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## Incest in a Thousdand Acres: Cheap Trick or Feminist Re-vision

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### Recommended Citation

Susan Ayres, *Incest in a Thousdand Acres: Cheap Trick or Feminist Re-vision*, 11 *Tex. J. Women & L.* 131 (2001).

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## INCEST IN *A THOUSAND ACRES*: CHEAP TRICK OR FEMINIST RE-VISION?

Susan Ayres\*

I. Introduction .....	131
II. Smiley's Feminist Re-vision .....	133
III. The Longing for the Mother .....	137
IV. Incest by the Father .....	141
A. The Role of the Narrative .....	142
B. Is Smiley's Rewriting a Cheap Trick? .....	143
C. Smiley's Rewriting Serves a Feminist Purpose – but Which One? .....	145
V. Conclusion.....	154

*You are entitled to have your story told in your language . . . or  
the law is failing.*<sup>1</sup>

### I. Introduction

In the Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Thousand Acres*,<sup>2</sup> Jane Smiley re-writes *King Lear*<sup>3</sup> from the older daughters' perspectives, because "[b]eginning with [her] first readings of the play in high school and contin-

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1. JAMES BOYD WHITE, *HERACLES' BOW: ESSAYS ON THE RHETORIC AND POETICS OF THE LAW* 42 (The University of Wisconsin Press 1985).

2. JANE SMILEY, *A THOUSAND ACRES* (The Ballantine Publishing Group 1996) (1991). This novel was Smiley's seventh fictional work. It won the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Critics Circle Award.

3. WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *KING LEAR* (R.A. Foakes ed., Arden Shakespeare series 1997) (First Folio 1623).

uing through college and graduate school," she had "been cool to both Cordelia and Lear"; rather, she was attracted to Regan and Goneril, the "older sisters, figures of pure evil according to conventional wisdom."<sup>4</sup> Smiley relates that Regan and Goneril "sounded familiar, especially in the scene where they talk between themselves about Lear's actions, and later, when they have to deal with his unruly knights."<sup>5</sup>

In describing her composition of *A Thousand Acres*, Smiley explains that in "wrestl[ing]" with "Mr. Shakespeare's" Machiavellian vision, she became a "lawyer for Goneril and Regan":

I proposed a different narrative of their motives and actions that cast doubts on the case Mr. Shakespeare was making for his client, King Lear. I made Goneril my star witness, and she told her story with care. I made sure that, insofar as I was able to swing it, she was an appealing witness as well—cautious, judicious, ambivalent, straightforward. . . . The goal of the trial was not to try or condemn the father, but to gain an acquittal for the daughters. The desired verdict was not "innocent," but rather "not guilty," or at least, "not proven."<sup>6</sup>

As Smiley points out, *A Thousand Acres* is "a response to the play,"<sup>7</sup> a "rewriting," "my own *King Lear*,"<sup>8</sup> which was influenced by feminist, Marxist, and environmental concerns.<sup>9</sup> Her purpose in re-telling *Lear* was to "cut [Mr. Shakespeare] down to size a little bit."<sup>10</sup> One of her feminist hopes was that "the minds of adolescent girls would encounter *A Thousand Acres* first, and that it would serve them as a prophylactic against the guilt about proper daughterhood that I knew *King Lear* could induce."<sup>11</sup>

In judging whether Smiley succeeded in fulfilling her purposes, the primary hurdle the reader must overcome is whether Smiley's rewriting to include Larry's (Lear's) incestuous relationship with Rose (Regan) and Ginny (Goneril) and the daughters' longing for the dead mother exceeds the bounds of the storyline to such an extent that the plot changes create a completely different story, or whether, as Smiley says she intended, the novel is a feminist rewriting of *Lear*. Is Smiley's incest plot a cheap trick that manipulates the reader's emotions, or a feminist re-vision that chal-

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4. Jane Smiley, *Shakespeare in Iceland*, in *TRANSFORMING SHAKESPEARE* 159, 160 (Marianne Nory ed., 1999).

5. *Id.* at 161. See *infra* notes 29-32.

6. *Id.* at 173.

7. *Id.* at 160.

8. *Id.* at 169.

9. *Id.*

10. *Id.* at 173.

11. *Id.*

lenges patriarchal structures and provides a discourse for suppressed feminine voices?

This article ultimately argues that the plot changes are not a cheap trick intended to manipulate the reader's emotions, but a feminist re-vision, which succeeds or not depending on the reader's critical feminist perspective. Thus, Part Two delineates several feminist stances, such as liberal feminism, radical feminism, social feminism, and postmodern feminism, and summarizes the plot changes Smiley has imposed on *King Lear*. Part Three considers one major plot change – the longing for the mother – in terms of patriarchy's suppression of a maternal genealogy and feminine language. This part argues that the novel successfully demonstrates the difficulty in overthrowing patriarchal suppression in order to create the woman-centered experience that feminists such as Luce Irigaray and Adrienne Rich describe.

Part Four considers another major plot change – the incest by the father – in terms of patriarchy's suppression of feminine reality. Smiley's re-vision succeeds by providing a voice for silenced feminine perspectives, and although some readers might consider the incest theme a cheap trick because it manipulates readers' emotions, this part provides several responses to that accusation. On one hand, Smiley's re-vision is not unlike Shakespeare's own re-vision of the folklore motif and historical Leir story. Smiley's re-vision is driven by a feminist purpose to demonstrate women's vulnerability to patriarchal violence. This part argues that from the viewpoint of radical feminism, Smiley's re-vision successfully contrasts dominant reality with suppressed feminine reality, and in the end of the novel, provides an alternative discourse that allows the primary female characters to subvert the patriarchal view. But on the other hand, from the viewpoint of postmodern feminism, Smiley's re-vision does not successfully reclaim feminine sexuality, or *jouissance*. Rather, the shame of incest cannot be overcome.

## II. Smiley's Feminist Re-vision

To answer the question of whether *A Thousand Acres* is a cheap trick, we must view Smiley's re-vision of *Lear* through the lens of feminism, first describing the plot structure of Smiley's "own *King Lear*,"<sup>12</sup> and then judging the appropriateness and the effectiveness of the two major changes – the longing for the mother and the incest by the father. Adrienne Rich's specialized sense of the word "re-vision" as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction"

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12. *Id.* at 169.

provides a way to define Smiley's project.<sup>13</sup> For Rich, re-vision generates an "act of survival" that carries political implications because it extends to anything a woman writes. "[T]his drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society."<sup>14</sup> Re-vision is necessary because "we need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us."<sup>15</sup>

The purpose of a feminist re-vision such as Smiley's is governed, in part, by the particular feminist goals it seeks to advance in "break[ing] its hold over us." While feminism can be broadly defined as "a politics directed at changing existing power relations between women and men,"<sup>16</sup> there is not just one feminism, but many feminisms, many different feminist politics. For instance, liberal feminists are concerned with increasing women's equality without radically changing social and political systems; a liberal feminist might stress women's choice and challenge the sexual division of labor.<sup>17</sup> Radical feminists such as Adrienne Rich are concerned with creating a new social order, separate from that of men; a radical feminist might consider sex and motherhood as forced slavery.<sup>18</sup> Finally, social feminists seek to transform the social system because they believe that patriarchy is tied to race and class oppression; a social feminist might argue that gender is socially constructed and that heterosexuality should not be privileged.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to these three broad categories, different feminist politics also exist along national lines. For instance, British feminist criticism has always been Marxist in its emphasis on class and politics.<sup>20</sup> American feminist criticism typically has strong political implications because it has focused on the distinctive experience of women – rallying with the motto that the personal is political.<sup>21</sup> And French postmodern feminist criticism has been less interested in politics, but more interested in the application of

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13. ADRIENNE RICH, *When We Dead Awaken*, in ADRIENNE RICH'S POETRY AND PROSE 166, 167 (Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi eds., 1993).

14. *Id.*

15. *Id.* at 167-68.

16. CHRIS WEEDON, FEMINIST PRACTICE AND POSTSTRUCTURALIST THEORY 1 (1987).

17. *Id.* at 16-17, 130-31.

