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# “Struck with Her Tongue”: Speech, Gender, and Power in *King Lear*

Kate Downey Hickey  
*Grand Valley State University*

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“Struck with Her Tongue”: Speech, Gender, and Power in *King Lear*

Kate Downey Hickey

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GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

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## ABSTRACT

My thesis addresses the supposed sexism in William Shakespeare's *King Lear* through an examination of the power of speech in the play. Employing a variety of scholarship, I argue that Cordelia exerts power both through prudent speech and in her silence, adhering to Renaissance expectations for women but also defying the unreasonable behavior of her father. I explore how Cordelia's values are recognized by and through other characters, especially Lear's Fool. While Cordelia is often viewed as the opposite of her sisters Goneril and Regan, I provide a reading of the play that treats all three sisters as complex characters rather than stereotypes. Employing Ian Pollock's interpretation in his graphic novel *Illustrated King Lear*, I explicate how Goneril, Regan, and Edmund embrace speech and sex as means to power. After examining misogynistic passages and psychoanalytic interpretations, I determine that Lear's sexism is a symptom of his own unnatural decisions and struggle with loss of power to his daughters. I argue that Lear is a misogynist, but Shakespeare was not. Contextualizing *King Lear* within Shakespeare's body of work and audience expectations, I conclude that Shakespeare intentionally used the mode of tragedy to illustrate the folly of choosing personal desires over loyalty and responsibility. Shakespeare changed his sources to make the Lear story not only darker but also more complex and compelling, intentionally evoking strong audience reactions. I argue that Shakespeare ironically used Cordelia's supposed silence and absence to centralize her as a second tragic hero, ultimately affirming the youngest daughter's voice and value.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

“Shakespeare sucks” is not only a comment I try to train out of my high school students but also one Ira Glass made on Twitter just last year regarding a performance of *King Lear* (qtd. in Mead). In an article for *The New Yorker*, Rebecca Mead reported, “Glass admired Lithgow’s performance but thought the play flawed. ‘No stakes, not relatable,’ he wrote.” While Mead rightly dismisses the value of “relatability” in art (because its purpose is to make us think outside our “selfie”-like “solipsism”), this Twitter feedback illustrates a valid concern about the future of Shakespeare, *Lear* in particular.

In the United States today, women are presumably more liberated than ever, with more opportunities for power and voice in society, and yet, in some ways, they are more objectified than ever. The media are frequently criticized for manipulating the portrayal of women’s bodies through computer editing, while HBO’s *Game of Thrones* takes heat for constant scenes of naked women and even rape. A 2001 film adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, entitled *O* and directed by Tim Blake Nelson, adds to Shakespeare’s story a rape scene between the Othello and Desdemona characters, escalating the violence in a play in which, as in his *King Lear*, women are invited to speak then murderously silenced. Male insecurities about the power women might wield are as prevalent in our modern media as in Shakespeare’s plays, where speech, gender and power intertwine from women’s delightful wit in the comedies to their grotesque silencing in *Titus Andronicus*.

*King Lear*, however, lacks some of the commonly admired qualities of Shakespeare’s works: it does not have the verbal fireworks of *Much Ado About Nothing* or the poetic justice of *Hamlet*; the tragedy even wants comic relief, as Lear’s Fool is more acerbic than humorous. Labeled bleak, sexist, and godless, *Lear* has the reputation for being William Shakespeare’s most

“pessimistic” play, in which the innocent are maligned, women are demonized, the violent and power-hungry run rampant, old men lose their eyes and their minds, and the gods are unfeeling or inactive (West 55). The Restoration period found the play so unacceptable that Nahum Tate simply rewrote the ending to make it happy, a version that persisted in performance from 1681 to 1823 (Van Domelen 132). Yet *King Lear*’s darkness makes it perhaps more important than some of Shakespeare’s other plays for a post-postmodern society, in which people exhibit Lear-like self-obsession and continue to argue over the play’s themes of gender roles, speech rights, and the existence of God.

*King Lear* is often noted for its motif of blindness and sight, but from the first scene,—in which Lear commands his daughters to “Speak!”—speech becomes a crucial basis for power in the play. Because Shakespeare’s language abounds with imagery and sensory comparisons, his work lends itself well to visual genres like film and, more recently, graphic novels. The focus on speech in this particular play makes interpretations of Shakespeare’s language especially important. Ian Pollock’s graphic novel version, *Illustrated King Lear*, sets Shakespeare’s original text in a stark and grotesque world and provides a modern perspective on the play’s imagery and characterization that will inform my reading. While the play does have sexist rants and bleak moments, as usual Shakespeare does not present a fable to be taken at face value. Instead, Shakespeare knows his audience’s expectations and uses them to make us, even today, question our assumptions. The dark elements of *King Lear* enhance the tragic power of the story Shakespeare reweaves from a much older one; provides glimpses of what could have been and what should not be whenever humans are faced with decisions; and ultimately makes audiences question how we handle power, speech, sex, and family in our own lives.

## Historical and Critical Background

The story of King Lear is an old one, and many scholars have been interested in how Shakespeare adapted his sources. Since most of the playwright's plots are not original, Shakespeare's decisions in relation to them greatly affect the assessment of his work. Alan Dundes enlists psychoanalysis to examine the folktale types inherent in the story of Lear, while Sigmund Freud focuses on mythical aspects of the story. Other critics look to versions of the Lear story from Holinshed or Geoffrey of Monmouth. The story is set in Britain in the 100s in a mythical pagan environment, but many of the beliefs and themes in Shakespeare's play are those of his own time. Some of the significant changes between Shakespeare's play and earlier tellings include shifting the focus from the Cordelia character to Lear, adding the Gloucester plot from Sidney's *Arcadia*, and ending with Cordelia and Lear's deaths rather than their triumph.

According to John E. Van Domelen, there were "fifty to sixty versions of the Lear story in existence when Shakespeare's play appeared" but "the end of Shakespeare's treatment of the play is unique" (133n4; 132). With so many versions of *Lear* in the Renaissance cultural atmosphere, Shakespeare no doubt had many influences on his telling, and James H. Forse notes,

More recent scholarship has moved away from the notion Shakespeare and other authors of his time mined "particular and distinct sources" in a favor of a view that they consciously or unconsciously drew not only upon several versions of a particular plot, but also on seemingly unrelated material such as "patterns of thought and logic, commonplace analogies, habitual figures of speech." (Forse 54, quoting Stephen J. Lynch)

Forse examines the comparisons between the 1608 (quarto) printing of Shakespeare's *Lear* and an anonymously written play performed in the early 1590s; concluding that the earlier play catered to the climate of Queen Elizabeth's reign, while Shakespeare's play was tailored to the



lineage and beliefs of King James I and the temperature of the audience at the beginning of his reign. Thomas B. Stroup also treats the play historically but from the perspective of performance needs rather than outside historical factors.

Many readers and viewers of the play focus on the powerful figure of King Lear, his tragic story of betrayal by his daughters and his ultimate death. Critics such as A.C. Bradley and John Middleton Murray saw Lear as the “universal man” and his story as an allegory for the moral struggle all individuals undergo between good and evil (qtd. in Hope and Kelly 234-235n23). Despite recent feminist readings, 21<sup>st</sup> Century productions may follow this older reading of the play: Meredith Skura asserts that “Most productions of *King Lear* today center on Lear: a king, a father, a man who ‘smells of mortality’” (121). However, because the play is so bleak, critics disagree about the moral message of Lear’s story. Van Domelen noted in 1975,

For several years *Lear* has been a critical battlefield upon which the Christianizers and the existentialists have been disputing the meaning or significance of this profoundly disturbing play. To those who see Lear as depending on a Christian framework of values for its meaning, the play is a terrible theodicy, an effort to explain the nature of evil as it works itself out in society and nature. To those who see Lear as deriving its values solely from the choices of the characters, especially those of Lear himself, the play is viewed as a profoundly pessimistic vision of the human condition. (132)

Some take Gloucester’s side that the gods are merely playing with men, while critics like Robert West and Johannes Allgaier maintain that the play is consistent with Christian theology. Van Domelen himself avoids the religious issue and instead looks at the meaning of Cordelia’s death from a thematic perspective, asserting that Cordelia represents love in the play.

Particularly since the 1980s, feminist and psychoanalytic readings have questioned the male perspective of the play. In linking feminist and Marxist criticism, Gayle Greene notes feminist techniques appropriate for addressing both sex and power in Shakespeare, including the analysis of cultural context and the relevance of literary works for contemporary social change. Her approach advocates valuing women's own words, not just what is said about them, a standard this paper tries to achieve. Feminist critics are concerned that Shakespeare's changes from his sources make his play more male-centered: as Meredith Skura puts it, "Shakespeare's play crowds Cordelia out of the main plot"; though she argues that the addition of the Edgar plot balances the parent-child ratio in the play, it does not provide a gender balance (122). Skura also claims that Cordelia is "harsher . . . more rebellious and less exemplary than her counterpart" in Shakespeare's chronicle source *King Lear* (126, 127). Skura asserts that Shakespeare marginalizes the daughter character to center on Lear and Edgar, representing through Edgar the historical ascension of King James over the pagan history of England represented by Lear's family. Finally, Skura traces in the play connections to Harsnett's contemporary account of Catholic priests violating servant girls in the process of supposedly exorcising their demons, which supports an underlying theme of women's sexual and religious evil.

Many scholars consider the possibility of the Oedipal complex in *Lear*. Alan Dundes and Norman Holland base their analysis on folklore sources, and Peter Rudnytsky argues that the play represents a hatred of female sexuality. John McLaughlin acknowledges incestuous tensions in *Lear* but focuses on applying Alfred Adler's birth order psychology to the play, explaining the behavior of Lear, his daughters, and Edmund as a result of their need for "social, political, and sexual power" (37). Lynda E. Boose views Shakespeare's plays in the context of the wedding ceremony, exploring its role as an outlet for father-daughter tensions in Shakespeare's plays.

Coppélia Kahn shifts from an Oedipal framework to the preoedipal psychology of the mother. Based on Renaissance child-rearing customs in which women are denigrated in order to help boys form a masculine identity, Kahn argues that Lear's behavior is a reaction to his inability to have Cordelia as a daughter-mother figure, as well as his general denial of the mother within himself ("The Absent Mother in *King Lear*"). Similarly, Gayle Whittier explores how tragedy ensues when the men in the play try to use words as a substitute for the procreative power that belongs to women; Lear's attempt to create Cordelia as his male heir leads to "stillbirth" (394).

Laura Hope and Philippa Kelly, in their article about dramaturgy and *Lear*, make assumptions about the play that are common to feminist criticism: the play has a "clear gender bias," "offers some of the most famously misogynistic lines in English-speaking theatre," and concludes with the subordination of women (229, 230). In this vein of criticism, Catherine S. Cox traces the Christian tradition's alleged stereotypes for femininity, *virgo* and *virago*, to argue that the women in the play are ultimately silenced for their characteristics as "unnatural" women (156). Hope and Kelly take this problem back to the beginning: From the Greeks, through the Renaissance, and even somewhat today, they argue, the theatre was a place "in which women initially had no role except as narrowly drawn characters performed by men, for men, in plays written by men, expressing male values before an audience that was *not* exclusively male" (Hope and Kelly 225, emphasis original). They cite Charlotte Higgins, who "points to Shakespeare as a source of this problem" (Hope and Kelly 225):

Shakespeare was, of course, writing for all-male companies; and, although he wrote transcendent parts for women, there are not very many. Of his 981 characters, 826 are male and 155 are female (16 percent). Women have less to say also: of roles with more

than 500 lines, only 13 percent are female. The most wordy of Shakespeare's heroines, Rosalind, has 730 lines. Hamlet, his most loquacious hero, has 1,539. (Hope and Kelly 232n2)

Shakespeare's use of women in his plays is consistent with his time period: his actors were male, and women were in fact expected to speak less than men, as Helen Wilcox explores in the tragicomedies. *Lear* follows this pattern: "In contrast to Lear's voluminous speeches (he has 166 lines in the Folio's first scene alone), Regan has only 182 lines in the entire (Folio) play, Goneril 149, and Cordelia 107" (Hope and Kelly 234n22).

Because much of theater depends on the script, speech is at the center of the gender issue in many Shakespeare productions as well as in the play *Lear* tries to stage in the love test.

According to Maureen Quilligan, "Shakespeare's theat[re] not only staged female obedience for the visual pleasure of its male auditors, but also outlined the parameters of discursive possibility for its female spectator" (qtd. in Hope and Kelly 234). Cordelia's affirmation within the play as one who speaks softly and gently while Goneril and Regan are railed against and meet horrible deaths would seem to convey the Renaissance ideals of silent, chaste women to the audience.

Director Gale Edwards voices the dilemma with staging the play in a society conscious of gender inequality: "It certainly wasn't just a matter of siding with the daughters, more a matter of overcoming the fact that romance, sexuality and women's outlook on stage is all generally coloured by men . . . to the point that women in the audience don't see it as wrong any more" (qtd. in Hope and Kelly 229).

Just as feminist criticism attempts to rethink previous views, recent criticism asks us to rethink our critique once again. Laura Hope and Philippa Kelly operate under feminist assumptions, but also consider how dramaturgy might provide a sexist play like *King Lear* with

more potential to connect to modern audiences and improve theater going. Pankaj Sharma departs from feminist assumptions entirely, seeing Cox's, Kahn's and Rudnytsky's readings, along with other feminist readings such as Kathleen McLuskie's "The Patriarchal Bard," as too limiting. Sharma asserts that while feminist criticism is valuable, "post feminism will . . . help us in restoring a balanced reading of characters as human beings first and man and woman later on" (446). In this paper, I aim to incorporate a variety of views and question some of the assumptions made by recent criticism. I find a feminist reading valuable for listening to women's voices and considering multiple perspectives on their characters; however, ultimately my reading sees their behavior as applicable to all human beings regardless of gender. Likewise, I think that revisiting older criticism and historical insight in the light of recent views can provide a more complete analysis of the play.

My argument combines close reading of the play and of Pollock's graphic novel with historical and feminist criticism to examine the role of speech for the women in the play. I enlist the feminist practice of questioning the patriarchal viewpoint but challenge feminist and psychoanalytic interpretations that I believe omit the larger themes and power of Shakespeare's work. I argue that within a patriarchal structure compounded by Lear's own unjust and selfish behavior, the women in *King Lear* find ways to achieve power through speech and sex. Regardless of gender, the play reveals the negative consequences of self-centered desires, whether for sex, power, or the relinquishing of responsibility. I draw particularly on Renaissance beliefs and Shakespeare's sources and dramatic practices to illuminate how Shakespeare intentionally manipulates gender conventions to create complex characters and illustrate human folly. I assert that Shakespeare's Cordelia is a tragic heroine, whose absence, silence, and even

death ultimately affirm her values of plain-speaking, loyalty, and loving sacrifice, not just for women but for all human beings.

### **A Note on the Text**

Some of the differences between the quarto (1608) and folio (1623) versions of the play are pertinent to my analysis. Following the lead of Thomas B. Stroup, I take the quarto to be a better representation of Shakespeare's original intent, whereas the folio reflects the needs of production. Therefore, most quotations come from the quarto text found in *The Pelican Shakespeare* publication of both versions, edited by Stephen Orgel; or from my much-loved and abused copy of *The Necessary Shakespeare* edited by David Bevington, which features a composite version of the quarto and folio texts. Quotations as they pertain to Ian Pollock's graphic novel are noted with his page numbers. For references to other plays, I utilized David and Ben Crystal's website *Shakespeare's Words*, which includes online texts of all of Shakespeare's plays.

## II. CORDELIA'S "SILENCE"

In the first scene of the play, Lear gives his daughters the so-called love test, asking them what they can say to prove who loves him most. The youngest daughter, Cordelia, famously answers, "Nothing, my lord" (I.i.78). In his introduction to the Pelican's combined printing of quarto and folio texts, Stephen Orgel claims the first scene is not reminiscent of the Jacobean court in which the play was performed but rather "a fairy tale world, where momentous decisions are determined by trifles" (xxxiii); he also asserts that the scene can be read in terms of a loyalty oath, "the larger question of the nature of power," or the debate between rhetoric and plain-speaking (xxxiii). The threads identified by Orgel—fairy tale, speech, and power—are interconnected and integral to the play, especially Cordelia's role within it.

While I agree with many of Orgel's observations, I disagree with his assertion that due to its fairy tale nature, "The opening moments of the play invite us not to take the action seriously" (xxiii). Rather, Shakespeare immediately turns convention on its head and shocks the audience into the seriousness of the situation Lear creates. According to Alan Dundes, the fairy tale predecessors to Shakespeare's story focus on Cordelia and end in her victory, while Shakespeare makes Lear central instead and sets the play on a path for tragedy. However, as we shall see, Cordelia's original strength in the story is not lost in Shakespeare's version. In the first scene, Lear's love test privileges words as proof of love and endows them with power, through which Shakespeare establishes Cordelia's paradoxical centrality to the story and absence from the text.

### **The Love Test**

In the famous first scene, the court is gathered to see which suitor Cordelia will have: the focus is on the youngest daughter, on marriage, on legacy. As in *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare

manipulates the audience through the conventions of comedy and tragedy by beginning a tragedy in the comic manner of a daughter's introduction to her intended suitor. Orgel points out that while tragedies typically focus on nations and politics rather than the familial dynamics of the comedy, "even overtly political tragedy, for Shakespeare, invariably starts in the family" (xxxii). Both familial and political systems in the Renaissance were predicated on a hierarchy that made power a major concern of both. The audience enters the world of *Lear* first on a familial plane, but Lear immediately shifts the focus away from Cordelia's future to that of the kingdom when he proposes breaking up the land at that moment. Yet Lear couches the political decision as a contest for his love, making the political familial, wielding his kingly power over both realms. Lynda Boose likens the scene to a marriage ritual, noting C.L. Barber's observation that "*Lear* begins with a failure of the passage that might be handled by the marriage service, as it is structured to persuade the father to give up the daughter" (qtd. in Boose 345). Like the father walking his daughter down the aisle and handing her over to a husband, Lear wants acknowledgement from his daughters one last time, but he confuses the giving of Cordelia with the division of his kingdom.

King Lear not only creates a fairy tale situation by mixing politics with family but also by claiming that one answer will have an absolute, long-term benefit to the speaker. The daughters must gauge what will please their father to earn a portion of his kingdom, like the young woman made to guess Rumpelstiltskin's name to learn his secret to wealth. The fairy tale echoes continue as Lear goes down the line from eldest to youngest, similar to Goldilocks choosing beds or, as Sigmund Freud notes, the choice among three caskets as in *The Merchant of Venice*. According to this fairy tale trope, the last option is always the best, so that the audience awaits an answer from Cordelia that will, in the words of Jane Austen, "amaze the whole room" (ch. 18).



However, Shakespeare uses the device of the aside to warn the audience that the story is not a fairy tale this time. While Lear is commanding the attention of the court, Cordelia commands the attention of the audience before it is her turn to speak: her asides punctuate the conversation between Lear and his other two daughters. The first to answer the challenge of who loves Lear the most, Goneril replies, “I do love you more than words can wield the matter, . . . A love that makes breath poor and speech unable”; she immediately undermines this assertion by proceeding to use an abundance of words (senses, rights, virtues, even life itself) to argue her superior love (I.i.48, 53). Witnessing this hypocritical, hyperbolic, and smarmy monologue, the third sister wonders, “What shall Cordelia do? Love and be silent.” (I.i.55). Regan then trumps Goneril: her answer is longer and goes so far as to claim that only her father’s love can make her happy. To which Cordelia laments:

Then poor Cordelia!

And yet not so, since I am sure my love’s

More richer than my tongue. (I.i.69-71)

Cordelia hears her sisters’ impossible claims and considers not only if she can respond in such a way but also if it is appropriate to do so. She realizes that she cannot and it is not: the problem is one of both skill *and* principle. When Lear asks, “What can you say to win a third more opulent / Than your sisters?”, “Nothing” is merely the truthful answer, to which she respectfully attaches “my lord” (I.i.77-78, 78). Cordelia’s short asides set up her sisters’ responses as inappropriate and prepare the audience for the response that shocks her father, who has not heard her thought process. While Cordelia thinks carefully about the unnecessary and self-indulgent question Lear poses, he responds to her with cliché: “Nothing can come of nothing” (I.i.79). Obviously something can come of “nothing,” for he next cautions her to “mend your speech a little / Lest it

may mar your fortunes” (I.i.83-84). While Lear is shocked by Cordelia’s response, Shakespeare constructs the interaction so that the audience is not. We are privy to Cordelia’s dilemma about how to respond, understanding that the other sisters’ responses are inappropriate and that Cordelia does not proudly plan to defy her father, only to say what she can manage.

Lear requests a show of words, and the first two daughters give him one. In this sense, their responses are much like Freud’s caskets: Regan’s response is longer and more purple than Goneril’s; Cordelia is expected to bring the gold to their iron and silver. However, in the fairy tale, as in much of Shakespeare’s work, appearances can be deceiving. The showiest box does not contain the true value. Cordelia’s one-word answer reveals more genuine love for her father than either of her sisters’ does, as their actions throughout the play prove. Orgel is correct about the fairy tale absurdity of this situation, because Shakespeare’s characters are not the black and white paper dolls of a romance world. Regan, Goneril, and Cordelia are not boxes of gold, silver, and lead, but rather women whose livelihood is dependent upon how they respond to the men in their lives. The fairy tale situation allows the audience to see the sense of following Lear’s command as Goneril and Regan do and thereby the powerlessness of their situation as women. Despite the unfair power structures, Shakespeare sets up Cordelia’s integrity as the better response. The playwright takes a flat fairy tale trope and literally embodies it, effectively helping the audience to understand Lear’s unreality and to sympathize with Cordelia.

