good Women*, for example, John Brinsley declares that what corruption is not

detected through a woman's tongue, will surely be detected through the eye. He urges women to see their vices in the mirror:

To you is this glasse presented, with a request, That you will vouchsafe to look into it, and that with an Eye not prejudiced against it. Possibly you may here see more of Satan, and your selves, his wiles, your weaknesse, then before you were aware of. If any shall espy some spots and blemishes discovered, not becoming the face of proffession, let them not blame the glasse, which represents things as they are, but themselves, or others, who have given the ground to their reflections. For their own Intentions, in holding forth this Glasse, they are such as I can approve unto God, sincere and candid...for your sakes were these meditations first conceived; and for your sakes are they now brought forth to a more publike view: that so what you would not vouche to heare with the eare, you may have opportunity to see with the eye.⁹

And just as what misses the ear may be discerned through self-scrutiny, so also what misses the eye may be clearer to the ear: thus Cordelia, in referring to her sisters' 'glib and oily art', draws on a frequently-cited Biblical passage:

For the lips of an immoral woman drip honey,
And her mouth is smoother than oil;
But in the end she is more bitter than wormwood,
Sharper than a two-edged sword. (5.3-5)¹⁰

But what Cordelia refers to as 'glib and oily' in Goneril and Regan, is not initially seen as such by Lear in 1.1: he takes their verbal dexterity as obedience, and rewards them for it. It is only when they begin to speak and act in ways that *don't* suit Lear, that he sees them as unnatural, devilish and unwomanly: 'Those wicked creatures yet do look well-favoured/When others are more wicked' (2.4.294-95). 'Down from the waist they are centaurs,/Though women all above' (4.6.140-141). In these terms Lear connotes his daughters' actions as transgressing the

codes of their gender. And Albany agrees with him, telling his wife: 'See thyself, devil!/Proper deformity shows not in the fiend/So horrid as in woman' (4.2.73-75). In this description Albany also reflects the commonly-accepted censure that husbands were expected to bring to wayward wives, as displayed in the following tract:

Let the husband also remember, that the infirmities of his wife, must be either taken away or borne withall. So that he that can take them quite away, maketh his wife farre more commodious and fit for his purpose: and he that can beare with them, maketh himself better, and more vertuous.¹¹

The narrowness of the strictures that governed women's conduct are emphasised when Lear addresses Nature about heavenly faces and devilish hearts. He begs Nature to match Goneril's face with what he believes to be her inner self:

You nimble lightnings, dart your blinding flames
Into her scornful eyes! Infect her beauty,
You fen-sucked fogs, drawn by the powerful sun
To fall and blister! (2.4.187-90)

This curse echoes his wish that Nature curse Goneril with sterility so that she cannot give birth to children who may treat her as she has treated her father: 'Suspend thy purpose if thou didst intend / To make this creature [Goneril] fruitful. / Into her womb convey sterility' (1.4.290-02). Indeed, when Lear begs this of Nature, he does more than wish that Goneril not generate children who are like her: he wishes on his daughter the cessation of the procreative powers that so strongly marked women's social value.¹² (It is worth noting here that if an actor playing Lear emphasises this line, he can transfer some audience sympathy to Goneril, giving Lear's own moral status the same sort of ambivalence that Hamlet is accorded when he wishes that his uncle be damned to hell.)

What words mean

It is clear that the words used by Goneril and Regan have conventionally been seen as deceitful in the play's first scene and, later in the play, as unnatural; and that in early modern England many social conventions would have encouraged such perceptions. But what if we try to read these characters another way? As noted above, even the sisters' 'deceitful' language in 1.1 can be read less critically if one considers that the love-test is initiated and prescribed by Lear, who in the play's first scene still has the double authority of his roles as king and father. In demanding that his daughters verbalise their love publicly, Lear exacts the sort of stylised verbal commitment which befits the rituals of the court. Two of his daughters (who are also his subjects) give him the material measures that he wants, and indeed formally demands, to hear: 'Beyond what can be valued, rich and rare' (1.1.62); 'I find she names my very deed of love' (1.1.61, 78). When Goneril says to Cordelia in the first scene, 'You have obedience scanted, / And well are worth the want that you have wanted' (1.1.322-23), is she not pointing out that in affirming her own love for Lear, she has simply done what her king and father has asked her to do?

