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Gothic Cordelias: The Afterlife of "Lear" and the Construction of Femininity

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“GOTHIC CORDELIAS: THE AFTER-LIFE OF *LEAR* AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF FEMININITY”

DIANE LONG HOEVELER

Humanity is the virtue of a woman [...] Humanity consists merely in the exquisite fellow-feeling which the spectator entertains with the sentiments of the persons principally concerned, so as to grieve for their sufferings, to resent their injuries, and to rejoice at their good fortune. The most humane actions . . . consist only in doing what this exquisite sympathy would of its own accord prompt us to do.

—Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1976: 313)

Opie's *The Father and Daughter*

During 1801 a novella titled *The Father and Daughter, A Tale in Prose*, written by Amelia Opie, went through twelve editions, selling close to 10,000 copies. Ferdinando Paër adapted the novella into an opera he entitled *Agnese di Fitz-Henry* within eight years, while two British dramatists adapted the tale for two different productions, Mary Therese Kemble's *Tears and Smiles* (1815) and Thomas Moncrieff's *The Lear of Private Life* (1820). These facts alone tell us that Opie's didactic piece powerfully spoke to the fears, sentiments, and prejudices of its culture. Opie was so famous during her heyday that Thomas Love Peacock felt the need to satirize her as 'Miss Philomela Poppysseed, the sleep-inducing lady novelist' in his *Headlong Hall* (1815). Walter Scott confessed that he cried over *The Father and Daughter* 'more than I ever

cried over such things', and Mr. Prince Hoare, editor of the journal *The Artist*, reported that he 'could not sleep all night' after reading it (Macgregor, 32). Tears and pathos were exactly the reactions intended by Opie, and we might go further to claim that by depicting hyperbolic passions and unbearable grief in her male characters she was actually attempting to elicit emotional excesses and pity from her male readers rather than simply her presumed female audience. The fact is that Opie's tale brings together a number of important strains not simply in the gothic construction of gender, but in the modern understanding of how subjectivity has evolved. The issues here are not simply sentimentality, agency, intention, or bourgeois control of the emotions, although all of these are important aspects of gothicism's construction of passion. Rather, the question that this essay will explore is how and why a number of largely forgotten literary and musical texts based on Shakespeare's *Lear* intersected to create what we now understand as the modern, female national subject.

Another way of posing this topic is to ask, what role did bourgeois women writers play in shaping the dominant cultural ideologies of nationalism and subjectivity? As Anne Mellor has recently claimed, '[n]ot only did women participate fully in the discursive public sphere, but their opinions had definable impact on the social movements, economic relationships, and state-regulated policies of the day' (3). In appropriating the cultural capital of Shakespearean narratives and domesticating them for an emerging middle class reader, women writers like Opie actually positioned women as the dominant purveyors of personal morality and civic virtue. For instance, in 1832 Anna Jameson published *Characteristics of Women, Moral, Poetical, and Historical*, but what is most striking about this treatise is that the women she analyzes are not real women, but all of them are actually heroines from Shakespeare's plays. In justifying her method, she claims, 'We hear Shakspeare's [sic] men and women discussed, praised and dispraised, liked,

disliked, as real human beings; and in forming our opinions of them, we are influenced by our own characters, habits of thought, prejudices, feelings, impulses' (I: xx). Jameson went on to note that she intended to analyze these fictitious heroines in order to find a way to talk about 'the condition of women in society, as at present constituted, [for it] is false in itself, and injurious to them', that the education of women, as at present conducted, is founded on mistaken principles, and tends to increase fearfully the sum of misery and error in both sexes' (I: viii). If Jameson could use Shakespeare's heroines as models for discussing the contemporary educational and social condition of women, it was because Shakespeare had by the late eighteenth century become an appropriated bourgeois cultural icon, celebrated as a middle-class poet who had bested the aristocracy of *belles-lettres* and seized the right to pen immortal works about the folly of kings and aristocrats.

Deidre Lynch has recently observed that in the mid-eighteenth-century through the romantic period readers acquired a growing sense of personal investment in their own fictional reading, acquiring the sense that they could interpret fictional characters as they needed or wanted to because they had come to identify with those characters as if they were real. In particular, analyzing Shakespeare's characters became one way of talking about the emerging national 'British' culture, its aesthetic values, its construction of the emotions, and its conflicted political and domestic rearrangements. But it was also true that at least a vague familiarity with Shakespeare had become a sort of membership requirement in the new British Empire; a passing knowledge of his plays and language became a crucial totemic aspect of the growing movement toward British nationalism. As Michael Dobson notes,

By the 1760s Shakespeare is so firmly established as the morally uplifting master of English letters that his reputation no longer seems to depend on his specific achievements

as a dramatist: a ubiquitous presence in British culture, his fame is so synonymous with the highest claims of contemporary nationalism that simply to be British is to inherit him, without needing to read or see his actual plays at all. (214)

If Shakespeare was ‘in the air’, so too were social, economic, and cultural anxieties about the place of women in the newly evolving nation-state of Great Britain. Seizing onto and appropriating Shakespeare’s characters, particularly his female characters, became a sort of cultural shorthand for depicting options available to women as either innocent victims (Cordelias) or vicious victimizers (Lady MacBeths) in the new and secularized Britain.

