‘Sure I shall never marry like my sisters’: The Measure of Marriage in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*

By Charlotte Fiehn, Harrisburg Area Community College, United States of America

Abstract:
When Cordelia confounds her father’s desire for flattery in Act I, Scene 1 of King Lear, she her love “according to my bond” (1.1.102) and so defines the parameters of legitimate parent-child relationships for the play. These relationships are not all that Cordelia defines, though. Her response to Lear’s test, the momentous answer, “nothing” (1.1.96), affirms the legitimacy of natural law and primogeniture. It also allows her to stress a duty to her future husband, leading to a second test of love that bears out Cordelia’s position on the responsibilities of a wife. The Kings of France and Burgundy must consider whether they will marry Cordelia without the benefit of her dowry, reckoning her value solely on the basis of her character. Indeed, the immediate context of the first love test is the apparently quite aggressive courtship of Cordelia and the prospect of her marriage. This paper explores the representation of marriage in King Lear in this instance and in the relationships of the primary and secondary plots. It examines marriage as a central if often overlooked element within the broader tragedy, and as a means by which Shakespeare considers the broader legitimacy and illegitimacy of relationships.

1 This paper explores marriage in *King Lear*, a theme that, like many others within the play, Shakespeare measures through a series of parallels. The courtship of Cordelia by the Kings of France and Burgundy, for instance, creates a second love test to define the proper basis for marital bonds, contrasting to Lear’s false reckoning of the parent-child bond immediately prior. The subsequent marriage of Cordelia to the King of France compares, as well, to the marriages of her sisters, of which Cordelia herself very heavily criticizes following her explanation of her perceived responsibility to her father. The representation of adultery – Edmund’s with Goneril and Regan, and Gloucester’s with Edmund’s mother – likewise has a bearing on the discussion of marriage and receives attention through parallels. Shakespeare also invites comparison of Edgar and Edmund on their respective legitimacy and illegitimacy – states defined by Gloucester’s relationship to each of their mothers, which Gloucester himself discusses in Act 1, Scene 1. Even Edmund himself, in declaring his treachery, makes reference to his bastard state and the context of it, his father’s relationship to his mother and thus the adulterous relationship, thus defined by Gloucester’s existing marriage (Edgar emerges as the elder of the two sons anyway) and his violation of his marital bond in the most outright sense. As Jannette Dillon comments in her summary of *King Lear*, Cordelia’s response to her father’s love test is what sets in motion an “extended examination of how bonds are maintained or broken between human beings” (104). The emphasis,

however, is predominantly upon personal bonds, not political ones (the political emerges as secondary), with paternal and marital bonds together taking center stage. The most tested bonds within the play are between husband and wife, and father and child. Kent's is really the only "bond of service" (104) other than, perhaps, Oswald's to Goneril, and Edgar's to Lear and then his father in the disguise of Poor Tom. As the parallel to parent-child relationships, marriage represents an important context for understanding gender roles and sexuality within the play.

2 Marriage is vital to Lear and his division of his kingdom and thus vital to the play's principle plot. As Ronald Cooley argued in his study of primogeniture in *King Lear*, the rightful transfer of Lear's property is not to his daughters, in any case, but to the elder of his son-in-laws – in this, the Duke of Albany. Cordelia, for instance, limits her duty to and love for her father in terms of how she will also bind herself to a husband. She defines her love for Lear in very precise terms, "According to my bond, no more nor less" (*King Lear*[1] 1.1.102), explaining the extent to which her father has warranted her obedience and love in having "begot me, bred me, loved me" (1.1.106). Her duty, though, to "Obey you, love you, and most honor you" (1.1.108), she undertakes in an intriguing fashion. Rather than obeying her father, who entreats her to perform, to "heave/ [her] heart into [her] mouth" (1.1.100-101), Cordelia demonstrates a seeming lack of obedience by refusing the command to perform and moving to criticize her sisters, perhaps to explain her apparent lack of obedience. Her criticisms, though, must also draw attention to gender roles and marriage. She asks "Why have my sisters husbands if they say/ They love you all?" (1.1.109-10). She draws attention at once to the performance, to what her sisters have said, and likewise what the part function of having a husband. She insists: "Sure I shall never marry like my sister's/ To love my father all" (1.1.114-115). The recognized responsibility of Goneril and Regan, as wives, is to not only love their father but to love their husbands by virtue of the respective bonds. Implying a passive transfer of loyalties, too, though, for women, Cordelia argues that it is the responsibility of her husband, a "lord" (1.1.112) to "carry/ Half my love with him, half my care and duty" (1.1.112-113). Marriage is the means of defining gender roles and personal responsibility alongside the parent-child bond that Lear and Gloucester emphasize in their interactions. Act 1, Scene 1, for instance, contains two love tests. The first is the test that concentrates on parent-child relationships – Lear attempts to test his daughters' love to determine how to divide his kingdom between them. The second love test, however, is the

[1] Hereafter referred to by abbreviation, KL.

