Privacy, Domesticity, and Women in Early Modern England

Edited by
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Contents

Acknowledgments vii
Notes on Contributors viii

1 Introduction: "indistinguishable space"
   Elizabeth Mazzola and Corinne S. Abate 1

PART I "Concealing Continents": SETTINGS FOR INTIMACY AND RESISTANCE 21

2 With the Skin Side Inside: The Interiors of The Duchess of Malfi
   Lisa Hopkins 21

3 Neither a Tamer Nor a Shrew Be: A Defense of Petruchio and Katherine
   Corinne S. Abate 31

4 "Wounds still curelesse": Estates of Loss in Mary Wroth's
   Urania
   Kathryn Pratt 45

PART II "Hospitable Favors": RITUALS OF THE HOUSEHOLD 65

5 Trafficking in John Ford's The Broken Heart
   Nancy A. Gutierrez 65

6 Good Enough to Eat: The Domestic Economy of Woman--Woman Eroticism in Margaret Cavendish and Andrew Marvell
   Theodora A. Jankowski 83

7 "Thy weaker Novice to perform thy will": Female Dominion over Male Identity in The Faerie Queene
   Catherine G. Canino 111
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Chapter 10

Looking for Goneril and Regan

Cristina León Alfar

It has always been a dream of mine to communicate how I feel about Shakespeare to other people. So I asked my friend[s]... to join me, and by taking this one play, Richard III, analyzing it, approaching it from different angles, putting on costumes, playing out scenes, we could communicate both our passion for it, our understanding that we've come to, and in doing that communicate a Shakespeare that is about how we feel and how we think today. Now that's the ethic we're going to give it here. – Al Pacino, Looking for Richard

In Looking for Richard, Al Pacino offers the above rationale for making his film, and it comes as a response to a goal. Following interviews with actors in which both alienation from and admiration for William Shakespeare is expressed, the screen goes dark and then words appear; the audience reads "The question." This tag is shortened and becomes "The quest." Accordingly, throughout the film, Pacino relentlessly searches for Richard's motives by rehearsing and performing scenes as well as by interviewing people on the streets of New York. Richard III becomes, in the process, a dynamic and multi-valenced character whose death is not only the result of a long history of over-arching political ambition among England's monarchs, but also, in the late 20th century New York view, the just punishment of a thug, the leader of a gang. Pacino's ethic for the film recalls, unconsciously, Louis Adrian Montrose's analysis of cultural materialism as interested in "the uses to which an historical present puts its versions of the English past." Communicating a Shakespeare "[who] is about how we think and how we feel today" is in some sense the conscious and self-reflexive aim of cultural materialists. Willing to think of scholarship on Shakespeare's plays as, in Ivo Kamps's view a "construction of a Renaissance historical context... through a selective consideration of dominant and marginal ideologies (both Renaissance and contemporary), class, Renaissance political and religious doctrines, and everyday material processes," a cultural materialist practice treats "the literary text... as an enactment or production... of that context..." In this light, we participate as much in the production of Shakespeare's plays and their meanings as the culture in which they were first produced. We do this not by attaching meanings to the plays that are not there, but through close readings that yield new meanings in part because we
bring different insights into those readings, via our cultural context. Pacino, Montrose, and Kamps's approaches to reading texts, particularly Shakespearean texts, are useful because, as I will argue here, a self-conscious form of reading allows us to see that responses to Shakespeare's "evil" women tell us more about ourselves than about the playwright. While I do not search for Goneril and Regan by examining performance options as Pacino does, I want to animate open-ended conversations about them, a process of looking that will be part quest and part intellectual re-evaluation.

In *King Lear*, the power Goneril and Regan desire and the violence in which they participate defy orthodox notions of appropriate feminine conduct. Because power as a feminine attribute is rejected by scholars as a violation of nature, Goneril and Regan become "evil." Their "evil" has less to do with Shakespeare's own view of feminine power, however, than it has to do with cultural prejudices against and expectations for specific and discrete behaviors naturalized according to gender. Women cannot be feminine power, it would seem, or if they can be, such tyranny must be a result of an unnatural femininity rather than the product of specifically cultural and political notions of kingship. Rather than assuming that real women, or good women, will not defend their own power or the sovereignty of their nation with violence, I argue that the play points precisely to the abuse of power by all monarchs, regardless of gender, as inherent to absolutism. Lear's banishment of Cordelia and Kent, in addition to his parceling of the country according to a game of words, establishes a grossly self-indulgent system of monarchy at best. At worst, his behavior smacks of tyranny. Thus Goneril and Regan's performance of monarchy in like modes cannot be a surprise. In fact, their ruthless grasp at power demonstrates the play's profound anxieties about the nature of kingship. And it is in a deinstitutionalization of monarchical authority, I argue, that Shakespeare's tragedies help us to find contradictions and forms of resistance that liberate his "evil" women from their vilified histories. For the tyranny Goneril and Regan perform comes out of Shakespeare's portrayal of the early modern system of government that takes its authority from God, and answers only to God, as a way to mystify the monarch's absolute right to rule, a portrayal highlighting the potential for tyranny in absolute systems. Thus as Jonathan Dollimore argues in regard to Edmund, Shakespeare's complex characterization of Goneril and Regan suggests that they are not "evil." Rather, Goneril and Regan's ruthlessness is produced by competing discourses on gender and power staged by the play as a way to raise questions about absolute forms of monarchy.

Traditionally, however, both King Lear's eldest daughters have been labeled villains. Their "evil" is in part defined by the reactions of male characters to them as the play progresses from its initial domestic squabble to an all out war for sovereignty over England. Undeniably, characters from Lear to Kent to Albany all agree that Goneril and Regan behave unnaturally toward their father, and that, therefore, they are monstrous fiends. As critics we have taken our view of Goneril and Regan from these male characters, so that their evil is defined by acts of will, power, violence, and sexuality—acts that disrupt the patrilineal morality's definitions of "appropriate" femininity. The male characters in *King Lear* operate under orthodox notions of femininity that cannot be reconciled with the idea of women in power. They view Goneril and Regan first and foremost as daughters and disregard the political state of emergency against which the women militate. Thus reading Goneril and Regan as "evil" reifies female subjectivity as split into the fictions of good and evil to which the male characters in *King Lear* subscribe. But I will suggest that we need not depend on Lear's or Albany's view of the sisters at all, nor need we look to them as illustrative of Shakespeare's own view. As David Scott Kastan has observed, we too often accept the words of characters as standing in for the beliefs of their creators. He writes, "A republican sentiment in the mouth of a literary character does indeed provide evidence that republican sentiments were thinkable; it does not necessarily prove that the author thought them or used the text to advance them." In the spirit of Kastan's observation, I want to suggest that we reexamine Goneril and Regan in the context of the political practices of the play, for their behavior is contingent on complex domestic and political systems of power and gender. To do so would be to separate their characterization from arbitrary moralization and, instead, to probe the conditions informing their acts. It would also introduce the possibility that their behavior is evidence neither of Shakespeare's condemnation of women in power, nor of his misogyny or his sympathy with Lear. While the sisters plot to neutralize their father's power, engage in extramarital affairs with the same man, and stand by as Gloucester's eyes are gouged out, these actions are not evidence of their innate "evil" but are symptomatic of the patrilineal structure of power relations in which they live and to which they must accommodate themselves.

Arguing for complexity in Shakespeare's tragic women, however, apparently is futile. According to Madelon Sprengnether,

Goneril's parting line in *King Lear*, "Ask me not what I know" (V.iii.160) ... refus[es] us insight into her presumably desperate state of mind. She will die by her own hand, unloved and unworshipped, her fate the antithesis of that of a tragic hero, the opacity of her consciousness an emblem of the lot of women generally in Shakespeare's tragedies. For the ingenuity was lavished on the development of the tragic hero, from his first fatal error to his final agonized awareness of his ignorance or transgression, does not extend to the women he resists, idolizes, or reviles. We will never know what they know. The subject position not only of Shakespeare's tragedy but of tragedy defined as genre in the Aristotelian tradition seems to preclude this very possibility.

In Sprengnether's reading, feminist criticism destabilizes the liberal humanist notion of universal meaning attributed to Shakespeare's plays. In the process of this laudable and crucial task, however, Sprengnether works from the assumption that recognizing Shakespeare's plays as "not a universal essence but rather a historically specific encoding of practices and values" cannot lead us to a fuller understanding
of his female characters (18). The subject-position of Shakespearean tragedy is uncompromisingly male, so that female characters are rendered flat and vacuous. Thus Sprengnether repeats the effacement of female characters such as Goneril that the universal reading, traditionally privileging male experience, first enacted. Either way, it would seem, a space for female characters, whether in historically specific encodings of representation and subject formation or in notions of universality, is lost, making only the male characters subjects of tragedy. My study assumes, however, that Shakespeare's subjects of tragedy are also female and that the difference between men and women in his tragedies is not a reflection of his disinterest in female experience or psychic development, but of our own investments in male subjects, in male experience, and psychic development. Our own biases and investments in binaries of active/passive and good/evil, reiterated in that of male/female, are projected onto his plays, blinding us to the complexity of Goneril's characterization. It is precisely by attending to early modern categories of gender and power that new ways of seeing his women as a product of those categories will develop. Thus the contradiction that the play stages between Goneril and Regan's monstrous female wills and their appropriate and necessary defense of England against an invading army opens a space for the women to become subjects of a tragedy that interrogates the tyranny of masculinist power relations.