Anatomizing the Emotions

[Shakespeare] was the least of an egoist that it was possible to be. He was nothing in himself; but he was all that others were, or that they could become [...] He had only to think of any thing in order to become that thing, with all the circumstances belonging to it [...] his talent consisted in sympathy with human nature, in all its shapes, degrees, depressions, and elevations.—William Hazlitt, *CW V*: 47-48

The development of the bourgeois novel occurred alongside, and one might even say, in tandem with the growing science of psychology. What this claim allows us first to explore is the possibility that the development of faculty psychology and what we now call psychoanalysis began when the behavior, motivations, and emotions of characters in literature were open to scrutiny and analysis by literary critics. By looking at literary characters as if they were actual case studies for how the human mind and emotions operate during periods of stress, literary critics provided the first models for psychologists, and we can think here analogously of Freud’s essays on Sophocles or E. T. A. Hoffman’s tales as blatant but later examples of this tendency.

The earliest modern professional male literary critics—Samuel Johnson, Coleridge, Lamb, and Hazlitt—spent a considerable amount of their writing careers analyzing characters in dramas, and most specifically, in Shakespearean works. As these critics fleshed out analyses of Shakespeare's major characters and their use of language, they were at the same time constructing a paradigm of what it meant to be human, that is, of what it meant to be a fully functioning and empathetic member of both a family and of the state. But clearly the emphasis begins to shift in all of the popular adaptations of Shakespeare's dramas from the public to the private sphere, so that finally what we have of Shakespeare during the heyday of the gothic period is a series of dysfunctional family portraits, not studies any longer of the power dynamics of failed royalty or kingship.

Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) defines what, for his age, was the ideal display of moral sentiment: a male aristocratic sufferer whose intense attempts at self-control in the face of great suffering cause tears in his immediate community. What Julie Ellison has called the 'early cultural prestige of masculine tenderheartedness' can be understood if we recognize that the culture at large was seeking to define what it meant to be not simply human, but also British (9).

There have been many recent studies of the emotions during this period in addition to Ellison, and another influential position has been put forth by Adela Pinch, who has argued that emotions are not located exclusively within the self, but are 'vagrant' or 'traveling', located 'among rather than within people'. Selfhood and emotions meet in 'the social performative', the domain of 'rituals by which subjects are formed and reformulated' (16; 167; 10). My own examination of women's sentimental texts in this period convinces me that it was the conscious intention of bourgeois women writers to civilize the general population through their works. Specifically, I would claim that a writer like Opie intended in her fictions to instruct her growing

middle-class audience by teaching them to control their emotions and properly display those feelings by attending theatrical performances, reading popular literature, and then making themselves the heroes and heroines of their own familial melodramas. Shakespeare just happened to be the patron saint of this emotional and national transformation, with his dramas providing the master narratives for what it meant to be an authentic British citizen (or, in Harold Bloom's recent formulation, to be "human").¹

How does the gothic construction of emotion, then, intersect with the theatre and opera, and specifically, with Shakespearean adaptations during the early gothic period? When David Garrick worked out his technique for portraying emotion on the stage, he used Charles Le Brun's *Method pour apprendre a dessiner les passions* (1702), a treatise that was consistently referenced by both artists and actors during the eighteenth century and was predicated on the essential connection between expressions on the face and the emotions within. According to Le Brun, there were only a certain number of emotions and to illustrate their expression was also to provide a 'kind of descriptive inventory of the soul'. Le Brun may have been the first to generalize about the emotions as if they constituted a field of scientific inquiry, but he was followed quickly by Charles Macklin, who thought that actors should have 'philosophical knowledge of the passions' by knowing their 'genus, species and characteristics as a botanist might those of plants' (Shawe-Taylor, 112).

Macklin was followed by Aaron Hill, whose 1746 tract on acting was more like a taxonomy and claimed that there were 'only ten dramatic passions', all of which had to be expressed in exactly ten stylized expressions. For this pre-gothic period, being able to generalize about anything meant to transform its significance into universality. In a description of 'grief' from an eighteenth-century acting manual, the author observes: 'A girl collapsing in tears merely

embarrasses the audience; a god or a hero, noble and elevated in bearing, who weeps despite himself, arouses the fear and pity essential to classical tragedy' (qtd. Ellison, 9). The stoic woman and the emotional man interacting together on stage embodied a new performative gender ideal, and thus we are reminded of John Philip Kemble and Sarah Siddons, the brother and sister acting team in Joanna Baillie's *De Monfort* (1802) and a number of other productions, she the embodiment of rational containment, he all histrionics.

In an analogous manner, literary critics established criteria for judging character and motivation based on generalized assumptions about the consistency of personality or a sort of universal 'humanity' that all people shared. Acting and criticism overlapped to the extent that the age was obsessed with defining, performing, and thereby controlling the emotions. Both efforts were at the same time working out a psychological and emotional inventory that ran parallel—and in some way was complementary to—the scientific advancements and developments that were being made by such people as Erasmus Darwin and Charles Bell who believed that the emotions arise from an organic brain-body unit in predictable, species-specific ways (cf. Richardson; Reed; Richards). Feelings were presumed to be universal, and Adam Smith as well as David Hume made much of what they called the 'natural capacity for fellow-feeling'. In his *Essay on Taste* (1759), Gerard had noted that the highest topic of literature was the depiction of suffering because with suffering comes pathos, and 'the pathetic is a quality of so great moment in works of taste, a man, who is destitute of sensibility of heart, must be a very imperfect judge of them' (qtd. Mullan, 127). Twenty years later Gerard published his important work on the nature of the imagination and the associative principle, *Essay on Genius* (1774), which included a Lockean discussion of 'the Influence of the Passions on Association', and used as its examples the analysis of specific Shakespearean characters. Lord Kames employs exactly

the same method in his *Elements of Criticism* (1762). And *Lear*, with its use of violent storms, an isolated and threatening heath, the cliff, blindness, madness and emotional excess, became the very embodiment of the literary sublime for the Enlightenment reading public. The sublime, however, becomes domesticated as pathos in the novels of the early gothic period, and tears become the coin of the realm for powerful men and fallen women. The various performances and the sustained critical and creative reading of Shakespeare's characters shaped not only British literary culture, but its emotional and national one as well. British citizens learned as a culture to understand and model acceptable private and public behavior—appropriate emotional responses and civic responsibilities—by studying the fates of Shakespeare's characters.