one that allows Cordelia to obtain a loving husband. When Cordelia responds to her father, declaring that she loves him according to her "bond" (1.1.102), she clarifies the nature of that bond according to the understanding that, as a woman, she has two roles, not one. She must perform her role as a daughter in conjunction with being a wife. Her language also stresses how she will function as a wife. Her role, she suggests, will be to share in her husband's cares and to share hers with him. Indeed, she insists that "[t]hat lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry/ Half my love with him, half my care and duty" (1.1.11-12). Although Cordelia speaks of care and duty, not suffering, considering the role of women, for instance, *Julius Caesar* and *Titus Andronicus*, Catherine Belsey suggests that, "[i]f women are to become consenting partners for men perhaps one condition is that they too must endure pain without protest" (134), they must bear suffering with an awareness that it is their duty. Cordelia's statement, her measurement of the marital bond, seems to imply this. Certainly, considering marriage and paternal bonds as parallels, Shakespeare shows Cordelia sharing in her father's cares and then suffering for him with a sense that it is her duty. The parameters of gender relationships are thus decided, with the sense of love, care, and duty divided for women between fathers and husbands, husbands expected to "take [the] plight" and actually "carry" the responsibility of maintaining those aspects of their wife's duties. Because of the division, though, Cordelia also rightly defines her role as that of a caring daughter and a caring wife; she is to share the burden of her father and her husband, to provide support to both but to provide support equally between them. When she marries, she is to transfer a portion of her love – a half, in her estimation – to her husband and thus to parallel the parent-child relationship with the husband-wife relationship, the inevitable comparison between child and wife status, embedded in the parallel and stressing the husband's autonomy, their authority, as comparable to that of a father. To the extent that Goneril and Regan betray their father and violate their bonded relationship to him, it thus is consistent that they violate their marital bonds – to some degree, they are the same.

3 The opening of Act 1, Scene 1 is particularly rich in its reference to marriage. The conversation between the Dukes of Gloucester and Kent establishes Lear's mercurial nature and his penchant for preference through reference, not with reference to his daughters but by alluding to his relationships with his sons-in-law. "I thought the King had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall" (KL 1.1.1-2), Kent affirms, in the opening line. Gloucester's response, "It did always seem so" (1.1.3) and his allusion to the "division of the kingdom" (1.1.4) emphasize that Lear has long-intended and long-debated how to divide his kingdom between his children – as dowry for his daughters, but for the benefit of their husbands. Just

as Kent and Gloucester have begun to discuss “which of the dukes [Lear] values most” (1.1.4-5), however, the second (parallel) evaluation begins. Kent calls upon Gloucester to speak of his relationship to Edmund (“Is not this your son…?” (1.1.8)). Gloucester’s response answers the question in terms of his relationship to Edmund’s mother as well as Edmund. “His breeding, sir, hat been at my charge” (1.1.9-10) is a response that squarely stresses both a parental responsibility but also a profoundly sexual one with Edmund’s mother. “[B]reeding” (1.1.9), in fact, is a loaded term here and Gloucester has “blushed” (1.1.10) to acknowledge his responsibility for “breeding” (1.1.9) Edmund. Breeding not only makes the obvious allusion to sex, even in a bestial, somewhat degrading fashion, but it alludes specifically to a function of marriage. For Gloucester, marriage plays a vital role because it not only provides him with his legitimate son Edgar (legitimate in every sense, as it turns out), but his adulterous relationship also brings about Edmund, whose destructive capacity and malevolent nature seem inexplicably linked to his bastardy. As Gloucester proceeds to explain, his second son, Edgar, is a product of his marriage. Edgar, in fact, is bred “by order of law” (1.1.19) and thus within the bonds of marriage. Gloucester does not blush to speak of this or even of the “good sport” (1.1.23). Rather, his embarrassment links predominantly to the extramarital nature of Gloucester’s relationship to Edmund’s mother, as well as to her fault probably more so than his – that Edmund’s mother had “a son for her cradle ere she had a husband/ for her bed” (1.1.15-6). Indeed, Shakespeare addresses the circumstances of Edmund’s conception and birth to emphasize the problems of sexuality and marriage defined by gender. The social stigma of illegitimacy is certainly one of these problems and something that Edmund himself addresses when he declares “Nature” (1.2.1) as his goddess, and questions why “should I/ Stand in the plague of custom, and permit/ The curiosity of nations to deprive me” (1.2.2-4). Clearly, he alludes to a lack of social status and an associated stigma – the social assumption that an illegitimate child, a bastard, is somehow dishonest and “base” (1.2.10). As Alexander Leggatt suggests, “Edmund’s being born at all was a social offense” (151) and although Gloucester initially declares an equal love for his sons (KL 1.1.17-18), “there is something anomalous…about Edmund, and Gloucester’s jocular evasiveness about acknowledging him” (Leggatt 151). In a sense, as Leggatt argues, Edmund’s illegitimacy – the latent relationship to sexuality, to nature, and his emergence outside the bonds of marriage – gives him a dubious status; “As Lear is and is not king, Edmund is and is not Gloucester’s son” (151) because of his conception outside of marriage.