While monarchs such as Elizabeth did not think of themselves as tyrants and while philosophers of monarchy worked to define the parameters of absolute rule within just and benevolent lines, violent defenses of the crown were sometimes necessary. Elizabeth quashed insurrections through arrest and execution of rebels and defended the nation against invasion through war. As conventional as these acts may seem now, they were backed up by a theory of monarchy that gave Elizabeth a divine right to perform them. The potential for tyranny in such a system is evident in early modern treatises such as the 1570 An Homily against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion as well as in King James I's own letters and speeches to Parliament. Because the monarchy was mystified through divine right, not only was a monarch's word law, but anyone strong enough to take hold of the crown could claim legitimacy of rule. After all, as the Homily makes clear,

As in reading of the Holy Scriptures we shall find in very many and almost infinite places, as well of the Old Testament as of the New, that kings and princes as well the evil as the good, do reign by God's ordinance, and that subjects are bound to obey them; that God doth give princes wisdom, great power, and authority; that God defendeth them against their enemies, and destroyeth their enemies horribly; that the anger and displeasure of the prince is as the roaring of a lion, and the very messenger of death; and that the subject that provoketh him to displeasure sinneth against his own soul....

Shakespeare's King Lear confronts the tyrannous capacity of absolute monarchy when, as is evident in the above quotation, no distinction is made between the just king and tyrant insofar as divine right is concerned. The mystifications of divine right demonstrated by the Homily (and also advocated by King James in both the Basilikon Doron and The Trew Law of Free Monarchies) make it clear that the reigns of both the tyrant and the just monarch are sanctified by God. As a way to protect the sanctity and the sovereignty of the monarchy from rebellion—for one man's just monarch is another man's tyrant—a sacred and prophetic chain of command is deployed. God's divine ordinance is conveniently assumed, making it not simply treason to act against the king, but a sacrilege leading to damnation.

Perhaps an even more interesting example of the power monarchs could assume as their own comes to us from King James I, whose speech of 21 March 1609 to the Lords and Commons of the Parliament at Whitehall clarifies his role:

Kings are justly called gods for that they exercise a manner or resemblance of divine power upon earth. For if you will consider the attributes to God, you will see how they agree with the person of a king. God has the power to create, or destroy, make, or unmake at his pleasure, to give life, or send death, to judge all, and to be judged nor accountable to none; to raise low things, and make high things low at his pleasure, and to God are both soul and body due. And the like power have kings. They make and unmake their subjects; they have power of raising and of casting down, of life and of death; judges over all their subjects, and in all cases, and yet accountable to none but God only. They have power to exalt low things and abase high things, and make of their subjects like men at the chess; a pawn to take a bishop or a knight, and to cry up or down any of their subjects, as they do their money. And to the king is due both the affection of the soul and the service of the body of his subjects.

While James also advocated a clear distinction between just kings and tyrants, his logic that monarchs are accountable to God only points to the circularity of early modern notions of kingship: a monarch ordained by God is accountable to God, but a monarch ordained by God is also, according to James, licensed by God to rule absolutely. And God remains accommodatingly silent in his judgements. The ruthlessness with which James endows both God's and the king's power provides a source of profound anxiety for those who depend upon the king's good will. For not only is the source of the king's power circular in nature, but his use of that power is also potentially capricious.

Shakespeare struggles with these definitions of divine right in many plays, including Henry V and Richard III. Hal faces a moral dilemma once he becomes king, based on his father's violent and illegitimate acquisition of the throne, a usurpation that is no less endowed with divine right. And the women of Richard III pose a powerful and heart-wrenching critique of the potential for tyranny in a
violent system of rule reinforced by divine right. Both plays confront the contradictions of absolute monarchy in which both legitimate king and usurping tyrant are ordained by God. The contradictory nature of the monarch’s rights and responsibilities under this system opens spaces for interrogation because James’s claims to the power to make and unmake his subjects, to raise up or cast down, and, perhaps most chillingly, to the power of life and death become a logical extension of a divine right government.

The chain of command implicated in divine right – from God, to the king, to the father/husband – also highlights the specifically patrilineal basis of kingship. The power of the monarch is associated with a historically masculinist system of inheritance. As such, the duties of the monarch – to protect the crown and the nation, to make war and peace, and in James’s view “to judge their subjects” – become expressly masculine. This backdrop to the culture in which King Lear was written offers us the opportunity for a complex reading of Goneril and Regan’s deployments of power. It provides a specifically historical basis for their behavior independent of gendered moralization and allows us to see the play as part of Shakespeare’s interest in the violent tendencies of a patrilineal system of kingship. In King Lear, as opposed to Richard III and the Henryiad, Shakespeare tests the boundaries of power by giving it to women, disrupting orthodox notions of appropriate feminine conduct. Rather than offering us an absolutist vision of good against evil, King Lear discloses a ruthless tradition of kingship that is based on an understanding of power as gendered, as masculine. When Goneril and Regan respond to their roles as leaders of the state in a traditionally masculine manner, rather than by behaving as women and caring for their father first and the nation second, we, as readers, reject their violence as unnatural. I argue, however, that we have misrecognized that which the play asks us to disavow. Rather than denouncing the women for their masculinist performance of power, the play asks us to reject the tyranny of absolute monarchy, which is a system built on divine right of rule, transferred by inheritance, and propped up by routine elimination of traitors and violent defense of borders. Monarchy, in this light, is both mystified and performed according to traditionally masculine jurisdictions: authority from God, patrilineal right of birth, and war. Shakespeare highlights the self-interest in a system of government that attempts to control disobedience to and rebellion against the crown by invoking the God-given right of the king to eliminate those who have sinned against him, and therefore God, in their challenge of his authority and wisdom. Thus Goneril and Regan cannot be held to artificial and politicized notions of femininity but, rather, ought to be placed in the context of their assertion of power, which is a transgression of gender required by absolute notions of power.

Rather than approaching the play through traditional configurations of male and female, I read the dynamics of gender and power in King Lear as a process that both produces and subordinates the subject, so that the social formation of the subject depends on forms of power as much as on its submission to those forms. Judith Butler writes in regard to this process:

We are used to thinking of power as what presses on the subject from the outside, as what subordinates, sets underneath, and relegates to a lower order. But if, following Foucault, we understand power as forming the subject as well, as providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire, then power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are.16

Butler’s analysis of subjection is useful to an understanding of Goneril and Regan because her examination of the workings of power accounts for a psychic dimension, an effect of the contradictory functions of power on the subject. In this regard, Goneril and Regan are produced by competing discourses on female gender and power: the first assumes a passive female subject “naturally” inclined toward mercy and obedience while the second assumes a ruthlessness and action that is “natural” to masculinity. When Goneril and Regan refuse to indulge Lear’s demand for 100 retainers, they do not only resist the role of submission assigned to them, but they also reproduce patrilineal structures of domination. Because, as I have argued in regard to Macbeth, power is defined by qualities associated with masculinity, Goneril and Regan must resist their culture’s definition of femininity if they are to take up the crown and rule the nation.17

Thus the sisters both resist and re-produce early modern paradigms of power. They resist gender configurations insofar as they refuse their subjection, as women, both to their father and to the social duty to act in feminine modes of compassion and obsequiousness. Their resistance, however, is enacted in order to reproduce the hierarchy of absolute monarchy, as Shakespeare sees it, wherein the monarch owes obedience only to God, from whom s/he takes her/his power and subjects others to her/his will in the name of state security. As my (deliberate) use of both pronouns in the previous sentence attests, such power is the prerogative of the monarch regardless of her/his gender. As An Homily against Disobedience and Willful Rebellion defines it:

... it is most evident that kings, queens, and other princes (for [Saint Peter] speaketh of authority and power, be it in men or women) are ordained of God, are to be obeyed and honored of their subjects; that such subjects as are disobedient or rebellious against their princes disobey God and procure their own damnation, that the government of princes is a great blessing of God given for the commonwealth, specially of good and godly; for the comfort and cherishing of whom God giveth and setteth up princes; and on the contrary part, to the fear and for the punishment of the evil and the wicked.