Finally, it is necessary to connect the variety of emotional displays in drama and opera to the growing nationalistic movement that sought to define true British character. It is helpful here to observe, as Gerald Newman does, that Britain sought to depict itself and its citizens in national and secular terms rather than in religious or tribal ones during the mid-eighteenth century. This shift was made possible, according to Newman, because of cultural rather than political activity, with one of the central figures being the 'artist-intellectual', an individual who 'both creates and organizes nationalist ideology' (56). The figure of Shakespeare begins to emerge here: the adaptation and use of his work functions as a sort of hallowed presence hovering as a protector over the domesticated landscape of gothic discourse. Benedict Anderson has also discussed the growth of secularism as allowing for a new sort of 'imagined community', a country with a 'national imagination' that would replace the religious construction of the medieval and renaissance communities (6; 36). There is no question that the growth of the Anglican habit of introspection merged with the institutionalization of Bardolatry during this period. Shakespeare and the Bible became the ur-texts for the growth of the new British 'national imagination'.

Appeals to nationalism almost as a form of religion suffuse sentimental, domestic fiction, and the portrayal of the father and daughter begins to dominate the popular cultural imagination.

Daughters replace wives and mistresses as the central focus of popular literature, while daughterly piety and devotion, displayed to an errant and undeserving father, becomes an allegory for the citizen's proper relation to a mad ruler. Cato, in other words, is replaced by Cordelia as the cultural standard bearer, and it is her tears, not his, that signify in the new gothic economy of emotions.

For instance, James Fordyce in his *Sermons to Young Women* (1766) writes: 'The world, I know not how, overlooks in our sex a thousand irregularities which it never forgives in yours; so that the honour and peace of a family are, in this view, much more dependent on the conduct of daughters than of sons' (qtd. Marsden, 1998: 21). Jean Marsden has drawn out the analogy here by observing that 'the family acts as a type of the state, the dutiful daughter becomes the pattern of national honour: family drama becomes national drama, and the daughters of England stand responsible for the honour and peace of the nation'. What is interesting about the romantic period, however, is that the fiction consistently shows the bond between father and daughter to be the 'necessary pillar of patriarchy': 'not only do these daughters uphold the familial power structure, they also reject or subordinate romantic love in favor of their filial piety' (1998: 17; 26; 22).

ROMANTICIZING THE *LEAR* NARRATIVE

A Man's life of any worth is a continual allegory—and very few eyes can see the Mystery of his life—a life like the scriptures, figurative...Shakespeare led a life of Allegory; his works are the comments on it.—John Keats, *Letters 2*: 67

In order to understand the proliferation of *Lear* narratives during this period, we need to appreciate the cultural anxiety that must have circulated in a powerful country that knew it was ruled by a king who periodically suffered from insanity. Consider that the ‘family’ of England felt vulnerable to external assaults from its enemy, France, and besieged internally by the rebellion and defection of its most prestigious holding, the American colonies. I would claim that this charged and anxious political situation was replayed allegorically in sentimental novels and melodramas as the seduction and insanity narrative. In fact, the private or closeted qualities of these stories are actually belied by their sheer prevalence. But why would a culture need to retell compulsively the same story, and why would these revivals occur during the height of the king’s madness and the attempts to impose a Regency? The dominant ideology replayed for public consumption positions the vulnerable daughter as the emblem of embattled nationhood. And crucial to this construction of the new English national identity were the qualities of generosity and sincerity, exactly those traits that dutiful daughters were expected to display toward their families and their communities. The good daughter is the loyal Briton, willing to endure any slight for the pleasure of sitting in blissful obedience and deference at the mad father’s feet. To be a Briton meant to assume a supine position, a tolerant, indeed even a groveling posture before absolute, unquestioned—and irrational—power. The ideological formula stated that domestic discord leads to political upheaval; the hierarchy of the state was duplicated in the hierarchy of the family, with the father as moral arbiter and final authority, no matter what his flaws. Father becomes quite literally fatherland, while the daughter—like Britain’s beleaguered citizens—could only smile gamely through her tears.

It is necessary to clarify, however, that the *Lear* that the eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century British theatre-going audience would have known was Nahum Tate’s anti-

Whig version, not Shakespeare's. In 1681 Tate decided to rewrite Shakespeare's *Lear*, a play he considered to be a confused "heap of jewels, unstrung and unpolished" (*Epistle Dedicatory*). In addition to adding references to the Popish Plot, he also took it upon himself to eliminate the role of the Fool, to insert a love affair between Cordelia and Edgar, and to exclude the King of France as a character altogether. His most infamous transformation, however, was his addition of a happy ending in which Lear retires in order to hand his kingdom over to the happily married Cordelia and her husband Edgar. In Tate's version Cordelia's cold comments to her father in the opening scene are motivated by her love for Edgar and her desire to avoid a dynastic marriage arranged by her father. Cordelia becomes, in other words, a pre-gothic heroine whose virtuous love transforms the character of Edgar, so that, instead of a political drama, the audience has a good deal of familial and personal distress and pathos to savor. Tate's Cordelia does not lead an army to rescue her father, as she does in Shakespeare's drama. Instead, she alternately cries and waits for Edgar to rescue her from her would-be rapist, Edmund (Marsden, 1995: 36).