18. *Id.* at 17, 28, 132.

19. *Id.* at 17-18.

20. See JANET TODD, FEMINIST LITERARY HISTORY 86-87 (1988).

21. See *id.* at 135. See also ADRIENNE RICH, *Blood, Bread, and Poetry*, in ADRIENNE RICH'S POETRY AND PROSE, 239, 248 (Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi eds., 1993).

Lacanian theory to femininity,<sup>22</sup> and in the possibility of disrupting patriarchy through writing and language.<sup>23</sup> Of course, this description of different feminisms is an over-simplification that ignores overlaps and similarities between feminisms;<sup>24</sup> however, it provides a useful paradigm to test the particular feminist goals Smiley's novel advances.

Smiley described her re-vision as "a puzzle" for which "[t]he challenge was sticking to the plot but substituting what [she] considered a truer but what many would say was simply a more congenial view of human nature."<sup>25</sup> Told from the viewpoint of Goneril, the oldest daughter, the plot conceded two modernizations: the battles would be fought in court, and "Goneril and Regan [would] live through to the end, so that they could reflect upon their experiences."<sup>26</sup> Thus, *A Thousand Acres* follows Shakespeare's plot in only general outlines.

In Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the action begins when Lear, the king of Britain, decides to divide his kingdom among his three daughters, Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia, giving the largest share to the daughter who says she loves him most.<sup>27</sup> Lear disowns Cordelia after the two elder sisters profusely express their love, but Cordelia can say merely, "Nothing," and when pressed, "I love your majesty / According to my bond, no more nor less."<sup>28</sup> Lear angrily marries off Cordelia, the daughter he "loved . . .

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22. The work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan is a source-text for many of the writings of French feminists; however, I think it more profitable to trace definitions through the French feminists themselves. One of Lacan's projects "reinterprets Freud in the light of structuralist and post-structuralist theories of discourse," describing different stages of development, beginning with "the imaginary" or pre-Oedipal state of "'symbiotic' relation" between the infant and the mother, moving to the "mirror stage" in which the child begins to develop an ego, and finally, the stage involving "the Law," or the "entry of the father which signifies . . . sexual difference." TERRY EAGLETON, *LITERARY THEORY: AN INTRODUCTION* 164-65 (1983).

23. TODD, *supra* note 20, at 53-55. See also TORIL MOI, *SEXUAL/TEXTUAL POLITICS: FEMINIST LITERARY THEORY* 105 (1985) (describing Helene Cixous' project as undoing binary oppositions that stem from logocentric ideology and "proclaim[ing] woman as a source of life, power, and energy, and . . . hail[ing] a new, feminine language" that subverts patriarchy) and WEEDON, *supra* note 16, at 22 (claiming that postmodern, or poststructural feminism also exists in different forms, but all forms "assume that meaning is constituted within language and is not guaranteed by the subject which speaks it").

24. For instance French feminists and radical American feminists "[b]oth valorize[ ] female relationships" and language, and share basic assumptions about gendered subjectivity. TODD, *supra* note 20, at 62. This description of different feminisms also ignores variations of the late '90s, third wave feminism, which arose after the composition of *A THOUSAND ACRES*.

25. Smiley, *Shakespeare in Iceland*, *supra* note 4, at 172.

26. *Id.* at 171.

27. SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 3, at act 1, sc. 1, ll. 35-53.

28. *Id.* at act 1, sc. 1, ll. 87, 92-93.

most," to the suitor who will take her for "nothing."<sup>29</sup> She marries the king of France and does not see Lear again until the end of the play, when the two elder sisters have divested him of his entourage of one hundred knights,<sup>30</sup> have thrown him out of the castle into a storm,<sup>31</sup> have chastened his "infirmity of . . . age,"<sup>32</sup> and thus have driven him to madness.<sup>33</sup> The speeches of Goneril and Regan grow increasingly disrespectful and shrill, until the sisters finally conspire to blind the Earl of Gloucester<sup>34</sup> without a fair trial.<sup>35</sup> When Cordelia returns to England, they capture and imprison her with Lear, finally ordering her death.<sup>36</sup> At the end of the play, Goneril poisons Regan (who has slept with Goneril's lover, Edmund), Goneril kills herself, a servant hangs Cordelia, and Lear dies after killing the servant.<sup>37</sup> Albany, Goneril's husband, turns the kingdom over to Lear's faithful servant, the Earl of Kent<sup>38</sup> and to Gloucester's faithful son, Edgar.<sup>39</sup>

Smiley rewrites *King Lear* in six narrative books and an epilogue rather than five dramatic acts. *A Thousand Acres* remains generally faithful to Shakespeare's plot and contains many of its elements: the division of the kingdom/farm, the disinheritance of Cordelia/Caroline, her marriage to the King of France/Frank, the storm scene in which Lear/Larry wanders madly, trial scenes, the blinding of Gloucester/Harold, the adulterous relation of the two sisters with Edmund/Jess, the shift in alliance of Albany/Ty from Goneril/Ginny to Lear/Larry, the successful/attempted poisoning of Reagan/Rose, the death of Cornwall/Pete, and the death of Lear/Larry.<sup>40</sup> *A Thousand Acres* also repeats major themes and images found in *Lear*, such

29. *Id.* at act 1, sc. 1, ll. 125, 247.

30. *Id.* at act 1, sc. 4, ll. 228-243; act 2, sc. 2, ll. 437-38, 260. The sisters claim that the knights are "insolent" and that they "Do hourly carp and quarrel, breaking forth / In rank and not to be endured riots." *Id.* at act 1, sc. 4, ll. 192-194.

31. *Id.* at act 2, sc. 2.

32. *Id.* at act 1, sc. 1, ll. 290-300.

33. *Id.* at act 3, sc. 4, act 4, sc. 6.

34. The Earl of Gloucester, his bastard son Edmund, and elder son Edgar, represent a subplot that parallels the major action of the play. Edmund conspires to take Edgar's land, Edgar goes into disguise as "mad Tom," Gloucester is arrested and tortured by Goneril and Regan, and dies after learning that Edgar, his true son, is alive and disguised as Poor Tom. *Id.* at act I, sc. 2; act 2, sc. 3; act 3, sc. 4; act 5, sc. 3.

35. *Id.* at act 3, sc. 7, ll. 55-83. After Regan's husband, the Duke of Cornwall, plucks out Gloucester's eyes, a servant kills Cornwall. *Id.* at act 3, sc. 7; act 4, sc. 2, ll. 71-73.

36. *Id.* at act 5, sc. 2-3.

37. *Id.* at act 5, sc. 3.

38. Lear banishes his adviser Kent in the first scene, when Kent tried to convince him to change his decision to disinherit Cordelia. Kent disguises himself as Caius and, along with the Fool, follows and serves Lear for the remainder of the play. *Id.* at act 1, sc. 1.

39. The Duke of Albany, married to Goneril, sides with Lear against Goneril after the conspiracy to blind Gloucester. *Id.* at act 4, sc. 2; act 5, sc. 3.

40. See generally SMILEY, *A THOUSAND ACRES*, *supra* note 2.

as “nothing”/nothingness, madness, eyesight, and appearance versus reality.<sup>41</sup>

Smiley’s re-vision contains both minor and major deviations from Shakespeare’s plot. One deviation is that Ginny survives and Rose dies –not of poison, but of cancer.<sup>42</sup> Another deviation is that Jess is not a bastard, like Edmund, but a draft-dodger with environmental concerns – he wants an organic farm and tells Ginny that her five miscarriages are the result of nitrates in the well water.<sup>43</sup> Although Larry becomes increasingly demented and dies after he “ha[s] a heart attack in the cereal aisle,”<sup>44</sup> Caroline survives. The absence of the fool in the novel is another change from *King Lear*.<sup>45</sup> My focus will be on the two major deviations – the longing for the mother and incest by the father – which I discuss in the following sections.