Power here belongs equally to male and female princes, and power itself remains a patrilineally inherited and protected right regardless of the prince’s gender. Thus Goneril and Regan’s resistance to traditional conceptions of appropriate forms of
feminine conduct emerges in order to recoup a masculine-based monarchical power, so that they recover the same form of power that demands their subjection as women. As Butler makes clear,

psychic resistance thwarts the law in its effects, but cannot redirect the law or its effects. Resistance is thus located in a domain that is virtually powerless to alter the law that it opposes. Hence, psychic resistance presumes the continuation of the law in its anterior, symbolic form and, in that sense, contributes to its status quo. In such a view, resistance appears doomed to perpetual defeat. (98)

Goneril and Regan's deployments of power cannot be expected to emanate from naturalized configurations of feminine goodness if they are to reproduce the forms of monarchical power already in place prior to their acquisition of the throne. A performance of power consistent with naturalized conceptions of femininity would not contribute to the status quo but, in fact, would associate monarchical forms of power with weakness and instability believed to be natural to femininity. Power, as the early modern period knew it, would cease to exist.

But neither is Shakespeare's play a pure representation of the status quo, for as Butler explains, this process of reproduction never achieves pure duplication:

If conditions of power are to persist, they must be reiterated; the subject is precisely the site of such reiteration, a repetition that is never merely mechanical. As the appearance of power shifts from the condition of the subject to its effects, the conditions of power (prior and external) assume a present and futural form. But power assumes this present character through a reversal of its direction, one that performs a break with what has come before and dissimulates as a self-inaugurating agency. The reiteration of power not only temporalizes the conditions of subordination but shows these conditions to be, not static structures, but temporalized—active and productive. The temporalization performed by reiteration traces the route by which power's appearance shifts and reverses: the perspective of power alters from what is always working on us from the outside and from the outset to what constitutes a sense of agency at work in our present acts and the futural expanse of their effects. (16)

Butler demonstrates the slipperiness of power, the ways in which it simultaneously precedes and emerges from the subject to have effects outside the subject, transforming as power passes through time and potentially having oppositional implications. Such slipperiness is also evident in King Lear. What seems to be Goneril and Regan's individual agencies, their free desire to humiliate and even bring physical harm to their father, is instead their repetition of a prior and external power that they perform in order that such power should continue to survive. Their ruthlessness subscribes to a mode of power enabled by the period's mystifications of absolute monarchy and responds to the dangers of insurrection and invasion occasioned by Lear's threats to retake the throne and Gloucester's knowledge of France's impending aggression. At the same time, as women, the power they exercise ruptures definitions of femininity. Their agency simultaneously is produced by, produces, and disrupts historically specific forms of power and domination in place in the early modern period and assumes the right of self and national preservation that is the duty of the monarch. Goneril and Regan cannot be held to standards of femininity fabricated to uphold a patrilineal order dependent on absolute authority if they are to perform a culturally specific form of kingship based on masculinist structures of power and domination.

Thus the self-interest Goneril and Regan display is embedded in early modern notions of absolute monarchy. This much is demonstrated by the love test Lear deploys as a public spectacle of domestic and monarchical inheritance practices. As some scholars have noted, Lear's reasons for splitting the monarchy and stepping down from the throne are personal and driven by his investment in retaining control over his daughters, especially Cordelia. Lear abuses his authority and exploits his daughters when he demands that they publicly measure their love for him as a way to receive the largest portion of land. His expectation that filial affection and gratitude will eclipse political ambition is at best naïve; at worst, his command for public declarations of love breeds resentment by forcing his daughters to cement marital alliances in a public performance. His plan fuses his daughters' value on the marriage market with a stabilizing of their positions within the monarchy. It also assumes that all three daughters will respond according to traditional definitions of womanhood: with love, compassion, and a desire to care for an aged father. While all three daughters' stability within the monarchy is seemingly secure, Lear stages a spectacle based on powerless and dutiful femininity that rings false before Goneril and Regan comply with his request. He miscalculates the responses of all three of his daughters, who answer first in order to achieve power and second to cement marital alliances. The scene Lear so carefully choreographs with his opening speech disintegrates in the face of Cordelia's "Nothing." As Stanley Cavell notes, Lear's rehearsed combination of political business and familial affection collapses because he forces one to depend on the other (67). Having set up the love contest not because he is too old to continue running the kingdom but because he desires a guarantee that Cordelia will always love him first, Lear's rage results from his realization that no such guarantee exits. In King Lear the self-interest the king displays is systematic of power relations in a hierarchical, patrilineal state. His own admission that he never intended to give the largest portion of land to the daughter who said she loved him most, but to Cordelia, betrays his interest in manipulating his kingdom, his power, and his daughters to satisfy his personal need for Cordelia's "kind nursery" (1.i.124); Lear's concern for the best interests of his nation, then, is suspect.

The theatrics of Lear's ceremony disclose the contradiction between the benevolence toward family and nation he claims and the coercion that surfaces
when Cordelia fails to speak when cued. Lear's opening speech defining the rules of the contest he has staged sets the pace and tone for the rest of the scene:

... Know that we have divided
In three our kingdom; and 'tis our last intent
To shake all cares and business from our age,
Conferring them on younger strengths, while we
Unburden'd crawl toward death. Our son of Cornwall,
And you, our no less loving son of Albany,
We have this hour a constant will to publish
Our daughters' several dowers, that future strife
May be prevented now. The princes, France and Burgundy,
Great rivals in our youngest daughter's love,
Long in our court have made their amorous sojourn,
And here are to be answer'd. Tell me my daughters
(Since now we will divest us both of rule,
Interest of territory, cares of state),
Which of you shall we say doth love us most,
That we our largest bounty may extend
Where nature doth with merit challenge? (I.37–53)

Lear's speech succeeds at making the stakes of his demand absolutely clear. The political and economic power he offers motivates, as it means to, his eldest daughters' obedience when they speak. His method of utterance exaggerates his age and weakness, so that Lear approaches the ceremony he has arranged theatrically. Filled with kingly importance, his use of the royal "we" comes off practiced and ceremonial. He exaggerates his infirmity - Lear is hardly crawling toward death - partly because he wants Cordelia near him, but also because the grand style fits the awesome nature of his retirement. Anticipating that rivalry between his children will attend his death and invoking the rivalry between France and Burgundy for Cordelia's hand, he prompts his daughters to speak in competition with one another in order to gain favor and power over each other. His ego expands, fills the hall, and orders his daughters to feed it, so that the play unmarks the investment of ego and control of women and children in settling of money and power crucial to the maintenance of patrilineal authority. As he directs his daughters to say "which loves us most," he also seems to say, "Take your cue from me, and make your declaration of love as theatrical as you can." As a model of kingship, he produces a court spectacle with each movement, word, and purpose emphasizing his benevolence - as both father and king - toward his daughters and their great love for him.

Goneril and Regan, perceiving the conditions of their advancement to power, submit to Lear's demands, in contrast to Cordelia. They reply, rather than exhibiting an insincerity innate to their characters, take their cue from their father's formality and hyperbole, performing their love as his demand requires of them.

When Goneril and Regan accept his proposition and declare the depth of their love for and loyalty to him, they obey their father's command. In keen imitation of her father's capacity for exaggeration, Goneril answers that she loves her father

Dearer than eyesight, space, liberty,
Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare,
No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honor;
As much as child e'er lov'd, or father found;
A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable.
Beyond all manner of so much I love you. (I.56–61)

And Regan, cued by and competing with her sister's answer, asserts that "[Goneril] comes too short, that I profess/ Myself an enemy to all other joys/ Which the most precious square of sense possesses/ And find I am alone felicitate/ In your dear Highness' love" (II.72–76). Imitating their father's elaborate speech, Goneril and Regan comply with the conditions of their inheritance. Their exaggeration comes at the instigation of their father, not as a result of their own "evil" and malicious natures. If Lear's division of the kingdom is "a decision that violated the accumulated wisdom of Elizabethan statecraft" (McFarland 102), but was also enabled by his power as king, why condemn his two eldest daughters for taking part? Instead, their obedience to Lear is not just evidence of their political ambition, but is also a performance that responds appropriately to the theatries of Lear's ceremony. As Bruce Thomas Boehrer notes,

Lear's words seek to mediate between the expression of unforced loyalty and the imposition of rewards and punishments. On the one hand his daughters' love must be freely offered because... it is "beyond what can be valued" (I.57); yet on the other hand that very love is subject to an elaborate set of pressures and constraints.

Because the contest is not meant, except superficially, to provide evidence of family love but to demonstrate Lear's authority over his children, as their king as well as their father, the scene makes familial love an effect of power and the power differential Lear emphasizes. He uses love to satisfy his desire for control even as he relinquishes political power. Moreover, that he reacts to Cordelia's refusal to obey and to Kent's advice by banishing them both demonstrates a capriciousness of rule allowed by divine right. Subjects may refuse to obey and advisors may advise, but finally all voices contradicting the king's wishes are silenced by the king's power to raise up and cast down his subjects. This is an effect of rule Goneril and Regan appear to recognize as they comply with their father's command.

While Goneril and Regan clearly inflate their love for Lear, they are not yet actively hostile to him. Goneril and Regan's brief exchange at the end of this scene demonstrates that neither of the sisters intends any malicious plan in regard to Lear, but that, instead, like their father, they wish to protect their new authority:
Goneril. You see how full of changes his age is, the observation we have made of it hath not been little. He always lov'd our sister most, and with what poor judgement he hath now cast her off appears too grossly.