4 The exchange between Gloucester and Kent precedes the entrance of Lear and the rest of the court. When Lear enters, echoing the discussion about the rivalry of the dukes of

Albany and Cornwall for Lear's affections, Lear himself mentions to the rivalry between France and Burgundy in pursuit of Cordelia. Lear's intention to divide his kingdom and the rivalry between France and Burgundy both cause considerable uncertainty in Lear's court according to Gloucester's observations, too. As Lear's daughters have waited to hear what dowry they are to receive, France and Burgundy have "Long in our court…made their amorous sojourn" (KL 1.1.51), waiting "to be answered" (1.1.52) as to which of them will win "the youngest daughter's love" (1.1.49). Yet, as with the apparent rivalry between Cornwall and Albany, much about this exchange is problematic. At once, Lear speaks of "The two great princes" (1.1.49) as rivals for Cordelia's love. This suggests, of course, that the two men have both courted Cordelia and that they appeal to her on an emotional level. The reference to her "love" (1.1.49) seems also to stress love as the desired basis for marriage for each of the princes. It suggests they each have pursued Cordelia in the hope of winning her love as opposed to her dowry. Yet, of course, the later exchange between Burgundy and France shows this to be incorrect. Similarly, Lear's language implies that Cordelia has at least some autonomy in choosing a husband. The basis of the rivalry is her love. Yet, Lear undercuts ideas both of love and of Cordelia's autonomy when he insists that the princes "here are to be answered" (1.1.52) at the division of the kingdom and when Lear has "a constant will to publish/ Our daughter's several dowers" (1.1.46). A paradox is not difficult to identify in the allusion to Cordelia's love and self-determination, alongside references to Lear's publication of her dowry (material value) and his apparent command of the situation in which the princes will "be answered" (1.1.52). Although Cordelia does seem to have some choice – Lear acts as though she does – the underlying reality is heavily material and practical. The actual choice falls to which of the two suitors accepts her with her dowry, just as the actual choice of land portions, the division of Lear's kingdom, falls to Lear. He has, according to his own declaration, divided the kingdom up already (1.139-40). Before his daughters even deliver their performances, he admits, he also intended that Cordelia should receive the largest portion because he loves her the most (1.1.38-9). Act 1, Scene 1 thus reveals various issues of gender, power, and autonomy. In a position of authority, maintaining the dual role of king and father, Lear proposes to force his autonomy beyond natural bounds. As Alexander Leggatt argues, Lear actually seeks to impose a fantasy of his daughter upon his actual daughter. In the opening scene, even, Cordelia "is not real" (Leggatt 145) to her father. Instead, he has asserted his inflated conception of his authority – as her father and king – to construct "a version of her in his mind" (145). He develops a fantasy that she "loves him totally" (146) and even to the extent that a potentially incestuous undertone

emerges. Indeed, Leggatt identifies such undertones in two separate instances: first, when Lear refers to “hot-blooded France” (KL 2.2.401), declaring something of a sexual jealousy; and second, when, in madness, he declares that he “will die bravely, like a smug bridegroom” (4.6.194).

5 Throughout the play, and most obviously in his madness, Lear has an indistinct notion of his own autonomy and he speaks with many contradictions, of awarding the loyalty of his son-in-laws and rewarding the love of his daughters. Lear speaks of his daughters demonstrating their love to earn a larger portion of his kingdom but he also declares that he is simply publishing Cordelia’s dowry and handing over the dowry of his other daughters, part of their inheritance that he long ago apportioned. Harry Jaffa and Alexander Leggatt imply that Lear may well have already divided his kingdom among his daughters, the love test being a simple performance. Lear also suggests that Cordelia will choose a husband. As Lear misjudges Cordelia’s value, the Kings of France and Burgundy must each reckon Cordelia’s value as a prospective spouse and Cordelia herself must act on an understanding of value. The reckoning of France and Burgundy resolves the second love test of the play in Act 1, Scene 1, and the validity, the truth of Cordelia’s reckoning, as well. As France insists, the play clearly demonstrates that “Love’s not love/ When it is mingled with regards that stand/ Aloof from th’ entire point” (1.1.275-277). Cordelia, of course, is also “herself a dowry” (1.1.278). The King of France also appeals to Cordelia as “most rich being poor” (1.1.290), “most loved” (1.1.291), and the situation being “lawful” (1.1.293). The lawfulness of the marriage between France and Cordelia proves lawful, too, as Cordelia returns to restore order to England and likewise restores a kind of order to her father. When she meets with Kent in Act 4, Scene 7, Cordelia is swift to provide commands to store her father, identifying elements as they should be seen, too; the “weeds…memories of those worser hours” (4.7.8). She also appeals to proper order, beseeching that the “kind gods/ Cure this great breach in his abused nature” (4.7.16-17). Although indirectly, her appeal to nature – quite different from Edmund’s – is clearly to the right or natural order of things, the, dominant theories of social order in Shakespeare’s day, it is nonetheless ironic within a play that sees such an inversion of the proper order (Calderwood 8). Still, at the beginning of the play, Lear demonstrates an unconscious adherence to the natural order. As Jaffa suggested in his study of Act 1, Scene 1, Lear has fulfilled his role as king and brought England to an unparalleled peak of political significance and stability. Allowing that “Shakespeare regarded monarchy as the best form of government” (Jaffa 405), Jaffa insists that the unification and pacification of England is the “supreme object of monarchical policy in the English histories” (405). Although Henry V

