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Sins of the Father, Sins of the Daughters: *King Lear* and Anti-Feminism

Cordelia, of Shakespeare's widely-known play *King Lear*, infuriates me. Why "[n]othing, my lord" (1.1.96)? Why can she not simply "heave [her] heart into [her] mouth," and appease her father (1.1.100-01); would that not be the most apt way to help him with his mental instability? Instead of disappearing between Acts 1 and 4, she could have been more proactive in rescuing her father from her supposedly evil sisters and his own mental decline. Whilst exploring my anchoring irritation for Cordelia, it became apparent to me: I should not be frustrated with Cordelia. I should instead take issue with the environment that she performs within, one that was hand-crafted by Shakespeare. It is now more clear what deep-rooted issues exist within *King Lear*. None can deny that Shakespeare's *King Lear* contains sexist language and degrades women; this much is obvious upon a base exposure to the play. But what is fascinating is what lives and breathes beneath the text, in the structure of the power dynamics in the play itself. Even outside of overt sexism, *King Lear* is anti-feminist due to the shifts of power throughout the play: Lear's growing insanity and instability track closely with moments in the play where female characters — of which, there are only three, Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia — stand up for themselves, packing punches full of audible and tangible defiance and power shifts from Lear to themselves. While the power stances taken by Lear's daughters could be explicitly taken as feminism, I will argue that the underlying power shifts between the parties is, in fact, disempowering. In this essay, I will focus on duo Goneril and Regan as they slither their way

into political power, Lear's relationship with Cordelia, and the overall lack of the female characters' motivations in the play. Anti-feminism stares back at the reader underneath *King Lear's* layered character development and plot devices and that is why its female characters tend to be unexplained, disempowered, and unfairly portrayed.

Goneril and Regan are often taken as a pair of villains who ostracize their elderly and mentally unstable father and, by all means, that understanding is not incorrect. However, the wider transactions of power between Goneril and Regan and Lear demonstrate that every time the daughters gain autonomy, power, or confidence, Lear suffers. That is anti-feminism. Their power harms the protagonist, generally put, and thus, sends Lear spiraling into mental distress. Lear dramatically begs to the "heavens" that they "give [him] that patience, patience [he] needs" after being denied a host of knights to tote with him between living in his daughters' residences (2.4.312). Lear's breaking point at the climax of Act 2 is synonymous to Goneril and Regan taking a stance for themselves. Defense of their actions is not relevant in this discussion; what is more important to see is that the victory for daughters is a loss to the father. Regan gutsily denies her fear-mongering father of his desire and even takes so much power as to question him: "[w]hat need one?" (2.4.303). If the power transaction is not apparent enough, Lear follows his outburst with tears and expresses a sexist sentiment, that tears are womanly and weak, among other angry anti-feminist comments toward his daughters (2.4.318).

In addition to direct confrontations between Lear and his two daughters, Goneril and Regan's relationships with Edmund, the bastard son of Lear's advisor Gloucester, are markedly unexplained. Randomly, Goneril and Regan each develop infatuations with Edmund, as he plots his father and brother Edgar's downfalls (4.2.25-30). These crushes are a different display of power: both sisters are in wedlock, and still express their feelings for another man. They do not

succumb to societal expectations nor the patriarchy in their, albeit morally wrong, feelings toward Edmund. So, this is a display of power on part of both women. Consequently, Edmund is the one who sends Lear and Cordelia into their deaths and plots against Lear during most of the play (5.3.303-06). Even in their romantic actions, Goneril and Regan exist in nonsensical roles that end up harming their father. On top of the consequences for Lear, Goneril and Regan's feelings for Edmund seemed inauthentic and gave the impression of a plot device; it is, in fact, the relationship that plots against them, their positions of power, and their perception to the reader. The pair seem like caricatures throughout the play, saying and doing inexplicable things as evidenced above. If Goneril and Regan are framed for Lear's murder, then Cordelia should be blamed for his initial break; while Cordelia's relationship with Lear is less antipathetic, Lear still indirectly suffers at her hands.