### III. The Longing for the Mother

Two major plot changes from *King Lear* serve Smiley’s feminist purposes. One is the emphasis on the sisters’ dead mother, who is not mentioned in *King Lear*. Ginny’s longing to speak with her mother and hear what her mother has to say about Larry is thwarted, because her mother died when Ginny was so young.<sup>46</sup> Ginny first thinks about her mother when she has taken Rose’s daughters swimming and her mother’s friend, Mary, apologizes for not befriending Ginny after Ginny’s mother had died.<sup>47</sup> Mary tells Ginny that her mother had been “‘afraid for you. For the life you would live after she died’” because “[s]he knew what your father was like, even though I think she loved him.”<sup>48</sup> According to Mary, Ginny’s mother wanted her daughters to have “choices” and was afraid that “‘Ginny [wouldn’t] stand up to him.’”<sup>49</sup>

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41. *Id.* at 98, 159, 245, 393 (nothing); 87-89, 125, 202, 233 (madness); 71, 134, 250-51 (sight); 9, 215, 304 (appearances).

42. *Id.* at 374.

43. *Id.* at 177. Jess is selfish like Edmund, but not as evil. *See id.* at 380.

44. *Id.* at 363.

45. Ironically, the fool was one of Shakespeare’s original additions to the Leir story. SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 3, at 50, 155. While there is no fool character in *A THOUSAND ACRES*, Smiley suggests that Larry is a fool, just as Shakespeare and the Fool in *King Lear* suggest that Lear is a fool. For instance, Larry says, “I’m not going to be your fool.” SMILEY, *A THOUSAND ACRES*, *supra* note 2, at 331. Both Lear and Larry are foolish concerning the premature division of their kingdom. As Richard A. Posner notes, “no play of Shakespeare contains a stronger warning against imprudence in the management of one’s affairs.” RICHARD A. POSNER, *LAW AND LITERATURE* 102 (rev. and enl. ed. 1998).

46. SMILEY, *A THOUSAND ACRES*, *supra* note 2, at 56, 315-16.

47. *Id.* at 98.

48. *Id.* at 97-98.

49. *Id.* at 98.



After Mary tells Ginny these things, Ginny dives into the pool, an action which suggests a symbolic delving into her subconscious memories of her mother, who “died before I knew her, before I liked her, before I was old enough for her to be herself with me.”<sup>50</sup> Ginny remembers her mother as “matter-of-fact and brisk,” who “impersonal[ly]” bottle-fed her daughters and had “no melding with the child into symbiotic fleshy warmth.”<sup>51</sup> Even though Ginny does not remember physical closeness with her efficient mother, Ginny still desires this “symbiotic fleshy warmth” and still desires to know more about her mother.<sup>52</sup>

Ginny also remembers her mother after the storm scene, when Larry has left his house and Ginny prepares a room for Jess, who has been kicked out of his father’s house.<sup>53</sup> Being alone in her father’s house gives Ginny an opportunity to search for clues about her mother. Ginny remembers that her mother “had a history . . . and for us this history was to be found in her closet.”<sup>54</sup> Their mother had not told Ginny and Rose her history, but they had unearthed it from her pre-World War II wardrobe:

Although her present was measured out in aprons—she put a clean one on every day—her past included tight skirts and full skirts and gored skirts, peplum waists, kick pleats, arrowlike darts, welt pockets with six-inch-square handkerchiefs inside them, shoulder pads, Chinese collars, self-belts with self-buckles, covered buttons. . . The clothes in the closet . . . intoxicated us with a sense of possibility, not for us, but for our mother, lost possibilities to be sure, but somehow still present when we entered the closet. . .<sup>55</sup>

For Ginny, remembering her mother is remembering her mother’s closet, and she recalls the closet “when [she] seek[s] to love [her] mother.”<sup>56</sup> Since her mother’s death, no clothes or other physical evidence of her mother remain because Mary and the other church ladies had cleaned out her mother’s belongings and given them to charity.<sup>57</sup> Even when Ginny looks for traces of her mother, she finds “nothing.”<sup>58</sup> Ginny longs

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50. *Id.* at 99. Mary Carden points out that Ginny’s longing for the mother is related to her reveries about “the submerged sea.” Mary Paniccia Carden, *Remembering/Engendering the Heartland: Sexed Language, Embodied Space, and America’s Foundational Fictions in Jane Smiley’s A Thousand Acres*, 18 *FRONTIERS* 181, 194 (1997).

51. SMILEY, *A THOUSAND ACRES*, *supra* note 2, at 99.

52. *Id.* at 243.

53. *Id.*

54. *Id.* at 242.

55. *Id.*

56. *Id.* at 243.

57. *Id.* at 246-47.

58. *Id.* at 243-45.

for her mother and wishes her mother had been alive “to tell us what to think of Daddy.”<sup>59</sup> Likewise, Ginny’s longing to fill the mother position herself is thwarted because nitrates in the well water have caused her five miscarriages.<sup>60</sup>

Smiley’s theme of longing for the dead mother reminds women that patriarchy has suppressed a maternal genealogy and women’s language. As Luce Irigaray, a contemporary French philosopher and poststructuralist feminist, has theorized, women often have a strained relationship with each other because they lack a maternal genealogy and a common language.<sup>61</sup> Whereas men’s speech provides a “linguistic home that man has managed to substitute even for his dwelling in a body” and that “has used women as construction material,”<sup>62</sup> women “are deprived of speech.”<sup>63</sup> Irigaray proposes the creation of a “female ethics” with “two vertical and horizontal dimensions: daughter-to-mother, mother-to-daughter, among women, or among ‘sisters.’”<sup>64</sup> She envisions that this female ethics would allow women “to talk to each other” and thus to love each other.<sup>65</sup> It would give women “a *periphery*, a circumference, a world, a home.”<sup>66</sup> Rich, like Irigaray, also envisions a “woman-identified experience” consisting “of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support.”<sup>67</sup>

Thus, Ginny’s longing to know more about her mother is a longing for what Irigaray calls “an active subject-to-subject relation” that takes the place of rivalry.<sup>68</sup> A subject-to-subject relation hopelessly gives in to rivalry, however, when Ginny attempts to poison Rose with hemlock-laced

59. *Id.* at 164, *see also id.* at 243.

60. Trying to get pregnant becomes Ginny’s secret project that she hides from her husband Ty, who confronts her when he finds the buried clothes from her fifth miscarriage under the foundation for the hog building. *Id.* at 275-78.

61. LUCE IRIGARAY, AN ETHICS OF SEXUAL DIFFERENCE 102-103, 107 (Carolyn Burke and Gillian Gill, trans., 1993). *See also* ADRIENNE RICH, *Anne Sexton: 1928-1978*, in ON LIES, SECRETS, AND SILENCE: SELECTED PROSE 1966-1978 121, 122 (1979) (describing the “horizontal hostility” between women, “the fear and mistrust of other”). Part of Rich’s project is to develop a common language among women. *See, e.g.*, ADRIENNE RICH, THE DREAM OF A COMMON LANGUAGE: POEMS 1974-1977 (1978).

62. IRIGARAY, AN ETHICS OF SEXUAL DIFFERENCE, *supra* note 61, at 107.

63. *Id.*

64. *Id.* at 104, 108.

65. *Id.* at 104.

66. *Id.* at 106.

67. Rich sees relations among women as part of a “lesbian continuum.” ADRIENNE RICH, *Compulsory Heterosexuality*, in ADRIENNE RICH’S POETRY AND PROSE 203, 217, 219.