Despite Shakespeare’s positioning of Cordelia as correct, the youngest sister has been criticized for her terse answer. Meredith Skura claims that Cordelia is “more morally ambiguous . . . harsher . . . more rebellious and less exemplary than her counterpart [Cordella] in the old play” *King Lear*, one of Shakespeare’s sources (126, 127). Cordelia, “not Lear, calls up the ‘nothing’ at the center of Shakespeare’s play. Twice prompted for more, she echoes Lear’s

account-book attitude toward emotion, and replaces Cordella's innocent claim with a tit-for-tat legalism" (Skura 126). John McLaughlin understands Cordelia in a similar way. Examining Shakespeare's *Lear* in terms of Alfred Adler's psychology of power and birth order, McLaughlin determines that, as the youngest child, Cordelia is accustomed to getting her way. Unable to be hypocritical like her sisters, Cordelia realizes she will lose the love test, so "instead of entering into the spirit of the contest she will insist upon the literal adherence to the rules...If love is to be quantified, then she will play the game with a vengeance" (McLaughlin 39). Both Skura and McLaughlin regard Cordelia not as resisting Lear's game in contrast to her sisters but simply playing it in a different way—with a detached, eye-for-an-eye mentality.

Skura and McLaughlin are correct in giving Cordelia credit for savvy and intention—contrary to much feminist criticism, Cordelia is not passively worked upon by the men of the play, but does exert agency through her speech. However, as we will see, speech is one of the few resources women like Cordelia and her sisters had against men, especially a king. Similar to Skura and McLaughlin, Catherine S. Cox claims that Cordelia "takes too literally her father's request" and fails to achieve the play's final command to "Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say": "while her 'nothing' appropriately articulates the silence befitting the virgo, it is followed by a sequence of scolding remarks that are neither truthful nor decorous" (147). Trying to fit Cordelia into a gender stereotype is problematic because she will not be silenced but neither will she take further liberties inappropriate to her situation. I disagree with Cox: Cordelia does in fact say what she feels—as much as she can under the circumstances, for Lear's request puts her in a no-win situation according to the Renaissance speech conventions I will examine below. Criticizing Cordelia's response to Lear blames the victim of his injustice.

The problem is not with Cordelia's response, but with Lear's request. Laura Hope and Philippa Kelly couch the situation in terms of acting:

[in] the final scene of his working life, Lear uses the only means materially 'known' to him: the ceremonial authority structure that is, he believes, himself. Lear's deeper meaning is not institutional but personal, and he misunderstands the distinction between public and private, as well as the cost of this misunderstanding. So, too, apparently does his youngest daughter; she cannot, or will not, take direction. If the two of them can be 'scripted' for a moment as director and actress—he awaiting her lines and she unable or unwilling to deliver them—what they badly need is a dramaturge who can explain them to each other.

(228)

While Hope and Kelly correctly identify Lear's mistake, I disagree that Cordelia misunderstands the direction; her asides prove that she very much understands the situation and does not blindly respond but rather thinks very hard about how to deal with the situation her father has created. Gayle Whittier interprets Lear's misjudgment as an attempt to impose upon his daughters the constructed power of naming (as in the naming of legitimate heirs): "The format of Lear's rhetorical contest in Act 1 . . . is paradigmatically male. . . . The 'lovetest' itself follows an almost chivalric formula and slips easily from ceremony to conflict"; Cordelia merely "exposes the fraudulence of rhetoric" (373, 374). Lear pretends to give his daughters the male prerogative to speak, but resents Cordelia when she takes him up on it.

Lear himself acknowledges the injustice of his actions. He introduces the test as "our darker purposes," which, according to the Pelican footnote means "secret plan," but the imagery of darkness implies evil intent and prefigures Edgar's "dark and vicious place" that produced his nefarious brother Edmund (I.i.35; V.iii.168). While Lear's darker purposes are often interpreted

as incestuous desire, I do not think his meaning is sexual. Edgar's line refers to Edmund's status as a bastard, but Stephen Orgel points out that "no stigma was attached to bastardy itself"; instead Edmund is a younger brother attempting to defy primogeniture (xxxvii). Edmund and Lear both darkly contradict Renaissance customs. Despite the semblance of a contest for the kingdom, the love test is all about Cordelia, as Lear predetermines to provide her with "A third more opulent" than her sisters' (I.i.86). Inheritance law, however, stipulated that all female heirs were to have property divided equally among them (Orgel xl); Lear defies this custom twice in first planning to give Cordelia more than her other sisters, then denying her the proper share. Perhaps he realizes he was being unjust to begin with and must save face when Cordelia's response exposes his irrationality. Lear also revokes Cordelia's dowry, the only bargaining power a single woman had in the Renaissance. Finally, Lear tries to maintain power after having given up the right to it; he has not only created his own problem, but violated the will of God, for kings were believed to have divine right to rule, and a hefty responsibility toward others accompanied this right. James Forse asserts that Shakespeare's play "reflected 'through a glass darkly'" some of the political "principles" of the time (65). Lear's plan is dark because it is secret and also because it subverts his responsibilities. While Orgel uses the terms *courtly*, *familial*, and *game* to describe the love test, it is none of the above, for the test results in the very real disintegration of both a kingdom and a family (xxxiii).

### **The Heart-Tongue Convention**

While Lear unreasonably relinquishes his responsibilities for his kingdom and daughters, Cordelia ultimately decides to adhere to the societal conventions that her father throws to the wind. She responds appropriately according to Renaissance ideas about speech, which stipulated

that the words of the tongue match the feelings of the heart—essentially that one speak with honesty. According to John L. Harrison, “The convention of heart-tongue was a popular one in the literature of the time . . . It had been widely used in medieval literature, and continued in use throughout the seventeenth century” (2). Such imagery equates the terms *tongue*, *mouth*, *words*, *speech*, and *lips* and conversely associates *mind*, *brain*, and *heart*, assuming integrity should be held between the two: “In the good man the tongue closely expresses the feelings and ‘thoughts’ of the heart” (Harrison 2, 3). Therefore, a disparity between speech and feeling/thought had consequences “not only of physical but of moral health” (Harrison 4). When Lear asks his daughters to put their love for him into words, he positions them to reveal their own mental and emotional health, while his response to them illustrates his own. Lear himself verifies the connection by asking Cordelia “But goes this with thy heart?” (I.i.94). Her reticence is for him indicative that she is “untender” to which Cordelia counters, no, just “true” (I.i.95, 96). Cordelia’s truthful words are morally correct, according to the heart-tongue convention.

John E. Van Domelen’s analysis of the heart in *Lear* confirms not only its moral symbolism, but also the self-control necessary to follow one’s heart. In his article “Why Cordelia Must Die,” Van Domelen tries to make sense of the death that he claims affects audiences more than any other in Shakespeare. Van Domelen reasons that Shakespeare’s “unique” ending illustrates that he “regarded the murder of Cordelia as part of the essential meaning of the play” and that this meaning is thematic: Cordelia is a “symbol of ideal love,” the unselfish, unchanging love of Sonnet 116, and Lear must learn to see past the “fool’s paradise” of having no responsibility in order to feel and practice such love; “The final step for Lear is the removal of the last temptation, Cordelia herself” for “our mundane strengths and goods hinder the soul’s development, while their loss benefits it” (132). Van Domelen’s argument is consistent with the

message of many of Shakespeare's works: Shakespeare affirms the power of love, from young lovers ultimately getting their way in the comedies to Iago twisting Othello's strong love to make him jealous. Lear's mistakes and punishments are all because of heart-related deficiencies, from being too open with his feelings to misjudging real love; while the villains are "coldly reasonable," denying all love (Van Domelen 133, 134). Judging by those who survive, the meaning of the play seems to be the importance of acknowledging a love that loyally stays with its objects despite personal danger (Van Domelen 133). Van Domelen also points out the concluding lines of the play, which advocate the heart-tongue convention: "Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say" (134). Cordelia set the example for this verbal integrity in the first scene.

As Van Domelen argues, the language in the play confirms Cordelia's centrality to this love lesson. While Cordelia is to some extent honest, she worries, "I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth"; Cordelia is in the situation Goneril claimed to be in, but rather than voicing heartless flattery, Cordelia just admits to being "[u]nhappy" about not being able to express her feelings (I.i.80-81, 79). This deficiency is actually a virtue, though Lear does not realize it: "The weight of her love is too heavy, too massive, too firmly rooted in her heart to be mined and turned into verbal currency" (Van Domelen 133). Cordelia's verbal nothing is her heart's huge something. Arnold Isenberg notes this is "the idea embedded quite casually in so many passages: that the facility of feeling is in inverse relation to its depth. Hamlet cannot profess his friendship for Horatio without a reaction of distaste; he is touched to the quick by the slightest allusion to his outward show of grief" (188). The fault is not Cordelia's inability to express her feelings but Lear's expectation that she do so. As Catherine Cox acknowledges, if Cordelia's "inability to speak" corresponds with "the inefficacy of language to convey true affection" then "silence is

Cordelia's only proper response" (147). Cordelia is the only sister whose words are consistent with her thoughts and feelings in the first scene, even down to humble thoughts of her own inadequacy. Eventually, Cordelia does come to literally heave her heart into her mouth in grief over her father: "she heaved the name of father / Pantingly forth, as if it pressed her heart, cried" out about her father's treatment at the hands of her sisters (Quarto IV.3a.26-28). *Courageous and encouraging* for her father when she returns, Cordelia comes to embody her name, which comes from the root *cor-* meaning heart (DeForest).

Not only does Cordelia's name represent her loving character, but it also suggests her centrality to the entire play. Van Domelen examines the use of the word *heart* in the play to help him argue that it is at the center of the play's meaning:

*King Lear* is concerned with essential human nature, the core of our being, and it is the *heart* of the matter in the play that Shakespeare is dissecting. . . . The name Cordelia may have precipitated this concern, as it suggests the Latin word for heart. If we were to answer Juliet's question of what is in a name, here the answer would be everything. The word heart occurs 48 times in *Lear*, more than in any other play Shakespeare wrote. And the heart is not just a matter of imagery: it is imbedded in the action as well. Edmund has a change of heart near the end of the play. Goneril stabs herself in the heart and dies, and Kent at the end of the play is dying of an overstrained heart. Finally, both Lear and Gloucester die of heartstrain caused in each instance by a mixture of joy and grief. (133)

Symbolically, Cordelia is the heart of the play, as her name suggests. In David and Ben Crystal's glossary *Shakespeare's Words*, the first definition for *heart* is "courage, spirit, valour" while the second is "spirit, soul, essence" (216). If Cordelia is both the symbol of courage and of the very soul, laid bare in its truth-speaking, consistent throughout the play, then her exile and



disappearance from much of the text does not lessen her importance to the theme or to Lear: “She is the fixed point of love from which Lear wanders and to which he returns” (Van Domelen 135). Without Cordelia, there would be no play. Heart imagery echoes throughout the play in association with true feeling, as Van Domelen argues, echoing Cordelia’s true worth in her absence. The heart is also often connected to speech. When Lear sets words as the standard for expressing love, they maintain power throughout the play. Lear fails to see Cordelia’s heartfelt truth because he expected flattery; his own ego overrides his daughter’s integrity. But a mere four scenes after the love test he comes to realize “I did her wrong,” after Goneril’s actions prove the warped heart-tongue connection of his eldest daughter (I.v.24). The king sees that Goneril “struck me with her tongue / Most serpentlike upon the very heart” II.iv.135-6). While Cordelia’s speech does express the feelings of her heart, Goneril uses her mouth hypocritically and then viciously to gain the upper hand.

Cordelia is morally correct not only in accordance with the heart-tongue convention but also with Renaissance expectations for women. Helen Wilcox explains, “Clever and Dodd’s household advice book of 1621 sums up the negative starting point for women’s access to language: ‘silence is the best ornament of woman’. . . On the whole, passivity is the norm for the women characters [in Shakespeare’s tragicomedies], and they need specific reasons to speak . . . a woman waits until invited or forced by circumstances to speak” (Wilcox 97, 99, 100). Accordingly, in Lear’s love test, the king explicitly commands each daughter in turn to “Speak” (I.i.54, 68, 86). When women did speak, they were expected to follow certain guidelines. In examining the tragicomedies, Wilcox finds that “appropriate speech is . . . seen as one of the attractive features of the younger women . . . Silence may have been the ‘best ornament’, but gentle speech could also be an acceptable embellishment of womanhood” (100). Cordelia

initially determines that silence is the best course of action, but when pressed, speaks little; Lear must question her to get her to explain. Lear puts his daughters in a no-win situation: they must either defy society's expectations or their king and father. Despite the fact that Lear's question neither follows his intentions (to give Cordelia more) nor protocol for inheritance (to divide equally between daughters), Cordelia tries to find the happy medium by following his command to speak and doing so in few words. As Wilcox notes, Lear ultimately confirms the Renaissance ideal for women's speech in Cordelia: "Her voice was ever soft, / Gentle, and low, an excellent thing in woman" (Wilcox 97; *Lear* 5.3.277-8). Although Lear initially punishes Cordelia for her silence, in the end it is her vocal restraint that he praises.

In examining the tragicomedies, Helen Wilcox proves the paradox that while Renaissance women are expected to be silent or to speak softly when spoken to, speech is often their only recourse for power. Cordelia attempts the latter convention, yet she also takes advantage of the power of speech. Meredith Skura contends, "She is right to defy her father for love, as Juliet and Desdemona are right to defy theirs at the beginnings of their tragedies. Yet Lear is hardly ready to hear her words, and, unlike Desdemona's, such words are hardly necessary. Cordelia has something of Shakespeare's untamed comic heroines in her—Hermia, Katherine, Beatrice—as well as something of Cordella" (Skura 126). I disagree that Juliet was right to defy her father; she precipitously created a situation in which she had to defy him and failed to fully explain the circumstances. Hermia, Katherine, Beatrice, and Desdemona, on the other hand, are indeed like Cordelia: they have the mettle to vocalize to men their thoughts regarding their own futures. Most of these heroines figure in comedies, and as noted earlier, the defiance of a father for love is a common comedic convention. Skura rightly notes that Cordelia's words are unnecessary, because her father should know their truth already.

As Wilcox's paradox implies, though women do have recourse to speech, its cultural inappropriateness can be disastrous. As innocent as Cordelia appears, she makes her own verbal power play, and her heart does not match her tongue because she cannot express what she feels. The result of this rift between tongue and heart is Cordelia's loss of power as princess, as heir, and as eligible maid. Lear's overreaction to her is also due to imbalance: as Harrison notes regarding *Measure for Measure*, "the rigid application of the letter of the law is yet another result of dependence on tongue rather than on the unity of tongue and heart" (Harrison 8). In this tragedy, hypocrisy of tongue and heart shifts the balance of power. Lear appears to give his daughters power through speech: the ability to talk into existence a better deal for themselves, but effectively he violates the inheritance and marriage traditions that provide at least some extent of power and protection for women. Cordelia is in a double bind: speech is her only source of power, yet she tries to speak appropriately and ends up only making matters worse for herself.

### **The Power of Silence**

Helen Wilcox reads Lear's eventual realization about Cordelia's soft speech as affirmation of the Renaissance belief that women should be silent or nearly so, thereby "avoiding the sharp shrewish sounds associated with rebellion and misrule" (97). According to Wilcox, speech was also synonymous with chastity, with the result that Lear's daughters are often perceived and portrayed as opposites: Cordelia is silent and virtuous while Goneril and Regan are outspoken and evil. Peter Rudnytsky calls this a "polarization of women into angels or demons, madonnas or whores," while Catherine Cox terms the types *virgo* and *virago* (Rudnytsky 301). The 1980s featured a rise in feminist criticism that tries to expose such male-created stereotypes, but the

decade also produced a graphic novel version of Shakespeare's text that reinforces antipodal readings of the sisters. Ian Pollock's *Illustrated King Lear*, published in 1984, was one of the first to use the increasingly popular medium of comics to present Shakespeare's original text with illustrations that cater to our current visual culture of film, comics, and video games. As Editor Becky Koh explains, "Plays lend themselves to graphic novels so well because they are visual. So much of Shakespeare is not in the text. When you add the graphic element, it makes the whole thing come alive" (qtd. in Miller). Graphic novels of Shakespeare's works have the potential to bring the text alive but inherently involve interpretation, not unlike a stage performance. As such, I will argue that while Pollock's modernized illustrations build upon the imagery embedded in Shakespeare's original text in a way that enhances our understanding of the interplay between speech, power, and sex in the play; his depictions of Cordelia further a flat characterization that I aim to disprove.

Ian Pollock visually emphasizes Cordelia's silence in comparison to her sisters, falling into the polarized characterization:



(Pollock 3)

Unlike her elder sisters, Cordelia is depicted with small features, most notably a small mouth, in a white face, the color of innocence and purity. She wears a simple black dress, and appears demure, less grotesque than her sisters, who are featured with bulbous, bright features and clothing, gleaming red lips, and mouths parted open to black chasms. Alan Dundes has identified

*King Lear* as a Cinderella-type folktale, and Pollock depicts Cordelia as a mousy Cinderella, while Goneril and Regan's exaggerated features suggest feet too big for dainty glass slippers. Pollock translates the fairy tale sisters into the modern blonde, brunette, red head trifacta, and naturally, Cordelia is the innocent blonde. When Cordelia must confess, "Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave my heart into my mouth," Pollock zooms in on her tiny mouth (Pollock 4). Scott McCloud, a comic book artist known for his efforts to create a lexicon for analyzing comics, notes that "viewer-identification is a specialty of cartooning"; readers can more easily see themselves in iconically depicted characters (42). Throughout the play, Pollock provides physical detail for Goneril and Regan that suggests realism while presenting Cordelia with a white face and small, dot-like features that suggest the iconic smiley face. Not only is Cordelia illustrated in a way that unconsciously makes her more likable to readers, but she is also visually opposite to her sisters in color and proportion. The artist's choices illustrate a prevailing characterization of Lear's daughters as tightlipped and innocent versus loudmouthed and lewd. Not only do critics tend to group the daughters into two categories, but they also categorize Cordelia as either the terse, heartless woman of Skura's analysis or the silent victim of Pollock's illustrations.

However, as I have argued that Cordelia rightly resists her father's love test, I also maintain that she finds power in both speech and silence. Vowing to "be silent" (I.i.55) does not make Cordelia passive or powerless. In a game where flattery and lies are expected, Cordelia's relative silence actually gives her power. Goneril and Regan seek to gain power by jumping through the hoop Lear has provided through his own power, but Cordelia asserts power over them all by calling Lear's bluff and adhering to decorum. In the unfair "game" Lear proposes,

Stephen Orgel argues:

His daughters understand perfectly what is required of them; they have only to play their parts. Cordelia, refusing to produce her accolade, is disrupting both a courtly ceremonial and family game, and it comes as a profound surprise to everyone present. In insisting on her right to silence, she is not only refusing to play, but is changing the rules. (xxxiii)

When Lear, as king and father, orders Cordelia to speak, her noncompliance challenges his power over her and sends him into a rage. Even the talkative Goneril realizes she can use silence to exert power over Lear, telling Oswald, “When he returns from hunting / I will not speak with him. Say I am sick” (I.iii.8-9). Again, the refusal to discourse makes Lear indignant and gives Goneril even further reason to control her father’s company and movement. Although women were expected to speak sparingly in the Renaissance, Lear’s daughters exert influence by refusing to speak when asked. These women find agency in the knowledge of society’s expectations, sexist though they may be.

While silence can be powerful, Cordelia does not actually remain silent, contrary to her reputation. Catherine S. Cox argues that Cordelia’s attempts to explain her inability to speak undermine the true feeling that would cause such inability, and “she places herself in a twofold position of gendered otherness that reifies the virgo/virago paradigms: an excessively feminized and passive position owing to her initial silence, and, when she breaks her silence and challenges Lear’s request, an inappropriately masculine voice” (149). While I do not agree that Cordelia does not truly feel in this situation, Cordelia does defy the dichotomy of the patriarchal view of women. Meredith Skura notes that after Cordelia’s initial short answers to Lear, “She goes on to make explicit—as Cordelia [in the source story] does not—the conflict between father and husband that her sisters deny” (126). When she does finally speak, Cordelia points out the

inconsistency of her sisters' gushing over their father when they are now obligated to their husbands instead. According to Renaissance social structure, a woman was under the aegis of her father until marriage, whereupon she came under the authority of her husband. Cox claims that Cordelia actually seems disinterested in romance and marriage, that her "'Husband' and 'father' are used interchangeably" and "love is a fixed commodity, divisible in a zero-sum game" (148). According to Cox, "her apparent resistance to marriage thematically befits a saintly heroine spiritually predisposed to embrace celibacy" (148). However, Cordelia has not created this "game"—she is forced to respond to one Lear has created, in which love is made a commodity and marriage has been inappropriately shuffled aside. By reminding him of husbands, Cordelia is merely trying to get Lear back on track. As Boose and Barber note, Lear inappropriately brings private matters into the public eye, grasping for power over his daughters as he stands to lose the last and favorite: "when Lear disowns and disinherits Cordelia, he thinks he has rendered her, dowered only with his curse, unfit to marry—and thus unable to leave paternal protection" (Kahn 40, referencing Boose's ideas). While Cordelia acknowledges the reality of her relationships with men, Lear uses the love test to supersede the business of his last daughter leaving his authority, attempting to postpone the reality that he is no longer his daughter's primary concern.

Lear's hyperbolic reaction is not to Cordelia's silence but rather to the truth she voices that he does not want to hear. Critics like John McLaughlin and Meredith Skura adhere to a Freudian interpretation of this interaction. McLaughlin asserts that in refusing to play Lear's game of flattery,

[Cordelia] cuts away one of his primary defenses, his safeguard against the loss of sexual power . . . Cordelia's pointed reminder that Lear must share her love with a husband

strikes at Lear's fiction of living with her as virtual husband and wife, a fact borne out by the way his mind runs to physical sex during his madness. (McLaughlin 39)

As I will argue later, Lear's sexual comments during his madness have other explanations besides a desire for his daughter; however, McLaughlin is correct that Cordelia's answer poses a much more natural source of distress. Lear's reluctance to give up his youngest daughter is a natural fatherly feeling: Marrying one of the presented suitors would necessitate Cordelia's moving quite a distance from her father, which would indeed be cause for grief if Cordelia is as beloved to Lear as characters as diverse as Kent and Goneril testify she is. Furthermore, she is the last daughter to vacate his household, leaving him alone in his old age. As Lynda Boose argues, Lear deviates from the usual dowry and marriage rituals and "frustrates the ritual phase of separation: by disinheriting Cordelia, Lear casts her away not to let her go but to prevent her from going" (333). If Lear cannot keep his last remaining and most-loved daughter, he will not give her away either. When Burgundy rejects her, Lear tells Cordelia, "you have so lost a father / That you must lose a husband" (I.i.234). Lear's intent, however, is reversed when France claims her despite the material losses Lear imposes. Ironically, in trying to keep Cordelia, Lear pushes her away, just as he tries to formally relinquish his kingdom while practically exercising power.