Regan. 'Tis the infirmity of his age, yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself.

Goneril. The best and soundest of his time hath been but rash; then must we look from his age to receive not alone the imperfections of long-ingrafted condition, but therewithal the unruly waywardness that infirm and choleric years bring with them.

Regan. Such unconstant starts are we like to have from him as this of Kent's banishment.

Goneril. There is further compliment of leave-taking between France and him. Pray you let us hit together; if our father carry authority with such disposition as he bears, this last surrender of his will but offend us.

Regan. We shall further think of it.

Goneril. We must do something, and 'tis the heat.

(1.1.288–308)

In a moment in which Goneril and Regan might be expected to express their malice toward their father, or to reveal a plot to do him harm, we can see that nothing of the kind is revealed or plotted. Because Lear has ensured that their "love" is a function of power, Goneril and Regan's efforts to protect their power certainly have the potential to ride roughshod over their father. However, at this point, no active plot against him surfaces. Rather, the sisters agree that what they have witnessed is typical of his past behavior, the banishment of their sister and of Lear's closest adviser, Kent, once more confirms his rashness. Significantly, their conference agrees with Kent's view that exiling Cordelia and refusing her a dowry achieves nothing for Lear but the absence of his favorite daughter. In fact, ostracizing Cordelia, according to Goneril, is evidence of Lear's poor judgment and is not an opportunity for celebration. Their conversation is dominated by a sense of caution and reveals that Goneril and Regan understand that the public love test enacted a displacement of power with love. While their father may have surrendered his authority to them, his actions against Cordella betray his inability to separate his power from his love for her. Having just been invested with monarchical authority, if not its title, Goneril and Regan express concern over the likelihood that their father—who in his rashness banished the two people closest to him—will, in similar displays of temper, exert the power he retains as the symbolic head of state with no small reteine of knights to retake the throne. Therefore, having complied with the terms of inheritance and the drama of Lear's ceremony that required them to act as dutiful daughters, Goneril and Regan begin to take control. They plan to forge a united front from which any attempts on Lear's part to regain the crown can be fought. Their "plot," if indeed it can be called anything of the kind, does not include a threat against his life but does exemplify the suspicious nature of kingship. Just as their father refused to be undermined by Kent's objections to his acts, Goneril and Regan understand that power must ever be on guard against usurpation and subversion. They will rule, then, in a fashion similar to that of Lear.

Conflict arises, however, in Act I.iv, when Goneril asserts her new power over a Lear unwilling to submit to his daughter's authority.25 When Lear takes up residence with Goneril, it is with the understanding that, as he makes clear, "Ourself, by monthly course./ With reservation of an hundred knights/ By you to be sustain'd, shall our abode/ Make with you by due turn." (1.1.132–35). It is no surprise to Goneril that Lear arrives with 100 knights or that she is responsible for their up-keep. However, their behavior and Lear's evident unwillingness to control them or himself both surprises and angers her. Because Goneril must attend to the rule of half the nation, her frustration in this scene is motivated by her desire to reflect that power. To do so, she must maintain an authoritarian position for her servants as well as for her subjects. She must present an ordered and functioning court to visiting heads of state on the lookout for, and ready to take advantage of, any disruptions of government indicating its weakness or vulnerability. When Oswald informs her that Lear is undermining that authority by chastising and physically assaulting her servants, Goneril is understandably upset:

Did my father strike my gentleman for chiding of his fool?

By day and night he wrongs me, every hour
He flashes into one gross crime or other
That sets us all at odds. I'll not endure it.
His knights grow riotous, and himself upbraids us
On every trifle. ... (I.iii.1, 3–7)

Goneril expresses legitimate motivation for her anger. Rather than focusing on court business, and just when she should be occupying a position of authority, Goneril finds herself distracted by petty disputes and expected to defer to her father's royal commands as if nothing has changed. She has not been granted the sovereignty of a monarch, nor has Lear relinquished it. The anger Goneril expresses results from her impotence as monarch so long as her father continues to usurp the control that is now rightfully hers. More than a domestic dispute between a father and a daughter, the struggle that begins in this scene is also political; Lear's demands and the behavior of his knights manifest themselves as a political threat in Goneril's mind, "set[ting] us all at odds." She and her sister are of one mind "[a]lot to be overruled" (I.iii.16), and her subsequent appeal to him attempts to maintain a hierarchical order in which Goneril rules and Lear respects her authority.

Yet Goneril contains her anger long enough to state her case to her father rationally. Not having fully adopted the ruthlessness of patrilineal forms of power, Goneril explains to her father the disruptive nature of his behavior:
Goneril's fear that her father is determined to overrule her and set everyone at odds is proved by Lear's response. "Darkness and Devils!" he explodes, "Saddle my horses; call my train together/ Degenerate bastard, I'll not trouble thee/ Yet have I left a daughter" (I.iv.252–55). As he did Cordelia, Lear rejects this daughter and his paternity of her when she does not comply with his demands. Lear expects unquestioned obedience. Goneril wants respect, and that request angers Lear because granting his daughter respect yields her power. As far as Lear is concerned, Goneril's petition reflects only her disloyalty to him, reflects, in fact, that she cannot be his daughter. But Lear's authority is limited; he cannot banish Goneril as he did Kent and Cordelia. Instead, as a punishment for stripping him of his power and identity, Lear assaults his daughter with his rage:

Hear, Nature, hear, dear goddess, hear!
Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful.
Into her womb convey sterility,
Dry up in her the organs of increase,
And from her derogate body never spring
A babe to honor her! ... (I.iv.275–81)

Lear spits a scorching curse at Goneril, motivating her response to him throughout the remainder of the play. Like his curse and banishment of Cordelia, his curse of Goneril debases her nature, making her into a monster. She is not only a "degenerate bastard" (I.iv.254) but a "marble-hearted fiend," (I.iv.259). Goneril's body shrinks, shrivels, and metamorphoses until she is no longer recognizably a woman. Instead, she is a "creature" devoid of femininity, devoid of reproductive and nurturing abilities because Lear believes that Goneril herself lacks conventional feminine—obsequious—feeling. Lear's disfigurement of his daughter's body is symptomatic of his fear of the female body, which in his mind is a site of pollution and disease. But it is also an effect of the power to which he has become accustomed. Able to make of his subjects what he will, Lear progresses from a curse of his daughter's womb and its seed to his own polluted state in having fathered this "creature," this monster woman, making the female body the site of "evil," what Edgar later calls "the dark and vicious place" (V.iii.173).

The effects of Lear's curse—sterility and the cutting off of the lineage—would effectively disrupt the patrilineal system. Gayle Whittier notes that "[s]ince the bonds of fatherhood are in large part nominal bonds, they can only be repudiated by cursing, specifically, through the womb itself." Lear abjures Goneril, in Julia Kristeva's sense, exorcising her power over him by conjuring the evil of the female body. Dissociating himself from the sexual act by disowning Goneril, Lear attempts to neutralize her power by making her claim to the throne illegitimate, a claim that depends on Goneril's inheritance of the throne and on her ability to have children. Lear's abjuration of his daughter multiplies and proliferates in its effect: his curse severs her physically from himself, anatomicizes and mutilates her body, and also
renders her valueless in a patrilineal order that marks women's worth through their patrimony and through their function as the bearers of children.

While Lear's misogyny is significant on its own, the humiliation and abuse Goneril experiences in this scene motivates her subsequent ruthlessness and cruelty toward her father as she protects her sovereignty. Though Marjorie Garber has no lasting sympathy for Goneril, she notes of Lear's curse that "the parent, who should give life, devours; the womb becomes transformed into a consuming mouth, the *vagina dentata* of psychology and anthropology" (152). Goneril's anger and rush to send word to Regan about her father's unwillingness to see reason become a practical performance of monarchical sovereignty designed to protect the power Goneril inherited at the same time that it reproduces the ruthlessness of Lear's absolute form of authority. Lear's blistering abuse makes her determined to find an ally in her sister. It is not that Goneril, like a child, wants sympathy from her sibling after a parent's anger, but that she knows the kingdoms she and Regan rule are vulnerable to his influence. Lear makes his intentions in that regard perfectly clear: "Thou shalt find," he threatens, "That I'll resume the shape which thou dost think/ I have cast off forever" (I.iv.308–10). Having threatened to retake the throne and resume his monarchical authority, Lear confirms in his daughters' minds the fear that until then is merely a possibility. Their rule is not necessarily permanent, but as transitory as Lear's love for Cordelia and Kent.