68. ELIZABETH GROSZ, SEXUAL SUBVERSIONS: THREE FRENCH FEMINISTS 124 (1989).

liver sausage and sauerkraut.<sup>69</sup> Ginny knew that she had always identified with Rose, and that “no day of my remembered life was without Rose.”<sup>70</sup> Although Rose had been Ginny’s “constant companion,” Rose overpowers her with jealousy and the confession that Rose is in love with Jess, whom Ginny had slept with earlier that summer.<sup>71</sup> Ginny realizes that she hates Rose and that “Rose had been too much for [her], had done [her] in.”<sup>72</sup> Consequently, Ginny resorts to a “premeditated” attempt to poison the sister she had always considered her twin.<sup>73</sup>

In contrast with her complicated relationship with Rose, Ginny’s relationship with Caroline, the youngest sister who was raised by Ginny and Rose after their mother’s death, had never been close:

Rose and I were always proud of how well we had done with Caroline, proud that we had taken good care of our doll, and the reward was the knowledge that she would live a life that each of us had thought about with some longing. That she never called us or seemed close to us did not occur to us as a failure, nor did it occur to us to wonder what she thought of us, whether she liked us. Could we have even said whether we liked her? I don’t know.<sup>74</sup>

Caroline is “the one who got away” and became a lawyer in Des Moines.<sup>75</sup> After Caroline expresses disapproval about the incorporation of the farm and Larry disinherits her, Caroline’s relationship with her sisters becomes increasingly strained.<sup>76</sup> After Caroline and Larry sue the two elder sisters for mismanagement of the farm, Caroline refuses to talk to her sisters.<sup>77</sup> Overall, the sisters’ relationships with each other consist of jealousy, rivalry, and misunderstandings—not the horizontal relation Irigaray imagines.

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69. SMILEY, *A THOUSAND ACRES*, *supra* note 2, at 336-39. Ginny delivers the canned sausage and sauerkraut to Rose, who never eats any (because she has converted to Jess’s vegetarian habits). This contrasts with *King Lear*, in which Goneril successfully poisons Regan, for the same reason—jealousy over a love affair. *See infra*.

70. SMILEY, *A THOUSAND ACRES*, *supra* note 2, at 8, 332.

71. *Id.* at 243, 324-28.

72. *Id.* at 329, 343.

73. *Id.* at 337, 332.

74. *Id.* at 344. *See also id.* at 386, where Ginny notes that the “difference [between Ginny and Caroline] now ran deeper than our clothes, to body type and stance, to skin and hair, to social class and whether we expected to be seen or not.”

75. *Id.* at 10, 106.

76. *Id.* at 19-21, where Caroline merely says “I don’t know,” in response to Larry’s plan to incorporate the farm and Ginny notes that maybe Caroline “had . . . spoken as a lawyer when she should have spoken as a daughter.”

77. *Id.* at 263-64.

Ginny's reveries about her mother and her relationships with her sisters demonstrate the difficulty in overthrowing patriarchal oppression and creating a maternal genealogy—either a common language or female ethics. At the end of the novel, even though Ginny is a guardian for her two college-age nieces,<sup>78</sup> and has made a move in the right direction to establish her independence, Ginny is nevertheless silenced and homeless. Ginny left her husband Ty to fulfill Rose's dream-life for their mother of living in a Hollywood apartment and working as a waitress.<sup>79</sup> The family lost the farm to a giant food conglomerate, and Ginny works extra hours to pay her half of the \$34,000 tax bill for the sale of the farm, what she calls her "regret money."<sup>80</sup> Ginny's life is based on "[s]olitude" and "remembering what you can't imagine."<sup>81</sup>

#### IV. Incest by the Father

"[R]emembering what you can't imagine" alludes to the father's incest, the second major deviation from the Lear story. While the longing for the mother serves a feminist purpose and is not an implausible deviation from the Lear story told from Ginny's point of view, the incest theme is more problematic. In *King Lear*, the storm scene marks Lear's growing madness and the collusive evilness of Regan and Goneril.<sup>82</sup> In contrast, in *A Thousand Acres*, the storm scene marks the reader's first awareness of a new thread – incest. During the storm, Rose tells Ginny that their father

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78. *Id.* at 397, where Ginny admits, "I recognize that they [the nieces] don't have a great deal of faith in my guardianship, though they like me, and we get along smoothly."

79. *Id.* at 202. Rose tells Ginny that she "used to fantasize that Mommy had escaped and taken an assumed name, and someday she would be back for us. . . . She was a waitress at the restaurant of a nice hotel, and we lived with her in a Hollywood-style apartment, you know, its own door, two floors, two bedrooms and a bathroom up and living room and kitchen down. Nice shag carpeting, white walls, little sounds from the neighbors on either side, sliding door out to the back deck." While we never get a detailed description of the apartment Ginny moves to, she works as a waitress, comes back for her nieces and fulfills the fantasy.

80. *Id.* at 396.

81. *Id.* at 397, 399. See also, Carden, *supra* note 50, at 198 (agreeing that "Smiley leaves Ginny's future unclear," but reading the ending as hopeful, and seeing "Ginny[']s function[ ] as a mother with a voice," who "offers her nieces—and her audience—what her mother could not offer her: the other side of the story of family and national history, the tools to excavate the unsaid"). I disagree with Carden's hopeful reading; the textual evidence offers little possibility of a maternal genealogy in Irigaray's or Rich's sense. Barbara Mathieson's ecofeminist reading also takes a negative view of the conclusion: "any hopeful signs in the novel's end for a renewed and meaningful life for Ginny and her nieces seems drastically undercut by the abandonment and waste of the natural world . . . the outlook is grim indeed." Barbara Mathieson, *The Polluted Quarry: Nature and Body in A Thousand Acres*, in *TRANSFORMING SHAKESPEARE*, 127, 142.

82. SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 3, at act 3, sc. 2.

“came after us.”<sup>83</sup> When Ginny denies it, Rose tells her, “after he stopped going in to you, he started coming in to me. . . . We had sex in my bed.”<sup>84</sup> Several days later, when Harold has taken Larry in, and has kicked Jess out, Ginny realizes the truth of Rose’s memory as she is making up her old bed in her father’s house for Jess. “Lying here, I knew that he had been in there to me, that my father had lain with me on that bed, that I had looked at the top of his head, at his balding spot in the brown grizzled hair, while feeling him suck my breasts. That was the only memory I could endure before I jumped out of the bed with a cry.”<sup>85</sup>

Days later, when she is shopping in town, she overhears her father talking to Caroline. Hiding in a dressing booth, Ginny remembers the suggestiveness of her father’s tone of voice: “All soft and affectionate, but with something underneath that I can’t describe.”<sup>86</sup> She tells Rose, “I thought I was going to faint,” and admits, “It happened like you said.”<sup>87</sup> Ginny realizes that “One thing Daddy took from me when he came to me in my room at night was the memory of my body.”<sup>88</sup> She remembers that her father had sex with her and that she didn’t resist; “I remembered, over and over again, what the top of his head looked like. But I never remembered penetration or pain, or even his hands on my body, and I never sorted out how many times there were.”<sup>89</sup> Just as Lear’s increasing madness takes over the second half of *King Lear*, the memories and ramifications of Larry’s incest take over the second half of *A Thousand Acres*. The incest plot provides a feminist re-vision of the *Lear* story by suggesting an alternative narrative of violence stemming from the viewpoint of the silenced evil sisters.

#### A. *The Role of Narrative*

Smiley justifies the plot change by arguing that “Narrative . . . always calls into question the validity of appearance, always proposes a difference between the public perception of events and their actual meaning. We see this all the time in our adversarial court system, where an event of apparent criminality has taken place, and the jury or judge must decide which narrative of the event is more likely to be true.”<sup>90</sup> Smiley’s description echoes that of Paul Gewirtz, who notes, as James Boyd White has before, that

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83. SMILEY, *A THOUSAND ACRES*, *supra* note 2, at 203.

84. *Id.* at 205.

85. *Id.* at 247.

86. *Id.* at 295.

87. *Id.*

88. *Id.* at 302.

89. *Id.* at 303.

90. Smiley, *Shakespeare in Iceland*, *supra* note 4, at 172.

“law and literature attempt to shape reality through language, use distinctive methods and forms to do so, and require interpretation.”<sup>91</sup> Gewirtz reverses Smiley’s relation between law and literature. While Smiley, a storyteller, compares her narrative rewriting to what happens all the time in the courtroom, White and Gewirtz, lawyers, compare what happens in the courtroom to storytelling. White says that “[t]he [legal] process is at heart a narrative one,”<sup>92</sup> and Gewirtz notes that “[s]torytelling in law is narrative within a culture of argument. Virtually everyone in the legal culture . . . is explicitly or implicitly making an argument and trying to persuade. Storytelling is, or is made to function as, argument.”<sup>93</sup>

So, there are always two sides to a story, voices that are silenced, stories we never hear. This is the power of storytelling, whether in law or in literature – the “distinctive power to challenge and unsettle the legal status quo, because stories give uniquely vivid representation to particular voices, perspectives and experiences of victimization traditionally left out . . . .”<sup>94</sup> The power of storytelling is especially effective in feminist revision because it provides an alternative discourse for silenced feminine voices and perspectives. Smiley’s version fills in these gaps.