For Cordelia, however, such obedience entails an irreconcilable dilemma. Lear's demand for complete subjection is incompatible with his daughter's expectations of loyalty in marriage. Her response to the conflict between filial and marital obligations is literally to display what Goneril verbally offers as '[a] love that makes breath poor, and speech unable' (1.1.66). Cordelia cannot speak what she feels, and she will not pretend to. In this stance Cordelia exerts a passive (conventionally 'feminine'?) strength: she *withholds* speech instead of using it persuasively to argue her case. She refuses to display the linguistic allegiance that Lear demands from her: 'Nothing, my lord' (1.1.96). In that 'nothing' is the substance of Cordelia's self-expression, and Lear would rather have her banished than express her separateness from him. In referring to the 'poor

judgement' with which Lear has 'cast her [Cordelia] off' (1.1.336), Goneril acknowledges the foolishness of Lear's action in expelling the daughter whom he most loves. In this conversation at the end of 1.1 she and Regan look not like demi-devils who are out to trick their father, but fairly reasonable characters who see their father as crazy for rejecting Cordelia, and as declining in mental agility as he grows older: 'You see how full of changes his age is' (1.1.334). 'He hath ever but slenderly known himself' (1.1.340).

Playing on ambiguities

When directors do try to portray Regan and Goneril as reasonable characters rather than as stereotypical devils, however, they are often seen as wrong-headed. For instance, of Regan's comment on her father, 'he hath ever but slenderly known himself' (1.1.340), Stanley Wells remarks, 'This reasonableness is so insidiously plausible that directors have sometimes been taken in by it; Peter Brook, in his 1962 production, portrayed Lear partly through the sisters' eyes, as an unruly old man offering more encouragement to his followers to be rowdy than the text demands'.¹³ It is helpful to explore in some detail one of the passages – where Lear's daughters paint Lear as an unruly old man – to which Wells objects in Brook's production. In 1.4 Goneril complains to Lear:

your insolent retinue
 Do hourly carp and quarrel, breaking forth
 In rank and not-to-be endured riots. Sir,
 I had thought by making this well known unto you
 To have found a safe redress, but now grow fearful,
 By what yourself too late have spoke and done,
 That you protect this course and put it on
 By your allowance, which if you should, the fault
 Would not 'scape censure... (1.4.207-15)

According to Goneril, Lear's knights are riotous, threatening the peaceful running of the kingdom. Lear, in response, claims that his men are 'of choice and rarest parts' (1.4.275). Albany sheds no light on who is in the right, declining either to support or deny Goneril's claim. ('I cannot be so partial, Goneril,/To the great love I bear you...' [1.4.329-30]). But when Lear exits at 1.4. 339, Goneril herself goes on to discuss with her husband her real reason for wishing to cut her father's retinue

A hundred knights!
'Tis politic and safe to let him keep
At point a hundred knights! Yes, that on every dream,
Each buzz, each fancy, each complaint, dislike,
He may enguard his dotage with their powers
And hold our lives in mercy. (1.4.340-347)

In other words, Goneril believes that her father's possession of a hundred knights endangers her own (and Regan's) newly-conferred authority, as well as their safety. One can thus assume that she has had no intention of honouring her father's contract to retain the service of a hundred knights; and, indeed, she states that she has already instructed Oswald to write a letter to Regan, asking her also to forbid her father's retinue. In instructing her servant to add in person to Regan 'such reasons of your own/As may compact it more' (360-61), Goneril virtually admits that this is what her own conversation with Lear was full of – embellishments, designed to 'compact' the urgency of her fears while making her demand seem plausible to her father.