Goneril and Regan's alliance becomes calculated at this point in its effort to paralyze their father's power and to protect their own. Their united decision to reduce Lear to fifty, twenty-five, and then zero knights is an attempt to strip him of feudal devotees and to neutralize his ability to retake the throne. The sisters reveal the fear his threat engenders as they struggle with him for power over the number of men in his train:

Regan. ... What, fifty followers?
Is it not well? What should you need of more?
Yea, or so many? sith that both charge and danger
Speak 'gainst so great a number? How in one house
Should many people under two commands
Hold amity? 'Tis hard, almost impossible.
Goneril. Why might not you, my lord, receive attendance
From those that she calls servants or from mine?
Regan. Why not, my lord? If then they chanc'd to slack ye,
We could control them. If you will come to me
(For now I spy a danger), I entreat you
To bring but five and twenty; to no more
Will I give place or notice. (II.iv.237–49)

The daughters' diminishment of Lear's train is clearly calculated, but not as a heartless attempt to humiliate their father. On the contrary, their calculations reflect both the instability and self-interestedness of the power with which Lear invested them. Their strategy takes heed of the muscle Lear's knights represent and reflects their grasp of the sincerity of his threats: his men could form a greater army to retake the throne for their leader. They attempt, in this regard, to defend themselves against the danger one hundred knights pose.26 Despite Lear's retention of the title, in order to continue enjoying its privileges, he gave up the material power of kingship to his daughters and their husbands, retaining merely the symbolic power. I want to suggest that the material power his daughters now possess never included the requirements of mercy. Because women rule, it does not follow that their power will derive from traditional definitions of femininity. Judging from Lear's own example, kingship signifies ruthlessness — not just against strangers and traitors, but against family as well. His daughters rule in perfect imitation of their father, acting to preserve the power given them. Rather than assuming that Goneril and Regan disrupt the patriarchal order,27 I argue that their rule exposes the violence of patrilineal structures of power. The women rule in a patrilineal fashion, reproducing existing forms of power, rather than according to naturalized gender distinctions.

While Lear, by himself, poses relatively little threat against Goneril and Regan, Cordelia, under the flag of France and at the instigation of Kent, has invaded England with the intention of re-establishing Lear on the throne.30 For all intents and purposes, then, the kingdom that Goneril and Regan inherited is under siege, and anyone caught acting in sympathy with Lear or France is a traitor. Certainly, any military action on France's part that threatens the stability of England's crown must be seen by those wearing that crown as an act of war. Similarly, any action on the part of English subjects that threatens those who wear the crown must be seen as treason and rebellion. Gloucester, by this logic, in possession of a letter that reveals France's imminent arrival and having arranged for the safe passage of Lear to those who represent Cordelia in Dover, has committed treason.

Clearly, Cornwall, Regan, and Goneril view Gloucester as a traitor when Edmund makes his father's part in the letter known. Once Oswald confirms that Gloucester "hath convey'd [Lear] hence" accompanied by "Some five or six and thirty of his knights,/ ... Who, with some other of the lord's dependents,/ Are gone with him toward Dover, where they boast/ To have well-armed friends" (III.vii.15–16, 18–20), the will to survive both politically and physically motivates their torture of Gloucester. As a traitor to their government, Gloucester suffers no more than any other Renaissance traitor — in fact, he does not suffer death because "the form of justice" (III.vii.25), or a proper arraignment, has not been conducted and later because Regan thrusts him out of doors in her concern for her wounded husban. If as readers we want Regan to show mercy to Gloucester, we are imagining that her duties as a ruler should be limited by her gender. Instead, the requirements of her role as ruler in a kingdom against attack by invaders, including under Renaissance notions of rule — the methods by which the stability of the nation must be preserved; as Elizabeth's defense of England against the Spanish Armada and her decisive actions during Essex's rebellion demonstrate, those methods include war, torture, and execution. A politics that requires those in power to
survive in the face of military threats motivates the actions that dominate the last three acts of the play. I want to make clear, however, that the scene works to interrogate that ruthlessness rather than to justify it; I do not argue that Gloucester deserves his torture, but that Shakespeare's staging of Gloucester's blinding demonstrates both the play's anxiety about the routine violence of early modern forms of kingship and its abhorrence of that violence. Thus the visual enactment of such violence dramatizes images of violent power in the name of political security that cannot be dismissed by an audience. The scene, therefore, graphically encapsulates the abuse of power, regardless of the gender of the monarch, embedded in divine right monarchy that the entire play calls into question.

Thus far in the play, Goneril and Regan's deployments of absolute authority have enacted a fairly pure rejection of traditional and naturalized feminine conduct in favor of a reiteration of monarchical power. "Feminine" qualities such as sympathy, reconciliation, and compliance are abandoned in favor of the brutality and violence of masculinist structures of domination. However, following Cornwall's death and the escalation of conflict with France, the sisters shift from a position of independence to a "feminine" dependence on a masculine subject. It is at this moment where resistance most appears, as Butler contends, "doomed to perpetual defeat," for their refusal of traditional performances of gender becomes reinscribed in their attachment to Edmund (98). I argue, however, that a desire for political survival drives, at least partially, their involvement with Edmund. Critics say their liaisons testify to the sexual license that is symptomatic of female "evil." The transgression against putatively gender-appropriate conduct that makes Goneril and Regan "evil" always include acts of unlawful desire. That Goneril pursues Edmund despite her husband's good health is ostensibly a symptom of the same "evil" she exhibits by chastising her father as a way to maintain her authority. Regan's contract with Edmund, though it takes place after Cornwall's death, ostensibly makes her faithfulness while her husband lived suspect, and further reinforces the "evil" of her violence against Gloucester.

But I argue that Goneril and Regan's attraction to Edmund is symptomatic of the authority that both women need in order to rule. As women, they do not possess power in any culturally constructed sense but are subject to their culture's definition of femininity as weak and subservient. While Goneril and Regan have resisted traditional feminine roles, their interest in Edmund demonstrates a need for a powerful and, it would seem, masculine ally. Goneril, erroneously, believes that her husband does not possess the violent power necessary for kingship despite his commitment to the war against France; and Regan's husband, once quite effective at his ruthless hold on power, is now dead. Edmund possesses the masculinist ruthlessness that Goneril and Regan need to rule. Goneril explains most effectively her objections to Albany's method of rule after Oswald describes his less than enthusiastic reaction to her return:

... It is the cowish terror of his spirit
That dares not undertake; he'll not feel wrongs

Goneril ridicules her husband's manhood, describing him as feminine, weak, and forgiving. In her eyes the very nature of rule is rigid, unforgiving, and violent, which in Goneril's estimation also makes it masculine. Her reference to changing gender roles with her husband in order to take charge of the escalating conflict demonstrates her masculinist conception of power. Realizing that her husband flinches at her mode of rule, she identifies him as feminine, discards him as an ally, and searches for a substitute who will stabilize her power. Despite her apparent contestation of naturalized forms of gender and power, therefore, Goneril's subjectivation to those forms remains undisturbed.

At the same time, however, Goneril and Regan's desire for Edmund responds to their need to protect their power. Hungry for power of his own, Edmund willingly assumes the ruthlessness necessary for the defense of the state. Goneril looks to him to give her the potency that her husband cannot: "My most dear Gloucester!" she confides to him as she leaves her to return to Cornwall, "O, the difference of man and man! To thee a woman's services are due,/ A fool usurps my bed" (IV.ii.25–28). Sexual roles, in Goneril's mind, also conform to patrilineal interests. Edmund, because he is willing to sacrifice all for power, fulfills Goneril's definition of a sexually potent man. Her husband, however, who in his failure to support her deployments of power becomes sexually impotent, deserves her infidelity. Similarly, Regan, now widowed, turns to Edmund as an ally who exudes the same power as her husband. Regan's claim to him is the more legitimate, she feels, because her husband is dead (IV.v.30–32). In fact, he has already begun to represent her officially, as she informs Albany: "He led our powers;/ Bore the commission of my place and person,/ The which immediacy may well stand up,/ And call itself your brother" (V.iii.63–66). Both sisters, consequently, seize on Edmund as a symbol of masculinist potency, as a means to legitimize their own desire and exercise of power through an affiliation with the new, and satisfactorily ruthless, earl of Gloucester. They reproduce gender configurations based on binaries of active/passive, male/female in order to reproduce monarchical forms of domination. Such systems depend on traditional definitions of gender, making such power masculine. Early modern notions of femininity and power, it would appear, are reinscribed through each woman's alliance with Edmund.