Lear expects those around him to bend to his will as they presumably always have to the king, but he is floored when the opposite occurs. Lear can be manipulated by speech and silence because he places his insecurity about his power within it by posing the love test in the first place. McLaughlin contends that this play "is the tragedy that is immersed most deeply in the psychology of power. . . . [Lear's] intent is to retain power at any cost. He is willing to give up political power, which no longer means anything to him, only because he thinks that doing so will enable him to consolidate the personal powers he fears are slipping away with advancing



years” (37). Cordelia’s departure coincides with the decline of Lear’s power as king, so that Cordelia’s marriage becomes a focal point for Lear’s anxieties about aging, losing power, and being alone. Ian Pollock’s illustration highlights the unstable situation in which Lear puts himself, high upon the pedestal of his own authority, inadequately supported by narrow beams, the scissors that will slice up his kingdom dangling precariously down:



(Pollock 2)

Critics such as Boose and McLaughlin may differ on Lear’s exact motives, but in any case his bizarre actions are the result of his attempt to maintain power over situations he knows he is losing control over, and Lear’s actions do not vary much from Shakespeare’s source matter. On the other hand, Cordelia’s agency regarding her role in familial structure is unique to Shakespeare: Skura notes that in earlier versions of the story, “the anonymous playwright left such honesty to someone else, usually to Cordella’s husband, the Gallacian king. Gallacia is incredulous at the treatment Cordella accepts passively, and he introduces the idea of ‘nothing’ to the play when he first meets her” (126). Shakespeare does not make Cordelia silent as in the source, but rather provides her power through speech, giving her the introduction of “nothing,” a concept central to Shakespeare’s version of *Lear*, which, like silence, has repercussions not originally anticipated and echoes throughout the play.

As previously referenced, McLaughlin has noted the similarity between Lear and Cordelia in trying to get their own way, claiming that Cordelia is the youngest, spoiled child intentionally

refusing to play Lear's game as her own power play, to which "Like a child who has always had his every wish gratified, [Lear] responds to a threatened loss of power with a tantrum" (40). While Lear's "tantrum" is motivated by a loss of power, Cordelia's "silence" is not petty or childish but rather the only effective counterbalance to the meaningless request of Lear and the blather of his two elder daughters, as supported by her asides and Renaissance conventions. The small number of lines women have in Shakespeare's plays can be troubling; but in Shakespeare's characters the quantity of lines is often inverse to respect, while pointed one-liners wield much more influence over both the audience and other characters. Gertrude, for instance, steals the windbag Polonius's thunder by telling him, "More matter, with less art" (*Hamlet* II.ii.95). Similarly, while *Hamlet* the play is revered, Hamlet the character's mopey inability to make decisions is not an example of behavior to emulate, though it takes up much of the play. Tragedy provides examples of what not to do, and sheer number of lines sometimes indicates the sheer absence of sense in a character.

Just as Cordelia's scenes in *Lear* are powerful even in their reticence, Cordelia's physical disappearance for most of the play crucially affects both Lear and the audience. In his 1952 article entitled "Cordelia Absent," Arnold Isenberg reflects:

I do not know of any critic who has been impressed by the disappearance of Cordelia, from the stage and from Lear's lips, during the long middle portion of the play. Yet this factor of absence is immensely important. Without it, the play would lose the dimension in which some of its greatest values are spread out. (185)

Unlike critics before Isenberg's time, I am struck by Cordelia's absence when I read the play. As Lear's situation gets worse and worse, I want Cordelia's sense and honesty back. Isenberg reasons that Lear, too, should want Cordelia back to protect him when he is abused by his elder

daughters, but that instead, even in his madness, he does not speak of her: Cordelia is absent not only in presence but also in Lear's words. I agree with Isenberg that Lear's silence on Cordelia is evidence of his repressed guilt over the way he has treated her. Even when she returns, he does not want to see her at first because that means he will have to confront his own wrongdoing toward her: "He must go back and convict himself of error: uproot the old Lear along with the old idea of Cordelia" (Isenberg 187). Isenberg credits Shakespeare with believing his audience will infer "the torment of self-accusation" that Lear does not verbally express and remember Cordelia as Lear tries not to: "she is continuously present both to Lear's mind and our own; and the silence, the absence, are not only compatible with this visionary presence, they are the positive pledge and proof of its reality" (186; 185). Lear's railing against Goneril and Regan is displaced guilt at his treatment of Cordelia, and Lear's silence regarding Cordelia is consistent with Shakespeare's common theme of appearances not being trustworthy: Cordelia's importance to Lear is illustrated by his inability to talk about her, which "is not neglect but avoidance. Lear is mute through an excess, not a deficiency of feeling" (Isenberg 189). He is not really angry with his daughters but with himself, resulting in his continued inability to exhibit the heart-tongue convention.

Isenberg's interpretation not only explains Lear's silence on Cordelia, but also asserts its importance for the power of the play as a whole. He notes that in Lear there are no "great speeches" but rather ones that are "almost unbearably intense" and that the power is in the silent building up of Lear's guilt and remorse, which finds its release in the "poetry of the . . . Scenes of reunion and reconciliation" (186; 185). Within Lear and within the audience, "the true nature of Lear's distress . . . is protracted and swelled by silence to an intolerable height and resolved in a rush, like the thawing of Niagara, in the great scenes of the fourth act" (189-190). According to

Isenberg, “the audience is prepared for these scenes because its emotions have been evolving in silent underlying correspondence with Lear’s . . . We appreciate its transports only because we have taken step by step with him in the development of his conscience” (187). While Lear’s initial cause for distress was the bruising of his ego, “arrogance, vanity, resentment,” he comes throughout Cordelia’s absence to feel “belated love with its attendant guilts and shames”; the themes of “ingratitude” and “injustice” are “interwoven” (Isenberg 190). Ultimately, Isenberg argues that Lear’s initial “egotism . . . estranges the audience”; it is Cordelia’s absence that makes Lear’s passion more complex and consequently makes him “a better hero for the play” (192, 190). Such use of absence to further character development and enhance tragedy attests to Shakespeare’s talent: “He stretches his bridge of speech over a fearful gap of the unspoken and expects the audience to span this gulf along with him. The feat is prodigious, unique” (Isenberg 193). Cordelia’s absence is proof of the Shakespeare audiences know and love: the Bard who suggests but does not preach, who illustrates that appearances are often deceiving, whose irony pulls at our heartstrings.

In *King Lear*, Cordelia illustrates the power, sense, and respectability of speaking the truth concisely; while her behavior largely follows Renaissance expectations that limit women’s speech, both genders could learn from her integrity. Furthermore, her ensuing absence takes on a power of its own as a silent reproof of Lear’s behavior—nothing does come to something. Isenberg makes excellent points about her silence as necessary to Lear coming to terms with his repressed guilt, as well as its consistency with Shakespeare’s craft. Unfortunately, Isenberg gives the audience more credit than it sometimes deserves, for if the audience truly felt Cordelia’s presence in her absence, as I think Lear actually does, there would not be such consternation over the marginality of Cordelia’s role. However, I argue that Shakespeare also provided the audience

with other clues to Cordelia's importance. While she is largely absent from Lear's speech, she is not entirely absent from the play. Though Cordelia physically disappears after the first scene, her presence remains through the words of others. Those who fill the vacuum of Cordelia's actual silence include the King of France, Kent, and the Fool.

### **Cordelia's Proxy Voices**

While Shakespeare gives Cordelia more vocal expression than her source inspiration, he does not in turn make the Gallacian king character silent on her account. Shakespeare's King of France puts himself at risk by verbally challenging the other monarch. France not only confirms Lear's irrationality, but also voices the inconsistency of Cordelia's treatment: "This is most strange, / That she that even but now was your best object . . . should in this trice of time / Commit a thing so monstrous to dismantle / So many folds of favor" (I.i.201-206). The image of Lear undressing his daughter emphasizes the complete inappropriateness of Lear's actions.

Yet the suggestion of nakedness is consistent with Cordelia's response of "Nothing." In Shakespeare's time, the word *nothing* was slang for female genitalia, a "pun on 'an O thing'" as well as the suggestion of anatomy that has "no thing" (Whittier 397n24). As a result, many scholars interpret Cordelia's answer psychoanalytically as a sign of incestuous tensions. David Willbern notes that this "vision of Cordelia stripped" accompanies "a hint of secret sin," in which the language presages the later descriptions of the "monstrous" nature of female sexuality (qtd. in Whittier 397n24). I will examine similar interpretations in the following chapter. However, Gayle Whittier points out that Cordelia's use of the word *nothing* differs from its sexual implications in other Shakespeare plays: "it goes virtually unheard as bawdy when Cordelia enunciates it—though not, perhaps, when Lear repeats it—because of its solemn (rather

than comic or ironic) context. Bawdy is difficult to associate with Cordelia's character" (397n24). Not to mention that the word *nothing* is used throughout the play in non-sexual contexts.

Instead of a sexual interpretation, I propose that the image of Cordelia's dismantling parallels the literal stripping down that Edgar and Lear himself later undergo: she is the first to be made a "poor naked wretch," reduced to raw humanity (III.iv.26). If Edgar's nearly naked male body is termed "the thing itself" and represents his basic identity as a man, then Cordelia's "nothing" is the representation of her identity as a woman (III.iv.98). As Whittier puts it, Cordelia's answer "bares her own gender" (381). In literally offering "Nothing," Cordelia poignantly offers Lear herself—the love and loyalty at her core, not the false garments of flattery her sisters don. "Nothing" does retain its sexual pun in that Cordelia also offers up her marriageable essence: Even before expanding on her roles to a husband and father, Cordelia's initial brief answer attempts to bring her father back to the original purpose of the meeting. But Burgundy and Lear are not interested in Cordelia as a person, and they reject her when she cannot provide them with material gain, whether of flattery or land. Cordelia's dismantling has implications for her marriageability as a woman: her loss of a dowry is as serious as the loss of her sexual purity would be, for those two are essentially her only bargaining powers as an unmarried woman. Thomas B. Stroup suggests that Lear sees Cordelia in the Fool's "houseless poverty," so that the acknowledgment that he made his daughter homeless leads to his famous realization that he shares humanity with a beggar (130). Early critics of Lear believed the king to represent mankind, but I think that Cordelia, Edgar, and even the Fool represent the basic humanity that causes Lear to realize his own error and humble himself to the level of other men.

While Lear selfishly rejects his daughter and leaves her vulnerable, France accepts her offered “Nothing” in all senses of the word. The only thing France can hope to gain from Lear any longer *is* Cordelia herself, and he declares her innate value beyond quantitative considerations: “She is herself a dower” (I.i.230). Not only does France believe Cordelia’s character to be clearly lovable despite her terse reaction to Lear’s question, but also her integrity and decorum cause him to gain further respect for her: “Thee and thy virtues here I seize upon. . . . ’Tis strange that from their cold’st neglect / My love should kindle to inflamed respect” (I.i.241; 243-4). France respects Cordelia for her plain-speaking and admires her more when he sees “the nothing itself” – the heart and mind of this woman. Lear claims that Cordelia’s behavior is not natural (I.i.200), but France’s words help to reveal that Cordelia is not unnatural but rather “unkind” in the sense of kindred rather than nicety—which is in fact a boon because it shows she is unlike her unreasonable father (I.i.249). Like his soon-to-be wife, France chooses truth over profit, though the truth is a profit to him in Cordelia’s character. He describes Cordelia monetarily, just as she had used “richer” to describe her love for her father: The couple shifts the paradigm from the material gain expected by Goneril and Regan to the more important value of family (I.i.69-71). Cordelia’s “Nothing” represents herself: her plain-speaking, her aversion to deception, her appropriate love for her father, and the fertility she offers to her husband. The appropriateness of Cordelia’s feelings and reply are reinforced by France’s reaction.

While France provides a vocal, powerful, logical male counterweight to Lear in favor of Cordelia, Kent lends his less powerful but more intimate voice to her defense and in doing so becomes an unlikely foil to Cordelia herself. The first to speak up, Kent directly refutes Lear’s judgment: “Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least” (I.i.140). Critics like Peter Rudnytsky have criticized Kent for misogyny, but Kent’s perceived sexist comments are made in

his later disguise as a nameless common man and are directed toward the other two sisters, whose conduct deserves censure, gender aside. In contrast, his dealings as himself and with Cordelia are not only wholly respectful but also sacrificial. While Lear's "bow is bent" toward Cordelia, Kent begs to "Let it fall rather, though the fork invade / The region of *my* heart" (I.i.131; 132-3, emphasis added). As the imagery suggests, Kent makes himself vulnerable to Lear both taking his life as a traitor and breaking his heart. Kent tells Lear he "Loved [him] as my father," making Kent like kin to Cordelia, a brother putting himself in the place of his sister because he believes it is in the best interest of their father as well (I.i.129).

France and Kent are not the only ones to recognize Cordelia's righteousness: even Goneril, typically read as one of the most evil characters in the play, comments, "how full of changes his [Lear's] age is . . . He always loved our sister most, and with what poor judgment he hath now cast her off appears too gross" (I.i.276, 279-280). Regan then cites Kent's value as further evidence of Lear's folly: "Such unconstant starts we are like to have from him as this of Kent's banishment" (I.i.288-9). Like Cordelia's asides to the audience, this aside between the sisters testifies to the former love and value between both Lear and Cordelia and Lear and Kent. Both loyal subject and villain acknowledge Lear's folly regarding his youngest daughter. Those who criticize Cordelia's speech fail to see that Lear is the only one offended by it. The absurdity of the first scene does not make the audience take it lightly, as Orgel suggests, but instead urges us to take Cordelia seriously and side with reasonableness amidst the insanity. The interchange also illustrates that while Cordelia and Kent attempt to deal honestly for Lear's sake, Goneril and Regan try to safeguard their own interests instead.



Kent and Cordelia share similar values as well as similar relationships to the king. Cordelia's asides reveal her dismay at Lear's dark contest, and Kent defends her words, taking her same course of plain-speaking:

Think'st thou *that duty shall have dread to speak*  
*When power to flattery bows?* To plainness honor's bound  
*When majesty stoops to folly.* Reverse thy doom,  
And in thy best consideration check  
This hideous rashness. *Answer my life my judgment:*  
Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least,  
*Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sound*  
*Reverbs no hollowness.* (I.i.135-142, emphasis added)

Despite claims that Kent is a misogynist, he offers up his own life to defend Cordelia's honor against the poor judgment of the king. Michael Holahan highlights a distinction between *low* and *hollow*, when he argues that Lear in fact learns in the course of the play to mimic Cordelia's gentle speech. Holahan asserts, "Since [real] wealth lies in a silent character, the real challenge is a difficult discrimination between softness and emptiness. Kent puts the matter negatively to the king, but he only begins a terrible process in which Lear learns to distinguish 'low sounds' from the 'hollowness' of least loving" (414). When Lear finds himself helpless against the forces of nature and human nature he decides, "No, I will be the pattern of all patience. / I will say nothing" (III.ii.37-38). Put in a similar situation of subordination as Cordelia, Lear adapts her silence. Lear's love test positions speech as good, but Kent and Cordelia see the difference between mere words and words with meaning. Meredith Skura's criticism of Cordelia for

introducing “nothing” into the play misses the point that nothing is something: plain-speaking is much more productive than hollow flattery.

Upon his banishment, Kent wishes Cordelia divine “protection” and tells her that she “rightly thinks, and hast most justly said” (I.i.170; 171). In a play that has been called godless, Kent expresses belief and supposes divine approval of the criticized daughter. He and Cordelia choose the truth over personal safety and gain, and their actions show that the truth is not as cruel as Lear would make it out to be. Both Kent and Cordelia see Lear’s folly, speak against it using all due deferential address, and risk their lives to return to the king after he has banished them. These actions are based not only in love but also in their sense of *duty*, a term Kent uses for his objection to Cordelia’s treatment (I.i.135), Cordelia similarly professing to speak “According to my bond” (I.i.82). Cox criticizes Cordelia for her focus on duty rather than love, but duty and love are one in *Lear*: Lear creates problems when he tries to receive love without fulfilling his duty, while Cordelia and Kent attempt to fulfill their duties to Lear because they love him. Soon after Cordelia appeals to a sense of duty, one of Lear’s knights points out Goneril’s unjust treatment of her father because “my duty cannot be silent when I think your highness wronged” (I.iv.61-2). Duty takes on the ability to speak, so that Cordelia and Kent can express their duty through their speech when they cannot express their love.

Yet Lear sets up a situation where words are not valued for their truth, so that the only way to exhibit love and duty becomes not through words but through actions. Because Lear will not listen to Kent’s counsel, Kent returns in disguise to ask for nothing but “Service” (I.iv.22). He becomes physical with Oswald, tripping him when he refuses to speak to Lear as a king, to which Lear says, “I thank thee, fellow; thou serv’st me, and I’ll love thee” (I.iv.84-5). He even

pays Kent for the deed. The king himself, when separated from the inciting event that bruised his ego, professes the value of service. Defending his knights' behavior to Goneril, Lear claims:

My train are men of choice and rarest parts,  
That *all particulars of duty know*,  
And in the most exact regard support  
The worships of their name. *O most small fault,*  
*How ugly didst thou in Cordelia show,*  
That, like an engine, wrenched my frame of nature  
From the fixed place, drew from my heart all love  
And added to the gall. O Lear, Lear!  
Beat at this gate that *let thy folly in*  
*And thy dear judgment out.* . . . (I.iv.258-267, emphasis added)

It is in the context of praising duty that Lear realizes he was wrong to treat Cordelia as he did (that he is in fact as foolish as the Fool has been barbing him for being). Cordelia's fault was following her duty, which Lear now realizes is no fault at all, for Cordelia's truth is now preferable to Goneril's lies. Furthermore, the knights' duty speaks to Lear of Cordelia's. Goneril a few lines before also indicates that actions can speak when she attempts to oust Lear's supposedly rowdy men: "The shame itself doth speak / For instant remedy" (I.iv.241-2), while Cornwall later tells Edmund that his "virtue and obedience doth this instant / So much commend itself" (II.i.114-115). And again, Regan says "both charge and danger / Speaks 'gainst so great a number" of Lear's followers (II.iv.217). In a world where words are given the power of actions, actions can speak like words. When Edmund frames Edgar, he adds the appearance of a physical fight to his forged letter. Much of the deception in the play is achieved through words, but

actions still have power. When truthful words are not valued, the truthful characters might still allow their love to speak up through actions, embodying the adage that actions speak louder than words. While power preoccupies the elder daughters, Kent and Cordelia are willing to forsake both power and security for the best interests of the king. If he will not listen to their words, they will act on his behalf.

Kent's affinity with Cordelia not only illustrates the rightness of their values and conduct but also shows that Lear's reaction to Cordelia is neither Freudian nor sexist, but rather simply a matter of power. On the verge of losing his power to age, Lear holds on to every vestige he can: he commands his daughters; he tries to maintain his previous privileges though he has given them over to Goneril and Regan; and, like the Biblical Darius, he chooses the letter of the law over his personal experiences of those he values. He tells Kent, who has objected to his judgment:

Hear me, on thy allegiance hear me!

Since thou hast sought to make us break our vow,

While we durst never yet and with strayed pride

To come between our sentence and our power,

Which nor our nature nor our place can bear,

Our potency made good, take thy reward... (I.i.155-160)

Couched in the language of speech (*hear*, *vow*, and *sentence*), the king's explanation for exiling one of his closest advisors is basically because he can, because of his "potency" and his "pride." Kent's banishment is an exercise of royal voice, status, and power over an opinion the king did not like, not a just punishment for a crime. Again, speech provides power: the power for Kent to displease the king and for the king to punish Kent for it. Lear asserts his power to speak

sentences over both Cordelia and Kent, regardless of their gender, social status, age, or biological relationship. He does not cast away a daughter he illicitly longs for, but rather pushes away those who love him but defy his declarations.

The first scene comes off as absurd, as Orgel claims, because Lear's behavior is absurd: he gives up his own power and strips Cordelia and Kent of theirs. Yet Kent and Cordelia continue to pursue Lear's interests, despite the king's folly. Cordelia becomes a queen, secure in France, but risks the lives of her subjects and herself to return and help her father. Kent forsakes his nobility to become a peasant servant because of his loyalty not only to Lear but also to Cordelia. In contrast, though the Fool's social status is far below both Cordelia's and Kent's, this very status permits him to maintain his power to defend Cordelia and advise Lear. Like Kent, the Fool cares for Cordelia and is a beloved servant of the king, but he can still attest to Cordelia's value when Kent has been silenced. Kent and Edgar must disguise themselves as common men in order to follow their hearts, but the Fool's role acts like a disguise, creating a seemingly inconsequential identity through which truth can be expressed. Lear must call for the Fool after three days of not seeing him, because, as a knight explains, "Since my young lady's going into France, sir, the fool hath much pined away" (I.iv.69-70). The Fool's mourning for the loss of Cordelia is a reproof: Lear commands, "No more of that, I have noted it," before changing the subject to Goneril (I.iv.71). When he appears, the Fool's first words to Lear call out his folly and, like Kent wishing the best for Cordelia, he asserts that the third daughter has received a "blessing" despite Lear's intent (I.iv.99-100). The Fool's role within the monarchical system allows him to speak truth to the king that others cannot get away with, so that while the king's own daughter and close advisor cannot challenge him because of their inferior ranks, the Fool, in his even more inferior rank, can. Ironically, the Fool is allowed to remain because he is given the label *fool*, while Cordelia

and Kent in their more respectable positions must be banished. The Fool not only embodies the absurdity of Lear's actions through his clownish presence but also voices them, often making comments about Lear himself being a fool.