To Lear, however, Goneril's embellishments are not plausible. He asks her, 'Are you our daughter?' (1.4.224), moving directly to the cry: 'Does any here know me? This is not Lear . . . Who is it that can tell me who I am?' (1.4.231-36). He curses her, 'Darkness and devils!' (260), calling her 'Degenerate bastard' (263). Just as he has damned Cordelia by the gods three scenes earlier, so also he damns Goneril in this scene because she, too, has defied his will. The vehemence of his curses sits at odds with the justice of his

case, so that it is unclear as to exactly how an audience is supposed to react. Knowing what we do about Goneril's communications with her sister, when Regan weighs in a few scenes later, her unwitting old father's words, 'I can stay with Regan, / I and my hundred knights' (2.4.264-65), have the potential to be quite heartbreaking. But if we take issue with the two sisters for breaking the agreement they made in 1.1, we would also have to acknowledge that in his action of splitting his kingship from its duties Lear has already abused his regal responsibilities. He is now a king in name only, and has given up his rights along with his duties. Effectively reduced to the status of sojourner, perhaps he should indeed live as his children's guest disburdened of both the 'cares of state' (1.1.55) and its attributes. For Regan and Goneril he is not so much the king as their querulous old father, who must accept the role of sojourner with which, through his own haughty foolishness, he is left. They see it as absurd to be expected to provide not only for their father, but also for one hundred of his (potentially destabilising) knights, kept solely to attend on him. From Regan's perspective, it is thus less cruel than pragmatic to reply to Lear, 'Not altogether so' (2.4.266).

Some recent productions have built their tension on the ambiguity of this situation, refusing to use 1.4 simply as a familiar point along the weary path on which 'universal man' suffers the hurts and indignities imposed by his ungrateful children. For instance, in Deborah Warner's 1990 production of *King Lear* for the National Theatre, Brian Cox, who was playing Lear, had the idea that he should enter in a wheelchair:

The only image I have of Lear at the moment is of an old man in a wheelchair. The wheelchair could denote helplessness and also perhaps cunning. I got this idea from the amount of time I have spent in air terminals noticing the way the old are manoeuvred through passport queues or security checks. They arrive at the airport with loads of baggage, hale and hearty, and are transferred to a waiting wheelchair, which causes them to age twenty years. As soon as they arrive on board they are sprightly young things again.¹⁴

By using the wheelchair with reckless gleefulness, Cox's Lear conveyed the wilful selfishness with which Goneril and Regan were rightfully exasperated. By 1.5, however, as Lear waited, bundled up and vulnerable, in Goneril's palace, he seemed ready for the geriatric ward.

Another opportunity to play up the ambiguities of the scene is afforded also by the ways in which Goneril and Regan speak and move. If the sisters are played as vicious creatures with harsh voices and demeanours, no matter how headstrong and expostulatory their father the audience's sympathy will remain on his side. But if the two sisters are played differently, the interpretative implications can radically be shifted. In Michael Kahn's 1990 production for the Shakespeare Theatre, Regan and Goneril were played as sisters who shared an affectionate relationship but who also shared a sense of their father's rejection. The catch in Goneril's voice when she observed to Regan that 'He always loved our sister most' (1.1.336) was deeply affecting, and later in the production when Lear delivered his curse to Goneril she listened in anguish and then burst into tears at his exit (1.4.c264). The effect 'was to render Goneril a poignant and sympathetic figure, while Lear came across as pitiable but also narcissistic and self-indulgent, too wrapped up in his own histrionics even to perceive his eldest daughter's pain.'¹⁵ And in Gale Edwards' production for the State Theatre Company of South Australia in 1988, Goneril and Regan appeared conciliatory and reasonable in their

protestations about the behaviour of Lear and his hundred knights, while it was Lear who violently over-reacted.