The seeming failure of their resistance demonstrates the malleable, proliferative, and conflicted space of subjectivity. The absolute form of power Goneril and Regan repeat requires a constant shifting, so that as Butler explains in her elaboration of Foucault's theorization of power,
in its resignifications, the law itself is transmuted into that which opposes or exceeds its original purposes. In this sense, disciplinary discourse does not unilaterally constitute a subject in Foucault, or rather, if it does, it simultaneously constitutes the condition for the subject's deconstitution. ...the disciplinary apparatus produces subjects, but as a consequence of that production, it brings into discourse the conditions for subverting that apparatus itself. In other words, the law turns against itself and spawns versions of itself which oppose and proliferate its animating purposes. (99, 100)

The reiteration of power in subject formation, in which Butler is interested, clarifies the apparent contradictions of Goneril and Regan's acts throughout King Lear. For if the sisters are interested in keeping power, why do they suddenly share it with Edmund, a man who has no relationship to them and, in fact, as a bastard is barred by law from assuming the power he desires? The fact is that Edmund, as a man, represents the lawful, orthodox definitions of masculine brutality, and as a consequence he enables both women to perform the brutality that they are, culturally, prohibited from performing. But at the moment that I argue Goneril and Regan assume traditional roles as women, a contradiction surfaces as a result of the law prohibiting adultery and unions with bastards, with men who retain no advantages of lineage and inheritance. Clearly, traditional forms of femininity Goneril and Regan assume by allowing Edmund to perform the brutality they, as women, cannot are canceled out by the adulterous and class transgressive alliance with Gloucester's bastard son. Thus, while both Goneril and Regan appear driven to repeat a performance of feminine gender dependent on a masculine strength, their adulterous desire for the bastard son of the earl of Gloucester certainly exceeds the original purposes of the patrilineal order. Monarchical power is consolidated through a recuperation of gender "norms" but also breached by an adulterous alliance, so that absolute systems of authority are reinscribed and subverted. Edmund's masculine strength upholds both the dynamics of gender and power staged in the play at the same time that its deployment acts to subvert systems of inheritance based on pure bloodlines. Thus, power in King Lear moves through a process of reiteration and subversion, a process that (temporarily) shifts the actors from male to female, legitimate to illegitimate, but ultimately does not change the effects of power. While it might seem that such an argument contradicts my earlier claim that the play interrogates systems of gender and power, I argue that the play's simultaneous reiteration and subversion of orthodox forms of power through women's performance of it renders inadequate the attribution of an archetypal evil to Goneril and Regan as a result of their use of that power.

Goneril and Regan's power collapses despite their attempts to consolidate it. The feud over Edmund that separates the sisters intensifies as their attention is forced toward war and the forces that would reinstate Lear. Regan's public announcement of her marital and political alliance with Edmund seemingly checkmates her still-married sister. But Goneril determines not to allow her sister that victory, revealing in an aside that the monarchy takes second place to her fight for Edmund: "I had rather lose the battle, than that sister/ Should loosen him and me" (V.i.8–19). But in the quickness of the last act's movement, Albany's confrontation of both Edmund and his wife with their plot against him forces the crisis. Before Regan can officially make her title Edmund's, Albany takes action against all three of them:

... Edmund I arrest thee
On Capital treason, and in thy attaint,
This gilded serpent [pointing to Goneril]. For your claim fair sister,
I bar it in the interest of my wife;
'Tis she is sub-contracted to this lord,
And I, her husband, contradict your bans.
If you will marry, make your loves to me,
My lady is bespoke. (V.iii.82–89)

Albany's exquisite sarcasm, compounded by accusations of treason and monstrosity, work their intended purpose. Edmund is taken off guard by Edgar; Goneril, also taken off guard, stays long enough to hear the allegations against Edmund, but exits in defiance of the indictment her husband makes against her. Regan, poisoned by her sister, is doubly paralyzed. The power that all three children sought to protect is taken away by Albany and Edgar with disarming swiftness.

Such an ending suggests that "evil" is righteously overcome by good. But the play's ending is more ambiguous than absolute. First of all, neither Goneril nor Regan accepts Albany's identification of herself as a monstrous, "serpent" woman. Rather Regan and Goneril die ever-defiant of Albany's moral righteousness. Goneril's exit, in particular, demonstrates her refusal both to accept her husband's evaluation of her as monstrous and to give up power and submit to the accusations that he brings against Edmund and herself:

Goneril. Say if I do [know], the laws are mine, not thine; *w
Who can arraign me for 't?
Albany. Most monstrous! O!
Knows't thou this paper?
Goneril. Ask me not what I know. Exit.
(V.iii.159–62)

Rather than reading Goneril's refusal to speak what she knows as Shakespeare's refusal to endow her with complexity, as Sprengnether claims, Goneril's response to Albany rejects his accusations against her ("Introduction" 1). Goneril both asserts her position as the law and scorns the power structure for which her husband stands. His invocation of the law demanding her submission as a woman
conflicts with her role as monarch and stimulates her contempt, keeping her from internalizing his moral judgement of her as monstrous. Goneril's suicide is an act of resistance to the punitive consequences that Albany plans by arresting her for treason. While suicide traditionally signifies religious despair, if Goneril feels despair, it is not religious but political, for she refuses to acknowledge Albany's claim to power or his control of the law. Catherine Belsey argues that "[s]uicide reestablishes the sovereign subject... As an individual action, therefore, suicide is a threat to the control of the state." In this light, Goneril's suicide is not acted to reassert herself into the "social body," in Belsey's words. Instead, she acts to guarantee her self-definition as a monarch against the state that would control her by defining her uses of power as immoral. Similarly, Regan's death, though instigated by her sister, is punctuated neither by apologies nor by regrets on her part. In fact, even as she begins to feel the effects of Goneril's poison, she asserts her power, "creating [Edmund] here/, [Her] lord and master" (V.iii.77–78). While she may not know she is dying, the lack of a self-deprecatory speech in the face of imminent defeat is significant. I would argue that both Goneril and Regan's refusals to internalize patrilineal definitions of "moral" femininity suggest a refusal on Shakespeare's part to condemn them wholly for their actions.

As for their plot to kill Lear, I would note that no real proof of any such plot exists because Gloucester provides only hearsay in that matter. Though he tells Kent, "I have o'erheard a plot of death upon him" (III.vi.89), Gloucester's ability to overhear the truth is suspect. This is the man, after all, who heard Edgar plot against his own life in a conversation with Edmund. Further, Edgar does not accuse Goneril or Regan of anything; notably, his whole attention is dedicated to the betrayal he and Gloucester suffered at Edmund's hands. While Edgar's accusations against his brother seek "justice," he does not appear interested in delivering the same justice to Lear's older daughters. Goneril and Regan, whose inheritance of the crown is legitimate, seem less immediately culpable than the bastard usurper. Finally, that Goneril kills her sister and then kills herself is important because no representative of Albany's or Edgar's "moral" order takes that action. While they seem to have internalized patrilineal dictates by asserting their monopolical power in violent fashion, neither woman allows patrilineal morality to define her identity or question her authority.

Edmund alone faces the wrath of the patrilineal system in the form of his brother Edgar and internalizes the structure's definition of his "nature" as "evil" (V.iii.244–45). His wrongs seem to be greater because he had no legitimate claim to kingship. Yet Edmund's illegitimacy is also a construct of the same patrilineal order that Goneril and Regan resist in their death. Edmund's "wrongs" are as constituted by patrilineal configurations of power as is Goneril and Regan's "evil." As Dollimore contends, "Edmund's scepticism is made to serve an existing system of values; although he fails to catch it, he does not introduce his society to its obsession with power, property, and inheritance; it is already the material and ideological basis of that society" (198). Edmund's putative betrayal of his father and brother is a response to old and entrenched resentments. As a bastard, Edmund is not entitled to power, to legal existence. Consequently, only attaining Edgar's inheritance will satisfy him, for verbal acknowledgment pales in comparison to legal and material acknowledgment. The quality of acknowledgment this bastard receives from his father in Act I.i is an acknowledgment to which Gloucester is "braz'd" (I.i.11), crudely laughing off the "sport at his making" (I.2.3). Gloucester's reference to Edmund as his mother's son reveals his anxiety about the young man's paternity. Because a guarantee of paternity is of the utmost importance in a patrilineal order, Edmund can never be anything more than a source of irritation and anxiety. When Edgar, the legitimate, confronts Edmund as a traitor in the name of God, father, and brother, Edmund's skepticism and rebellion collapse: "What you have charg'd me with, that have I done/ And more, much more, the time will bring it out" (V.iii.163–64). Edmund accepts and internalizes the patrilineal order's condemnation of his desire as "evil."