### **The Fool as Cordelia**

While the Fool is certainly more whimsical and less refined than Cordelia, there is an undeniable connection between the two, who never appear on stage at the same time and both refuse to flatter the king. Stephen Orgel calls him “the plain-speaking Fool, a surrogate Cordelia” (xli). While many characters are surrogates in that they speak for Cordelia, the Fool's presence in her absence cannot but suggest a more literal substitution. Shakespeare's actors often played multiple parts, sometimes characters that are foils to each other; for example, one actor may play both Theseus and Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The combined doubling and foiling uses comparison to provide an interesting commentary on ruling and loving. In the Stratford Festival's 2014 production of *King Lear*, the Fool rested his head on Lear's shoulder, interacting with him much like a young or doting daughter might, so that one could imagine a versatile actor playing both Cordelia and the Fool.

Thomas B. Stroup makes an argument for actor doubling, investigating Alois Brandl's 1894 observation that “the parts of Cordelia and the Fool in *King Lear* were written for the same boy actor” (Stroup 127). I will cite many of his points, because I find his case compelling and incredibly important to Cordelia's role. In the quarto text, not only do Cordelia and the Fool never appear on stage at the same time, but “Between Cordelia's entry and the Fool's entry the same number of lines are spoken as between the Fool's exit and Cordelia's re-entry. Time is exactly meted out for some reason, probably for change of costume and make-up” (Stroup 128).

Stroup notes that there is a lengthy, unnecessary build-up for the Fool's entrance in scene I.iv, in which "the audience is prepared for a pretty boy to appear as the Fool, a person sympathetic to Cordelia who will assume her defense and also remind them of her person" (129). Actor doubling would also account for the entire quarto scene that was cut from the Folio, scene IV.iii (denoted "a" in the Pelican edition). Stroup argues that this scene serves to mirror I.iv by not only providing time for the actor to change appearance but also connecting the two characters through subject matter: wit combined with grief, and Lear's remorse (130). According to Stroup, it was unusual for editing for performance to involve cutting an entire scene, but it makes sense here because, like I.iv, IV.iii is "unnecessary to the plot" but necessary for the logistics of actor doubling: "The scene [IV.iii.] emphasizes the affinity of the two roles; and yet, if the two were played by the same actor, the audience must dissociate the person now appearing as Cordelia from the person recently appearing as the Fool. This scene provides just such dissociation" (Stroup 130, 130-1). Stroup proposes that the acting company had lost strong actors like the boy who played the Cordelia/Fool role between the writing of the quarto and the publishing of the folio, which necessitated script revision.

Actor doubling not only explains textual decisions and provides theatrical insight, but also has profound implications for character and theme. I share Stroup's belief that the Fool is intended to fill not only the physical gap of Cordelia's presence but also the verbal gap of her truth speaking. In his first scene, the Fool offers to "teach thee a speech" (I.iv.111). Presumably reciting is part of his job as a fool, but the implication is that Lear cannot recognize truthful speech (such as that of Cordelia and Kent) so that the Fool must school him in it. The advice in this recitation includes, "Have more than thou showest, / Speak less than thou knowest" (I.iv.114-5). Modesty is made adjacent to brevity: the Fool advises Cordelia's virtues. Lear does

not acknowledge these virtues in the love test, and the Fool's unique role allows him to criticize this. Because Cordelia is reasonable, she is exiled from the corrupt world, just as Kent is; but, paradoxically, the Fool in his supposed folly can speak truth in the foolish reality Lear has created. Stroup notes Janet Spens's observation that "the two roles call for the same kind of voices . . . [and] there seems to have been a boy actor (some have suggested Armin) with a voice proper for the singing of whimsical songs required by such roles as Ophelia, Desdemona, Feste, and the Fool in *Lear*" (Stroup 127). The roles of women who were silenced in death in the tragedies were played by the same actors who spoke volubly in and brought humor to the plays. Orgel notes that one of the Fool's songs even "refigures Feste's song at the end of *Twelfth Night*," providing echoes of comedy within tragedy (68n79). Cordelia may have a soft and gentle voice, but her counterpart uses this same voice to sing bawdy songs and openly chastise the king. Both Cordelia and the Fool have literally "spoken out with that same voice of reality" (Stroup 129). If Shakespeare wrote the parts of Cordelia and the Fool for actor doubling, he found a way to give Cordelia more voice than gender conventions would allow, just as he used cross dressing to give voice to female characters in the comedies.

Whether or not the same actor plays both Cordelia and the Fool, the text alone associates the two characters. The conversation of Lear and the Fool echoes that of Lear and Cordelia in the first scene: Cordelia had said, "Nothing, my lord" to which Lear replied, "Nothing can come of nothing"; later, Lear says, "This is nothing, fool" and the Fool replies, "Can you make no use of nothing, uncle?" (I.iv.124, 126-7; I.i.77, 79). The Fool mocks Lear's previous answer to Cordelia, keeping the topic of nothing alive when her "nothing" has made her nothing. As



previously mentioned, Stroup points out Lear's storm scene reference to the Fool as "you houseless poverty" and postulates,

So might he have referred to his daughter, for had he not given her nothing for dowry and shut her out of doors, even as he himself is now shut out? And had the Fool not reminded him, as Lothian reminds us, that "Nothing can be made of nothing", the very warning Lear gave to Cordelia? Has he not placed her in the same position as his Fool? And does not his distraught mind at this moment agonizingly recall his sin against his daughter? He made her a houseless poverty, and the Fool is her image before him, her *alter ego*. Here Shakespeare has achieved an unusual, if not unique, set of identities: the Fool in that he represents Lear's conscience to himself, his inner voice, thereby represents Cordelia. (130)

The Fool takes Cordelia's role in truthful speaking against Lear's folly and also literally echoes her, constantly reminding both Lear and the audience of Cordelia despite her physical absence. Stroup argues that what Isenberg calls Lear's "torment of self-accusation" is aggravated by seeing and experiencing the homeless state he brought on Cordelia. In making his daughter nothing, Lear incites a chain of events in which he himself becomes nothing and learns his own error. Stroup notes that the first mention of the Fool occurs because Lear has struck Goneril's gentleman "for chiding of his fool" (Stroup 129; *Lear* I.iii.1-2). Lear's defense of the Fool is "Lear's first overt act against Goneril—or she takes it as such" (Stroup 130). Lear's conflict with Goneril begins because he defends the Fool as he should have protected Cordelia. Stroup argues:

This opposition to cruelty . . . is an unconscious return to Cordelia, for in defending the Fool he is defending what is most devoted to her, the very symbol and constant reminder of her. It is this realization of his injustice to her and his recognition of his own stubborn

pride which brings him ironically at once to madness, to regeneration, and to peace of mind. And Cordelia's deputy, the Fool, is the instrument for all of these. (Stroup 130)

Cordelia is generally considered the means for Lear's redemption in the play, and I agree with Stroup that the Fool is integral in helping Lear to realize his wrongdoing.

Since the Fool serves as a reminder of Cordelia's truth, Stroup points out that he is no longer necessary once Lear understands his error. In IV.vi, Lear more than once admits he was "foolish," what the Fool had been trying to tell him. Lear's other reference to a fool in this scene has received attention for the ambiguity of whom Lear refers to: "And my poor fool is hanged" (V.iii.304). According to Stroup, "editors generally agree that it refers to Cordelia, not the fool" but "The body in the King's arms may well have been that of both, and the ambiguity of the line is quite intentional" (131). This ambiguity would in fact make more sense if the same actor played both parts. Tom Clayton addresses Lear's line in a short piece for *The Ben Jonson Journal* in 2012. He reasons, "Since his [Lear's] physical concentration on Cordelia is almost total in his last scene and speech, it is certain that in one sense the first line of the speech must refer to *Cordelia* as hanged, presumably with *fool* 'used as a term of endearment or pity'" (Clayton 142). The Crystals' primary definition for *fool*—"dear, darling, innocent creature"—suggests that Lear here realizes Cordelia was not in the wrong, but the loving child he turned into a victim (181). However, Clayton argues that Shakespeare meant for the Fool to be evoked as well:

The playwright . . . can hardly have failed to notice the strong possibility that *the* Fool might come at once to mind for many . . . the sense of possession and close relation to Lear . . . could accommodate both Cordelia and the Fool . . . Like Cordelia, the Fool has

been a fool for Lear in serving the King faithfully from beginning to end . . . Lear may well be thought to have his daughter and his Fool momentarily merged in his mind. (143, 144) Stroup, too, believes that “in death she and the Fool are united . . . at least in Lear’s mind” (131). While Ian Pollock does not collapse the two characters, he does equate them visually: After the final line of Shakespeare’s text, he illustrates an end page with a small, centered frame depicting the Fool hanging from a noose (140). Not only does Pollock assume the same fate for Cordelia and the Fool but essentially provides the Fool a paradoxically silent “last word,” suggesting the power of silence and absence. Considering Shakespeare’s affinity for double meanings and self-referential lines (such as his “distracted globe” in *Hamlet* [I.v.97]), I think it most likely that in Shakespeare’s text Lear intends Cordelia but that the audience is expected to remember the Fool, too.

While I believe the line is meant to connect Cordelia and the Fool, especially if played by the same actor, I do not think it necessarily explains the Fool’s disappearance. The Fool dies not in reality but with the reappearance of Cordelia, as he came into life with her disappearance. References to him by other characters, such as Goneril in a scene physically separate from Lear, prove that the Fool is not merely a representation of the king’s conscience. But the fact that he becomes inconsequential when Cordelia returns, that *she* is Lear’s fool now instead, illustrates her centrality to the text. The Fool’s fate does not matter because he was a stand-in for Cordelia, yet the death of his loyalty and truth-speaking is mourned simultaneously with Cordelia.

In eliminating lines pertinent to Cordelia in the folio and not doubling the parts of Cordelia and the Fool, both characters become marginalized, and the audience loses the brilliance of Shakespeare’s complex use of character. The play is certainly as bleak as some critics claim when the Fool is merely a missing “bitter boy,” as Stroup calls him, and Cordelia is a missing,

then silenced, sacrificial lamb (131). According to Stroup, critics have noted that the evil characters in the play outnumber the good, but “as far as this balance is concerned, Cordelia and the Fool function as one character” and counterbalance the opposing forces in the play (129). When the Fool is viewed as Cordelia’s literal and vocal stand-in, the influence of reason and loyalty is stronger in the play; Cordelia maintains a voice throughout; and her death is more meaningful as the strong child who stood beside her father all along rather than simply a passive pawn of whom Edmund takes advantage. As Stroup says, the double meaning of *fool* comes “together to furnish a poignant close and account for what happened in the end to one of Shakespeare’s finest characters” (131). I think Shakespeare intended the Fool to simultaneously evoke Cordelia and contrast with her, reminding the audience of her reason and loyalty and of the deficiency created by her absence in Lear’s life.

### **The Queen of the Quarto**

Changes from the quarto to the folio not only weaken the connection between Cordelia and the Fool, but also cut an entire scene (Act 4, Scene 3a) that gives Cordelia more voice. A feminist eye notices that this scene features the voices and perceptions of men, not Cordelia’s own voice, and that the qualities the scene attributes to her are conventionally womanly, dealing with beauty and meekness at the news of her father’s fate: “an ample tear trilled down / Her delicate cheek” and she has a “ripe lip”; she is moved to “Patience and sorrow,” not anger like her evil sisters; her tears are “holy water from her heavenly eyes”; and “Sorrow would be a rarity most beloved / If all could so become it” (Iv.3a.12-13, 20, 16, 31, 23-24). Cordelia appears like the beautiful, sorrowful woman that later became a fixture of Victorian art, in such pieces as Waterhouse’s *Lady of Shalott* or John Everett Millais’s *Ophelia*. The Tate Museum website

notes, “*Ophelia* was not the only painting by Millais that expressed romantic love and death of a young and grieving heart,” for jilted women were believed to have little “future chance of love or marriage” and thereby “Death by drowning or decline were considered appropriate endings for such female characters in works of art” (“*Ophelia*”). Like *Ophelia*, *Cordelia* is abandoned by men, and the Tate description of Millais’s painting notes that *Ophelia*’s death is described by other characters, never seen on stage, just as in IV.iii in *Lear* and *Cordelia*’s death. *Ophelia* is still “the most popular postcard sold by the Tate,” which might suggest that even modern audiences find sorrowful beauty moving (“*Ophelia*”). Indeed, Pollock’s depiction of the dead *Cordelia* is his most sensual illustration of her, a change from her earlier small features:



(Pollock 136)

Pollock illustrates her breasts boldly in the final act and in this scene portrays her lips to more resemble the red sensuous ones of her sisters, which I will examine in the next chapter. Gayle Whittier and Coppélia Kahn each suggests in her own way that *Lear* perceives *Cordelia*’s earlier rebellious speech as masculine, but re-feminizes her upon her return and death. Pollock’s depiction likewise feminizes *Cordelia* in death similar to a painting of a dead Victorian beauty.

Yet Shakespeare’s text does not support an *Ophelia*-like death for *Cordelia*: Further comparison illustrates that *Cordelia* is given much more voice and agency than *Hamlet*’s forsaken bride. *Cordelia* and *Ophelia* are both left by their lovers, but *Cordelia*’s husband first defended her, made her his queen, and returned with her and some of his own forces to help her

father despite the threat to his own country. Cordelia grieves not because she has been rejected by her lover, but because her father has been rejected by her sisters. Stephen Orgel observes that *Lear* “has a strong erotic element, though it has little to do with the issues of marriage that fill the first scene — ‘tell me how much you love me’ is what fathers say to children in this play, not what lovers say to each other” (x1). Shakespeare takes that initial comedic expectation and shifts the focus from the trials of romantic love to those of filial love. As Cordelia says in the end, she did all for her father. While Ophelia becomes mad and lists off flowers, Cordelia, in sane sorrow, lists off the flowers her father had donned in his madness (IV.iiib.3-6). Though Cordelia needs a man to support her in exile after the first scene, she responds to Lear honestly despite the possibility she will have no male support in a male-controlled society. Cordelia defends love of a husband to her father in the beginning yet shows the love she still holds for her parent. Conflicts between lovers and fathers do not drive Cordelia mad but rather inspire her to speech and action. Stroup also notes that “the commingling of Cordelia’s smiles and tears . . . matches the Fool’s wit and grief as described before he comes on” (130). Unlike Ophelia’s, Cordelia’s grief is tempered with joy and connects her to the character who provides her influence when she is gone. It is also paired with a boldness Ophelia lacks: As Cox notes, Cordelia will not fit into the virgo stereotype because her silence and tears are complicated by her “masculine voice” (149).

The excised quarto scene in *Lear* provides an image not merely of a beautiful, weepy woman, but of a strong one, who has strong emotions just as her sisters but chooses to handle them with more restraint. Cordelia shows signs of strong grief and even anger, crying out about her sisters, but “then away she started to deal with grief alone” (Iv.iiia.32-33). As in the love test, Cordelia shows self-awareness and control, which contrasts with the vitriolic commanding and yelling we hear from her sisters throughout the play. The Gentleman reports not only Cordelia’s

patience but also her passion: “It seemed she was queen / Over her passion who, most rebel-like, / Sought to be king o’er her” (Iv.iii.13-15). Coppélia Kahn notes, “Whereas Lear thought weeping an ignoble surrender of his masculine power, Cordelia conceives her tears as a source of power . . . her empathy and pity coaxing mercy from nature” in the imagery of IV.iv.15-18 (47). Kahn interprets this scene as a confirmation of Cordelia as the stereotypical “daughter-mother Lear wanted her to be . . . in a culture that dichotomized power as masculine and feeling as feminine” (47). Yet she notes that tears provide Cordelia with power. Cordelia is able to use feminine expectations to her advantage, turning tears to power just as she turned silence to power. John E. Van Domelen notes that through her strength of heart Cordelia “is intimidated neither by the tempestuous passions of her father, nor by the reversal that leads to her imprisonment and death” (135). Rather than being insecure about gender identity or how much she is loved, Cordelia is motivated by a higher sense of what is right, what is right not only for her gender but also for one’s station in life and generally for one’s interactions with others. She is not meek and powerless, but prudent and fiercely caring, royal qualities no one else in her family, even her father the king, exhibits.

James H. Forse believes that *King Lear* proposes a particular view of monarchy, because decisions in Elizabethan and Jacobean theater were influenced by the current monarch. Forse makes the case that Shakespeare’s *Lear* differs from previous versions of the story because of its audience, James I, who not only published his ideas on kingship but was also familiar with Shakespeare’s work and the way in which theater could be used for public relations. King James believed kings had an “exalted position” with “heavy responsibilities,” responsibilities that Forse traces from James’s writings to the character of Lear (Forse 64). Lear violates two of the main precepts James advocated for kingship: he forgets his duty as king in favor of personal interests

and allows the kingdom to be divided (Forse 65). Forse concludes, “I think it obvious that Shakespeare portrayed King Lear as the antithesis to James’s depiction of an ideal monarch” (64). While Goneril and Regan also put personal interests over the good of the entire kingdom, Cordelia takes royal responsibility over her own well-being (as does her husband who leaves for the sake of his own kingdom). Cox and Whittier note that Lear essentially expects Cordelia to take on the role of “stand-in for his eldest son,” and though her gender does not allow her to take the full place of a male heir, I think Cordelia is the sister most likely to be an adequate ruler (Cox 150). Cordelia is not merely a “queen over her passion” but a queen period, who illustrates the characteristics of a good monarch much more than her father does. Kent and the Gentleman are both willing to risk their lives to communicate with this queen who has courageously returned in the face of danger to take responsibility for a man who would not take responsibility himself.

Cordelia, France, Kent, and the Fool span different genders, nationalities, and levels in the social hierarchy but are linked by a dedication to duty and truth that manifests itself in plain speech and action. In the face of Lear’s irrationality, Cordelia rightly attempts to maintain decorum but reaches beyond the traditional bounds of speech expected of both women and subjects, wielding both speech and silence, presence and absence as a rebuke against Lear’s unreasonable exertion of power. Orgel claims that the first scene is not reminiscent of Shakespeare’s time, and indeed in Lear’s behavior it is not, but Cordelia does represent the values of the time. Accordingly, while Orgel may be correct that everyone is shocked by Cordelia’s answer, Lear is the only character upset by it; everyone else expresses dismay not at her words, but at Lear’s reaction to her. Shakespeare’s use of male counterparts to and advocates for Cordelia allows her character’s values to resound throughout the play.



Michael Holahan argues that it is Cordelia's soft voice that Lear himself must learn to emulate in the course of the play, observing that Cordelia's "exile heralds a terrible void in Britain, one that is figured by chaotic sites and acts of terror—a wild heath, a blinding storm, plucked eyes. The challenge for ethical inquiry is to complete a circle, to redraw that map of hollowness, to call a soft voice home" (414). The first scene of the play positions Cordelia at the center of the audience's moral consciousness, then absents her. Rather than being unloving, passive, or unrealistic, Cordelia's role in Lear's absurd court is to set an example for a sound heart-tongue connection, prudent speech, and a love and duty that goes beyond personal gain. These values are echoed throughout the play and ultimately affirmed at its end, for by banishing those who practice them, Lear makes tragedy inevitable. John E. Van Domelen, too, notes Cordelia's role as a moral cornerstone: "It is against her fixed value as the symbol of love that the rest of the characters are measured" (135). In the love test, Lear seeks to exert undue power over his daughters; Cordelia resists this yoke by speaking truly. Cordelia's asides and the time other characters spend talking about her and for her install her at the center of the conflict, despite her disappearance after the first scene.

### III. SPEECH, SEX, AND POWER

The obvious contrast to Cordelia's supposed reticence is the flattery of Goneril and Regan. By volubly responding to their father's request, Goneril and Regan violate more than one expectation for their gender. Helen Wilcox explains, "social acceptability might be seen in terms of the doubly closed lips of chastity and silence . . . Women's use of language in public, whether spoken or written, was likened to exhibitionism or promiscuity" (Wilcox 97). Accordingly, Lynda Boose suggests that Goneril and Regan are "prostituting" the marriage ritual of the first scene, something Cordelia refuses to do by maintaining her silence (334). Yet Lear is the first to mar the ritual, and the daughters are trapped in the same paradox Wilcox notes in the tragicomedies: "Speech is seen to be 'wench-like', and words are the only weapon permitted to women" (105). While Cordelia attempts to maintain power by holding with decorum as much as possible under the unreasonable circumstances, Goneril and Regan take the opportunity of Lear's poor judgment to seek power through speech and sex. In the play, speech, sex, and power are fundamentally linked in the characters of Goneril, Regan, and Edmund, which Ian Pollock particularly draws attention to in his graphic novel.

#### **Goneril, Regan, and Edmund**

Goneril and Regan's first move is to strip their father of his retinue, the issue that leads Lear to realize the consequences of his divestiture of power, but this is only phase one. The sisters' end game involves taking over the entire kingdom. Shortly after the kingdom is reallocated to Goneril and Regan and they limit their father's numbers, Curan mentions to Edmund, "Have you heard of no likely wars towards 'twixt the two Dukes of Cornwall and Albany? . . . You may then in time" (II.i.10-11, 13). The sisters agree to unite only to eliminate

the threat from their father, but clearly still see each other as rivals for power. Later, they again must join forces to combat France, while the threat to each other still stands: “There is division, / With mutual cunning, ’twist Albany and Cornwall; / But true it is. From France there comes a power / Into this scattered kingdom” (III.i.19-23). The victory over France’s forces is achieved not only through the alliance of the forces of Cornwall and Albany, but also through the addition of Gloucester’s authority via Edmund, whom Regan’s husband gladly raises to the title for his own political advantage.

The violence necessary for Goneril and Regan to take over the kingdom is foreshadowed and linked with their means of power, speech and sex, in Pollock’s depiction of the love test. A close-up of Goneril shows her with a black hole of a mouth, rimmed in plump red, spewing hearts along with the words “I love you more than word can wield the matter . . . a love that makes breath poor and speech unable” (Pollock 3). While the hearts suggest the heaving of her heart into her mouth as Cordelia cannot, the hearts are multiple and resemble specks of blood, foreshadowing the violent outcome of her hypocrisy:



(Pollock 3)

Arnold Isenberg notes that in Shakespeare's plays "Hypocrisy and pretense, protestation and profession, the glib and oily art which generates plot after plot, are of course evident to the most careless reader. Not less pervasive, though less conspicuous, is the idea embedded quite casually in so many passages: that the facility of feeling is in inverse relation to its depth" (188). Pollock illustrates Goneril and Regan's hypocrisy as it is felt: large, wordy and obvious; while Cordelia's shorter asides of truth are featured in smaller panels. The visual juxtaposition exactly conveys the power untrue speech can wield over us, and how the still, small voice of truth can be literally marginalized.