### B. *Is Smiley’s Rewriting a Cheap Trick?*

Does Smiley’s rewriting to include incest serve these feminist purposes of providing a discourse for silenced voices? Is her rewriting a cheap trick that manipulates the reader’s emotions? How can we fail to side with Rose and Ginny over Larry when we believe he has raped them as girls? Their adultery with Jess doesn’t tip the scale, nor does Ginny’s plan to poison Rose – if only because Rose dies of cancer first. One could argue that *A Thousand Acres* is more than a revisionary impulse, that it is a different story, a different set of characters. Smiley’s version is just as plausible as a version in which Lear killed his wife, the mother of his daughters, and thus abused his authority by committing murder. That version would also explain Regan and Goneril’s venom for the father and longing for the mother.

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91. Paul Gewirtz, *Narrative and Rhetoric in the Law*, in *LAW’S STORIES: NARRATIVE AND RHETORIC IN THE LAW* 2, 4 (Peter Brooks and Paul Gewirtz eds., 1996). See also WHITE, *supra* note 1, at 36-37, who states that “Law always operates through speakers located in particular times and places speaking to actual audiences about real people. Its language is continuous with ordinary language: it always operates by narrative; it is not conceptual in its structure; it is perpetually reaffirmed or rejected in a social process; and it contains a system of internal translation by which it can reach a range of hearers. All these things mark it as a literary and rhetorical system.”

92. WHITE, *supra* note 1, at 36.

93. Gewirtz, *supra* note 90, at 5.

94. *Id.*

From a lawyerly perspective one could argue that Smiley's version is not plausible. It is not supported by the evidence—that is, the textual clues in *King Lear*. Smiley surpasses her own goal “not to try or condemn the father, but to gain an acquittal for the daughters.”<sup>95</sup> From a modern reader's perspective we could argue that the incest plot is a cheap trick, a hook. We could point out that modern novels tend not to be best sellers unless they contain dramatic plot lines such as incest.

Even from a feminist perspective, the value of Smiley's intent to give voice to the silenced daughters is overshadowed by the addition of the incest plot, which arguably goes over the top in proving a feminist point. It is an excessive play on our emotions, and as many critics have pointed out, feminist concerns over patriarchal abuse of women and land stand up even without emphasis on the incest theme. For instance, Barbara Mathieson reads the novel from an ecofeminist perspective, emphasizing the rape of the land. Although Mathieson mentions the parallel rape of the daughters, she argues that “Far more than exploring ‘women's issues,’ however, . . . Smiley's novel recounts a universal human tragedy with implications for every being on the planet.”<sup>96</sup> Mary Paniccia Carden also reads the novel as an ecofeminist, and views “‘Smiley's portrait of the American farm’” as one “intended to unsettle American nostalgia for its mythical Rockwellian-hued past, tracking destructive gender-power dynamics to their roots.”<sup>97</sup>

Rather than considering the plot change a cheap trick, perhaps we can justify Smiley's rewriting along the same lines as Shakespeare's rewriting of both the folktale and history of Leir into *King Lear*. Shakespeare commonly “borrow[ed] the plot and most of the characters—and sometimes some of the actual language—from an existing work of history, biography, or drama, and to embroider the plot, add[ed] some minor characters, alter[ed] the major ones, and [wrote] most—or more commonly—all of the dialogue.”<sup>98</sup> In the case of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the plot line is actually an old folk tale motif of a father testing his three daughters. The youngest flunks the test because she answers that “she loves her father as meat loves salt, is driven out; she finds a good master, often a prince, whom she marries, and her father, discovering he has been mistaken, is reconciled to her, sometimes when he comes to the wedding feast and is

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95. Smiley, *Shakespeare in Iceland*, *supra* note 4, at 173.

96. Mathieson, *supra* note 81, at 136.

97. Carden, *supra* note 50, at 182.

98. POSNER, *supra* note 45, at 397. Posner points out that the Renaissance view of plagiarism “was much more limited than the modern notion” and that the Renaissance “borrowing, to us stealing, was a way of expressing respect for illustrious predecessors in a tradition-oriented society.” *Id.* at 399-400.

given meat without salt.”<sup>99</sup> However, in composing the play, Shakespeare probably consulted several versions of the historical Leir story, including the twelfth century version by Geoffrey of Monmouth,<sup>100</sup> the 1587 version in Holished’s *Chronicles*,<sup>101</sup> and other sources,<sup>102</sup> as well as a more contemporary play *King Leir* produced in 1594 by the Queen’s and Earl of Sussex’s Men.<sup>103</sup>

### C. *Smiley’s Rewriting Serves a Feminist Purpose – But Which One?*

*A Thousand Acres* can also be read as a feminist modernization of the primary themes in *King Lear*. If, as many critics have pointed out, *King Lear* is concerned with the antinomy of natural law versus positive law,<sup>104</sup> and of the king’s failure of authority, Smiley has put these themes in a contemporary context.<sup>105</sup> As a radical feminist, Smiley demonstrates Larry’s failure of authority as a sexual being and as a father figure. By raping his daughters he has treated them as his possessions. The rapes are not portrayed as violent acts, but as unnatural violations – the father’s misuse of his daughters. Smiley’s addition of the incest plot is consistent with the view of critics who have suggested that “Lear may be . . . harbouring [sic] a suppressed incestuous desire for Cordelia.”<sup>106</sup>

Rose responds to Larry’s incest with a seething rage.<sup>107</sup> Ginny responds with a realization that “the memory of [her] body” has been taken<sup>108</sup> and with the “riddle . . . of how we judge those who have hurt us

99. SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 3, at 93. The folk tale ends in reconciliation. *Id.*

100. *Id.* at 94. Geoffrey’s Latin account in *Historia regum Britanniae* is the story of Leir’s love-test of his daughters Gonorilla, Regan, and Cordeilla. After the King of France marries Cordeilla, the husbands of Gonorilla and Regan take Leir’s authority, and deprive Leir of his men. Leir goes to France, where the King raises an army that routs the usurpers. Leir is re-instated as king, and at his death, Cordeilla succeeds as queen. *Id.* at 94.

101. *Id.* at 94-95.

102. In John Higgins’ *The Mirror for Magistrates* (1574), “Cordila tells her story in verse.” *Id.* at 95. And in Edmund Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* (1596), the story of Leir is briefly told. Spenser’s changes of the traditional story include changing Cordeilla’s name to Cordelia, and the death of Cordelia by hanging. *Id.* at 95-98.

103. *Id.* at 90.

104. POSNER, *supra* note 45, at 93; Paul M. Shupak, *Natural Justice and King Lear*, 9 CARDOZO STUD. L. IN LIT. 67 (1997).

105. For instance, Carden believes that both Smiley and Shakespeare ask “What happens when the law of male ownership of land and women is interrupted.” Carden, *supra* note 50, at 181.

106. See, e.g., SHAKESPEARE, *supra* note 3, at 39, n. 2; Mathieson, *supra* note 81, at 128, n. 4-5; JANET ADELMAN, SUFFOCATING MOTHERS: FANTASIES OF MATERNAL ORIGIN IN SHAKESPEARE’S PLAYS, *Hamlet to The Tempest* 125-26 (1992).

107. Rose repeatedly warns Ginny not to make her feel sorry because she is fueled by anger. SMILEY, *A THOUSAND ACRES*, *supra* note 2, at 207, 382, 398.