represents the only king actually to have come close, Jaffa argues that Lear has at least established himself as "head of a united Britain" (405). Such is the prominence of Lear's England that even the historic rival nations of France and Burgundy, representing "the world" (405), appear as suitors for Lear's youngest daughter – and not even his eldest daughter, who, by rights, according to primogeniture, is heir to his kingdom. As Jaffa expresses it, "[n]ever in the histories does Shakespeare present his native land at such a peak of prestige and political excellence" (405), the potential of Cordelia's marriage certainly playing a party in affirming that portrait. The love test, then, as Jaffa also argues, refuting the likes of Coleridge and A.C. Bradley, is also part of the portrait and part of the pretense. While both Coleridge and Bradley argue that the first scene, Act 1, Scene 1 of *Lear*, is little more than "an absurd fairy tale" (407), Jaffa outlines the extent to which the division of the kingdom is actually pretense and "part of a larger system of pretenses within the scene" (407). Cordelia appears to have the choice of husband, of who she marries, but the decision ultimately does not fall to her. It is another pretense, perhaps part of the same pretense as the love test, but Lear is still the one who makes the choice and material interests dictate the decision. Lear will choose for her and such is Lear's expectation for the love test, he has likely already decided how to divide his kingdom, affording Cordelia and her husband the largest portion. Indeed, as Mary Beth Rose observes in her study on gender representation in the English Renaissance, a married woman, in fact, had limited "agency and identity" (293). For instance, women could not bring legal suit and they only "kept nominal possession of any land she owned, her husband [retaining] the rights over and profits from it" (293). This, too, has bearing on the division of Lear's kingdom and is a problem of Act 1, Scene 1, too. Lear first speaks of awarding his daughters' dowries, transferring them to their husbands, his son-in-laws. Only after declaring this intention, does he introduce the love test and speak about rewarding his daughters, letting them win their portion, through their expression of love.

6 When Cordelia confounds her father's desire for flattery in Act 1, Scene 1, though, she expresses her love "according to my bond" (1.1.102) and introduces the problem of natural and real relationships and responsibilities to Lear's world of pretense. Her response to Lear's test, the momentous "nothing" (1.1.96), affirms the legitimacy of natural law and primogeniture. It stresses a duty to her future husband and her duty to her father. Yet, the statement also grounds the political situation and ends the pretense of Lear's love test. Cordelia forces a second test of love that reinforces her position on marital bonds and leads to the exposure of Lear's pretense even further, exposing his pretense about marriage even in terms of the material elements. Rather than having a marriage negotiated based on her

material “price” (1.1.225), the value of her dowry, Cordelia wins a husband who recognizes her as something more than Lear’s “best/ object” (1.1.246-7), valued, as her sisters are, by Lear’s false measure. She earns a husband who reckons her value beyond the material (“She is herself a dowry” (1.1.278)). Her other suitor, of course, reveals that he valued only her “fortunes” (1.1.288). Much as Lear falsely measures love, Burgundy pursues a prospective bride based only on her perceived material value. Cordelia’s judgment on this, too, is that materialism and egotism should have no place in serious courtship and certainly no such bearing on a marital bond as Burgundy allows (“Since that respect and fortunes are his love,/ I shall not be his wife” (1.1.288-9)). As Jaffa outlines in his study, too, though, “it is striking that, although Goneril and Regan have been married for some time, they have not yet received dowries” (411). Although Jaffa argues that perhaps the kingdom division is intended to “gain the support of the major powers in the kingdom” (411), he establishes that Cornwall and Albany “represent the geographical extremities of Britain” (411). What Lear divides the kingdom between Goneril and Regan, too, the Fool observes that “Thou hast pared thy wit o’ both sides, and left nothing i’ the middle” (1.4.207). Each of the relationships – and especially marital relationships – derived from materialistic and egotistical desires contribute to the chaos and the breakdown of social order in *King Lear*. Cordelia’s marriage to the King of France is the principle depiction of a positive marital relationship, but in contrast to this, too, the marriages of Goneril and Regan, and even Gloucester’s marriage and his extramarital relationship, represent the negatives of marriage. Indeed, although the representation of these marriages is largely secondary within the play as a whole, key scenes reveal that both Goneril and Regan strive to manipulate their husbands, as Edmund manipulates his father and brother. In Act 3, Scene 7, Cornwall gives instructions to Goneril to “Post speedily to my lord, your husband. Show him this letter,” which Goneril does. Although Cornwall is a dominant and malicious figure within the play, as well, he is as much a cuckold as his brother-in-law.