Perhaps the play's ambiguity, its own skepticism, is best expressed through Edgar's entrance in Act V.iii. As a victim of the patrilineal order's ruthlessness, Edgar might have promised the greatest potential for a modification in the structure of power relations. But instead the power simultaneously reproduced and resisted by Goneril and Regan is here spectacularly reiterated by Edgar, who enters as the patrilineal system incarnate, armed, wielding a sword in the very name of vengeance against one who dared threaten the patrilineal order. He chooses to ignore his brother's youth, eminence, valor and heart because patrilineal morality is based on absolute rather than partial truths; it accepts no excuses, admits no motivation for rebellion. The "moral" codes that relegated Edmund to illegitimacy support patrilineal interests and power. True to the structure that made him legitimate heir, Edgar cannot see beyond his brother's treason to question that structure. Such treason can be answered only with the sword: "My name is Edgar, and thy father's son! The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices/ Make instruments to plague us/. The dark and vicious place where they got/ Cost him his eyes" (V.iii.170–74, emphasis mine). Displacing the responsibility of Edmund's act of rebellion onto the immorality and pollution of female sexuality, Edgar discloses his own anxiety about Edmund's illegitimacy (Dollimore 203). He aligns himself with father and gods against Edmund in alliance with the patrilineal order's moral codes. As a product of those codes, Edgar, like his bastard brother and Lear's "immoral" daughters, functions within a ruthless and brutal structure of power. I cannot assert, then, with Morrisey Henry Partee that "the play, which began with Lear's coupling of irresponsibility and absolute power, concludes with Edgar's declaration of a new spirit of moderation and duty" because Edgar in fact returns to and in the spirit of vengeance against the bastard usurper. His moral duty lodges firmly with the patrilineal order that Lear and Gloucester represented on absolutist and unforgiving principles. The suffering and marginalization Edgar experienced might have taught him mercy, but such an opportunity is irrevocably lost as Edgar champions patrilineal moral authority with the violence of his sword. Thus Edgar enters in the service of the same masculinist forms of power that Goneril and Regan defended. His entrance is not a return to order because the order of absolute power
endowed by father and gods was never in question, never in jeopardy. While Goneril and Regan were women in power, their enactment of power did not ascribe to feminine gender roles. Edgar’s entrance constitutes, therefore, a reproduction of power first directed by Lear, and subsequently performed by Goneril and Regan.

Therefore, the play’s ending finds no comfort in Edgar. For he repeats the brutality with which Lear, Gloucester, Goneril, Regan, and Edmund ruled, a brutality that lead each of them to their annihilation.\(^{41}\) The play seems to suggest more than that ruthless uses of power lead to annihilation; that, rather, the nature of power itself demands violence and brutality and leads, therefore, to annihilation. Thus, patrilineal forms of power are exposed as flawed and in need of revision, which, as I have argued, Edgar cannot enact. Yet as Dollimore argues,

> [in the closing moments of Lear those who have survived the catastrophe actually attempt to recuperate their society in just those terms which the play has subjected to sceptical interrogation. There is invoked first a concept of innate nobility in contradistinction to innate evil and, second, its corollary: a metaphysically ordained justice. (202)\(^{42}\)]

Though Dollimore contends that the play resists that recuperation in the deaths of Cordelia and Lear, I would argue that Edgar’s entrance enacts just such a recuperation (203). Absolute power is enacted through violence whether in the hands of men or women. In this light, the closing scene merely confirms the violent and resilient nature of power, evidencing Shakespeare’s discomfort with a system of power relations for which even he cannot envision an alternative.

The difference between interrogation and repetition is, perhaps, slippery. There is no lasting shift in power relations in King Lear, and this “failure” has caused many critics to assume that Shakespeare supported a system of monarchy that severed women from acts of power and reinscribed them within passive roles through violent punishment of their transgressions. The risk of interrogation is, it seems, that what is being cast as detrimental to systems of state and subject formation will be interpreted as endorsement of those systems and formations. Perhaps a clearer subversion of early modern systems of power would have been to make Goneril and Regan’s ascension to power a successful matriarchal alternative to Lear’s monarchy. But such a dramatization would have meant a total re-vision of power in the early 1600s. It would have meant a valorization of feminine based forms of power that were not in evidence even in Elizabeth’s reign and, as a consequence, a vision of power that Shakespeare, as a subject of his time and place, may not have been capable of imagining – at least at this point in his career. But it does not seem to me that the only way to stage questions about absolute forms of rule is to dramatize ideal alternatives. If indeed a playwright is nervous about his nation’s mode of power, perhaps the most effective stand is taken by dramatizing the status quo. Thus a staging of an utopian monarchy would have meant the loss of a dramatization of the gender based definitions of power that are entirely independent of the gender of the monarch. For if monarchy, as a system of power, is a masculine domain, it would follow that monarchs will approach their roles as men, as subjects of a system of power understood according to gender divisions.

While the play itself, in its recuperation of patrilineal power through Edgar, Albany, and Kent’s reordering of the social system, appears to close off the feminine from power, it must finally be seen as staging the contestatory space for the subject Butler seeks through her examination of the ways in which “power that first appears as external, pressed upon the subject, pressing the subject into subordination, assumes the psychic form that constitutes the subject’s self-identity” (3). Goneril and Regan’s deployments of monarchical authority, in this regard, cannot be separated from the specific forms of power in play during the early modern period that were constructed on absolute principles. The dynamics of gender and power Shakespeare stages are, as I have shown, in conflict throughout the play, but not so as to condemn feminine desire or agency as “evil.” Rather a paradox emerges wherein “a subject only remains a subject through reiteration or rearticulation of itself as a subject, and this dependency of the subject on repetition for coherence may constitute that subject’s incoherence, its incomplete character. This repetition or, better, iterability thus becomes a non-place of subversion, the possibility of a re-embodying of the subjectivizing norm that can redirect its normativity” (Butler 99). While King Lear appears to reject the feminine power it depicts, instead it calls into question the very structures of domination prohibiting women’s access to power through a naturalization of masculine and feminine genders. Such structures are revealed as false, but perhaps more importantly, they are revealed as deployed in the self-interests of the very power Goneril and Regan appear to resist.

The play’s apparent endorsement of Goneril and Regan’s monstrosity – as depicted by Lear, Kent, and Albany’s views – is vexing. But these male characters’ condemnations both elide and are contradicted by the political emergency posed by France’s invasion of England. It is not possible historically or textually to read Goneril’s and Regan’s defenses of their nation as either a mistake or as a monstrous arrogation of power. In fact, the play separates the domestic from the political, so that even Albany must admit that a defense of England against France is of chief importance:

**Albany.** Our very loving sister, well betem.
Sir, this I heard: the King is come to his daughter,
With others whom the rigor of our state
Foe’d to cry out. Where I could not be honest,
I never yet was valiant. For this business,
It touches us as France invades our land,
Not bols the King, with others whom I fear,
Most just and heavy causes make oppose.

**Edmund.** Sir you speak nobly.

**Regan.** Why is this reason’d?

**Goneril.** Combine together ‘gainst the enemy;**
For these domestic and particular broils
Are not the question here. Albany.
Let's then determine
With the ancient of war on our proceeding. (V.i.20–32)

If indeed Goneril and Regan’s defense of England partly constitutes their illegitimacy as monarchs as well as their bloodthirsty defense of power, why does Albany agree that France’s invasion cannot be dismissed or allowed? Moreover, it is significant that Goneril urges everyone to take a united stand against France and herself separates the political urgency of this stand from the “domestic and particular broils” of Lear’s position. Such a distinction suggests that Goneril does not see the war as necessarily carried out against her father but as a national defense of borders. Surely her view is not unreasonable. Queen Elizabeth defended England against Spanish invasion and against Mary Stuart’s claims. Why then is Goneril in particular, but Regan as well, accused of evil, of illegitimate rule? The answer must lie in the affront to femininity that such violence implies. But to depend on orthodox gender paradigms for our interpretation of these women and the play is to discount what is finally its primary action: the defense of national sovereignty. That Goneril and Regan are correct in that defense suggests something about the play’s view of their rule. At the very least, the play’s view is ambiguous, and in this regard it struggles with the tyrannical tendencies of absolute monarchy, tendencies embedded in philosophies of government that are also necessary to the sovereignty of the nation. Thus the play depicts that rule as both appropriate and informed by violent practices with which the play is uncomfortable.

I would go so far as to suggest that the primacy given to the pathos of Lear’s grief, confusion, and deep sense of injustice on the heath by Shakespearean scholars throughout the years does not cancel out my reading of the political conditions of the play, which insist on absolute protection of the crown and therefore on absolute ruthlessness. The pathos of Lear’s emotional breakdown focuses attention on Shakespeare’s interrogation of absolute monarchal systems that build their authority on a competition, not just between siblings, but between fathers and their children. If power is all, then family relations fall by the wayside to be trampled in the rush for power. Surely, the contest Lear stages in Act I.i demonstrates just this. For when Lear’s own power to orchestrate the smooth transition of power from father to daughter is questioned by Cordelia, his first reaction is to sever himself from his daughter. Family bonds are rejected in favor of what Lear sees to be his primary function and right as king: to be obeyed. Goneril and Regan reproduce Lear’s mode of kingship, in this light, acting as monarchs first and ultimately losing sight of filial bonds. Thus Lear’s grief, compounded by Gloucester’s suffering, dramatizes the play’s discomfort with the ruthless and alienating tendencies of absolute monarchy.

Thus, Goneril and Regan are queens, monarchs, in a system of power relations that deploys mercilessness, vengeance, and cruelty to defend its interests. Goneril and Regan cannot, therefore, rule within the limitations of their gender. Instead, they must subscribe to the brutal nature of kingship. While Dreher notes that “the logic of the [play] condemns them, not because they rebel against traditional feminine passivity, but because in so doing they become cruel and inhuman tyrants,” I would argue instead that the logic of the play requires Goneril and Regan to rebel against traditional feminine passivity to become cruel tyrants, to become monarchs (106). King Lear exposes the marginalization of women from acts of power and desire, interrogating the nature of patrilineal power and uncovering its brutality. Because power has been defined in traditionally masculine terms, King Lear exposes the masculinist structure of kingship as necessarily vengeful and destructive at the same time that it interrogates conceptions of femininity as naturally, and necessarily, passive and obedient. In this respect, what critics specify as the “immorality” of Goneril and Regan’s choices becomes instead symptomatic of a ruthless patrilineal structure of power relations they are required to reproduce as representatives of that structure.