108. *Id.* at 302.



when they have shown no remorse or even understanding.”<sup>109</sup> Rose compares both fathers, Larry and Harold, to Hitler, and doesn’t “care if they suffer” but wants them to show remorse.<sup>110</sup> Rose bases her ethic on an order of “evil and retribution”<sup>111</sup> in which she “*want[s]* what was Daddy’s. I want it. I feel like I’ve paid for it, don’t you. . . . You think a teenaged hooker costs fifty bucks a night? There’s ten thousand bucks.”<sup>112</sup> Ginny’s ethic is based on compassion – she struggles to understand, even if she doesn’t forgive what her father did.<sup>113</sup>

Ginny does not understand her father’s basic character, much less his incest. She says that “[t]rying to understand my father had always felt something like going to church week after week and listening to the minister . . . marshal the evidence for God’s goodness, or omniscience, or whatever,” but the problem was that “[m]y father had no minister, no one to make him gel for us even momentarily. My mother died before she could present him to us as only a man, with habits and quirks and preferences, before she could diminish him in our eyes enough for us to understand him. I wish we had understood him. That, I see now, was our only hope.”<sup>114</sup> A conversation between Ginny and Rose shows their different views about their father:

[Ginny] said, “I don’t understand Daddy. I just don’t.”

“You’re not supposed to, don’t you get it? Where’s the fun in being understood? Laurence Cook, the great I AM.” She laughed again.

“I want to.”

“I don’t. Anyway, I understand him perfectly. You’re making it too complicated. It’s as simple as a child’s book. I want, I take, I do.”<sup>115</sup>

Although Rose articulates a “masculine” ethic of judgment over Larry and accuses Ginny of being “paralyzed” because she is trying to “see[ ] things from his point of view[.]”<sup>116</sup> Ginny cannot articulate her point of view, her understanding, because it is based on a “feminine” ethic of compassion and she has no mother, no feminine language to “make him gel.”<sup>117</sup> These two

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109. *Id.* at 398.

110. *Id.* at 253-54.

111. *Id.* at 254.

112. *Id.* at 327.

113. *Id.* at 399.

114. *Id.* at 20-21.

115. *Id.* at 228.

116. *Id.*

117. ROBIN WEST, *CARING FOR JUSTICE* 23, 35-36 (1997). Postmodern or poststructuralist feminists, such as Irigaray and Cixous, also describe a masculine and feminine ethics,

different types of ethics are contrasted by Robin West.<sup>118</sup> An ethic of justice “is typically associated with universal rules, consistency, reason, rights, the public sphere, and masculine virtues,” whereas an ethic of care “is typically associated with particularity, context, affect, relationship, the private sphere, and femininity.”<sup>119</sup> Therefore, by including incest, and by using a masculine and feminine ethics to differentiate Ginny’s point of view from Rose’s, Smiley provides contemporary audiences with a foothold to understand Shakespeare’s grand themes and Smiley’s feminist concerns.

Maria Aristodemou, in describing Angela Carter’s feminist re-visions of fairy tales, provides some guidelines for judging such re-visions.

By juxtaposing new stories on old texts feminist writers can reveal the oppressive nature of previous stories as well as uncover new voices, new possibilities and new roles for women within them. The use of prior texts is not, however, a simple matter of appropriation or imitation. All texts and languages, legal or literary, are the carriers of ideas and ideologies and it is the task of the new writer to use and abuse the genre to best suit her new purposes. The problem, however, is whether such musings appease by offering imaginary solutions to real problems.<sup>120</sup>

Aristodemou’s emphasis on feminist re-visions as “use and abuse” of the prior text provides a defense for Smiley’s introduction of incest into the Lear story. However, as Aristodemou notes, the reader must still be satisfied that the re-vision’s solution appeases “real problems” of patriarchal oppression.

Smiley provides a counter-narrative, a possible story of the silenced sisters. James Schiff justifies the incest plot as “credible, [it] makes absolute sense, and fits the story. In addition it answers well to its culture.”<sup>121</sup> And Susan Strehle calls the incest plot “a plausible motive for the girls’ actions.”<sup>122</sup> In our society, the likelihood that a father might rape his

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but do not correlate masculine with men, feminine with women because they consider subjectivity not fixed, but changing. See WEEDON, *supra* note 16, at 32-33, 65 (noting that Cixous “avoids the metaphysics of presence in which the speaking subject is the guarantee of meaning, and in this way avoids tying feminine and masculine language to the biological sex of the speaking subject”).

118. WEST, *supra* note 116, at 23, 35-36.

119. *Id.*

120. MARIA ARISTODEMOU, *LAW AND LITERATURE: JOURNEYS FROM HER TO ETERNITY* 157-58 (2000).

121. James A. Schiff, *Contemporary Retellings: A Thousand Acres as the Latest Lear*, 39 *CRITIQUE: STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION* 367, 376 (1998).

122. Susan Strehle, *The Daughter’s Subversion in Jane Smiley’s A Thousand Acres*, 41 *CRITIQUE: STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION* 211, 214 (2000).

daughter is, unfortunately, “credible” and “plausible” as many feminist legal scholars have noted. For instance, Kimberle Crenshaw argues that “battering and rape, once seen as private (family matters) and aberrational (errant sexual aggression), are now largely recognized as part of a broad-scale system of domination that affects women as a class.”<sup>123</sup> West points out that “[t]he centrality of rape and the fear of rape to women’s lives have of course been exhaustively documented in feminist writing over the last twenty years.”<sup>124</sup>

Smiley’s novel is something many legal scholars and feminists, including West, a radical feminist, would argue desperately needs to be heard.<sup>125</sup> In *Caring for Justice*, West claims “there are also political reasons feminist legal theorists should keep our focus on patriarchal violence rather than patriarchal constructs. . . . It is extremely difficult . . . to communicate to men. . . the defining role that sexual violence and the fears of sexual violence play in women’s and girls’ lives.”<sup>126</sup> One of West’s premises is that women’s sexuality and pleasure differ profoundly from men’s because women’s sexual pleasure “is a source of danger” since it makes “[women] vulnerabl[e] to assault, rape, violence, and death.”<sup>127</sup> *A Thousand Acres* demonstrates women’s vulnerability in a way that focuses on patriarchal violence rather than on what West calls patriarchal constructs. The novel circles around the suppressed stories of violence that Larry has enacted against Rose and Ginny. Strehle accepts Smiley’s “revisionary impulse” that “criticize[s] the roaring patriarch and the silent daughter for creating a family discourse in which truth cannot be named or history imagined. Both subversive acts open up a new space in which oppression

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123. Kimberle Crenshaw, *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color*, 43 STAN. L. REV. 1241, 1241-42 (1991).

124. WEST, *supra* note 116, at 101. Compare *United States v. Morrison*, 529 U.S. 598, 614 (2000) (noting that the Violence Against Women Act of 1994 “is supported by numerous findings regarding the serious impact that gender motivated violence has on victims and their families,” but pointing out that “[s]imply because Congress may conclude that a particular activity substantially affects interstate commerce does not necessarily make it so”), with *Id.* at 628-29 (Souter, J., dissenting) (surveying “the mountain of data assembled by Congress, here showing the effects of violence against women on interstate commerce”).

125. See generally WEST, *supra* note 116.

126. WEST, *supra* note 116, at 262. By “patriarchal constructs” West refers to the attention given by poststructuralists to the notion that subjectivity and discourse is constructed, and that patriarchy privileges the male in such constructs. See, e.g., WEEDON, *supra* note 16, at 131 (“Poststructuralist feminism requires attention to historical specificity in the production, for women, of subject positions and modes of femininity and their place in the overall network of social power relations. In the process of constituting subjectivity, the meaning of biological sexual difference is never finally fixed. It is a site of contest over meaning and the exercise of patriarchal power. This discursive contest, in which women can resist particular meanings and power relations, is subject to historical change”).

127. WEST, *supra* note 116, at 114-15.

and abuse can be named and other stories written."<sup>128</sup> The "silencing violence"<sup>129</sup> of the patriarchy can be cured by women's stories. But is this feminist focus a cheap trick?