It is also important to note that Tate thought he was improving on his source material when he increased in prominence Edmund's role, which included Edmund's thwarted plan to rape Cordelia during the storm. This interpolated scene—including the portrayal of Cordelia's new serving woman assisting her to flee the rape—became one of the most famous to be painted during the eighteenth century. Pieter Van Bleeck's painting *Mrs Cibber as Cordelia* (1755) was extremely popular, widely admired, and diligently copied throughout the rest of the century. Cordelia's rescue by Edgar concludes in a speech in which she lauds private love and virtue over Edgar's lowly public status and his lack of royalty. And so in spite of his Tory sympathies, Tate's version concludes by anticipating the bourgeois shift that would occur during the next century. For Tate, Cordelia is transformed into an almost-seduced maiden who is only too willing to

forsake the corrupt aristocracy in favor of marrying a superior bourgeois British citizen, while Lear becomes a simple father who just needs to see his favorite daughter settled in a successful marriage so that he can retire and hand over the (e)state to them. An article published in 1783 went so far as to see Cordelia as the ‘patron saint of the private sphere’ because of her ‘propriety’, ‘fine sensibility’, and ‘softness of female character’, while these qualities were all praised as the marks of appropriate British bourgeois females (Dobson, 93).

David Garrick is the actor most associated with the portrayal of Lear throughout the eighteenth century, and, indeed, he played the role from 1742-1776, over a thirty-four-year period. His revision of the *Lear* story downplayed the portrait of a pathetic Cordelia in favor of an appeal instead for sympathy for a confused father and his devoted daughter. His stated intention was to draw ‘amiable tears’ from his audience, rather than to make them miserable or titillate them with a threatened rape scene. And although Garrick made a number of attempts to restore some of Shakespeare’s original language and plot to his 1756-76 versions of *Lear*, Tate’s revision was actually kept alive on the British stage because of the increasing madness of King George III. His insanity made for more than a few awkward social and political moments, and so *Lear* was finally banned altogether from the London stage from 1811 to 1820. Indeed, the only caricature we have of George as Lear was drawn by George Cruikshank in January 1811, just as the Regency Bill was being debated. Titled ‘King Lear and his Daughter’, it depicts George with arms upraised in horror at the sight of a prone woman, meant to represent Cordelia, dead at his feet. The actual subject of the caricature is the death of George’s youngest and favorite daughter Amelia in November 1810, an event that was believed to have sent the King into his final and irreversible insanity (Bate, 1989: 85-86). But what is most interesting about this caricature—besides its sheer cruelty—is that it positions the King within his personal domestic space, as a

father first, a monarch second. It also pictorially asserts that the reason for his insanity was not as a result of his political failures or duties, but was instead caused by his disappointments and tragedies as a parent.

In addition to the heroic efforts of Garrick, Samuel Johnson also played a crucial role in finally institutionalizing Shakespeare as a cultural icon when he published his eight volume edition of the plays in 1765. As Dobson observes, Johnson's actual agenda was to nationalize and standardize Shakespeare's language by using his words as illustrations throughout his *Dictionary* (214). Most tellingly, however, Johnson could not abide the conclusion of Shakespeare's *Lear*, feeling it to be unbearably tragic and finally admitting that he preferred the happy conclusion provided by Tate. For Johnson, it was unnatural that evil should triumph while good should be destroyed. But Johnson was actually late entering the contested Shakespearean turf, for earlier attempts to canonize Shakespeare as the premier British bard had been made by Charles Gildon in *Remarks on the Plays of Shakespear* (1710), John Upton in *Critical Observations on Shakespeare* (1746), William Dodd, *The Beauties of Shakespeare* (1752), William Richardson's *Philosophical Analysis and Illustration of some of Shakespeare's Remarkable Characters* (1774), Alexander Gerard's *Essay on Genius* (1774), and Thomas Whately's *Remarks on some of the Characters of Shakespeare* (1785). In 1753 Charlotte Lennox published *Shakespear Illustrated*, and in 1769 Elizabeth Montagu published *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespear*, while Elizabeth Griffith composed a book of sermons entitled *The Morality of Shakespeare's Dramas* (1775). In short, Shakespeare was contested ground and female literary critics were as quick as male authors to try to appropriate his dramas for their own purposes. Male critics, however, tended to grapple with aesthetic or textual questions in Shakespeare, while female critics were wont to see moral and ethical lessons—and actually to produce sermons as Griffith did—from the

actions of the dramas. This female tendency to domesticate and moralize about Shakespeare's characters comes to perhaps its most extreme (and some might say, absurd) conclusion in Mary Cowden Clarke's three volume set, *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* (1850-51).