When Regan's bloody-looking response includes the word *enemy*, she evokes bloodshed and politics, apropos since, in requiring this verbal love test, Lear makes enemies of his daughters to himself and to each other. Goneril and Regan are both illustrated throughout Pollock's novel with full red lips and wearing red dresses. Red is the color of love, life-sustaining blood, and the heart, an organ that echoes throughout the play: the origin of Cordelia's name, origin of true feeling in the tongue-heart connection, and the ailing organ that causes the death of both Gloucester and Lear. But red is also the color of violence and lust, of blood shed in power struggles and the hot blood of passion. Goneril and Regan's hearts merely issue from their mouths rather than literally break over their loved ones. In contrast to Goneril and Regan's red lips, most of the other characters barely have lips; their mouths are simply black lines or holes. Through mouth close-ups and the use of the color red, Pollock helps the reader to see that speech, sex, and violence are means of power open to Goneril and Regan as women and as daughters of a father who opens the door to a power vacuum by violating inheritance protocol.

Pollock's depiction of the mouth also draws attention to its power through Edmund, who, like Goneril and Regan, uses speech to overcome the usual system of inheritance. As previously

mentioned, being a bastard was not in and of itself considered evil, just as being a woman was not. However, both bastards and women had fewer rights and would receive less in inheritance than an eldest, legitimate son through primogeniture. If Goneril and Regan or Edmund want a kingdom, or merely an earldom, to themselves, they must find a means to gain the upper hand. The three characters are linked visually in Pollock's version: like the lips of Goneril and Regan, Edmund's are red, and he juggles red balls in the air (Pollock 19). Just as Goneril and Regan use words to flatter their father, Edmund frames his brother Edgar through words, staging a false story and writing a condemning letter. When he shows the letter to his father, the heart-tongue connection is emphasized in his lying text ("It is his hand, my lord; but I hope his heart is not in the contents"), and Pollock's visual highlights the mouth that tells these lies:



(Pollock 16)

Speech is also part of the alleged crime: Edgar's danger is in having "spoken against the Duke of Cornwall"; and he claims he's not "said a word" (II.i.23, 27). When Edmund calls to his father for help, his mouth is grotesque in red and black against his sickly white skin tone, and the tongue takes an indecent prominence:



(Pollock 40)



The red juggling balls evoke the Fool and thereby the folly and sensuality associated with that figure, as I will examine further later. The mouth imagery is both grotesque and lustful, similar to the depiction of Goneril and Regan, even down to the saliva spewing from his tongue like a bloody heart.

Edmund's power is in his tongue, both for deception and seduction, reminiscent of the man described in a London broadside, dated between 1660 and 1675, entitled "The mournful maidens [sic] complaint for the loss of her maiden-head, or, a warning for other maidens to take warning by." The now pregnant and unmarried former maiden cautions, "Young-men will use so much dissemulation . . . he complemented with so false a speech, she believed his words. . . . He had such a nimble Tongue / I believed his word then all along . . . many fine words he to me said . . . his mouth it was so full of lies" ("The mournful maidens"). Her ruin is a result of the deception of his tongue, as he had promised to marry her; and the color red is demonized along with the man's tongue, for his hair was red "And that colour it n'er is true" ("The mournful maidens"). She cautions, "Young Maidens all be not too bold / You hear the woful tale I have told" ("The mournful maidens"). Elements associated with immorality and ruin in this piece—the tongue, the color red, sex and feminine boldness—are all characteristics of Regan, Goneril, and Edmund.

Pollock's illustrations highlight how Edmund uses his mouth to achieve not only lechery but also treachery. Accepting an immoral "nature" justifies his lust for power and betrayal of his family, as well as his lust for Goneril and Regan, who are means to both sexual and political power for him. Edmund protests against his powerlessness as a bastard by embracing the sensual stereotype of bastards and using it to gain power, much like Milton's Satan, who would rather rule a world of pain than be ruled, or the Tyrion of HBO's *Game of Thrones*, who tells Jon

Snow, “Let me give you some advice, bastard. Never forget what you are. The rest of the world will not. Wear it like armor and it can never be used to hurt you” (Benioff and Weiss). While Edmund takes up the mantle of immorality, Goneril and Regan choose to abandon societal expectations of the soft-spoken, virtuous woman to get what they want. According to John McLaughlin, “Much of the behavior of Goneril and Regan can be explained by what Adler called the ‘masculine protest,’ a refusal of women to accept the weakness of the feminine role” (41). As Helen Wilcox has noted, words are sometimes the only way for women to make this protest: In *The Winter’s Tale*, “part of Paulina’s frustration is that, as a woman, she is unable to fight for her queen with anything other than words; were she a man, she would willingly make Hermione’s innocence known ‘by combat’”; Beatrice, too, wishes she could physically fight Claudio but must rely on Benedick instead (Wilcox 104). In lieu of the ability to take physical action, Goneril and Regan initially use words to commit violence.

Pollock associates the daughter’s violence of speech with sensuality through his depiction of the mouth. As Goneril and Regan talk their father out of their inheritances, they divest him of his remaining power through words, scenes illustrated with close-ups on those voluptuous, blood-red lips. The panel focuses on Goneril’s mouth when she refuses to speak to her father about his complaint, when she accuses him of wrongdoing regarding his “insolent retinue,” and when she explains she has written to her sister about him (Pollock 22, 31, 36). Goneril’s power over her father is both physical and verbal: he complains of her attempt “to cut off my train, / To bandy hasty words” (II.iv.149-150). A similar viewpoint illustrates Regan refusing to take her father in:



(Pollock 60)



Regan's full, pouty lips hover at the ready, pursed in a manner that brings to mind the Fool's comment, "there was never yet fair woman but she made mouths in a glass" (III.ii.35-6). Like this proverbial woman, Goneril and Regan calculate to achieve the desired outcome. Once Regan has some of Lear's power, the power to order others around, she uses it on him: In the third panel on page 60 (see above), Regan's mouth takes the center of the frame, essentially ordering Lear to stay with Goneril and dismiss half his men. Again, Pollock makes Regan's giant lips dominate the panel, representing the growing power she is able to command through speech and bringing the reader up close and personal, perhaps able to imagine her satisfaction as she forms the words.

Eventually, Lear is visually trapped between Goneril and Regan's two sets of lips, symbolizing their control of him with their words:



(Pollock 61)

Motion lines indicate that Lear's head swivels between the two of them, unable to believe the words that are stripping him of the little power he has left; he resembles a top, spun to dizziness by their unbelievable words. Lear's problem is speech: he requested it of his daughters and only later realized the power they would exert with it.

The power of Goneril and Regan's speech is not exclusively reflected in Pollock's interpretation; the correlation between speech and violence is in Shakespeare's language itself. Lear describes Goneril's offense with savage, oral imagery that takes away Lear's own power to speak: "she hath tied / Sharp-toothed unkindness like a vulture here. / I can scarce speak to thee"; "[she] Looked black upon me, struck me with her tongue / Most serpentlike upon the very heart"

(II.iv.114-116, 135-146). In the next act, Gloucester refers to Goneril's "boarish fangs" threatening her father's flesh, while Lear wonders about his "Judicious punishment: 'twas this flesh begot / Those pelican daughters" (III.vii.61; III.iv.68-69). Lear associates Goneril with creatures that pick at old bones and deceive, as she has done to him; and as with these predatory animals, her mouth is the weapon, though through words rather than literal eating. This imagery suggests the betrayal, violence, and beastliness of her speech. Yet Arnold Isenberg notes the imbalance of "the exacerbated violence and pathos of Lear's revulsion from his two daughters: nothing we have seen in either of these women explains why their defection should so wrench his mind and rankle in his breast" (192). Lear gave Goneril and Regan authority over his life and they took it, but they as yet have enacted no physical violence. I agree with Isenberg that Lear's hyperbolic reaction to Goneril and Regan's treatment is a sign of his inner guilt over his treatment of Cordelia. He knows he has put himself in this situation but prefers to blame others, a reaction common to human nature as old as Adam and Eve. Goneril and Regan are monsters at this point because Lear has made them so.

However, Lear begins to understand that his daughter's cannibalism would not have been possible without him, which also helps to explain the abundance of sexual imagery in the play. Edgar in his feigned madness follows Lear's "pelican" reflection with the seeming nonsense, "Pillicock sat on pillicock's hill" (III.iv.70). According to Orgel, the *pillicock* of this nursery rhyme could mean "an endearment" or "baby talk for penis" (72n70). Lear, on his hill of masculine power, created these women who attempt to devour him and opened the door for the innocence of the child-parent relationship to be perverted. The sexual language the Fool and Edgar contribute to Lear's anguish underscores the confused relationships of his family, as Lear has made his daughters his mother (as the Fool says) and the daughters have tried to devour their

father. Lear grapples with the idea that Goneril is his offspring: “But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter / a disease that lies within my flesh, / Which I must needs call mine”

(II.iv.196-298). Sex and violence intertwine because Lear’s sexual activity produced violence.

Goneril and Regan are not simply maligned for their gender, but for their behavior: they are “unnatural hags,” implying not only womanhood in its “witch” sense but also behavior “against natural feeling, not in accord with kinship” and malice (II.iv.255; Crystal and Crystal 210, 470). Lear’s misogynistic lines that refer to his wife as an “adulteress” (II.iv.110-112) and curse Goneril’s womb (I.iv.270-284) are symptomatic of his obsession with how he could have fathered such daughters. He wants Goneril to experience what she has done to him, “That she may feel / How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is / To have a thankless child” (I.iv.283-4).

While many critics seek to blame the daughters, Lear’s role in their actions is often overlooked. Hope and Kelly, however, envision a staging of *Lear* in which Goneril and Regan might be portrayed as “mirrors of his parental self-centeredness and Cordelia as a mirror of his intransigence” (231). Lear strikes back at Goneril’s sharpness with sharpness of his own, attempting to “Pierce every sense” with his curse, and invoking Regan’s power against Goneril: “with her nails / She’ll flay thy wolvisish visage” (I.iv.302-3). The daughters’ violence is only negative to Lear when it hurts him, so that one might speculate they learned such behavior from Lear himself. While Lear realizes early on the violence and voracity of Goneril and Regan, he takes longer to understand how his own request opened the door for their actions.

The famous heath scene illustrates Lear’s realization of the power of speech. Driven into the storm by his daughters’ threats, he treats the sky as if it were an open mouth yelling at him:

*Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow!*

You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout

. . . *Spit*, fire! Spout, rain!

Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire are my daughters. (III.ii.1-2, 14-15, emphasis added)

In denying the storm as his daughters, he likens the two, both spitting upon him, as Goneril and Regan spit out hearts in Pollock's vision of the first scene. Kent continues the mouth metaphor: "Such groans of roaring wind and rain I never / Remember to have heard" (III.ii.47). Reading this as a commentary on Goneril and Regan's speech confirms that their words are both unnatural and not expected of any child, regardless of gender. While Lear begins to understand the problem, he is still self-centered: the storm reminds him of his daughters, just as he assumes that Edgar's Poor Tom has become destitute because he must have daughters: "What, his daughters brought him to this pass? / Couldst thou save nothing? Didst thou give them all?" (III.iv.57-58). As Arnold Isenberg notes, Lear's real problem is not his daughters treatment of him but his own behavior, with which he has not yet come to terms.

Driving out Lear is only the beginning: once their father is gone, Goneril and Regan turn their verbal, violent, and sexual passions toward augmenting and retaining their newfound power. Consistent with the Renaissance woman's source of power, Goneril and Regan's violence continues to be verbal. The audience hardly sees Albany, as his wife directs all of the affairs and commands Oswald, while at the beginning of Act 2, Regan consistently speaks more than her husband. Shakespeare may often provide more and larger roles for men than women (no wonder in the male-dominated theater scene of the Renaissance), but he certainly gives these women the rein. Regan trumps her husband's (physical) stocks punishment with "Till noon? Till night, my lord, and all night too" (II.ii.137). In Pollock's depiction of this scene, Cornwall's lipless, black, gaping mouth is mirrored on the facing page by an odd single gaping eye from a close-up of Regan (48-49). Similarly, Regan has her characteristic red lips, while Cornwall has a distinctive

red nose. Pollock depicts these bullies in coordinating strident, monstrous reds and blacks, as the husband executes the violence and the wife eggs him on to more.

Kent's punishment presages the increased violence of the famous blinding scene, in which Cornwall commits the physical violence against Gloucester, but Regan is equally forceful through words. Goneril wants to "Hang him instantly," to which Regan counters, "Pluck out his eyes" (III.vii.4-5). Cornwall requests, "Leave him to my displeasure," but she defies her husband's command, yelling insults at Gloucester and plucking his beard (III.vii.6). Her voracious mouth usurps Lear's initial prerogative as king and male to command "Speak":



(Pollock 89)

Cornwall fumes in the background of this frame, while Regan is the one lording over Gloucester. Once Cornwall has stomped the man's first eye out, Goneril calls for "Th' other too" (III.vii.74). Regan then outs Edmund as a traitor, sparing none of Gloucester's feelings with her words, and sends him off with the notorious and cruel line, "let him / smell His way to Dover" (III.vii.95-6). Regan no longer needs to parrot false affection but can exult in the power provided by cruelty over others, allowing her wolfishness full rein, at least in speech.

Eventually, Goneril and Regan's lust for both power and Edmund moves them beyond womanly words to manly action, a consequence of their "refusal to accept the weakness of the feminine role" (McLaughlin 41). When her partner (both in bed and in cruelty), Cornwall, is wounded by a servant, Regan commands, "Give me thy sword. A peasant stand up thus?"

(III.vii.83). Her sense of royal power is greater than her womanly and speech-bound proprieties, and she stabs the servant, with the masculine weapon of a sword, though apparently from behind, as cowards do. In trying to transcend her feminine powerlessness, McLaughlin asserts, “Regan’s masculinity is best dramatized” in this action (41). Her husband dead, Regan then takes command of Oswald, directing him to her purposes in allying herself politically and sexually with Edmund. As she plans to notify her sister, “My lord is dead; Edmund and I have talked, / And more convenient is he for my hand / Than for your lady’s” (IV.vi.32-34). The motivation here is not love but power: Edmund is “convenient” for Regan and will go on to lead her forces in the battle. Goneril and Regan “both abandon the passive feminine sexual role—Cordelia’s role—and become masculine aggressors, competing for sexual favors from the man whose open drive for power they emulate and hope to surmount” (McLaughlin 41). As noted by Dundes, speech metaphors are used in the making of these arrangements: another speech-lust-power connection (362). Furthermore, Regan asserts power over Goneril not only by making a claim on Edmund but also by usurping her sister’s servant to accomplish it.

Even more so than Regan, Goneril pursues a masculine path toward power. Albany is largely absent in the beginning of the play, Goneril being the one to direct Oswald, as “She denies her husband’s authority and reserves for herself alone the absolute power of monarchy” (McLaughlin 41). According to Wilcox, “A man whose wife is outspoken is seen as emasculated” (105). In Goneril’s case, Albany’s impotence provides her the opportunity for usurpation, which is mainly achieved through verbal commands. Even Goneril’s sexual solicitation of Edmund is an order: “If you dare venture in your own behalf, / A mistress’ command. Wear this; spare speech” (IV.ii.20-21). Goneril appeals to Edmund’s lust for power, relegates him to the woman’s role of silence, and placates him with the physical (a favor and a

kiss). She wields power, sex, and speech simultaneously, as a man would. Pollock envisions this exchange with a sickly green background, a color used as a background in no other scene, though it visually echoes the green skin tone of Regan once she has been poisoned by Goneril, evidently over Edmund himself. The panel featuring the kiss is set off in yellow, a color not of love or of passion, but of disease:



(Pollock 96)

Goneril’s flapper garb and blatant blue eye shadow are styles associated with loose women. The kiss itself takes on the power of speech (“this kiss...if it durst speak”), though perhaps it does not have the same effect on the speaker as on the one spoken to. Cultural consensus would indicate that Goneril feels something for Edmund, as she closes her eyes in the kiss; Edmund’s eyes, on the other hand, are open.

The final scene confirms that Goneril was not without feelings and the desire for love: even the grasping Edmund, who earlier wonders which sister he should choose for the most political gain, realizes, “Yet Edmund was beloved. / The one the other poisoned for my sake, / And after slew herself. . . . Some good I mean to do, / Despite of my nature” (V.iii.238-240, 241-242). While Goneril, Regan, and Edmund begin by using speech and sex for personal gain, the audience can identify with the feelings of marginalization and the desire to be loved, or at least feared, exhibited by these villains. As usual, Shakespeare will not let villains be entirely evil, or good characters be without reproach. Part of the tragedy of *King Lear* is not simply the fall of the mostly good, but also the flickers of empathy the audience feels for the mostly bad. Goneril’s

strength of feeling and Edmund's last minute change of heart are enough both to shatter the black-and-white fairytale world of Shakespeare's source story and to make us wonder what might have been if the situation had been different.

Because Albany does not share Goneril's ambitions, she looks to Edmund for love instead and takes over her husband's role in the coming battle. Goneril reaches the height of her "masculinity . . . when she assumes the command of an army after her husband refuses to act on the news of invaders from France" (McLaughlin 41). Goneril's tenacity makes her "the better soldier" when compared to her husband (IV.v.5). Freud observed that a literary woman, such as Lady Macbeth, whose husband "had been completely impotent . . . had turned all her energies into ambitious plans" (qtd. in Holland 170). Goneril is of this type, adopting a masculine virility in place of her husband, both sexually and verbally, in order to compensate for his lack of agency. McLaughlin further asserts:

it is significant that she takes her own life with a masculine weapon, a knife. Suicide is her ultimate rejection of the inferior feminine role.

Suicide, Adler asserted, is always an attack on someone else. . . . Goneril's suicide is her final attempt to gain a victory by forcing her husband to suffer remorse and guilt.  
(42)

When Goneril realizes she has lost control of Edmund to Regan, and of the kingdom to Albany, she has again lost her agency. Like ancient warriors who fell on their swords rather than be killed by others, Goneril's suicide is the only action she can take to maintain control.

Yet, aside from the manner of her death, Goneril's main weapons are those of a woman. McLaughlin notes that as the eldest, she was "dethroned" as a child by Regan, whom she kills "with a woman's weapon, poison" (42). Poison is ingested through the mouth, and Biblically,



poison is a weapon akin to words, another woman's weapon: "the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison" (*KJV James 3:8*). Goneril's status as an adulteress confirms the associations between women's strong speech and promiscuity. From the love test to her final demise, Goneril grasps for power against her father, husband, sisters, and lover in any way she can: verbally, sexually, and by drawing on both traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine characteristics. Gender stereotypes eventually become irrelevant: Goneril is as akin to Lady Macbeth as to Faustus. Goneril is not merely an outspoken adulterer, but someone who in trying to gain control over others made too many deals with the devil and paid her due.

While Goneril rebels against her prescribed role even in the manner of her death, Regan finds herself the victim of her conspirators in the end. The Regan who has verbally hoodwinked her father experiences poetic justice when she requests that Edmund "speak the truth" about whether he loves Goneril (V.i.8). He pulls a Cordelia and equivocates with the politically correct answer: "in honoured love" (V.i.9). When Regan asks him outright about their sexual relationship, Edmund again deflects: "That thought abuses you" (V.i.12). Pollock depicts this exchange as another mouth close-up:



(Pollock 121)

Both mouths loll open, gleaming and red and lustful, Edmund's tongue characteristically hanging out. As martial as Regan has been, securing Edmund is more important than victory over France's forces, as the panel below illustrates. Pollock's perspective distorts her face to make her mouth the focus once more. Soon after, she finds she has unwittingly been poisoned by this organ. While Regan thought she was colluding with Goneril and Edmund, both betray her in the end through their characteristic hypocrisy of word and thought.

The audience may feel some sympathy for this woman who does appear to have been in love with Edmund, according to her aside, and dies in a manner she has no control over. Like Hermione and Beatrice, Regan does not have the opportunity to take up a sword and defend herself. She is a victim in a sense that Goneril, who does take up a weapon in the end, is not. Yet we have also seen Regan's cruelty to the helpless old Gloucester, and her conniving to get Edmund out from under her sister's grasp to help her take control of the kingdom. Goneril, Regan, and Edmund illustrate that those made powerless by the men in power must use desperate means to make a place for themselves; simultaneously, they are a lesson that ultimately flattery, violence, grasping and backstabbing lead only to death.

### **Misogyny & Psychoanalysis**

While I argue that *Lear's* sexuality and violence are bound up with speech to serve tragic purposes consistent with Renaissance ideals, the negative comments about women by the supposedly good, male characters in the play have led to condemnation from feminist critics. Hope and Kelly note the trend since the '80s "for women to direct *King Lear* and even to play the role, with a benefit to be gained by handing off the play to ambitious women directors in the hope of ameliorating, in the audience's response, the sexist rampages of Shakespeare's

thunderous octogenarian” (229). Many critics see only certain characters as sexist, others blame the playwright, and some call the entire play misogynistic.

In examining the daughters from the perspective of the *virgo* and *virago*, patriarchal conceptions of women from Christian tradition, Catherine Cox argues that Cordelia exhibits characteristics of both *virgo* and *virago* but most resembles the former, likening her to a female martyr from hagiographic tradition. Goneril and Regan then are “a pair of scheming *viragos* who demonstrate just about every negative stereotype of gender and gendered identity” and are likewise silenced for their virility (155). Cox reasons, “It is quite telling . . . that images of witchcraft, monsters, demons, and vermin are frequently used by Lear, Albany, and others to describe the women’s ‘unnatural’ behavior . . . Such images corroborate the audience’s credence of moral codes through which ambiguously or inappropriately gendered behavior is mediated and rejected” (155-156). Cox concludes that the women in the play embody “gendered stereotypes” and the play silences all of the women for their “unnatural” qualities that threaten the patriarchy (154, 157).