7 Goneril and the Duke of Albany prove very much at odds. In response to Goneril’s bid to manipulate him, to incite him to take action against “the army that was landed” (4.2.5), Albany reportedly “smiled” (4.2.6) and essentially revealed knowledge of his wife’s treachery. He identifies his wife’s coming as “The worse” (4.2.7) and calls Oswald, his wife’s representative “sot” (4.2.10), having “turned the wrong side out” (4.2.11). Shakespeare thus begins the final pronouncement on Goneril’s marriage and brings about the dissolution of her marriage. In response to these revelations and accusations, Goneril proceeds to disparage her husband openly, as if to declare her own preference for Edmund and demonstrate her

treachery the more clearly. She describes a “cowish terror of [her husband’s] spirit” (4.2.15) and contends that her husband is guilty of inaction, he “dares not undertake” (4.2.16). Although this is not a fair accusation, Goneril takes sides against her husband in this moment, demonstrating her disloyalty in decisive action. As if to demonstrate the kind of action she expects of her husband but does not see, she acts to protect Edmund. “Then shall you go no further” (4.2.14), she says to him, to further affirm her disloyalty in the action, actively defying her husband and supporting Edmund with a single step. Were Goneril loyal to her husband, too, or at all deferential to his authority, she would do nothing to support Edmund so openly, in the company of servants and even in the face of her husband showing some awareness for her preference. The social elements of the scene bear consideration, as well. This is, after all, no private dialogue between husband and wife. There is no parallel in this exchange to, say, the interactions between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, when the latter accuses her husband of unmanliness and incites him to take action. The open defiance and the defiance, even more particularly, in front of low-order servants is such that strikes a harsher blow. The openness of the defiance and the social aspect determine that Goneril’s is an act of direct disobedience towards her husband in violation of the bonds of marriage. Indeed, Goneril proceeds to defy her husband with outright deception. In speaking of her husband’s “cowish terror” (4.2.15) she proceeds to suggest that “He’ll not feel wrongs/ Which tie him to an answer” (4.2.16-17). She suggests as much that he equivocates as that he disagrees with the course of action and suggests that she may yet persuade him (“Our wishes on the way/ May prove effects” (4.2.17-18)) even as she sends Edmund away, “[b]ack…to my brother” to “[h]asten his musters and conduct his powers” (4.2.19). She also speaks again to the act of deception she will undertake, providing a show of loyalty to her husband, a performance, as much as she previously did with her father. “I must change names at home,” she declares, “and give the distaff/ Into my husband’s hands” (4.2.19-20), the use of the word “distaff” (4.2.20) even somewhat echoing the ceremony attached to the love scene where she undertook a similar “change” of name and show of loyalty. While Shakespeare does not provide much guidance as to what those bonds are, as he conceives them for the play’s context, Cordelia clearly refers to the need to obey her father and then parallels her duties as a daughter with her duties as a wife. The consequences for this breach of loyalty are also tremendous. Goneril moves from defiance of her husband to an apparently adulterous relationship with Edmund. At least, the sense of a lustful attachment is apparent.

8 The Duke of Cornwall, by contrast, tends to side with his wife, determining to pursue sustained action against Lear and later Cordelia and the King of France. The relationship

between Cornwall and Regan is no less destructive and unnatural, however, in terms of what it achieves. Indeed, Cornwall's death is as much a result of the destructive force of his marriage. It occurs, of course, as he is "going to put out/ The other eye of Gloucester" (4.2.86-7). His involvement with Goneril and Regan, with their treachery and their unnatural activities, is that much more direct. Gloucester intervenes in various scenes and speaks alongside his wife, to her intent. In Act 2, Scene 2, for instance, Gloucester intervenes in the dispute between Lear and Regan concerning Kent and the behavior of Regan's servant. He undertakes to restore order: "Keep peace, upon your lives!" (2.2.49), with a tremendous immediacy. His language is decidedly violent. "He dies that strikes again" (2.2.50), he declares, before he asks, "What is the matter?" (2.2.50). In a sense, he demonstrates a readiness to act without waiting to consider the particulars of the circumstances. He commands, of course, that the men "[s]peak" (2.2.52) but Oswald is notably "scarce in breath" (2.2.53) and Cornwell's attitude is such that he identifies and potentially insults Kent as "a strange fellow" and a "tailor" (2.2.57). He also clearly responds to Kent's apparently uncouth nature and his loyalty towards Lear. "You beastly knave, know you no reference?" (2.2.71), showing his emphasis on status again. Of Kent, Cornwall accuses that he is "some fellow/ Who, having been praised for bluntness, doth affect / A saucy roughness and constrains the garb / Quite from his nature" (2.2.100-103). He proceeds to order his punishment in spite of Lear's protests and the telling feature of the exchange and Cornwall's manner is that he adopts the kind of regal and entitled tone of his wife and sister-in-law. He rises to meet their enjoyment of power, which, in itself, is beyond the natural order, beyond what is reasonable and measured according to social expectations for women. So too is the treatment of Kent by Cornwall, with inevitably parallels Regan and Goneril's treatment of Lear and Gloucester. Cornwall orders that Kent be put into the stocks and repeats the accusation that he is a "stubborn ancient knave" (2.2.136). Even as Kent protests his age, that he is "too old to learn" (2.2.138) and serves the King (2.2.139), Cornwall shows that he shares in his wife's ruthlessness. Without acknowledging Kent's plea and warning that it is "too bold malice" (2.2.141-2), Cornwall does not relent but orders "he sit till noon" (2.2.146). Regan, of course, then shows her loyalty and unity with her husband. "Til noon?" (2.2.147) she queries, adding that Kent shall sit in the stocks "Till night…and all night, too" (2.2.147), calling Kent, also, her father's "knave" (2.2.150). The same lack of mercy, of compassion, brings about Cornwall's death when he and Regan together goad each other in the blinding of Gloucester, too. Their lack of compassion is what they have in common and is a demonstration that causes, in effect, much of the disruption of the play. Even Lear's madness