Hazlitt, perhaps the premier Shakespearean of the romantic age, found Shakespeare's greatness to lie in his presentation of empathy. For Hazlitt as well as Coleridge, Shakespeare's greatness was located in his ability to feel a perfect sympathy for all of his characters, while at the same time displaying a standard of 'disinterest'. It is not far, of course, to move from this notion to Keats's negative capability, and indeed, Keats's definition itself is suffused with illustrations from Shakespeare's characters, revealing how thoroughly a reading of the plays had infiltrated his understanding of aesthetic and psychological principles. Keats would, of course, have heard Hazlitt lecture on Shakespeare and the English poets (published by Hazlitt later as *Shakespeare and Milton*).² Finally, in his *Characteristics*, Hazlitt observes:

It has been said that tragedy purifies the affections by terror and pity. That is, it substitutes imaginary sympathy for mere selfishness. It gives us a high and permanent interest, beyond ourselves, in humanity as such [...] It makes man a partaker with his kind. It subdues and softens the stubbornness of his will. It teaches him that there are and have been others like himself, by showing him as in a glass what they have felt, thought, and done. It opens the chambers of the human heart [...] It is the refiner of the species; a discipline of humanity. (CW IV; 200)

For the male closet drama theorists, the human emotions were to be elicited and experienced in the privacy of one's own reading chamber because the staged version could never match the imaginative drama that occurred in the 'mental theatre'. In his 1811 essay, Charles Lamb stated the reasons for his preference for Shakespeare in the closet: 'While we read it, we see not Lear,

but we are Lear' (205); 'do we not feel spell-bound as Macbeth was?' (208). But the "we" that is referenced in these comments does not include the female reader.

For women writers, however, the theatre was largely off bounds. Shakespeare was most frequently read in the Bowdlerized versions at home, while women were discouraged from attending the public theatre because of concerns for both the content of the plays and the composition of the audience (Wolfson 204). As Wolfson has noted, Shakespeare's works were 'already, and indelibly, established as the excellence of English literature embodied. The challenge was to refashion him for female company' (201). I would claim that it was in the women's novel that Shakespearean tropes, themes, and concerns could be addressed and safely domesticated. The emotional excesses of women's novels, particularly gothic novels, can be understood as enactments of the love, guilt, betrayal, repentance, and revenge that characterizes Shakespeare's works (forbidden territory to women, and all the more seductive for being out of bounds).

If romantic male critics and poets identified with Lear, it is fair to say that romantic women writers identified with Cordelia, that is, with the problem of female disinheritance and its attendant consequences, sexual vulnerability and victimization. In her *Memoirs*, Mary Robinson informs us that as a schoolgirl the first dramatic performance she ever saw was *King Lear*, performed in 1763 at a boarding school she attended, one run by Hannah More's sisters. In a *Memoir* in which Robinson depicts herself as a betrayed wife as well as a disillusioned mistress of a personage no less important than the Prince Regent, what we remember most vividly is the extended description of her anger and sorrow at paternal desertion and betrayal. Keeping this vignette in mind will allow us to see how the *Lear* story resonated not simply in Robinson's life, but in the lives of late eighteenth-century and early gothic bourgeois women writers. The

Shakespeare who was adapted by gothic women writers is the dramatist who was able to capture the terror, desperation, humiliation, and tragic sacrifices of powerless women. The very public dynastic downfall and the personal tragedy of an early British king becomes for a series of gothic and sentimental women writers rewritten as what we might call a closet epic tragedy, that is, a large trunk whose misery gets unpacked and then is stuffed again into the small space of a novella.

HANDEL/OPIE/PAËR

[Shakespeare's women] seem to exist only in their attachment to others. They are pure abstractions of the affections [and reveal] the true perfection of the female character, the sense of weakness leaning on the strength of its affections for support.

—William Hazlitt, *CW IV*: 180

Moving Shakespeare's royal characters out of the palace and into domestic hearth and home was actually the major strategy of Amelia Opie (1769-1853) when she rewrote the *Lear* story. We are told by her biographer that when she was not attending murder trials, she was visiting insane asylums in Norwich and London (Macgregor, 5; Brightwell, 12-17). An astute student of human passions in extreme situations, her sentimental novella traces the history of the motherless Agnes and her devoted father. Adored by her successful father and worshiped by the community, Agnes falls prey to Clifford, a seducer, who persuades her to elope with him. Thinking they are on their way to be married in London, Agnes is pregnant before she knows it, and her lover has disappeared in order to marry—at the request of his corrupt aristocrat father—a woman with a larger estate. Destitute and humiliated, Agnes and her infant son return to her native village, only to encounter a madman wrapped in chains on the forested outskirts, raving

about his dead daughter. Unlike Lear on the heath, this father has been driven to madness through no fault of his own. He is blameless, while the Cordelia of this piece—Agnes—has brought this calamity on him and her community through her own act of sexual licentiousness and pride, for she ‘thought herself endowed with great power to read the characters of those with whom she associated, when she had even not discrimination enough to understand her own: and while she imagined that it was not in the power of others to deceive her, she was constantly in the habit of deceiving herself’.³

The climatic recognition scene between father and daughter occurs after Agnes returns with her son Edward to her birthplace, and encounters a chained madman roving around in the woods, claiming that he is there to visit his daughter’s grave:

At the name of “father”, the poor maniac started, and gazed on her earnestly, with savage wildness, while his whole frame became convulsed; and rudely disengaging himself from her embrace, he ran from her a few paces, and then dashed himself on the ground in all the violence of frenzy. He raved, he tore his hair; he screamed and uttered the most dreadful execrations; and with his teeth shut and his hands clenched, he repeated the word father, and said the name was mockery to him. (93)