Peter Rudnytsky reads similar gender stereotypes in the female characters. As noted earlier, he asserts that the play includes a “polarization of women into angels or demons, madonnas or whores,” as in the passages I have cited, when Lear rails against Goneril and Regan after he is “symbolically castrated” by them through the removal of his entourage and influence (Rudnytsky 301, 304). Joining McLaughlin and Dundes in Freudian criticism, Rudnytsky associates the mouth itself, the source of Goneril and Regan’s treacherous speech, with the vagina, which conflates the Renaissance expectation that women be both silent and chaste. Rudnytsky proposes that “Lear’s intense focus on Cordelia’s mouth displaces upward his interest in the nothingness between her legs,” infuriating him when “‘nothing’ issues from both sets of Cordelia’s female

lips” (Rudnytsky 305, 304). Arpad Pauncz “went so far as to speak of a ‘Lear Complex,’ as a kind of reverse Oedipus complex, referring to a father’s being sexually attracted to his daughter” (qtd. in Dundes 359). As Rudnytsky sees it, Lear calls Goneril and Regan whores and sees Cordelia as an angel, but both are symptoms of incestuous desire masked by misogyny.

Lynda Boose also considers the possibility of sexual desire in Lear’s behavior: in accordance with “the folktale motif of [the father] trying to lock up his daughter for himself,” Lear “casts [Cordelia] away not to let her go but to prevent her from going . . . Compelled by nature to give up his daughter, he unnaturally gives up his kingdom” (Boose 335, 333, 334). In Coppélia Kahn’s analysis of Boose’s ideas, “the father symbolically certifies the daughter’s virginity. Thus the [marriage] ceremony alludes to the incest taboo and raises a question about Lear’s ‘darker purpose’ in giving Cordelia away” (Kahn 39). Lear’s incestuous desire for the daughter who must be married off becomes the motivation for his seemingly illogical act of dividing the kingdom, preventing Cordelia from leaving him for a husband.

However, Alan Dundes proposes that “psychoanalysts and several literary critics may have erred in reading *King Lear* as a literal expression of incestuous desires on the part of the father figure. What the folktale behind the play and very likely the play itself does entail is *a projection of incestuous desires on the part of the daughter*” (360, emphasis original). Goneril and Regan “are obviously the wicked older sisters (often step-sisters) in Cinderella and other *märchen*. Among sisters, there is commonly sibling rivalry for the affection of the father” (Dundes 362). Rudnytsky takes this further, claiming, “the sisters’ sexual rivalry over Edmund reenacts their genteelly masked contest for their father’s affections” (308). Indeed, according to C.L. Barber, when the opening scene of the play can be viewed as a marriage ritual, “Regan and Goneril, though married, pretend to meet Lear’s demand on them in all-but-incestuous terms”

(qtd. in Boose 345). Cordelia does insightfully wonder, “Why have my sisters husbands if they say / They love you all?” (I.i.99-100). Goneril and Regan’s highly sexualized words and actions could be a result of *their* incestuous desire.

Yet the two elder sisters clearly lust after Edmund, not Lear. Regan also appears compatible with her cruel husband before his death, while Goneril turns to Edmund, not her father, because she perceives Albany as weak. Their sibling rivalry is over their share of the kingdom, not over the father with whom neither of them wishes to deal. Perhaps then, as Norman Holland suggests, “The older married sisters have outgrown and repressed the Oedipal love for the father; Cordelia has not, nor can she bring herself to speak of this forbidden love” (Holland 169). Cordelia’s behavior during the love test may be an indication of repressed desire. However, Dundes notes that the daughter-heroine of the folktale sometimes punishes herself for her incestuous desire, but in *Lear*, “The suicide is shifted to Goneril” and “it is noteworthy that the apparent motivation for Goneril’s decision is unrequited lust (for Edmund)” (362). A comparison with folktale tradition suggests that Shakespeare’s Cordelia did not have unnatural, conflicted feelings about her father, nor did Goneril and Regan. Ultimately, Dundes determines instead that *King Lear*

reflects an older male’s reworking of a female-centered fairy tale . . . one possible reason for Shakespeare’s giving vent to such vitriol with respect to the sexuality of women in *King Lear* . . . might be his normal father’s repugnance at the thought of his ‘innocent’ daughter becoming a sexual object for men (himself included). (365-6)

While the heavy sexuality of the play makes psychoanalysis tempting, I maintain that the sexuality and treatment of women in the play is more about Lear’s own insecurities regarding his

power as a ruler and a father than any innate hatred of women or repressed sexual desire among family members.

In fact, Freud's own writings focus less on the Oedipus complex in *King Lear* than on the symbolic elements of the story, such as the casket trope mentioned earlier. Norman Holland sums up Freud's ideas on Cordelia:

Cordelia's behavior, he said, reminds one of other stories (e.g., Cinderella, Psyche, or the choice of Paris) in which the third of three women surpasses the other two. Often this third woman is mute, and muteness in dreams and stories frequently symbolizes death . . . Freud therefore concluded that Cordelia, the third, the mute woman, as in the tradition of the triple mother-goddesses, stood for Death. (168)

Freud sees in *Lear* not only the folktale but also the myth, in which the next life stage for the aging Lear is death. In Shakespeare's seven stages of man, the final stage before death is "second childishness" (*As You Like It* II.vii.166), a stage Lear reaches when he makes his daughters his mother and Goneril reflects upon his behavior: "Old fools are babes again" (I.iv.19). Holland asserts that Freud recognizes "a psychological rather than a literal truth" akin to that found in dreams, namely that "Lear's initial rejection of Cordelia . . . signifies his resistance to death and his longing for the love of woman" (Holland 173, 168). In marrying off Cordelia, Lear loses the last reminder of his own fertility and love of women, whether sexual or merely filial. Either way, it is another step closer to death for him. According to Freud, Lear's love of Cordelia has the same motivation as his rejection of her, just as goddesses "have been both creators and destroyers—both goddesses of life and fertility and goddesses of death" (299). Lear curses Goneril's fertility out of spite, and embraces an imprisonment that means his death to all but Cordelia. He would rather be a singing caged bird with her than part of the intrigue of "gilded

butterflies”—symbolic of both courtly show and youthful beauty (the women making mouths in a glass)—any longer (V.iii.9, 13). Anxiety over aging provides insight into Lear’s irrational behavior and railing against women.

Freud’s commentary also supports the connection between speech and sex. When he compares the three sisters to the three caskets of *The Merchant of Venice*, he casts Goneril and Regan as gold and silver, which he calls “loud,” and asserts their “blatant nature” (294).

Accordingly, onstage the mouth is the outlet for the sister’s carnality:

The marked contrast between Cordelia and her sisters is also indicated by the sexual symbolism of speech. Speech is sexual; dumbness, not speaking, is asexual. Cordelia is unable or unwilling to speak. Her name which may derive etymologically from heart (cor) may be related to Lear’s request for her heart (I,i,106), but she cannot heave her heart into her mouth (I,i,94). Freud interpreted Cordelia’s dumbness as a representation of death, an interpretation that is not incompatible with the asexuality suggested here. If dumbness is death, then speaking is life. Among other examples of the sexuality of speech, there is Albany’s attempt to communicate that his wife is sexually unavailable to Edmund: “My lady is bespoke” (V,iii,90). Regan refers to Goneril’s “most speaking looks” before admitting that Edmund and she “have talk’d” (IV,v,30) which means presumably that they have come to some sexual understanding. (Dundes 362)

In a world where true, plain-speaking is not valued, not only can actions have the ability to speak, as we saw earlier, but also speech becomes action. Goneril’s husband is most often dumb and Regan’s ends up dead, creating a vacuum in which the two can brazenly compete for their father’s favor initially and then for Edmund’s. Speech allows them to lust after both Edmund and the power he can help them achieve. Similarly, Pollock’s tongue-wagging Edmund exhibits

“hypersexuality, which culminates in his adulterous liaisons with both Goneril and Regan” (Rudnytsky 303). In the world of Goneril, Regan, and Edmund, speech is power, speech is sexual, and sex and speech are both means of achieving power.

Coppélia Kahn examines the play from a different psychoanalytic angle, seeing Lear’s behavior not as a result of Oedipal desires but rather as a result of the preoedipal mother-child relationship, the “‘the maternal subtext,’ the imprint of mothering on the male psyche, the psychological presence of the mother whether or not mothers are literally represented as characters” (35). Kahn bases her argument on Nancy Chodorow’s idea that male identity is created “*in opposition to*” the mother with whom he has seen himself as the same being in the nursing stage, which necessitates that men denigrate women and their activities (Kahn 37, emphasis original). Kahn notes that during the Renaissance this situation was aggravated by James I and the Puritans, wet nurse practices that created separation from the child’s natural mother, and laws that made aging parents dependent on their children. Kahn takes Boose’s theories one step further: “the renunciation of her [the daughter] as incestuous object” implicit in the marriage ceremony “awakens a deeper emotional need in Lear: the need for Cordelia as daughter-mother” (40). Lear’s love test is an attempt to contract his daughters into taking care of him in his old age: he expects Cordelia to provide a “kind nursery” (Kahn 40). Kahn argues that his daughters’ refusal to support his second childhood causes anger and misogyny, as he yearns for the mother figure and denies its latent presence within his masculine self.

Kahn cites many of the passages I have already examined, a “striking series of images in which parent-child, father-daughter, and husband-wife relationships are reversed and confounded” but she asserts that in these “Lear re-enacts a childlike rage against the absent or



rejecting mother as figured in his daughters” (41). She notes, as I have, the abundance of mouth imagery:

The play is full of oral rage: it abounds in fantasies of biting and devouring, and more specifically, fantasies of parents eating children and children eating parents . . . His daughters are the mouths he fed, which now tear their father’s generous hand; but at the same time, he is the needy mouth that would turn against those daughters for refusing to feed him on demand. Lear’s rage at not being fed by the daughters whom, pelican-like, he has nurtured, fills the play. (Kahn 41-42)

While Lear hates his daughters, he also feels a “deep sense of identification with his daughters as born of his flesh,” which “leads him to project his loathing toward the procreative act onto his daughters, in a searing indictment of women’s sexuality” (Kahn 43). For Kahn, misogyny allows Lear to separate himself from his role in his daughters’ behavior as well as “from any feminine presence” (44). Yet when his daughters deny the care of his second childhood, they make Lear confront the mother within him, bringing him to “*Hysterico passio!*” and “women’s weapons,” tears (Kahn 33, 46). Kahn argues that Lear’s anger and madness are his reaction to the absence of the mother figure in his life and his desire to express the mother within him. The storm scene allows him to weep, as it were, when it would be inappropriate for a man to do so otherwise:

he evokes and excoriates a world full of viperish women. Interwoven with Lear’s indictments of women during acts 3 and 4 are the imaginary lustful mistresses of Poor Tom’s sophisticated past, the wearers of plackets and rustling silks [painted butterflies perhaps], as well as the real Regan tearing out Gloucester’s eyes, and the real Goneril, stealthy and lustful, seducing Edmund and sloughing off Albany. It is as though Shakespeare as well as his hero must dredge up everything horrible that might be

imagined of women and denounce it before he can confront the good woman, the one and only good woman, Cordelia. (Kahn 46)

Kahn's argument explains much of the play's obsession with the mouth, sex, and demonizing women, from Lear himself to Poor Tom and even the evil of Goneril and Regan. I agree with her that Lear's sexism is a result of his own fears, his desire to be taken care of, and his inability to cope with the power of the women in his life.

However, Kahn does seem to assume the dichotomous reading of Lear's daughters that I try to counter. Like Rudnytsky, Kahn treats Cordelia as simply one iteration of masculine ideas of women: "Cordelia's goodness is as absolute and inexplicable as her sisters' reprobable badness, as much an archetype of infantile fantasy as they are" (46). Kahn casts Cordelia as the Virgin Mary, the ultimate mother who pities and sacrifices for Lear, who enacts for him "the fantasy that a prison can be a nursery in which Cordelia has no independent being and exists solely for her father" (49). Her connection to Mary dovetails with Cox's interpretation of Cordelia as *virgo*. Cox and Whittier complicate Kahn's mother-daughter confusion with the observation that Lear also treats Cordelia as a male heir at the beginning of the play. As Cox puts it, "Cordelia is coerced into inhabiting several competing gender identities—daughter, son, wife, mother—resulting in her own ambiguously gendered status. . . . Lear, it seems, relies on his youngest daughter to assume the appropriate gender role when needed" (150). The king harbors self-serving and contradictory expectations not just for Cordelia; as I have argued, he creates a situation unfair to all of his daughters.

Kahn does, however, acknowledge that the women in the play may be more complex than Lear envisions them. As noted earlier, Cordelia turns her tears to power while her father saw

them merely as weakness. Kahn also points out that Lear at one point does understand the appropriate relationship for a father and daughter:

He asserts his manhood, and admits Cordelia's separateness from him at the same time that he confesses his need for her: he can say "I am a very fond foolish old man" and yet also declare, "For (as I am a man) I think this lady / To be my child Cordelia" (4.7.59, 69). . . . Lear acknowledges his manhood and his daughter's womanhood in the same line and the same breath. He can stop imagining her as the maternal woman that he yearned for and accept his separateness from her. Yet he also calls her his child, acknowledging the bond of paternity that he denied in the first act. He need not be threatened by her autonomy as a person nor obsessed by the fleshly tie between them as parent and child. (Kahn 48)

For most of the play, Lear does not view Cordelia nor Goneril and Regan as whole people, but only in relation to his own gain. I think Kahn's point applies to any character in the play: regardless of gender or the type of relationship, tragedy occurs when people attempt to overpower others and fail to see that while they may need them, they need not control them. Kahn and other feminist critics can help us to see that patriarchal structures can be part of the problem, because they prevent the type of relationship Lear envisions for himself and Cordelia in prison when "Parent and child are equal, the gestures of deference that ordinarily denote patriarchal authority transformed into signs of reciprocal love" (Kahn 48). While Lear has a glimpse of equality, Kahn asserts that he reverts to his idea of Cordelia as his nurse when they are in prison together, and only "Cordelia's death prevents Lear trying to live out his fantasy, and perhaps discover once again that a daughter cannot be a mother" (Kahn 49). She believes this to

be one of Shakespeare's reasons for allowing Cordelia to die when she does not in his sources, though we will see that there are other likely explanations for this ending.

Kahn's analysis provides insight into Lear's creation of the love test and his sexist language. She confirms that the Fool's criticism of Lear's conflation of daughter and mother is correct: his inappropriate expectations for his role and his daughters' roles catalyze the action of this tragedy. Kahn's argument also serves to illustrate that this view of women is in fact the view of a man with a very skewed perspective: Lear sees everyone in his life in relation to himself and how they can serve him, rather than his responsibilities to them. In the next chapter I will address limitations of Kahn's analysis.

### **Sex as Symptom of Folly**

While Oedipal and preoedipal interpretations can provide some insight into the sexual and sexist language in the play, I argue that there are other explanations more consistent with Shakespeare's themes and characterization. Some critics interpret Lear's vitriol as evidence of non-sexual repression. Isenberg, for instance, understands Lear's mad overflow of language as a result of his repressed guilt over exiling Cordelia, while Van Domelen theorizes that Lear denies the love and responsibility represented by Cordelia; "When Lear can no longer make meaningful choices he discovers hell, not heaven on earth" (Van Domelen 134). By extension, the sexist language and rage of Lear, Poor Tom, and the Fool in the storm scenes are not expressions of reality but rather characteristics of hell. Indeed, Meredith Skura notes an account of a real hell on earth that served as one of Shakespeare's source texts: "Samuel Hartnett's recent and well-known exposé of fraudulent demoniacs and their Catholic exorcists" (136). Skura argues that Shakespeare was so fascinated by the "the experience of possession," whether or not it was

“pretense,” that “Harsnett may well have been a catalyst for the bleak vision of sadism and suffering that, countering its sunny opposite in *King Lear*, first helped generate the play” (136, 137). According to Skura, Shakespeare drew on Harsnett’s accounts for the madness of Lear and Poor Tom, as well as the blinding of Gloucester, mainly from the language of the victims who were supposedly possessed. In employing possession narratives, Shakespeare brilliantly conveys “the experience of being passively driven by an alien entity inside oneself” as Edgar, Lear, and Gloucester are all driven by confusion and anger caused by being betrayed and having betrayed loved ones (Skura 137). Disturbingly, Skura also notes the way in which the sexual condemnation, and even violation, of servant girls in the name of exorcizing the devil from their female anatomy finds its way into Shakespeare’s *Lear*.

While Skura and Rudnytsky point out aspects of the play that seem to condemn women’s sexuality, I argue that Shakespeare does not condone such views. Rather, he uses the blatant sexuality and male reaction against it as a symbol of the real problem of power and the hell it can create. The words “natural” and “unnatural” are used throughout the play to refer to parents and children, unnatural not in the sense of sexual desire but in the way that children relate to parents and vice versa. It is unnatural for Lear to split up his kingdom and require flattery over the wellbeing of the kingdom itself, with which he has been entrusted. It is unnatural for him to disinherit Cordelia and for Edmund to betray his brother and father. Lear calls his daughters’ behavior unnatural as he wonders how they could wage war on their own father. While Edmund justifies his actions with “Nature,” his final change of heart (not to mention his previous track record with Edgar and Gloucester, both of whom are able to be bilked because they trust Edmund) illustrates that he could have chosen to be otherwise. I contend that sex and women are not bad by nature in the play, nor even is Edmund; rather, the evil in the play occurs when

characters use power and sex immorally, to betray those whom they are supposed to love for the sake of their own gain. The sexuality of the villains in *King Lear* does not cast women as madonnas and whores but rather emphasizes the various lusts (for both men and women) that lead to tragedy. Sex in *Lear* is a symptom of the dangers of putting one's own whims above one's responsibility, whether to a kingdom or simply to those one claims to love.

To balance the sexuality of Goneril and Regan, Shakespeare adds the Gloucester plotline to the original Lear story. As Lear's choices opened the door for his daughters' actions, Gloucester's wanton behavior begot Edmund and gave the son a reason to embrace sensuality just as his father had. Referring to the cases in which priests used their hands to try to exorcise demons from the female anatomy while horrified spectators did nothing to stop it, Skura claims, "Harsnett's account of these exorcisms is most extensively recalled in Gloucester's blinding, where the grotesque near-rape of a serving girl becomes the blinding of an old man. The moment might be seen as a primitive form of poetic justice for Gloucester's heartless adultery, were not the concern for justice overwhelmed by the anguish felt watching the scene" (139). By reversing the gender roles in this harrowing scene, Shakespeare gives Regan the opportunity to symbolically avenge the injustices done upon women by men. Yet Skura also notes that in Shakespeare's version a servant does step up to protest: Shakespeare theatrically rights the wrong of those who see others suffering and do nothing.

Skura claims that Lear's mad language is not merely that of Harsnett's victims: "Lear voices the priests' sexual loathing of what lies beneath 'the *girdle*,' the accusations they make to justify their sexual violation of the female demoniacs" (140). In his mad hell, Lear locates hell in the female anatomy and uses it as a justification for his daughters' evil, rather than taking responsibility for his role in the situation; in effect, he has violated their rights and allowed them

to violate his but blames them rather than himself. Most disturbing about Skura's connections between Harsnett's possessions and Lear's madness is not the sexual language of his hell but Skura's assertion that "Lear's recovery from this sexual hysteria also draws on the same passages from Harsnett": in telling Gloucester his hand "smells of mortality," Skura claims "Lear has just evoked the depths of Harsnett's perverted hell . . . The smell of sex on specifically priestly hands in Harsnett's pornographic attack" (140). While I find Skura's interpretation of this line a bit of a stretch, it does illustrate that while Lear blames his daughters, he is also at fault. He has violated them, not literally or even with incestuous desire, but by blaming them for his own misjudgments and demonizing them. After asking them to verbally prostitute themselves for the kingdom, he condemns them for being whores. Skura does acknowledge that "Harsnett's revelation is neutralized . . . absorbed, if only for a moment, into a universal mortality, the fate of both Catholics and Protestants, women and men, subject and object of nightmare terrors" (140). Lear and Gloucester are not incidentally stripped to raw humanity but are brought to such a point because of their abuse of power. Skura is correct that the course of the play allows these characters to exorcise their demons.

Shakespeare also exorcises evil in the play through the Fool, whose role as a clown or jester in the Renaissance allowed him not only to speak truth but also to voice the improper and provide a channel for the inappropriate and unspeakable. The Fool's runaway speech represents the runaway lusts in the play, from Gloucester and Edmund's lechery to Goneril and Regan's cruelty. While the Fool is in one sense a stand-in for Cordelia, he is also her antithesis. When Lear exiles Cordelia's honor and respect, he creates an opening for the vulgarity and disrespect of the Fool. The Fool's lewd speech is couched in songs and stories, but serves as a commentary on the play's events. For example, he says to Lear, "Cry to it, uncle, as the cockney did to the

eels when she put ‘em i’ th’ paste alive. She rapped ‘em o’ th’ coxcombs with a stick, and cried ‘Down, wantons, down!’” (II.iv.102-105). Orgel’s notes on the text point out the associations with male anatomy and lechery suggested by eels and coxcombs; the anecdote is also about a woman violently suppressing these phallic symbols. The Fool’s language does not reinforce misogyny in the play, but rather echoes the means by which Goneril and Regan have found power, as well as Lear’s own inability to understand how the intimacy with his wife could produce such children.