traces to Cornwall and Regan more directly than to Goneril and her husband, whose rejection is less decisive. Lear, after all, sees the rejection of his authority and sees proof of his daughter's deception when he observes Kent in the stocks. The Fool comments that Kent "wears cruel garters" (2.4.10) and has received treatment better suited to animals ("Horses are tied/ by the heads, dogs and bears by th' neck, monkeys by th' loins, and men by th' legs" (2.4.10-12)). Kent then provides the quite decisive evidence that Cornwall and Regan have demonstrated unnatural tendencies. "It is both he and she," (2.4.17) Kent insists, and it is the "son and daughter" (2.4.18), both genders, "Jupiter" (2.4.23) and "Juno" (2.4.24). The stress is very much upon both genders having violated the natural order within those bonds of marriage. Jupiter and Juno are respectively the male and female ruling deities and thus the stress is upon both genders and higher authority, but also a false, fictional authority, because Shakespeare is aware of Christianity, though his characters are not. The order violated is also the same that, in its true form, dictates Lear to be the true king and Cordelia to be his true daughter, even as, technically, per the laws of primogeniture, Goneril and her husband should inherit Lear's lands (McNeir 188-9). The same natural order determines Lear's abdication (and the division of his kingdom) to be a violation of natural law (Dillon 105); he severity of Macbeth's crime as he murders Duncan – his kinsman and his king. Cornwall and Regan, though, in this broader context of *King Lear*, represent the ultimate unnatural couple. Their relationship, their partnership, brings only destruction – both of their deaths, Cornelia's death, and Gloucester's decline as well. Perhaps ironically, as a couple, they undertake to destroy the paternal generation – Kent, Lear, and Gloucester – rather than undertaking to produce any heirs promote stability and peace. Lear, of course, does not moderate his reckoning of the incident's importance, but it is clear enough that Shakespeare embeds irony into the declaration that "Tis worse than/ murder/ To do upon respect such violent outrage" (2.4.26-28). Telling, too, is Kent's retelling of the interaction between Cornwall and Regan in response to Goneril's letter. Reportedly, "they read" (2.4.39), "[t]hey summoned up their meiny…and attend/ The leisure of their answer, gave me cold looks" (2.4.40-43).

9 Cornwall's murder and the story of his decline, depend on further interaction between himself and Regan as a couple, again stressing the centrality of marriage. As in Act 1, Scene 1, the balance emerges between paternal bonds and marital bonds as the stress reverts to Goneril and Regan, and their behavior towards Lear. It is, however, in the presence of Cornwall and Regan, not Regan and Goneril that Lear demands to know "what reason" (2.4.144) he has to think that Regan is glad to see him, what proof there is, after all, of her affection. Interestingly, before Cornwall and Regan, too, Lear declares his own confused