The recognition scene, such a standard device that it had become a literary cliché fifty years earlier (cf. Perry), reminds us that the emotional freight of the piece can be found in the meaning of the troubled father-daughter dyad. And it is no coincidence that it was this scene that was consistently emphasized in all of the later dramatic and operatic adaptations of the work. The hyperbole here, the frenzy, the gnashing of teeth and violence of display, all of these actions code emotional excess as dangerous, insane, and unacceptable behaviors in the new bourgeois British citizen. And to cause such extravagance of feeling in another person, and that person being one’s

father, is an unforgivable sin in the new middle-class emotional economy. Agnes must pay for her error and she does so promptly: as her father gazes on her with ‘inquiring and mournful looks’, Agnes begins to cry, ‘tears once more found their way, and relieved her bursting brain, while, seizing her father’s hand, she pressed it with frantic emotion to her lips’ (94). In this scene it is the daughter who sheds tears for the blameless father, the daughter as citizen who has failed her insane ruler.

But Agnes is a victim as well as the victimizer of her father’s hopes and trust. Seduced by a wealthy aristocratic man, Agnes is powerless against his family, reminding us of Ellison’s observation, that ‘as sensibility’s social base becomes broader, its subject paradoxically becomes social inequality. Sensibility increasingly is defined by the consciousness of a power difference between the agent and the object of sympathy’ (18). Class inequities provoke our sympathy for Agnes, but it is her father’s humiliation that stirred the strongest emotions in Opie’s readers. It is the loss of his daughter’s virginity as a piece of valuable property that the father himself possessed that most incensed the contemporary male readers of this text. As Susan Staves has noted, Opie’s novella needs to be read in light of the Marriage Act of 1753, which caused ‘an expression of anxiety about the weakening of older restraints on the independent behavior of children’ (133).

The father is led by Agnes to shelter in an insane asylum that he himself built in his prosperous days, before the ruination of his business which was brought about by his depression over his daughter’s disastrous elopement. Here Agnes patiently serves as his attendant, while he spends his days sketching charcoal drawings of her tomb on his wall. His madness consists in telling Agnes that his daughter—standing in front of him—is dead. After seven years of such penance, Agnes is rewarded finally with her father’s recognition of her, quickly followed by the

father's death and then Agnes'. They are ultimately (and ironically) buried together in the same grave, so carefully and lovingly sketched by the father on his madhouse wall. It is no coincidence, I think, to see the sudden profusion of sentimental prints of Cordelia and Lear published at this time as a response to the popularity of Opie's work. John Thurston's engraving *King Lear: O my dear father* (1805) depicts a very maternal Cordelia comforting and cradling her father in her arms, while Henry Corbould's engraving *King Lear: His Sleep is Sound* (1817) also features Cordelia watching anxiously over her insane father, now safely sleeping.

The climactic pathetic scene in which father and daughter both recognize each other for the first time since her fall and the last time before both of their deaths, is dramatically framed by the use of an aria adapted from Handel's oratorio *Deborah*, and transformed into a popular parlor song which the father and daughter sing to each other about paternal love and hope, *Tears, such as tender fathers shed*. The use of the aria at this particular point in the novella is telling, for what it suggests is that at points of high emotional intensity we turn to staged recitals of our feelings, hence the distancing effect of the Handel piece at the precise moment when the emotional intensity overwhelms both father and daughter. The very specific use of the Handel piece within Opie's narrative also suggests the melodramatic, hyperbolic quality of a text that was just a short step away from being operatic in its excesses. In fact, the adaptation of gothic and sentimental novels as source material for the theatre and opera was becoming a common convention, suggesting the growth of a literate society that demanded a form of visual entertainment that repeated and replayed the tropes of popular novels.

Given its currency we should not be surprised that Ferdinando Paër adapted the novella into an opera he entitled *Agnese di Fitz-Henry* within eight years of its publication. Paër's 1809 opera follows in almost virtual detail his source in Opie, although the action is set in Italy and the

opera has a happy ending, with Agnese marrying her lover Ernesto and moving in with her suddenly recovered father. In his *Life of Rossini*, Stendhal recorded his disgusted reaction to seeing a performance of *Agnese*:

Even the remarkable popularity of the opera cannot shake my conviction that it is profoundly wrong for art to deal with purely horrifying subjects. The madness of Shakespeare's *Lear* is made tolerable by the most touching devotion of his daughter Cordelia; but I personally feel that there is nothing to redeem the ghastly and pitiable condition of the heroine's father in *Agnese* [. . . which] has always remained with me as a thoroughly disagreeable memory. (qtd. Commons)

Paër (1771-1839), an Italian who spent most of his productive life in Germany and France, is remembered today as one of the major practitioner of *opera semiseria*, a style that combined the comic and the horrible, using both aristocratic and lower-class characters. We might go so far as to observe that the genre of *opera semiseria* is the musical equivalent of the literary genre of melodrama, while rescue operas are the literary equivalent of the gothic. Well suited to the sentimentality of the period, *opera semiseria* specialized in juxtaposing the pathetic with the appalling without having to carry through the action to a tragic conclusion—as evidenced in the mad scenes in *Agnese* (Kimball, 244). Before composing *Agnese* in 1809, his most famous opera was *Camilla, ossia Il sotterano* (Camilla; or, The Tunnel, 1799), one of the rescue operas—largely based on the plot lines and conventions of gothic novels—about the French Revolution.⁴ *Agnese*, however, is an almost literal adaptation of the Opie novel, with Luigi Buonavoglia writing the libretto and adding for comic relief the character of the director of the insane asylum, who treats the inmates as laughable and easily cured if they would just stop indulging in their extreme emotional responses to a variety of life's typical events. *Agnese* was the first opera to

take its audience literally into a lunatic asylum and to depict in almost clinical detail the behavior of a madman. Was its blatant depiction of insanity a cheap attempt to exploit the sensibility of the era? Certainly visits to observe the inmates of Bedlam had become a sort of sport for people like Opie, not to mention the general bourgeois population.