The play will not allow its audience to forget that it was Cordelia's initial stance that leaves Lear gasping for breath in Act I. Cordelia and Lear's relationship is more complex than that of Goneril and Regan's with Lear, however, there is still power gained and sanity lost. Cordelia's assertion that she loves Lear "according to [her] bond, no more nor less" cuts deep (1.1.102). Lear has significant expectations for Cordelia: she is his favorite, his comfort, and a keeper of his trust (1.1.171). Without her, he cracks. Firstly, he banishes Cordelia, the source of his pain (1.1.120). This action can be explained by rashness and mistrust, so that's not where he truly suffers. Shortly after Cordelia's banishment, Kent, Lear's advisor, speaks up on her behalf, advocating for her to not be treated too harshly (1.1.171); Lear is driven to a break, tossing out Kent, and vowing that if he is seen after ten days in Britain, then that "moment is thy death" (1.1.202). The loss of Kent is the start of Lear's suffering. After Kent's departure, Lear is left to grovel in Cordelia's betrayal and to suffer from his daughter's mistreatment. Cordelia took a

stance, and Lear suffered. Instead of calling Cordelia names or mislabeling her as an unthinking, headstrong teenage girl, the blame should be placed upon the strings of *King Lear* that play the tune of anti-feminism.

Cordelia's last moments in the play are equally as significant to Lear's disempowerment. Sitting beside her father's sickbed, Cordelia reappears in the play following a three act break. She nobly declares that she will shoulder Lear's suffering, cooing to Lear that "O dear father, / It is thy business that I go about" (4.5.26-27). Backed by the French forces of her betrothed, she has heroically returned to Lear's side during one of his lowest moments in the play and bravely faces his demons (who have taken the faces of her sisters). Cordelia is the picture of female power and, more importantly, of a loyal daughter. Alas, her power was not to be. Fast forwarding



Lear carries Cordelia's dead body moments after her murder in Act 5, Scene 3.

to the end of the play, Edmund has secretly ordered Cordelia's execution following her and Lear's capture (5.3.294-95). Cordelia's rise to power and autonomy was done. Beginning with a teenage girl standing up to her father's pride, she was murdered at the peak of her power, at the helm of an army with a noble cause. This cut deeper than Cordelia's Act I rebellion for Lear. Sobbing, he enters. "Howl, howl, howl," Lear cries, his speech breaking down into base animal impulses (5.3.308). To the left, Lear is pictured at his lowest, mourning his daughter, pleading "never, never, never" that his "poor fool is hanged," meaning Cordelia, before he keels over and dies (5.3.370-05). As a result of

Cordelia's absolute power, Lear dies. Children have stepped over the parent, addressing the world rather than their father; Cordelia, while not as cruel as her sisters, took a stance and held onto her power. Sadly, that power was leeching straight out of Lear and his will to continue on.

A multitude of explanations for the lack of character development and presence for Cordelia, Goneril, and Regan exist, however, the anti-feminist one will never be wrong. This is not to blame nor condemn Shakespeare — it is to recognize that critiques of the women of *King Lear* are misplaced on their actions and should instead cut deeper, to what it means to be a woman in the play. Readers do not like Cordelia, Goneril, and Regan due to the anti-feminism that runs deep in this play. Lear is an unstable old father whose decline lines up directly with his daughters' successes, more or less. To be a woman means you cannot “love your majesty / According to my bond, no more nor less” — you must have “a love that makes breath poor and speech unable” (1.1.66, 101-02). On Cordelia's deathbed, he proclaims that she was the perfect woman; he praises how “[h]er voice was ever soft, / Gentle, and low, an excellent thing in woman” (5.3.228-29). Lear wants that power that slides over to his daughters. As proven by his first request of them, he wants unconditional, unquestionable, and, most importantly, silent love. Exploring how male characters' perceptions of the women of *King Lear* would be a fascinating follow-up to this approach, and would, without a doubt, yield more evidence of the sexism coupled with anti-feminism in the play.

Goneril declares at the cusp of Lear's death that “the laws are mine, not thine” (5.2.189). Lear's defeat and eventual end meant power for her. A shared power between Lear and his daughters could not coexist — it was clear from the beginning of the play that, no matter the action, the rise of a daughter will always be the fall of a father, and vice versa. *King Lear* may not mean to be anti-feminist, but it is. The only way that Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia would not

be “arraign[ed]” for standing up for themselves is by watching their father fall; it is an injustice of anti-feminism (5.2.190). Gender is not a tool for symbolism or a meaningful theme in *King Lear*: it is an insult to the depth of Cordelia, Goneril, and Regan. Empowerment for women was just within reach for this play, and yet, it falls short, and empowerment of the daughters is distractedly the demise of the father.

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