Conclusion

In reconsidering the relationship between Lear and his daughters, we might conclude that Lear's willful temper is as important a consideration of 'fault' as is his daughters' conniving. I am not trying to build an argument that represents Goneril and Regan as reasonable (and even innocent) daughters who have been demonized by their father as well as by centuries of patriarchal critics. Rather, I suggest that arguments such as those I have outlined above can serve to free Regan and Goneril from constraining 'wicked sister' stereotypes. This makes their relationships with their father and their sister more interesting, their relationship with the chronology of the play more suggestive, and their connection to early modern gender conventions a more important consideration.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ For an expanded view of feminist approaches to *King Lear* (and a different critical perspective of some of the issues I discuss here), see my edition of the play for the Bell Shakespeare series, Halstead Press, 2001.
- ² In 1986 Jane Smiley wrote the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *A Thousand Acres*. Smiley based her novel on *King Lear*, setting it in mid-western America. She used the novel to re-frame her feelings of anger about *King Lear*, addressing what she believed to have been some of Shakespeare's blindspots. Why should Cordelia be praised when she leaves her father and goes off to France? What about the sisters who stay at home? And why should Lear be valorised as a paradigm for spiritual and emotional growth? Smiley's character 'Daddy' wants to make over his one thousand acres of property to his daughters. Caroline (the Cordelia-figure) is a hard-nosed lawyer who opposes her father's wish partly because she doesn't want to live on the property anyway. The older daughters, Ginny (Goneril) and Rose (Regan), unlike Caroline, have been sexually abused by Daddy; having also acted as servants to him all their lives, they consider their turn to have rightfully come. Narrated by Ginny, *A Thousand Acres* challenges many of the assumptions traditionally framing *King Lear*: that the play is about good versus evil; that characters can be positioned in relation to these extremes; that the Lear and Gloucester figures are simply deluded old men 'more sinned against than sinning'; and that the story need be 'about' them anyway. Why must it prioritise these figures in order to address the 'great' issues about being and selfhood? *A Thousand Acres* also challenges the place of the absent mother in *King Lear*, and the legacy she has left her husband and daughters.
- ³ See Beatrice Gottlieb, *The Family in the Western World from the Black Death to the Industrial Age*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 20.

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- ⁴ See Jean Howard, "The Geographies of the Early Modern Stage", in *Theater of a City: Social Change and Generic Innovation on the Early Modern Stage*. (Forthcoming) Given as a paper at the Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University, July 2000.
- ⁵ Jonathan Sawday has brilliantly traced the movement in the seventeenth century from the hierarchal conception of the body state (the subject of Menenius' fable in *Coriolanus*) to a mechanistic, anti-monarchical conception of the body-politic, in which all of the parts are as equally necessary to the workings of the whole as are the parts of a clock. (*The Body Emblazoned*. London: Routledge, 1995).
- ⁶ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. P. 79.
- ⁷ See, for example, the most famous conduct book, Baldesar Castiglione's *The Courtier*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967. In this book on manners he offers a section on women's sexual 'continence', asking whether 'women more than men refrain from living unchastely' (p.244). In debating as to whether women are more guilty of tempting men by their beauties or whether men are more guilty of tempting women by their sexual inducements, he implies that it is women's carnality that is the basis of both forms of transgression. In other words, female carnality provokes a woman to tempt men, while its signs – face-painting, pretty gestures, exposures of stockings, ribbons, etc - induces men to practice the arts of seduction. (see pp. 242-253).
- ⁸ Hence Vesalius, on the title page of *De Humani Corpori Fabrica* (1543), depicts a man resting his hand on the body of a woman, just near the opening to her womb. Jonathan Sawday describes this picture in terms of 'the conjunction of womb and tomb' within the universe: 'The world is neither geocentric, nor heliocentric, but uterocentric: the womb is out point of origin.' (p. 71). And in guiding u back to the skeleton, the left hand of Vesalius' figure gestures also to the idea of death that conjoins with the womb as the source of life: 'We are born to die' (p. 71).

- ⁹ John Brinsley, *A Looking-Glasse for Good Women, held forth by way of counsell and advice to such of that sexd and quality, as in the simplicity of their hearts, are led away to the imbracing of looking towards any of the dangerous errors of the times, especially that of the separation. As it was lately presented to the Church of God at Great-Yarmouth, By John Brinsley. Oct 9, 1645.*, p. A2
- ¹⁰ I am indebted to Dosia Reichardt for alerting me to this connection.
- ¹¹ First gathered by RCn and now newly perused, penned and augmented, by John Dod and Robert Clever. London, Assignes of Thomas Man, 1630.
- ¹² While it has been recently argued – by, for example Stephen Orgel (*Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare's England*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) – that many women were members of professional guilds, and thus had employment options other than those of being mothers or prostitutes, it is indisputable that the procreative role was emphasised in literature and the visual arts as a crucial part of women's value.
- ¹³ Qtd. Alexander Leggatt, *King Lear*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1991, p. 268.
- ¹⁴ Brian Cox, *The Lear Diaries*, London: Methuen, 1995. p. 15.
- ¹⁵ Miranda Johnson-Haddad, 'The Shakespeare Theatre at the Folger 1990-1991', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 42 (1991),p. 481.