Paër, however, transforms Opie's use of the Handel aria, *Tears, such as tender fathers shed*, and instead has Agnese play the harp and sing a favorite song so that her father will finally recognize her through her singing voice. And instead of using the Handel piece, taken as it was from a gruesome Old Testament story, Paër has Agnese sing a decidedly New Testament lament that figures the daughter as a lost lamb seeking for her father, the good shepherd: 'If the lost lamb/Finds her good shepherd once more,/Grief quickly/Changes to joy;/With her harmonious bleating/She sets the hill ringing;/Nor from her face could you tell/How dismayed she has been./So to her father/Return Agnese'. The change in imagery is significant, in that the Old Testament patriarch is replaced in Paër by the father as a forgiving Christ-figure, a shepherd seeking his lost lambs, not a vengeful deity.

Although composed in 1809, *Agnese* was not performed in London until 1817, and was unfortunately competing directly with *Don Giovanni* that particular season. Despite a fine production and enthusiastic reviews, the opera only had five performances before it was suspended 'on account of some similitude which was thought to exist between the situation of Hubert [the father's insanity] and that of his majesty George III' (Fenner, 131). But what is most striking about the use of Handel in Opie and later in the popular melodramas written by Mary Therese Kemble in 1815 (*Smiles and Tears*) and Thomas Moncrieff in 1820 (*The Lear of Private Life, or the father and daughter*), is that the music is used in all of these pieces at what we would recognize as the 'moment of desire' in the text. Specifically, the aria is used to frame what can be

identified as the oedipal crisis of the narrative: the moment at which the father struggles to recognize his daughter as a sexual woman, an individual who has defied him and allowed herself to enter into an illicit passion with a seducer who has no intention of making her his wife. It is this recognition that is so painful to the father that he distances it by performing its pain in a stylized, almost ritualized manner, couching it in distinctly Old Testament biblical imagery. Such a move emphasizes Opie's emotional pathos in order to suggest that the sexual disgrace of the daughter is equivalent to the warfare between rival Old Testament tribes. To lose one's virginity is tantamount to losing national honor and one's standing as God's chosen people.

One is reminded here of Žižek's answer to the question, why do we listen to music? His reply:

in order to avoid the horror of the encounter of the voice qua object. What Rilke said for beauty goes also for music: it is a lure, a screen, the last curtain, which protects us from directly confronting the horror of the (vocal) object [...] voice does not simply persist at a different level with regard to what we see, it rather points toward a gap in the field of the visible, toward the dimension of what eludes our gaze. In other words, their relationship is mediated by an impossibility: *ultimately, we hear things because we cannot see everything.* (93; his italics)

What the music screens from view is the father's fantasized vision of his daughter in the sexual act. The music blocks, in other words, a reversed primal scene so that what cannot be imagined or viewed by the culture at large is the daughter's seduction, the daughter's uncontrolled sexuality. It is interesting to note that the three most recent adaptations of the *Lear* narrative written by women, Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* (1992 Pulitzer Prize winner), Elaine Feinstein and the Women's Theatre Group's *Lear's Daughters* (1987), and Margaret Atwood's novel *The Cat's Eye* (1988), all reveal patriarchal incest and physical abuse to be the dark secrets

hidden in the father-daughter relationship.⁵ For Freud, *Lear* was another narrative about the acceptance of the intermingling of eros with thanatos, but for contemporary women writers the *Lear* story had to be focused on the father's corruption of the virgin daughter as a metaphor for his rape of land, resources, and innocence.⁶

Another romantic seriocomedy based on Opie's novella, *Smiles and Tears* by Kemble, combines the low comedy of a confusion of identities with the pathos of a disastrous seduction. Performed in 1815, the play is given a happy ending. The father does suffer from insanity, and instead he recovers when Agnes and her seducer are finally able to marry. Hazlitt was in the audience on opening night, and he gave the play a very negative review indeed (Jones, 290). Finally, the popular melodrama by Thomas Moncrieff, *The Lear of Private Life*, sums up the shift we have charted from public concerns with the state to private issues of domestic harmony and marital fidelity. Performed in 1820, the play also rewrites Opie, giving the father his sanity back after Agnes and the seducer marry. Like Tate so many years earlier, audiences were simply unable to accept the bleak, pessimistic, deeply moralistic ending that both Shakespeare and Opie provided their readers. The middle-class British audience that attended the theatre wanted piety, melodrama, and pathos, but in moderation. They wanted just enough suffering; they could not abide a tragic ending, which they could only see as nihilism.

As we have seen, the narrative of *Lear* was domesticated so that the national and dynastic issues that Shakespeare explored could be transformed into popular novels, dramas, and operas that moved the action from the public to the private realm. The shifts that we see in the secularization and domestication of high cultural artifacts to popular ones says a good deal about the construction of the national as well as the gothic ethos in this period. 'I think therefore I am' seems to have been transformed to 'I cry therefore I am', or 'I suffer therefore I am,' or 'I am

guilty and in pain therefore I am'. Provoking intense suffering and displaying that suffering in a stylized, almost ritualized manner became the dominant mode for this culture to define universalized humanity. Citizens of Britain were able to recognize their shared humanity—their shared 'Britishness'—only when they could see demonstrated intense guilt about failed filial duty, extreme shame about sexual license, and hyperbolic grief about causing madness in one's family members.