Ultimately, the way we should unravel this knot is by reading *A Thousand Acres* not as a re-vision of *King Lear*, but as a play on a play.<sup>130</sup> As Aristodemou characterizes some re-visions, *A Thousand Acres* is not merely a use, but an abuse of Shakespeare's play. *A Thousand Acres* is not a cheap trick, but a different story, a creative reworking of *Lear*, that rhetorically starts in a different particular place among particular people speaking a particular language and addressing real concerns.<sup>131</sup> Smiley's story is about incest, a story that should be told and heard. As Martha Minow notes, "[t]he storyteller uses bits of the past to unsettle the present and deprive it of peace of mind."<sup>132</sup> In the past, women's stories have been repressed whereas, "[d]ominant narratives are not called stories. They are called reality."<sup>133</sup> Dominant reality has excluded women's stories, especially those about violence against women.<sup>134</sup> Not surprisingly, feminist scholars have been engaged in "the recovery of suppressed stories of women from the official or accepted accounts of events or conditions in the world."<sup>135</sup> Smiley's re-writing of *Lear* is part of this radical feminist project to recover suppressed stories of violence.

Smiley's novel demonstrates both dominant reality and suppressed feminine reality. For instance, Larry oppresses Ginny's "point of view": "When he talked, he had this effect on me. Of course it was silly to talk about 'my point of view.' When my father asserted his point of view, mine vanished. Not even I could remember it."<sup>136</sup> She and Rose try to maintain their story, their point of view: "we just had to agree on our plan and stick

128. Strehle, *supra* note 121, at 225.

129. WEST, *supra* note 116, at 262.

130. Although Smiley consciously chose the novel as a genre for her re-vision, the novel makes playful references to the story as a play. See Smiley, *Shakespeare in Iceland*, *supra* note 4, at 162; e.g., "But we went straight home, as if there were no escape, as if the play we'd begun could not end." SMILEY, *A THOUSAND ACRES*, *supra* note 2, at 237.

131. See WHITE, *supra* note 1, at 39.

132. Martha Minow, *Stories in Law*, in *LAW'S STORIES* 24, 33.

133. Catharine A MacKinnon, *Law's Stories as Reality and Politics*, in *LAW'S STORIES* 232, 235; see also DALE SPENDER, *MAN MADE LANGUAGE* 90 (2d ed. 1985), who notes, "[i]n my research on language one factor which I have often observed is that while women may appreciate the parameters of male reality, men frequently cannot appreciate the dimensions of female reality."

134. Regina Graycar, *Telling Tales: Legal Stories About Violence Against Women*, 8 *CARDOZO STUD. IN L. AND LIT.* 297 (1996). See also *supra* note 120; *infra* note 140.

135. Graycar, *supra* note 132, at 297-98.

136. SMILEY, *A THOUSAND ACRES*, *supra* note 2, at 190.

to it.”<sup>137</sup> They had to keep a “united front”<sup>138</sup> against the dominant community reality that perceived they threw Larry out in the storm and the community belief that Larry was an upstanding citizen. Ginny and Rose have to “stick with what’s true”:

Rose laughed, then she said, “Did we treat him badly?”

“I know people think we did.”

“But did we? Do you think so?”

...

I said, “I don’t think so, no.”

“Well, then. Stick with what’s true.”

“What’s true?”

“He went out into the storm because he was stubborn and childish.”<sup>139</sup>

What’s true from their personal experience and point of view is a completely different version from that of the community and from that of *King Lear*. As Rose tells Ginny,

But he did fuck us and he did beat us. He beat us more than he fucked us. He beat us routinely. And the thing is, he’s respected. Others of them like him and look up to him. He fits right in. However many of them have fucked their daughters or their stepdaughters or their nieces or not, the fact is that they all accept beating as a way of life. We have two choices when we think about that. Either they don’t know the real him and we do, or else they do know the real him and the fact that he beat us and fucked us doesn’t matter. Either they themselves are evil, or they’re stupid. That’s the thing that kills me. This person who beats and fucks his own daughters can go out into the community and get respect and power, and take it for granted that he deserves it.<sup>140</sup>

Rose and Ginny must continually struggle to provide a counter-narrative that opposes dominant reality. They have to struggle just to remember “what’s true.” At the end of the novel, although Ginny doesn’t tell Caroline about the incest, because it would “wreck [Caroline’s] childhood,”<sup>141</sup> she angrily tells Ty her point of view:

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137. *Id.* at 163.

138. *Id.* at 165.

139. *Id.* at 227-28.

140. *Id.* at 326-27.

141. *Id.* at 390. Earlier, Rose told Ginny that she didn’t think Larry had sex with Caroline: “I’m not sure. I mean, he told me that if I went along with him, he wouldn’t get

You see this grand history, but I see blows. I see taking what you want because you want it, then making something up that justifies what you did. I see getting others to pay the price, then covering up and forgetting what the price was. Do I think Daddy came up with beating and fucking us on his own? . . . No. I think he had lessons, and those lessons were part of the package, along with the land and the lust to run things exactly the way he wanted to no matter what . . . .<sup>142</sup>

Ginny's point of view starkly contrasts with Ty's, who doesn't believe what she has told him, and at any rate, believes that "people should keep private things private."<sup>143</sup> Ty's view corresponds with the dominant reality that suppresses women's stories by relying on a public/private distinction.<sup>144</sup> By the end of the novel, Ginny subverts the patriarchal view by leaving Ty and voicing her own feminine story, what she knows to be true.

Ms. Smiley's challenge to Mr. Shakespeare results in a new reality, the father's incest of his daughter, and serves Smiley's radical feminist purpose of "gain[ing] an acquittal for the daughters." By adding the incest theme, Smiley's rewriting is "[her] own Lear," which succeeds where Shakespeare fails in giving voice to the suppressed Regan and Goneril.

From a postmodern feminist perspective, however, Smiley's novel is a tragedy because it does not liberate the female body. As Aristodemou argues, a re-vision should appease our sense of a solution to the problem.<sup>145</sup>

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interested in her. He presented it as a kind of biological fact. I suspect he never tried anything with her, mostly because she acts like she feels differently toward him than we do. She humors him and sympathizes with him. He doesn't overwhelm her the way he does us.'" *Id.* at 205.

142. *Id.* at 371.

143. *Id.* at 368.

144. Arguably, the majority opinion in *United States v. Morrison*, 529 U.S. 598, likewise constructs a dominant narrative that suppresses women's stories of violence. See Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Disputing Male Sovereignty: On United States v. Morrison*, 114 HARV. L. REV. 135, 136, 170 (2000). MacKinnon claims that "*Morrison* can be seen to employ ostensibly gender-neutral tools to achieve a substantive victory for the social institution of male dominance," and that the majority relegates violence against women to the realm of the private. *Id.*

*Morrison* effectively defines the private as the location where effective redress for sex-based violence is unavailable, ignoring the destruction of women's freedom and equality in private by the lack of public limits on male violence. The private is thus constructed of public impunity. The jealous guarding of this specific line between public and private acts, under which exercise of state power is accountable to public authority but exercise of so-called private power is not, thus becomes one of the central public means of maintaining a system in which male power over women remains effectively without limit.

*Id.* at 170.

145. ARISTODEMOU, *supra* note 119, at 158.

Viewed from a postmodern feminist stance, *A Thousand Acres* fails to liberate the female body. As Hélène Cixous proscribes, woman's writing from the body is not only "subversive" but "volcanic": "If she's a her-she, it's in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the 'truth' with laughter."<sup>146</sup> Like the tragedy of King Lear, *A Thousand Acres* is the tragedy of Ginny Cook, whose body and femininity have been usurped by the patriarchy. Although Ginny has an adulterous affair with Jess, she does not reclaim her sexuality.