Pollock’s graphic novel can help readers recognize how the role of the Fool connects the play’s preoccupation with sex to Shakespeare’s larger theme about power. Pollock illustrates the Fool like Goneril, Regan, and Edmund, in grotesque red, visually suggesting a connection between the characters. The Fool’s bulbous clown nose and characteristic red clown hair evoke the red juggling balls earlier incorporated with Edmund, for the Fool mocks Lear just as his daughters do and as Edmund flouts his own father’s authority. Pollock’s depiction emphasizes that the villains are fools. The Fool simultaneously criticizes Lear and his daughters:



(Pollock 83)

The phrase “whore’s oath” issues from a gaping hole that resembles the red mouths of the villainous characters as well as the “O” of the vagina, both textually and visually associating women’s speech with sex. Accordingly, when Goneril and Regan use words against Lear, he questions whether what they have said is “well spoken” (II.iv.237). Only once he has determined it is not, does he label them whores, cursing Goneril’s “adulterous” mother and her beauty,



calling her a “disease” and both of them “unnatural hags” and other such insults, many of which involve violence and the mouth, as we have seen (II.iv.130-1; 165-168; 223; 280). The wolf reference in the Fool’s line also connects sexual lusts to violence as much of the speech language in the play does. Though initially praised, Goneril and Regan’s verbosity is comparable to taboo sexual voracity, a subject otherwise expressed in the play by fools and madmen. Lear’s use of sexual language, most notable in his later madness, begins in the first act parallel to the beginning of his madness. His sexual language is not a reflection of his misogynistic nature, but rather of his frustration with loss of power, a loss he has initiated by making love a matter of words and going back on the love he supposedly had for his favorite daughter. Lear acts like the spoiled little boy who did not get his way, and the Fool notes here that a “boy’s love” is just as unreliable as a “whore’s oath.” The king makes himself the villain; accordingly, his language reflects the characteristics of the obvious villains, whose sexual and verbal greediness manifests their greed for power.

The Fool also voices the real problem of the play through his definition of folly. Folly has more to do with duty and loyalty than sexuality:

That sir that serves for gain  
And follows but for form,  
Will pack when it begin to rain,  
And leave thee in the storm.  
But I will tarry, the fool will stay,  
And let the wise man fly.  
The knave turns fool that runs away,  
The fool no knave, perdy. (II.iv.61-68)

Orgel notes that in this speech “disloyalty is the real folly” (54n67). The Fool’s seemingly nonsensical rhyme foreshadows the support he, Kent, and Edgar literally provide Lear during the storm. They follow their duty through action and remain loyal contrary to personal comfort. Goneril, Regan, and Edmund think they are wise in their conniving for power, but those who stay in the storm, though seemingly foolish, are wise in what Isenberg would call the matters of the heart. Lear asks the Fool when he was “wont to be so full of songs” and the Fool replies, “I have used it, nuncle, ever since thou madest thy daughters thy mother; for when thou gavest them the rod and putt’st down thine own breeches, [sings] Then they for sudden joy did weep, / And I for sorrow sung, / That such a king should play bopeep / And go the fools among” (I.iv.166-172). Lear has reversed the familial order, just as he has tried to sidestep the political order of things. The Fool’s silly and bawdy songs reflect this perversion. This is certainly how Goneril sees her father: “Old fools are babes again” (I.iii.19). If Lear will give up his own agency before his time, his daughters will become the parents. For Kahn, this is exactly what Lear wants, and Shakespeare confirms through both the Fool and the tragic ending that Lear’s desire to relinquish responsibility is not natural. In her 1988 production, Gale Edwards “[suggested] mockery” of King Lear himself, giving “Lear a big red clown’s nose bestowed on him by the Fool, which kept falling off and bouncing around the stage” (Hope and Kelly 232). Edwards’s production decision physically illustrates the Fool as the embodiment of Lear’s folly.

John E. Van Domelen expresses Lear’s folly as Lear’s desire for a “fool’s paradise” of no responsibility through Cordelia’s protection, at both the beginning and the end of the play (134). His reading is consistent with both Kahn’s assertion that Lear wants to be taken care of and with the heart-tongue convention. According to Van Domelen, Shakespeare used the word *heart* more than in any other Shakespeare play; the playwright also used the word *fool* here more than in any

other play besides *Twelfth Night* (133). Van Domelen concludes that “as Shakespeare approached the time of composition of *Lear* his concern with the human heart and its folly reached a climax” and provides examples from the play to illustrate that “[i]t is of the very essence of the play that all the more or less good characters are addressed as fools or alluded to as being foolish” (133). Shakespeare uses such irony throughout the play when moral failings are revealed by the senses. Alongside his description of the heart-tongue convention, John L. Harrison explains, “An allied deviation was from head to eyes, both head and eyes often referring to the Fancy, mere opinion or light judgment” (3). As Gloucester famously “stumbled when I saw,” Cordelia’s appearance of disrespect and rebellion in the beginning turns out to be the course of duty and loyalty in the end (IV.i.17). While Goneril and Regan’s disloyalty drives Lear mad, his heart actually breaks when Cordelia, “my poor fool[,] is hanged” (V.iii.304, 310). The heart that has finally learned to value loyalty breaks over its death.

Shakespeare employs the Fool as a foil not only for the truth-speaking Cordelia, but also for the sexual, power-hungry characters and for Lear himself. When examined from multiple angles, the Fool’s role conveys the idea that self-centered lusts for both sex and power are indeed foolish, while true wisdom, though world may see it as folly, is plain-speaking, loyalty, and the unswervingly love that takes responsibility for oneself and loved ones.

#### IV. TRAGEDY AND HEROISM

Thus far, I have argued for the value of silence and plain-speaking, for Cordelia's presence in her absence, and for a more nuanced reading of the sexual language in the play in which both sex and speech are tools for power and indicators of selfish error. Despite the power and strength Shakespeare gives to Lear's daughters, dramaturges Laura Hope and Philippa Kelly voice a valid concern: "certain dramatic moments (like the death scenes in *King Lear*) conventionally play out gendered expectation of female subordination" and, quoting Valerie Traub, "the cost of redemption in Shakespeare is 'a complete capitulation to masculine terms as well as the resurrection of the faulty structure of sexual dualism'" (Hope and Kelly 230). Ultimately, Lear's strong daughters die, Cordelia's legacy to Lear is her quiet gentleness, and a man both ascends to power and has the literal final word in the play. To conclude, I will address some of the remaining obstacles regarding the role of women in *King Lear* by examining Shakespeare's tragedy in relation to comedy and tragicomedy, audience expectations, and the role of the tragic hero.

##### **From Tragicomedy to Tragedy**

To begin, while I have noted many instances in which Coppélia Kahn's interpretation is helpful in explaining Lear's behavior, I disagree with her ultimate conclusion. Kahn grounds her argument in psychoanalysis because she believes the family is the source not only of gender identity, but also of identity in general; however, this theoretical framework limits criticism to Lear's inner workings. Ironically, in attempting to view the play from the perspective of the importance of the mother, Kahn's analysis still centers on Lear himself and the daughters' relationship to his perceptions and development. For Kahn, Shakespeare's tragedy in *Lear* is the

inability for daughters to be mothers, a situation he later remedies “in Marina, Perdita, and Miranda—the world of pastoral tragicomedy and romance, the genres of wish-fulfillment” (49). I disagree with her view that Shakespeare ultimately affirms this father-daughter relationship. As Skura notes, Shakespeare’s sources for *Lear* were tragicomedies, sometimes called romances, that he choose to write as tragedy; he could have easily made Cordelia the daughter-mother, but he did not. Instead, Shakespeare intentionally ended the story with Cordelia’s death, illustrating the folly of Lear’s desires through the tragedy they caused. *Lear* is indeed “a tragedy of masculinity” when its hero cannot come to terms with the correct role of women in his life (Kahn 36). While critics disagree on Cordelia’s meaning to Lear, Kahn and Van Domelen both assert that she is a crutch for her father; his development depends on the removal of the security she represents. Therefore, her death actually confirms her importance.

Furthermore, Kahn’s phrase “The Absent Mother” goes further to explain the problems of Shakespeare’s heroes than she outlines. Lear’s wife is completely absent from the picture; he no longer has a female voice to help him raise his daughters or make decisions in the kingdom. Perhaps the absence of a mother figure in *Lear* has led to Lear’s need for more from his daughters than is reasonable. Lear obviously struggles with the roles of men and women within himself and his family, just as Goneril and Regan struggle with gaining power in a patriarchal society. Kahn’s assertion that masculine power and feminine emotion conflict are certainly evident in Goneril’s suicide over Edmund, despite victory over her siblings, when Albany has reasserted his own authority. The inability for characters to reconcile the masculine and feminine, power and emotion seems to me to be a result of the lack of a mother figure to balance Lear’s fatherly role. Nor is this imbalance unique to *Lear*. Shakespeare’s starting point for many tragedies, comedies, *and* tragicomedies is actually similar: mothers are absent or irrationally

imprisoned, and fathers have all the power but little understanding. Shakespeare's conflict frequently stems from the patriarchal environment: Single father-figures try to control dependents who feel stifled by their power. The pattern is the same whether the dependent is Rosalind or Ophelia, Hermia or Desdemona, Hermione or Katherina; even male characters like Orlando, Florizel, and Romeo chafe against the rules imposed upon them by the older men in their lives.

When we consider that the gender of the dependent does not necessarily matter, the issue becomes not sexist but ageist. Skura argues that Shakespeare broadens the story of *Lear* to make it about "family, not father": "Shakespeare's dual plots suggest . . . that father and child are both sinned against and sinning" (121, 122). Skura is correct here: there is wrongdoing all around in *Lear*. This bleakest of tragedies explores a theme common to many Shakespeare plays: the conflict between generations. In fact, the play ends with it: "The oldest have borne most; we that are young / Shall never see so much, nor live so long" (V.iii.322-323). The most obvious message of *King Lear* is to respect one's elders: exactly what Goneril, Regan, and Edmund do not do. I have expressed this theme in terms of loyalty, for not only do children like Cordelia and Edgar try to do right by their parent, but also Kent, Albany, the Fool, and the servant who dies at Cornwall's hand all attempt to support Lear and Gloucester despite the wrongs these men have done. Their loyalty is all the more important because of the sins of these two old men, and Shakespeare complicates the pat moral lesson of respecting one's elders with the lesson to take responsibility for one's role not only as child but also as parent and ruler. *King Lear* illustrates that what Lear and Gloucester have done in following their own desires is not admirable; following one's heart and conviction even when it requires sacrifice is.

Nonetheless, the older generation with whom the young take issue is a patriarchal, male-dominated crowd. Consequently, while the absence of wives in most of Shakespeare's plays provides the environment for conflict, Shakespeare's resolutions involve the return of women to the balance. In the restoration of tragicomedies and comedies, daughters do not come to take care of their fathers as in Lear's fantasy according to Kahn; instead, mothers Hermione and Thaisa are restored to their rightful place, and daughters enter the path to become wives and mothers themselves. Marina, Perdita, and Miranda are no longer caged in with their fathers, as Lear desires to be with Cordelia, but released into a new set of relationships, successfully completing the marriage ritual Boose claims that Lear stifles. Comedies are also more known for giving women vocal influence. Hope and Kelly do acknowledge that Shakespeare provides "transcendent parts" for women; furthermore, he gets creative in how to do this in an all-male theater. Rosalind, for instance, dresses as a man for half of her play, allowing her the freedom to move and speak. The double cross dressing of men playing women playing men is very "meta," as we would say today, and provided both men and women a chance to find humor within society's strict gender roles. Furthermore, women like Rosalind and Beatrice often out-wit their male counterparts through words (I once found myself trying to write a defense of Orlando in Rosalind's interest, because he seems so unequally matched to her).

Feminist critics might argue that in comedies women are given freedom of voice throughout play but then forced back into the patriarchal structure by being shackled to husbands in marriage. However, I do not think Shakespeare allows patriarchy to succeed so easily. Husbands are likewise shackled to wives and, Benedick being the obvious example, like it. Those left out, like the Prince in *Much Ado* or Jaques in *As You Like It*, wish they were paired to a female companion. Shakespeare's marriage scenes involve interconnected relationships of

daughters and fathers, husbands and wives, fathers and sons, best friends both male and female; the interdependency of dancing; and the feminine power of goddesses descending from the heavens. Shakespeare's treatment of gender seems to me to be a suggestion not that women should come to mother their fathers as Lear wishes, or become subjected to a husband as Goneril resists, but rather that men and women working together is necessary for a healthy family and society. In contrast, one of the lessons of the tragedies is that disorder and power-based motivations in the family and kingdom lead nowhere good for anyone, regardless of gender. According to Stroup's research on actor doubling, Shakespeare's audiences were accustomed to seeing the same actor play both the tragic young women and the vocal, comical, uncensored fools: Shakespeare gives in the comedies the freedom of song and criticism to the very same mouths silenced in the tragedies. Shakespeare overall maintains balance.

In fact, this balance is what comedy and tragedy as genres are all about, the reason for those two faces on the drama masks. Comedy is by definition life affirming by ending in marriage, and the partnership of men and women is necessary. Tragedy is by definition sterile, ending in death; the fertility of women cannot triumph if tragic ends are to be achieved. When sex is equated with speech in women, the Cordelia who is willing to forsake marriage must be provided far fewer lines than the Rosalind who seeks it. Hope and Kelly note, "beyond her moving reunion with Lear and her 'no cause no cause' in the play's fourth act, we never (at least in the Folio text) get to hear what [Cordelia] thinks. In the final act of the play, she is given no lines at all, just a report of her untimely death and an account of how good and gentle she was" (230). I do not think it a coincidence that comedies tend to give women more verbal and authoritative rein. I argue that gender inequity is a symptom of the environments that allow tragedies to occur. We might read the silencing and deaths of Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia not



as a confirmation that women should be silent or subservient to men, but rather as an indication that the world is out of balance when women are treated this way and such deaths are in fact *tragic*.

The wholesale destruction that bothers many about *Lear*'s ending in some ways mitigates the gender discrimination. The joke in my high school classroom is that in a Shakespearean tragedy "er'ybody dies"; the playwright does not discriminate by gender nor, in this play, even goodness. The lustful and cruel men in the play meet death just as Cordelia and the servant who challenges Cornwall do, while Goneril and Regan's deaths are in fact the result of their own lustful, power-hungry behavior. Only men survive, but mostly men fill the dramatis personae; looking only at numbers, more men than women do die in the play. And as with line distribution, mere numbers do not necessarily indicate importance. Gender does not play a part in Lear's treatment of Kent and Cordelia, and in fact, a comedic gender trope is reversed in this tragedy. Kent plays the role that a female, such as Rosalind and Viola, would play in a comedy: dressing up as a common man in order to be able to move and speak as necessary and to protect oneself. Edgar, too, takes on a lowly disguise and finds more freedom of speech, movement, and intimacy with those he is deceiving, who have been deceived about him. Interestingly, Cordelia does not take the same tack; unlike the Rosalind who secretly follows her love into exile where her father secretly happens to be, Cordelia openly follows her lover into exile and must return openly to save her father. In tragedy, women are not allowed the freedom of disguise nor the freedom of speech it provides. Instead, Goneril simply takes on a masculine role in her own feminine form. Also, as I have argued, Cordelia's character actually has more power in the play because of her supposed silence and physical absence. Ironically, the tragedy turns out to give women more freedom of speech, movement, and power in their own feminine identities.

However, just like the power of men in the tragedies, it is a lonely, sterile power, not the dynamic life-affirming power of the comedy.

In turning *Lear* into a tragedy, Shakespeare had to kill the women not to affirm their subjugation but because of their value to society. According to Alan Dundes, in the folktale types that underlie Shakespeare's work, "the central figure is the daughter-heroine" so that "Shakespeare's emphasis upon Lear . . . is a critical literary change from the folklore source" (356). In Holinshed's *Chronicles*, the Cordelia character gets face time after her exile, Leir is completely in the wrong, Cordella's army succeeds, and both live in the end (Orgel xli; Skura 122). Shakespeare took a story in which, in typical fairy tale fashion, morality was black-and-white and the lesson clear, and complicated it: he made the characters more complex, "reduced [Cordelia] to a supporting character," incorporated the Gloucester plot from Sidney's *Arcadia*, and ended all in betrayal and death (Skura 125; Orgel xli). By changing the focus from Lear to Cordelia, Shakespeare takes a romance and makes it a tragedy. Removing Cordelia does not illustrate misogyny in Shakespeare, but rather an awareness of the importance of honesty and virtue. Without Cordelia's voice and the values she represents, Lear's mind and kingdom disintegrate rapidly. Women may be helping this downfall, but so are men, and neither are men like Kent or the Fool able to stop the course of events; even Edgar precipitates his father's death. No matter what the psychoanalytic causes, tragedy begins when Lear puts his daughters into an unreasonable situation, in which the natural order of daughters marrying and creating new families, a biological and dynastic necessity for the continuation of a race or a kingdom, is stifled. Women and men are both required for the continuation of the species, and humanity must work within this reality without turning into pelicans and tearing each other apart. Cordelia tries

to defend this order to her father by asserting her role toward a husband when her father requests all of her love.

James Forse's article on the differences between Shakespeare's play and an anonymously authored play on the same topic twelve years prior highlights the importance to Renaissance society of marriages that produced legitimate heirs. In the version of the play that preceded Shakespeare's in the 1590s, entitled *The True Chronicle History of King Leir*, Lear and Cordelia are triumphant in the end. According to Forse, Shakespeare did not rewrite the ending of his source, just choose a different point in the saga than the previous playwright had: "in what I will call an epilogue, Geoffrey of Monmouth continues the story through Lear's death three years later, and Cordelia ascending the throne as Queen-regnant, only to be deposed and imprisoned by the rebellious sons of her sisters, and committing suicide in despair" (Forse 57). In a time when threats had been made to the queen's life and Scottish claims had been made to the throne, "A play ending like Monmouth's narrative with the imprisonment and death of a Queen, probably would have seemed too timely and incendiary to Elizabeth's somewhat paranoid Council" (Forse 57). Furthermore, Forse suggests, "audience attitudes and tastes in 1594 also might dictate the 'happy' ending to the Lear story. Many historians note what might be called an undercurrent of 'succession jitters' among the English public from the 1560s on" as a result of Elizabeth's unmarried, childless state (58). Forse believes that the playwright was influenced not only by what Elizabeth would approve but also by what the audience wanted to hear. This situation illustrates the importance of marriage and childbearing to the continuance of the kingdom and the security of the people. By avoiding a husband who would assume her authority and children who might demand her time, health, and eventually throne; Elizabeth succeeded where Goneril and Regan did not. However, to a certain extent she made the

monarchy unstable in order to do so. Forse claims that Shakespeare's audiences "were enthused, after 44 years of an heirless, spinster Queen, to have their new King and a guaranteed succession in his royal family" (57). Whatever patriarchal structures made it difficult for women to have voice and power, women's reproductive capacity was undeniably important to the survival of the race and kingdom.

Forse contrasts the 1590s play with Shakespeare's, asserting that "Master Shakespeare probably tailored his ending to the perspectives of Court and audiences of 1606 and 1607," which includes their ability to accept the tragic death of Lear and Cordelia when their own kingdom was now united by James I, who had a clear heir (61-62). Forse also makes the case that "Shakespeare portrayed King Lear as the antithesis to James's depiction of an ideal monarch," arguing that Shakespeare's company was the King's Men, Shakespeare was familiar with James's writings on kingship and James was familiar with Shakespeare's plays, and that both men knew the ability the stage had to influence the morality and thought of the audience (64). According to Forse, Shakespeare not only ended the story at a different point but also added the famous heath scene and wrote his text in order to "[portray] two 'lessons' dear to the heart and policies of his royal patron" which are that kings have a heavy responsibility and kingdoms should not be divided (65). Following Forse's observations, I have already argued that Lear illustrated what not to do as a monarch, while Cordelia is the one who embodies the qualities of a good monarch. She attempts to reunite the kingdom after her sisters begin to tear it apart and places her responsibility to her father's kingdom over her own wellbeing. Yet Cordelia also represents a change from what may have made Elizabethans uncomfortable: she embraces marriage and the possibility of providing an heir for her king. By ending the play with her death, Shakespeare entirely cuts out her time as returned queen, heightening the tragedy of the play.

Many are uncomfortable that only men are left at the end of the play, but I think that discomfort is intentional. While there is hope implied in Edgar's rule, as yet it is a sterile hope: the something of life does come from woman's "nothing." The fertility of the comedy cannot succeed in this tragedy. Cox argues "the threat of 'unnatural' women [is] thus safely eliminated" when Cordelia, who unnaturally exhibited characteristics of both virgo and virago, and Goneril and Regan, with their strong virago power, meet their deaths (157). However, she also concludes that "the absence of women/Woman in the closing lines should give us pause. For all the cathartic satisfaction we may experience at this palliating if not pat conclusion, we are compelled to acknowledge the constructedness of this world and this resolution, which have their being in the time and space of a text" (157). Indeed, gender has been constructed in *Lear*—and reconstructed. Cordelia does not fit into virgo/virago or angel/whore categories because Shakespeare represents her as a whole person. While Cox sees the women's deaths as a return to masculine constructions of female power, I argue instead that *Lear*'s pessimism and bleakness are a result of the silencing of female voices.

The truth still stands that Lear is the cause of the problem, not the women in the play. In a world with no paternity tests, women's chastity and subsequent marriage was essential to ensuring a biological legacy. Lear purposely puts the division of his kingdom over Cordelia's marriage, jeopardizing her future as well as his own, shirking not only fatherly responsibilities to provide a viable source of support for his daughter in marriage but also kingly responsibilities regarding the future of his kingdom. Goneril and Regan do not appear to have any children in the play, which might be a source of anxiety to Lear, especially when Cordelia's response could mean her infertility as well. He received these daughters through his wife, so he curses her, too, beyond the grave, which is also perhaps an expression of his resentment that he has had to parent

and reign alone. As Freud suggests, Lear struggles with the shift from fertility to death in his own life and grasps for that sexual desire that used to be his and created his daughters in the first place. In his madness, he adopts the mad sexual words of Poor Tom and the words of the Fool, whose bawdy humor was presumably the order of the day for someone in his role. Ultimately, Lear's sexual language develops through suffering and madness initialized by his own lack of responsibility, not by the promiscuity of his daughters; whereas Gloucester's male promiscuity led to the complications that he and Edgar endured at the hands of Edmund.