As late as 1837 *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* stated the opinion that the fame of Opie's *The Father and Daughter* would endure 'till pity's self be dead' (qtd. Jones, 52). Opie herself wrote that her aim in writing was to 'excite profitable sympathies in many kind and good hearts and...in small degree enlarge our feelings of reverence for our species, and our knowledge of human nature, by shewing that our best qualities are possessed by men whom we are too apt to consider, not with reference to the points in which they resemble us, but to those in which they manifestly differ from us' (qtd. Ty, 58). Very similar, if more direct sentiments were expressed in 1847 by George Gilfillan, who observed in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* that 'the finest compliment that it is possible to pay to woman, as a moral being, is to compare her to "one of Shakespeare's women"' (360).

We return, then, to the need to universalize about an intrinsic 'human nature' that all people share because it is rooted in 'feelings', emotions that we can all enact because we have learned the scripts, seen them performed on stage and—by extension—now in films and on television. One could also note that in the Chinese alphabet the figure for 'to feel' and 'to think' is the same, and that such a union of faculties would appear to be the goal of much gothic and Western speculation on the nature of the mind. To become a composite self who thinks and feels in a unified, coherent manner would appear to be the ideal of an age that sought to replace a

theocentric conception of the world with one in which humans were believed to be potentially godlike, at least if a unification of their faculties could occur.

In conclusion, it is perhaps instructive to cite an observation made by Iris Murdoch: our present situation is analogous to an eighteenth-century one. We retain a rationalistic optimism about the beneficent results of education, or rather technology. We combine this with a romantic conception of “the human condition”, a picture of the individual as stripped and solitary. The eighteenth century was [like the twenty-first is], an era of rationalistic allegories and moral tales. (qtd. Alexander, 1)

Murdoch appears to be suggesting here that what we now recognize as the ideology of ‘affective individualism’ began during a period that idealized isolated individuals alone with their feelings, attempting to seek meaning for life in understanding the moral significance of the emotions that buffeted them. But standing alone, stripped and bare like Lear on the heath, was precisely what was too painful for the romantic or gothic sensibility to bear. The moral of the Lear tale as rewritten by the gothic ethos was that no one finally stood alone. All of us—even the insane and the disgraced—are loved by the members of our families and our communities. If we master the scripts and perform the emotional excesses required from us, we can all enact indefinitely the dramas of denying our solitary selfhood, denying that we were isolated and alone in an alien or indifferent universe. Indeed, Shakespeare and the Bible have provided the master narratives on which Western civilization has been constructed. These texts have taught us what to feel, how to feel, and how to enact those feelings in ways that preserve the patriarchal family and position all of us in one subservient role after another. When a tender father sheds tears for a disgraced daughter we have constructed the most benign face of the patriarchy we can imagine. But it is

Cordelia's silence that I remember, her frustration, her futility, and finally it is her tears that I think I feel.

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NOTES

¹ For the most extensive and provocative discussion of the racist, sexist, and anti-semitic issues involved in Harold Bloom's construction of Shakespeare, see Desmet and Sawyer. This collection contains Caroline Cakebread's very perceptive analysis of the contemporary construction of the Cordelia figure in the fiction of Margaret Atwood, Jane Smiley, and Gloria Naylor.

² Keats was keenly interested in *Lear*, as both his 1818 poem "Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again" and this letter to George and Thomas Keats, 21, 27 Dec 1817, attest: 'I spent Friday evening with Wells & went the next morning to see West's *Death on the Pale horse*. It is a wonderful picture, when West's age is considered; But there is nothing to be intense upon; no woman one feels mad to kiss; no face swelling into reality. The excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth—Examine King Lear & you will find this exemplified throughout; but in

this picture we have unpleasantness without any momentous depth of speculation excited, in which to bury its repulsiveness’.

³ Opie, *The Father and Daughter*, 93. All quotations are taken from the Broadview Edition, with page numbers in parentheses in the text.

⁴ See Hoeveler and Cordova for a full discussion of ‘rescue’ operas as adaptations of gothic novels in both Britain and France.

⁵ In her own comments on the writing of *A Thousand Acres*, Jane Smiley observed: ‘I imagined Shakespeare wrestling with the *Leir* story and coming away a little dissatisfied, a little defeated, but hugely stimulated, just as I was. As I imagined that, I felt that I received a gift, an image of literary history, two mirrors facing each other in the present moment, reflecting infinitely backward into the past and infinitely forward into the future’ (qtd. Novy, 173).

⁶ Freud in *The Theme of the Three Caskets* (1913) writes: ‘Lear is not only an old man: he is a dying man....But the doomed man is not willing to renounce the love of women; he insists on hearing how much he is loved. Let us now recall the moving final scene, one of the culminating points of tragedy in modern drama. Lear carries Cordelia’s dead body on to the stage. Cordelia is Death. If we reverse the situation it becomes intelligible and familiar to us. She is the Death-goddess who, like the Valkyrie in German mythology, carries away the dead hero from the battlefield. Eternal wisdom, clothed in the primaeval myth, bids the old man renounce love, choose death and make friends with the necessity of dying’ (301).

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