sense of paternal and marital vows. He declares that “I would divorce me from thy mother’s tomb/ Sepulch’ring an adult’ress” (2.4.146) as he challenges her “Sharp-toothed unkindness” (2.4.147) towards him. Lear, himself, equates paternal bonds to marital bonds; Regan’s betrayal of her father is a betrayal of her husband, in a sense, or at least to the point that Lear imagines that his own marital bond must somehow become invalidated. The further parallel in this reckoning, of course, is to Gloucester and adulterous relationship as well as his marriage, his earlier sense that his legitimate son had betrayed him and his conclusion that somehow a child born out of wedlock had no inherent lesser value than a child born within it. In the presence of her husband, again, though, Regan speaks about her father’s age and its significance. Marital and paternal bonds, in this, are again set on somewhat equal terms, essentially argued to be equal in the sense that Cordelia earlier suggested in Act 1, Scene 1. Alongside her husband and likewise with his presumed blessing, Regan, though, insists that “Nature in you stands on the very verge/ Of his confines” (2.4.165-66). It is the presence of Cornwall, too, and finally with his support, that Regan challenges Lear’s even more fundamental sense of natural order, declaring that he “should be ruled and led/ By some discretion that discerns your state/ Better than you yourself” (2.4.166-68), going so far as to ask that Lear “[s]ay you have wronged her” (2.4.170). She requests what Lear and potentially Shakespeare, too, consider a clear violation of the natural order or at least an affirmation of the unnatural state that Lear has brought about by abdicating his throne, renouncing his responsibilities as a king and thus, inadvertently, giving way to his authority and responsibilities as a parent. Cornwall’s confirmation of this, too, is that he acknowledges, “Fie, sir, fie” (2.4.185) and arguably adopts a position in relation to Regan that is comparable to Goneril’s. Indeed, Regan seems ready to outdo her husband in cruelty, as she did when Cornwall placed Kent in the stocks and she insisted that he should stay in them overnight, challenging her husband in the process. The extent to which gender roles emerge as problematic in this is perhaps not so readily explorable. It is difficult to determine the parameters of the relationships between Goneril and Regan and their husbands based on gender alone. On the one hand, the parameters seem sometimes consistent with the representation of gender within *The Taming of the Shrew*; implying that female subservience is preferable to a woman who bates and challenges her husband as Regan does; or, indeed, as Goneril defies her husband. Neither Goneril nor Regan are sympathetic characters and Regan’s involvement in Gloucester’s blinding would no doubt have triggered immense shock among a Shakespearean audience. Cornwall, however, seems to actively claim his wife and defer to her on occasion. He clearly claims her even as she demonstrates decided cruelty:

"'Tis best to give [Lear] way. He leads himself" (2.4.341), he declares, ordering that Gloucester "[s]hut up your doors" (2.4.352). He responds to affirm his wife's orders with these declarations and he then insists that "My Regan counsels well" (2.4.353), affirming that they are of like minds but also stressing their relationship, his ownership of her and apparent approval. A comparison emerges to the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in this, the latter having to literally relinquish her female state to commit acts of violence and cruelty herself. As Catherine Belsey argues, Lady Macbeth seeks to deny her gender constitutes, urging "evil spirits to 'unsex' her" (134). Yet, this urging, a perversion of "the meaning of manhood as a way of taunting her husband with cowardice" (134), is indicative of the lack of partnership. Regan experiences no such direct struggle with her gender, even as she goads her husband to remove Gloucester's eyes. Goneril receives a curse by her father that essentially deprives her of gender status but rather to this effect. She, like Lady Macbeth, does speak disparaging about her husband and then seeks to replace him with Edmund, obvious allusions to adultery embedded in this violation of her marital bonds. The cruelty of both sisters, though, is still perhaps predominantly feminine in that it depends upon the neglect of their father and the goading of their husbands and Edmund to further acts of violence as the play progresses.

10 The parallel of paternal and marital bonds, of course, includes the further parallel of Lear and Gloucester's situation – the situation with their children, legitimate and illegitimate. Lear's expectation is that his daughters should be "tender-hefted" (2.4.193) and that they should "comfort" (2.4.196) and not "grudge my pleasures, to cut of my train" but rather, as "bond of childhood" (2.4.201), show the "effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude" (2.4.202). Gloucester's expectation is likewise that his sons should be loyal and that his legitimate son should be the more loyal and honorable, the more valuable to him, because of his legitimacy. Like Lear, Gloucester calls out in the storm to Edgar, not realizing that he speaks to his son. He declares that he is "almost mad myself" (3.4.176) because he had a son "Now outlawed from by blood" (3.4.177) but Gloucester mistakes his sons, identifying the one as loyal when, in fact, he is not. With this, it is notable, too, that Cornwall, as Lear's son-in-law, takes an increasingly active part in the humiliation of Lear as Goneril and Regan reject him. His blinding of Cornwall, in fact, parallels his part in casting Lear out into a storm, affirming the blindness of his father-in-law as he affirms Gloucester's literal blindness. Similarly, Regan's part in killing the servant who challenges Cornwall is also a parallel and a clear presentment of their relationship again, their partnership and its destructive capacity. It is through Regan's actions that Cornwall is able to entirely blind Gloucester, learning the truth about Edmund as