When Ginny contemplates having sex with Jess, she becomes aware of her sexual desire: "I could feel my flesh turn electric at these thoughts, could feel sensation gather in my nipples, could feel my vagina relax and open, could feel my fingertips grow sensitive enough to know their own shapes."<sup>147</sup> The next day, when she and Jess do have sex, it is "awkward," but afterwards, she "felt blasted with desire, irradiated, rendered transparent."<sup>148</sup> She correlates her desire for Jess with pure, animal instinct—she feels like "a sow long[ing] to wallow,"<sup>149</sup> and like a "dog."<sup>150</sup>

Ginny's sexual desire for Jess is short-lived and overshadowed by her sexual repression and shame both before and after she remembers the incest. Even before she remembers the incest, she is uncomfortable with her body and sexuality. When she marries Ty, she is nineteen, and "had never touched my breasts except to position them in my brassiere or to wash them with a washcloth."<sup>151</sup> She didn't want her husband "to see [her] body," and sex "ma[de] [her] touchy. It was full of contradictory little rituals":

There had to be some light in the room, if only from the hall. Daytime was better than nighttime, and no surprises. I always wore a nightgown. When he pushed it up, I closed my eyes. When he entered me, though, my eyes were wide open, staring at his face. I hated for him to turn away or look down. I didn't like it if either of us spoke. He made the best of it, and I never refused him.<sup>152</sup>

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146. Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, in *NEW FRENCH FEMINISMS: AN ANTHOLOGY* 245, 258 (Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen trans., Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron eds., 1980).

147. SMILEY, *A THOUSAND ACRES*, *supra* note 2, at 174.

148. *Id.* at 175.

149. *Id.* at 174. Although she has "unaccustomed" sex with Ty in this scene, she had been fantasizing about Jess. *Id.* at 299-300.

150. *Id.* at 186.

151. *Id.* at 300.

152. *Id.* at 301. Rose also describes problems with her sexuality, including that after she had a mastectomy, "[Pete] preferred me to keep my nightgown on if he was in the room,"

Ginny "assumed that all of this was normal,"<sup>153</sup> but after she remembers the incest, she acknowledges that "[o]ne thing Daddy took from me when he came to me in my room at night was the memory of my body."<sup>154</sup> The repressed memory of incest fills her with shame, which poisons her sexuality:

Desire, shame, and fear. A freak, like a woman with three legs, but my freak, that I readily recognized from old days in high school and just after, when every date had the potential to paralyze me. The way I unparalyzed myself then was to break dates with boys who actually attracted me. The best thing about Ty had been that he attracted Daddy. I saw that he was clean and polite and familiar and good. Somehow that enabled the three-legged woman to walk, carefully, and very slowly, but with dignity.<sup>155</sup>

Once she remembers the incest, she no longer has sex with Ty. "Sex itself, which [she] had rarely if ever actually enjoyed, seemed now like it would be too close to those memories [of sex with her father] for comfort."<sup>156</sup>

*A Thousand Acres* is not about *jouissance*, the "direct reexperience of the physical pleasures of infancy and of later sexuality," which patriarchy represses.<sup>157</sup> Smiley's project does not reclaim women's sexuality that has been "confiscated" by men,<sup>158</sup> nor emphasize, as does Luce Irigaray, women's sexuality as multiple and "woman's autoeroticism [as] . . . very different from man's. In order to touch himself, man needs an instrument: his hand, a woman's body, language. . . As for woman, she touches herself in and of herself without any need for mediation."<sup>159</sup> Although *A Thousand Acres* supports Irigaray's description of male sexuality, it fails to re-

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that Pete told her she had a "frenzied dislike of sex," and that she was always looking for a sexual partner who would "supersede Daddy. . . [or] sort of put him in context, or diminish him somehow." *Id.* at 323, 324.

153. *Id.* at 301.

154. *Id.* at 302.

155. *Id.* at 283. Earlier, Ginny says "[s]hame is a distinct feeling. I couldn't look at my hands around the coffee cup or hear my own laments without feeling appalled, wanting desperately to fall silent, grow smaller. More than that, I was uncomfortably conscious of my whole body, from the awkward way that the shafts of my hair were thrusting out of my scalp to my feet, which felt dirty as well as cold." *Id.* at 211-12.

156. *Id.* at 276.

157. Ann Rosalind Jones, *Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of l'Écriture féminine*, in *THE NEW FEMINIST CRITICISM: ESSAYS ON WOMEN, LITERATURE AND THEORY* 361, 362 (Elaine Showalter ed., 1985).

158. Cixous, *supra* note 144, at 250, 247-49.

159. LUCE IRIGARAY, *THIS SEX WHICH IS NOT ONE* 196 (Catherine Porter trans., 1985).



vision female sexuality as a different economy in which women “refused to go to ‘market.’”<sup>160</sup>

Ginny’s rejection of the male economy is clear when she tells Ty her view of her father’s actions, but Larry’s rape of Ginny, once she recalls it, represses her sexuality. As Drucilla Cornell suggests, “Imposed sexual shame severely limits psychic space for free play with one’s sexuality.”<sup>161</sup> Smiley has shown us the violence of the patriarchy, the oppressive force that destroys women’s sexuality: “My body reminds me of Daddy, too, of what it feels like to resist without seeming to resist, to absent yourself while seeming respectful and attentive.”<sup>162</sup> The “gleaming obsidian shard” that Ginny “safeguard[s] above all the others” is “remembering what you can’t imagine”—her father’s “unthinkable urge, pricking him, pressing him, wrapping him in an impenetrable fog of self that must have seemed, when he wandered around the house late at night after working and drinking, like the very darkness.”<sup>163</sup>

Like Ginny’s obsidian shard, Smiley’s re-vision, as Strehle points out, “is more threatening, more like an arrowhead to clutch in the night against the father’s arrival. Larry chose not to remember, in part, because he had no language for what pricked and pressed him; Ginny gains that memory through language – also a product and tool of patriarchal culture, but now seized by the daughter and transformed into the weapon of her resistance.”<sup>164</sup> Ginny’s weapon and Smiley’s re-vision enact resistance to the patriarchy. The result is a feminist rewriting that serves an important political purpose by giving voice to the silenced female narrative, but that ignores utopian possibility<sup>165</sup> because it fails to provide an example of a maternal genealogy, a woman’s language, or female desire that “[wins] back [her] body.”<sup>166</sup>

## V. Conclusion

*A Thousand Acres* is not a cheap trick, intended solely to manipulate the plot and our emotions, but rather, a feminist re-vision or appropriation of *King Lear*. Whether Smiley’s re-vision appeases our sense of a solution to a feminist problem of patriarchal oppression depends on our feminist

160. *Id.*

161. DRUCILLA CORNELL, *THE IMAGINARY DOMAIN* 9 (1995).

162. SMILEY, *A THOUSAND ACRES*, *supra* note 2, at 398.

163. *Id.* at 399.

164. Strehle, *supra* note 121, at 224.

165. See, e.g., IRIGARAY, *I LOVE TO YOU* 10 (Alison Martin trans., 1996) (“I am, therefore, a political militant for the impossible, which is not to say a utopian. Rather, I want what is yet to be as the only possibility of a future.”)

166. Cixous, *supra* note 144, at 256.

stance. From a radical feminist perspective, the re-vision succeeds by giving voice to a traditionally oppressed female reality. From a postmodern feminist perspective, the re-vision is ineffective because it ignores the possibility of a maternal genealogy or feminine sexuality. However, applying this either/or approach unfairly discounts the effects of patriarchal violence on women, and ignores how “[i]mposed sexual shame severely limits psychic space for free play with one’s sexuality.”<sup>167</sup> Effecting resistance to the patriarchy implies a first step – a writing that is “subversive.”<sup>168</sup> The next step, a writing that is “volcanic,” that “smash[es] everything, . . . shatter[s] the framework of institutions,”<sup>169</sup> awaits a different re-vision of *King Lear*.<sup>170</sup>

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167. CORNELL, *supra* note 159, at 9.

168. CIXOUS, *supra* note 144, at 258.

169. *Id.*

170. See Smiley, *Shakespeare in Iceland*, *supra* note 4, at 177-78 (noting that “I find myself having to disavow my most famous and admired novel, *A Thousand Acres*,” because “I have changed over the years,” “my interpretation of *King Lear* . . . has changed in significant ways,” and that “How would I write *A Thousand Acres* now? The fact is, I probably wouldn’t. The inevitability of the characters’ downfall, the almost mechanical working out of their fates, doesn’t appeal to me anymore. I just don’t believe it.”).