NOTES


5. I have chosen to focus solely on the two sisters and not to extend my reading to Edmund, though clearly my argument applies to his culturally derived class as a bastard and as, according to Stanley Cavell, “the central evil character” of the play. See Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 76.

6. The verdict against Goneril and Regan comes in aside, as a given about which scholars need not provide proof. See Harry Berger Jr., who establishes a dichotomy between “good” characters and “self proclaim[ed] knave[s],” in “Text Against Performance: The Gloucester Family Romance,” in Shakespeare’s "Rough Magic," eds. Peter Erickson and Coppélia Kahn (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1985), 210–29, 211; and Linda Bamber, who argues that Lear is an example of Shakespeare's misogyny because Goneril and Regan, along with Lady Macbeth and Volumnia, are “nightmare females... not just
women who are evil; their evil is inseparable from their failures as women," in Comic Women, Tragic Men: A Study of Gender and Genre in Shakespeare (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982), 2. See also Paul Delany, "King Lear and the Decline of Feudalism," in Materialist Shakespeare: A History, ed. Ivo Kamps (London: Verso, 1995), 20-38. For Delany, King Lear looks back at feudalism nostalgically, rejecting the ruthless bourgeois economics of Edmund, Goneril, and Regan, so that the play, in his reading, proceeds from the points of view of Gloucester and Lear. He writes, "Though Lear has let the garden of England run to seed, it is clear that Edmund, Regan, and Goneril have no interest in restoring it to its proper condition" (34). What that proper condition is, Delany does not specify, though presumably it would be some other form of state, neither feudal nor bourgeois. See also Diane Elizabeth Dreher for whom Goneril and Regan are "Shakespeare's evil women... sociopaths, individuals without conscience or empathy, motivated only by power and appetite," in Domination and Defiance: Fathers and Daughters in Shakespeare (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986), 105-6; Jodi Mikalakchi, The Legacy of Bondage: Gender and Nation in Early Modern England (New York: Routledge, 1998), for whom it is a given that Goneril and Regan are an example of England's savage native origins; and Marianne Novy, who claims that "Few of [Goneril's and Regan's] lines carry hints of motivations other than cruelty, lust, or ambition, characters of the archetypal fantasy image of women as enemy," in Love's Argument: Gender Relations in Shakespeare (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 153. Claudette Hoover's analysis of Goneril and Regan is a momentous exception to the dearth of criticism on Goneril and Regan. She makes a solitary case for what is that is Shakespeare is rejecting in his representation of the women. See her "Goneril and Regan: 'So horrid as in woman'," San Jose Studies 10, no. 3 (1984): 49-65. Only Stephen Reid attempts a full defense of Goneril and Regan based on Oedipal and sibling rivalries in "In Defense of Goneril and Regan," American Image 27 (1970): 226-44.


10. My reference is to events contained in the Riverside edition of the conflated text of King Lear. Thus I am not accounting for discrepancies between the quarto and folio editions of the plays (they are now considered separate in both the Oxford and Norton complete works). Clearly, a study of the differences between quarto and folio would yield fascinating results for my argument, but I have chosen to contain my present project to both the representation of the daughters as they are portrayed in the conflated text and to scholarly reactions, most of which have been to the conflated text. For lively and pivotal readings of the differences between quarto and folio editions of King Lear, see R. A. Foakes, "The Two Texts of King Lear," 21-34; Michael J. Warren's "Quarto and Folio King Lear and the Interpretation of Albany and Edgar," 35-47; Gary Taylor's "The War in King Lear," 48-58; and Jay L. Halio's "The Transmission of the Texts," 59-71; all four articles can be found in Critical Essays in Shakespeare's King Lear, ed. Jay L. Halio (New York: Hall, 1996). For parallel text editions of the plays see Michael Warren's The Complete Texts of King Lear, 1608-1623 (Berkely: University of California Press, 1989); and René Weis's modernized King Lear (London: Longman's, 1993).

11. There are several analyses that do not insist on Lear's or Cordelia's goodness, Goneril and Regan's "evil," and Shakespeare's misogyny. Reid defends Goneril and Regan in "In Defense of Goneril and Regan," 226-44. Jonathan Dollimore notes in Radical Tragedy that Lear's behavior with all of his daughters is based upon a particularly brutal hierarchy, 199; McEachern defends Shakespeare from accusations of misogyny in "Fathering Herself" but centers her defense on Cordelia rather than the two elder daughters, 2; Thomas McFarland's analysis of family relations avoids delineations of good against "evil"; see "The Image of the Family in King Lear," in On King Lear, ed. Lawrence Danson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 91-118, 98. Paolo Valesio, in a rhetorical analysis of Act 1.1, argues that Cordelia, no less than Goneril and Regan, desires the kingdom, rejecting her father's rhetorical framework (flattery) to position herself, advantageously, against her sisters. Valesio's analysis deconstructs both Goneril and Regan's "evil" and Cordelia's virtue; see Novanzia: Rhetorics as a Contemporary Theory (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 41-60.
dividing 'the sway, revenue, execution of the rest' between Albany and Cornwall (I.i.135-37) separates the name of the King from the power of kingship, separates the signifying 'addition' glossed as 'honors and prerogatives'... from the imposition of the law, and separates the non (the signifier which encodes the law) from the non (the phallic prohibition which enforces the law). To the horror of his court, Lear performs ritualistic self-castration. When Lear gives up the phallus, he reveals to everyone the gap between the chain of signification and the chain of drive on which castration locates itself in the unconscious. This gap, once sutured by Lear's kingship, now yawns wide with the loss of the king as a phallic referent" (100-1). Clearly, Lear's conflict with Goneril in Act IV dramatizes a struggle over who precisely has become that phallic referent. See 'Entitled to Be King: The Subversion of the Subject in King Lear," Literature and Psychology 42, no. 1-2 (1996): 100-12.

26. In "Women, Centaurs, and Devils in King Lear," Hoover reads Lear's vision of women as centaurs as a symptom of his association of his daughters with sexual pollution - an association that also includes references to Eve, witchcraft, and death. But Hoover's conclusion that Lear ultimately succeeds in rejecting that misogyny as "a necessary prelude to his reunion with his daughter Cordelia" reads that reunion with more optimism than I can (349). Adelman's analysis of Lear's misogyny in this scene is more persuasive (Suffocating Mothers 103-29).


28. On the threat Goneril and Regan perceive in Lear's retainers, Tennenhouse notes that "[w]hen Lear resigns the throne, the retainers operate only as the symbols of a power once located in Lear. Detached from the legitimate right to exercise power, they suddenly pose a potential threat to legitimate authority" (Power on Display 136).


30. Significantly, Valesio notes in regard to Cordelia's arrival with a French army, that "we think we are wise and moral because we blame Goneril and Regan, because we 'see through' their scheming...[yet] the bulk of the army has been lying in ambush...thus [we have not realized] that Cordelia's scheming has escaped us" (Novantiqua 58).


33. I use the phrase "performance of gender" in this sentence in Butler's sense as she investigates it in Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990).

35. Thus I cannot agree with Dympna Callaghan's reading of the sisters' deaths as silent, though she also argues that the women "undermine the centrality of the male tragic hero... if [the plot] can be said to have a centrifugal force... [it] moves not inward and upward towards the tragic hero, but rather towards the void at its center, which has been, from the first, the axis of its revolutions." See Woman and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy: A Study of 'King Lear,' "Othello," "The Duchess of Malfi," and "The White Devil" (New York: Harvester, 1989), 87.


38. See Cavell's analysis of Gloucester who, he argues, "recognizes the moral claim upon himself... to acknowledge' his bastard; but all this means to him is that he acknowledge he has a bastard for a son. He does not acknowledge him, as a son or as a person, with his feelings of illegitimacy and being cast out... Gloucester's shame... is shown... by the fact that [he] has to joke about [Edmund]. Joking is a familiar specific for brazing out shame, calling enlarged attention to the thing you do not want naturally noticed" (Downing Knowledge 48, 49). Cavell's sympathy with the bastard Edmund does not extend to Goneril and Regan, however. For Cavell, Regan is "evil" (53) and her "mind is itself a lynchmob" (63).


41. See Valesio, who argues that "[t]he tragedy is that none of the three factions (the king, Goneril and Regan, Cordelia) succeeds in its intent, and the specter falls from their grip after all of them have scrambled in blood and desperation to conquer it" (Novantiqua 59).

42. Consequently, Goneril and Regan do not "imperfectly replicate [Lear]," as Adelman argues (Suffocating Mothers 108); they replicate him quite perfectly.