### **Rethinking the Tragic Hero**

Tragic conventions and historical context can help to explain the fate of Lear's daughters; however, part of *Lear's* bleakness results from Shakespeare defying expectations about the tragic hero. Hope and Kelly wonder if "we might consider the cost of an exclusive focus on Lear as universal man: for instance, that Lear's redemption is enacted at the cost of Cordelia's agency" (231). They consider Harold Bloom's assertion of the "greatheartedness" of Lear and his representation of the "universal man" (230):

how can the figure of Lear be universal if women are only written into the play as accessories to the old man's journey? . . . As for the representation of femaleness in the play, within their small allotment of lines, the female characters perform scenes of extraordinary violence (thus justifying their father's curses). . . to direct one's gaze away from Lear is something of a challenge. Even some of his daughters' most basic physical details emerge, for example, through his own curses. . . . Given that Lear accords his own

daughters so little respect, in following his ‘journey’ it is tempting to do the same, relegating them to a cursory contemplation of extremes of evil and compassion. (Hope and Kelly 230)

As I have argued, Shakespeare provides Lear’s daughters with more voice, power, and complexity than their father will acknowledge, and appearances can be deceiving: Lear’s abundance of words only serves to expose his madness, while we long for Cordelia in her absence. Shakespeare changed his sources to make Lear the focus rather than Cordelia, but he did little to improve Lear’s character, and left audiences more disconcerted than usual. More than perhaps any other Shakespearean tragedy, *Lear* actually provides little reason to sympathize with the protagonist at the beginning of the play. As we have seen, all characters in the play recognize that Lear is unreasonable in his governing of his kingdom and in his treatment of his daughters, while even Richard III in all his murdering tendencies has an underdog charisma that makes him fascinating. The tragic pattern is rather reversed with Lear: his tragic flaw of self-centeredness comes out in the first scene, and not until he begins to experience misfortune does he realize his own fault and see the humanity of others. I would not use Harold Bloom’s epithet of great heartedness at all: Lear learns to expand his heart, growing it perhaps a few sizes bigger as Seuss’s Grinch does, at his own suffering, Poor Tom’s suffering, and Cordelia’s loyalty and suffering; but the only greatness of his heart at the beginning of the play is for himself, and all of this emotion proves to be too much for his heart in the end, for it breaks.

Elizabeth Schafer notes that “Lear’s tirade against women is positioned late in the play when sympathy for the elderly king is riding high” (Hope and Kelly 233n16). Sympathy for the king at this point does not necessitate that the audience agree with his sentiments; rather, we

might instead pity his inability to distinguish virtuous men and women from lustful, power-hungry ones, which got him into this predicament in the first place. Hope and Kelly wonder:

is it really such a stretch to imagine that many female and male spectators in the audience do not whole-heartedly identify with Lear . . . ? Who in the audience would honestly wish to have Lear as a father? Many a spectator, particularly those who are daughters themselves, may instead identify with Lear's much-maligned daughters, resenting the selfish, bombastic, controlling father who let it be known that they were always second (or third best). Some spectators may identify with Cordelia, mourning the fact that if everything isn't done just daddy's way, he will let her know that she is "nothing" at all and vanquish her. (231).

As I have argued, the women in the play are put in an unreasonable situation by their father and each chooses how best to deal with it. The dichotomizing of the daughters may have come from Lear himself, the problem from the beginning, a problem with which women today can relate. If society is still as gender-biased as Hope and Kelly imply, then a play written in a gender-biased environment should in fact still be relevant. Hope and Kelly cite the instance of the young woman being expected to take care of her aging father and the resentment that might engender (no pun intended):

sitting at the play in 2014, [audience members] might hear an uncomfortable internal bell ringing as they consider choices they have made for their own fathers or mothers in response to increasingly erratic behaviors . . . It is an undeniable truth that the relationships between stubborn parents and the children who are their beneficiaries are never free of dependent self-interest on both sides, no matter how we frame our words . . . That



daughters are expected to be primary caregivers of aging parents is still contemporary. (229-230, 231)

Women today, like those in Shakespeare's day, may be able to identify with the injustices and frustrations of Lear's daughters. Though Ira Glass does not recognize it, the play fulfills his requirement that it be "relatable": the daughters' predicaments still occur to some degree today.

The villains are also understandable to a modern post-Enlightenment society that values science and reason, as well as an America founded on individualism (Mead). John E. Van Domelen points out:

From the standpoint of mundane wisdom and cool self-interest the self-sacrificing actions of Kent and Cordelia are bound to appear foolish. Moreover, it is the evil characters who are coldly reasonable, and from their viewpoint the vehemence of Lear, the credulity of Edgar, the impetuosity of Kent, and the sensuality of Gloucester all appear as irrational foolishness. (134)

While I agree with Van Domelen that Shakespeare ultimately uses the idea of folly to illustrate that self-sacrificing actions are not necessarily foolish, he has a point that Goneril and Regan's actions do have a practical sense about them. A modern audience might indeed see Cordelia's silence as foolish; she should stand up for herself! We may be tempted to believe that Lear's men are in fact rowdy or that he begins to suffer from dementia in his old age. We may find ourselves siding with the injustices of Goneril, Regan, and Edmund. And that is part of Shakespeare's genius. Whether the audience is Renaissance or contemporary, viewers are pulled in by the sympathy Shakespeare intentionally creates for his villains—sympathy created through words.

Like Lear, the audience must learn to decipher true feeling from selfishly motivated pretense, but Shakespeare provides clues. Shakespeare makes the daughters' alliance and aim

clear in their aside in Act 1. Furthermore, like Cordelia, Lear is ultimately supported by most of the characters in the play, while Goneril and Regan find themselves left with no sympathizers in the end. The bad die along with the good. As Van Domelen puts it, “the rationalism of Goneril, Regan, and Edmund does not prove to be an effective alternative—not even by worldly standards—, to the moral values rooted in the hearts of the good characters. If survival is the ultimate criterion, then good would seem to prevail” (134). Part of the tragedy here is that Goneril and Regan are both victims and perpetrators (there is no getting around the violence they do commit, even if it does justify Lear’s seemingly sexist curses); likewise, Cordelia is both a victim and a rebel. Shakespeare’s plays masterfully entwine societal expectations with criticism of those expectations, creating complex characters who are controversial because they are so realistic; the stark morality of Shakespeare’s source is simply not realistic to audiences, then or now. Gender is one component in the larger picture of Lear’s tragedy, a picture that involves good and bad attitudes and decisions.

Modern audiences might find new ways to understand Lear’s daughters and criticize his conduct, but he is still the tragic hero. While his heart does not seem great to me in the first scene, his position still is, and other voices in the play attest to his previous sense and love for Cordelia. The love test is his tragic flaw, his fatal moment of weakness when he puts his own comfort above that of his family and kingdom. Lear’s first responses to his misfortune are temper tantrums, but eventually he “bears responsibility for the misery that ensues” from his error and illustrates “extraordinary heroism and endurance” through the storm and Cordelia’s death (McDonald 86). Cordelia, in fact, is often referred to as the cause of Lear’s redemption. Lear realizes his error in exiling her, kills her assassin, and has the strength to carry her on stage and wish for the voice he once criticized.

## Double Catastrophe

While Shakespeare's text was most likely tailored for his audience, including the monarch, part of his prowess as a playwright is the way in which he manipulates his audience's expectations. Most of his plays were developed from older stories that his audience already knew; Shakespeare's success in the theater world was a result of what he did with these stories. Forse notes that Shakespeare's audience may have expected a happier ending like that of the play from 10 years before:

Shakespeare ends his play with what I have referred to above as the 'epilogue' to the Lear saga—the death of Lear and the overthrow, imprisonment and death of Cordelia.

Shakespeare reshapes and condenses that outcome into one ironic episode . . .

Shakespeare seems to have reshaped Spenser's version of Cordelia's hanging. The *Faerie Queen* is the only source to specify her death by hanging. . . . the triumphal ending of the earlier *True Chronicle* is mocked and turned on its head in Shakespeare's version. (61)

By ending with "one of the bleakest scenes in all his tragedies," Shakespeare provides his audience with a shock they were not expecting (Forse 61). By thoughtfully reconstructing more than one previous source, Shakespeare complicates and intensifies the story. As Meredith Skura puts it, "Where the old Leir story concentrates on how to judge and repair human discord, Shakespeare focuses more on what it feels like and how it can craze the wits" (134). David Bevington reflects, "Today, Shakespeare's relentless honesty and refusal to accept easy answers convince us that he was right to defy the conventions of his source" (656). In making the story darker, Shakespeare also writes an ending that is more poignant, more heartbreaking, and ultimately a better lesson against the selfish blindness of Lear.

Lear's entrance with Cordelia's body is a striking scene that not only enhances the play's dramatic power, but also illustrates Lear's development. Catherine S. Cox notes that in this scene Lear "cradles the body of Cordelia, temporarily inhabiting the maternal role that he had hoped to impose upon her" (156). Lear embraces the mother within him that Kahn argues he could not before and exhibits the love Van Domelen sees him rejecting earlier, now taking care of Cordelia instead of expecting her to take care of him. Yet Van Domelen notes that "If we look at the play objectively, without allowing any one character to dictate our responses, we will have to regard that pathos-filled speech in Act V not as proof that Lear has transcended mundane folly but rather that he is in very real danger of suffering a relapse and nullifying everything he has suffered so much to learn" (134). Both Van Domelen and Kahn view Cordelia's death as the only thing that stops Lear from reverting to his original desire for dependency.

While Cordelia's death is clearly a moment of pathos for Lear, one wonders if he really has changed since his exile of her. In looking for Cordelia's quiet voice, Lear "duplicates the opening scene; here again Lear requests speech from Cordelia, who offers 'nothing.' Having disowned and banished Cordelia because of her voice, Lear now praises what angered him most" (Cox 156). Cox notes, "His insistence here that her voice epitomized her most desirable feminine attributes has already been betrayed not only by his rejection of her words but also by the content of those words—there was nothing 'gentle,' 'low,' or 'excellent' in Cordelia's blunt and assertive remarks about 'honor' and 'bond'" (156). Cox suggests that Cordelia is excellent now because she is silent. As I have argued, Cox misunderstands Cordelia's sense of duty as much as Lear does, but neither does Lear really know his daughter in the end. Lear fits Cordelia into the virgo category as he has maligned Goneril and Regan for their strong virago personalities, but Cordelia never did exhibit the hypocrisy of the others. She tried to maintain decorum but showed

her love through her actions, following her convictions to the end. For Cox, Cordelia's adherence to faith and willingness to sacrifice herself echoes the hagiographic tradition, but as Cox herself also argues, Cordelia does not entirely fit that virgo conception either. While Shakespeare drew on gender categories and expectations, his Cordelia defies classification. In looking for Cordelia's gentle voice after her death, Lear does not seem to really be looking for this complex Cordelia that we see throughout the play. As I have argued, while she is silent and plain-speaking at times, she also defies the meekness expected of women in the Renaissance and illustrates the potential to be a better ruler than her father or sisters. Lear does not acknowledge any of this strength when he attempts to call her back from the dead. Lear's inability to see Cordelia for who she is heightens the tragedy and contributes to *Lear's* bleakness.

Even though Shakespeare shifted the focus of the original story from Cordelia to Lear and then Edgar, his condensed ending that echoes the first scene brings the importance of what Cordelia exhibited in the first scene back into focus. I would like to propose that Shakespeare wrote *King Lear* as a double tragedy: his changes to the ending of the play made the catastrophe not merely that of Lear but also of Cordelia. In his sources the two deaths happened at different times with other events in between. Remembering Forse's commentary on the ending, Shakespeare "reshapes and condenses that outcome into one, ironic episode" when Lear enters with Cordelia's dead body then shortly after dies himself (61). The audience experiences the scene more like the double deaths of Romeo and Juliet than a scenario like *Hamlet's* ending, in which a sea of less consequential dead bodies provides the backdrop for Hamlet's tragic death. Shakespeare stages Cordelia's death as if she were a tragic heroine as Lear is a tragic hero. Russ McDonald reflects on the so-called tragic flaw: "the appropriate word here is paradox, a radical form of irony. Tragic drama presents its audience with a spectacle in which heroic men and

women are destroyed by their own capable hands, victims of the very traits that set them apart from the rest of us” (88). The strength of love and sense of rightness that prevented Cordelia from complying with her father’s love test, and indeed set her apart from the rest of her family, was the same love and loyalty to her father that caused her to return and meet her death. While Shakespeare named this play after Lear, he wrote the ending for Cordelia to be a tragic hero(ine) as well.

The audience’s reaction to Cordelia’s death confirms her role as tragic heroine. John E. Van Domelen muses, “The audience’s reaction to the death of Cordelia cannot be to the mere fact that innocence is murdered, since so many innocent characters in Shakespeare’s plays die” (132). He cites other young women such as Ophelia and Desdemona or even children in some of the plays. Why is it that Cordelia’s death is so much more disturbing than these others? In his article “Why Cordelia Must Die,” Van Domelen argues that “Shakespeare regarded the murder of Cordelia as part of the essential meaning of the play” and “thematically at least, the ending could not have been otherwise” (132). Van Domelen brings up the conflicting interpretations of the play’s ending between Christians and existentialists, but he essentially sidesteps the issue in arguing that Cordelia’s death is necessary to the thematic message of ideal love. However, in asserting that “Cordelia . . . embodies the truth at the heart of things, which is love” and the unswerving, timeless love of Sonnet 116 at that, Van Domelen starts verging on Christian terminology (134). For Christians, God is love, God is timeless, and Jesus Christ is willing to sacrifice himself for the love of mankind, just as Cordelia sacrifices herself for Lear’s sake. Furthermore, Christians throughout the centuries have argued that the existence of evil, which is so strong in *Lear*, is not a reason for the nonexistence of God. Rather, sacrifice, as embodied in Jesus Christ himself, is the highest form of love and integral to God’s purposes for redemption.

By analogy then, Cordelia's sacrifice is necessary for Lear's redemption, as Christ's sacrifice was necessary for the redemption of mankind. Despite its ostensibly pagan setting and lack of any divine intervention in the lives of the good, critics have noted many Biblical references embedded in *King Lear*.

Van Domelen seems to imply that the value of Cordelia's death depends on her *murder*, not simply her death. In steering away from the suicide of his sources, Shakespeare did not hazard a cardinal sin for this heroine and instead made a character who otherwise has shown strength in the story. While audiences feel that Goneril and Regan have a reason to die or that Ophelia's death is explainable and perhaps she's better off now, Cordelia was a strong character who does not go mad but has the age and intelligence to control her situation. Although Cordelia willingly enters a dangerous situation for her father, her death is not her fault. Cordelia's death is tragic in the way that Juliet's is: if the timing had been slightly different, it would not have happened. In both stories, Shakespeare sped up the timeline to increase the dramatic power. Cordelia's death is difficult because she is courageous and loving; she gets angry as we all do, but she submits to what she believes is right anyway. Her strength and conviction make her nearly avoided death that much harder to take.

Cordelia's death might feel even more painful because she hazards it, yet this is a distinctly Christian ideal. While a reward in the afterlife for injustice on earth may seem hollow to non-Christians, sacrifice for a cause bigger than oneself, for which one is paradoxically rewarded, is the essence of Christianity itself. Johannes Allgaier argues that Cordelia's seemingly inconsistent combination of rebellion and obedience is actually embedded in the Christian *ethos*. He denies the common interpretation that Cordelia is too proud, instead asserting that she rightly resisted an attempted "spiritual rape" by her father (Allgaier 1035). Yet in the end her pity and

love for him, a result of “that freedom of spirit which is the source of love” allows her the “freedom to suffer” for him, “the freedom of the Christian which was proclaimed at Golgotha” (Allgaier 1035, 1037, 1038). Like Jesus in Gethsemane, Cordelia weeps; but she nonetheless chooses to serve her father regardless of the cost. Some have noted the *pieta*-like scene of Lear holding Cordelia’s body. While the genders are reversed, Lear holds and weeps over Cordelia’s body as Mary did over her son’s.

Yet Cordelia is not the only sacrificial character in the play, and as we have seen, may not have been the cause of Lear’s redemption. If Lear represents mankind or, even worse, God, then Cordelia’s death certainly seems pointless. But Jesus Christ sacrificed himself not just for mankind, but also for the purposes of his heavenly father. If Cordelia acted upon the will of God, as Jesus Christ did, then the redemption here is not of Lear, but of Cordelia. I propose that what Cordelia does accomplish, despite her death, is her own integrity: Cordelia does the right thing throughout the play, no matter the cost to herself. Shakespeare casts Cordelia not as the virgo of Cox’s dichotomy but as a king (or queen, in this case), who “bear[s] witness unto the truth” (*KJV* John 18:37). Biblically, she will find eternal reward and glory in heaven.

Whether the audience agrees with Christian beliefs or not, Shakespeare employs Christian themes and symbolism in his final tragic scene and gives Cordelia an identity that both acknowledges and transcends gender stereotypes. In their automatic rejections of Cordelia’s silent and silenced role, feminists may be missing the value Shakespeare expects his audience to see from her interactions with Lear. John E. Van Domelen reflects, “Though we know the quality of [Cordelia’s] excellence, the inestimable worth of her truthfulness and love are values that Lear can acknowledge only after much suffering” (135). Even if Lear fails to see the real Cordelia or only does for a moment, the audience knows her value. Going one step further, Michael



Holahan, in his article “‘Look, Her Lips’: Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*,” argues that throughout the course of the play, Lear learns to take on Cordelia’s soft speech. Cordelia began by saying “nothing” and eventually Lear does so as well. While Lear’s desire for her to speak in the end may seem insincere, Holahan believes that Lear comes to speak softly himself, illustrating through his actions that he understands Cordelia’s value. Holahan also recognizes the importance of genre for connections between speech and character:

“Contingencies, even of breath and speech, move oppositely in romance and tragedy” (Holahan 430). Noting that “Lynn Enterline argues the success of the female voice in a rhetoric of animation in *The Winter’s Tale*,” Holahan claims, “*King Lear* seems to me to present other problems: the female voice succeeds but at the cost that is tragedy” (Holahan 430n60). While the Renaissance expectation for women to speak little and softly may seem sexist and subjugating to women, its value *for both genders* is implicitly illustrated in the double deaths of Cordelia and Lear.

## **Conclusion**

*King Lear* is Shakespeare’s bleakest tragedy because one simple request from a king unleashes immense greed for power, sex, and violence; a storm of hatred and insult that destroys haphazardly the characters we see as good as well as the characters we see as evil. Yet Shakespeare also complicates such simplistic distinctions. While Lear is the tragic hero, we see his anger toward both the loyal truth-speakers and the power-hungry flatterers. McLaughlin notes that “Edmund thrives . . . not because the ‘gods stand up for bastards’ but because Goneril and Regan share his striving for personal power, strivings they have learned from their father” (43). Bound by their fathers, their genders and/or their very births, all three villains wield their

words promiscuously and cruelly to attain power; but they do so at the example of their parents. In *King Lear*, “slanders [do] live in tongues”—not only behind red, seductive lips but also in the mouths of kings and earls who put their own desires above their responsibility to family and subjects (III.ii.89). Evil step-sister types use speech as one of their only means of influence, yet Shakespeare provides some justification and vulnerability for them. As Pollock’s mouth imagery highlights, *King Lear* plays into negative beliefs about women, reveals the dangers of a disconnected heart and tongue, and illustrates the consequences of selfish lusts.

Likewise, the supposedly innocent youngest daughter rebels against her family’s injustices while maintaining Renaissance decorum. Cordelia and her supporting characters, especially the Fool, provide a voice of reason in the play’s madness. Although Shakespeare takes Cordelia out of the action, her “Nothing” continues to be a standard against which to judge the ensuing behavior. Cordelia’s clear, truthful words hover over the scenes of Goneril and Regan’s manipulation and Lear’s madness that follow. As Arnold Isenberg notes:

The draught upon our experience and understanding is not paralleled elsewhere in literature. This is that “something more”—the sense of being affected to a degree which is not explained by the explicit contents of the plays—that has so dazed Shakespeare’s critics and prompted them to describe his drama as an art of implication and misdirection, of oblique expression and tangential reference. Cordelia’s absence is only the most remarkable example of his ability to stretch these strangely disturbing fingers into regions of the heart that could not be probed by speech. (194)

The way in which Shakespeare uses Cordelia’s nothing to illustrate something attests to the magic that we so often find in his craft. The very absence of mothers and of a sense of

responsibility for other human beings proves the importance of balance, respect, and truth in our diverse societies.

While feminist and psychoanalytic criticism can identify problems with patriarchal structures and gender dichotomies, they are problems already imbedded within Shakespeare, not because Shakespeare condones them but because he conveys them as problematic, too. The ways in which Cordelia is criticized and the women in the play are forced into a sexist dichotomy only end in tragedy. Reflecting on the power of Cordelia's silence, Isenberg notes:

If Shakespeare has any standing with us as a psychologist [which he must if critics insist on applying psychoanalysis to his characters], we should believe that there is some connection between silence and emotional force. For speech is show; and the show of the feeling is, in Shakespeare, perhaps not always false but always suspect. The plays are haunted by this prepossession as by few others: it is a prime facet and exemplification of the greater theme that dominates his art—appearance and reality, the difference between *seems* and *is*. (188)

While *Lear* seems pessimistic and misogynistic, its tragedy is the logical result of judging appearances over essence. Cordelia's death is not a confirmation that women should be silent; rather her life is a suggestion that, like Lear, we could all learn to love more and talk less, to be rather than appear. By compressing Cordelia's death with Lear's, Shakespeare creates a tragic heroine, whose values the audience comes to appreciate because not listening to her voice results in the most affecting catastrophe in Shakespearean tragedy.

The end of *King Lear* should feel bleak: the ways in which people hurt each other, both emotionally and physically, in the play are indeed tragic. The injustices done to women in the play should be deplored, and the death of Cordelia should feel terrible. Yet, as throughout the play, Cordelia's absence is a reminder of what life is like without the qualities she possesses.

Like an x-ray image, Shakespeare uses darkness in *King Lear* to illustrate the light of truth, loyalty, plain and prudent speech, courageous actions, and a love of others that is stronger than the love of self. *King Lear* is not merely about the fall of a great man, but also about the fall of his daughters and friends. The play acts as a criticism of power structures that fail to value individual people whatever their gender identities.

In a world of political rhetoric and sound bites meant to manipulate, television shows whose men and women are just as lustful and power-hungry as *Lear*'s characters, and a growing apathy among millennials; Shakespeare reminds us that evil is real and it can come for anyone, hero or villain. However, like Cordelia, we still have the choice to follow our hearts and our convictions, the power to speak or to stay silent, the ability to differentiate between lies overly professed and truth left unsaid. In *King Lear*, Shakespeare uses words to strike our hearts with tragedy and impress upon them the powerful responsibilities of truth and love.

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