he does calling for him: “Thou call’st on him that hatest thee” (3.7.108). Again, it takes Cordelia to reestablish the proper perspective on things and demonstrate not only how children should be to their fathers but how husband and wife should consider themselves bound to each other. In effect, she returns to England, at least in part, to claim an inheritance for herself and her husband; an inheritance that was hers due to her sisters’ treachery and that she presumably recognized from the first. In consoling her father, too, she restores parameters for kindness and respect, charging, though, that her sisters’ acts, as Kent also declared, extended beyond the bounds of what might have served as treatment for animals (“Mine enemy’s dog,/ Though he had bit me, should have stood that night/ Against my fire” (4.7.42-44)). Illegitimacy extends to marriage, though, too, and the treatment of husbands, in the scene immediately following this process of restoration. Edmund and Regan meet and Regan challenges Edmund as to his feelings for her and whether he does “not love my sister?” (5.1.10). Strikingly, too, Regan charges that he “Tell me but truly, but then speak the truth” (5.1.9), echoing her father in Act 1, Scene 1 again when she declares that “You know the goodness I intend upon you” (5.1.8). When he offers an answer, Regan also persists as her father did. Edmund declares that he loves Goneril in “honored love” (5.1.11) and then proposes that “That thought abuses you” (5.1.14) when she proposes a potentially illegitimate and unnatural bond, defying marital vows, between Edmund and Goneril. As such thoughts of illegitimacy in relation to bonds happened to abuse both Lear and Gloucester, so too, as Cordelia returns to England from France to restore order in Act 4, similar thoughts abuse Goneril and Regan both, bringing about their deaths. Edmund, too, demonstrates his illegitimacy and the unnatural nature of his own bonds with Goneril and Regan in having “sworn my love” to both sisters and ensured that “[e]ach jealous of the other as the stung/ Are of the adder” (5.1.64-65). That he yet cannot enjoy either one “If both remain alive” (5.1.67) again offers confirmation of the role that illegitimate relationships play between men and women. Such relationships are destructive, unsustainable – their role, if any, is to destroy, perhaps even to self-destruct, to lead to the destruction of their unnatural effects. Goneril and Regan act against each other – breaking their alliance and ultimately killing each other – because of their illegitimate desire for Edmund. Considering their fate, too, with respect to their marital bonds and how they behave in recognition of them, it is clear that Cordelia’s declaration in Act 1, Scene 1 must have particular bearing again. She declares, as much exposing the falsity of her sisters’ marriages as their declared love for Lear, “I shall never marry like my sisters to love my father all” (1.1.114), suspecting, perhaps, that her sisters neither novel their father nor their husbands to any manifest degree. Their distinct lack of

loyalty, plays to this idea. Cordelia, on the other hand, demonstrates that careful division of love when she returns. As Richard C. McCoy notes, even when she comes to his rescue, in an act of loyalty and kindness, their relationship is “fraught” (50), maintaining a certain formality, even has he finally recognizes her, “my child, Cordelia” (4.7.49) and himself as a “very foolish, fond old man” (4.7.60). Yet, Edmund’s role in this is also to finally undo all hope of reconciliation between Lear and his legitimate, loving daughter. As the product of an illegitimate relationship himself, his is a “thoroughgoing malevolence” (McNeir 188). He aligns with “Nature” but also seeks to undo all that is natural, subverting everything from legitimate relationships, as mentioned, including his brother’s to his father, but also, as McNeir argues in his study of Edmund, “the hierarchical laws of primogeniture and legitimacy” (188-189). Such laws are central to *King Lear*, too, as the legal or practical basis for Cordelia's response to her father (nothing should persuade him to give her a larger portion of his kingdom than he gives to her sisters). The law of primogeniture determines that Lear’s kingdom should pass in tact to the eldest of his children to promote the stability of the political and social orders as well, as the play’s tragedy suggests, as personal and familial stability, too.

11 With the parallels of paternal bonds with marital bonds so prevalence throughout *King Lear*, and with marriage, too, a dominant concept and problem within the drama, it emerges, finally, that marriage and the responsibilities of husband and wife are central to the play. Illegitimate marital relationships cause a degree of destruction at least comparable to that caused by the paternal bonds proved illegitimate. With Edmund as the ultimate form of illegitimacy – the product of adultery and the inciter of adultery, too – Shakespeare affirms, in part, what Lear declared about “the act of generation” (West 56). In Act 4, Scene 6, Lear declares against procreation and legitimate sexuality in favor of lechery because “Gloucester’s bastard son/ Was kinder to his father than my daughters/ Got ‘tween the lawful sheets” (4.6.116-118). Yet, because Lear’s judgment on this proves false, Shakespeare shows the bonds of marriage in fact, represent the only legitimate context for sexual desire. More than this, they are a guard against a force destructive to social order, represented by Edmund and even reinforced by Goneril and Regan, who demonstrate illegitimacy in their false declaration of their love for their father and their adultery with Edmund. Although Robert H. West elaborates on the relationship between sex and pessimism in King Lear, arguing how Edgar, Gloucester, Lear, and the Fool variously refer to sexuality in negative terms (Gloucester finally recognizing that his lechery in “a dark and vicious place” (5.3.206) lead to his blinding), he falls short of demonstrating how adultery is the underlying cause of the

destruction of the play's social order. Clearly, the indulgence of desires, especially sexual desires, beyond marital bonds, causes a particular darkness to emerge. There is evidence enough, in fact, for what Robert West calls "the sex horror" (57) of the play because Gloucester's adultery and later Goneril's and Regan's (even their false love declarations for their father, adulterous to their husbands) cause chaos and death. A contrast emerges, too, with Cordelia's own conception of spousal love and responsibility; this supporting the restoration of order at the play's conclusion, although it cannot also prevent her death. Her death stands as a final act of illegitimate and unnatural cruelty in a world dominated by such things, in which law is subverted on that principle and personal level. As the character with a double bond of legitimacy, too, her death also provides the final measure of a true marriage in an unnatural and chaotic context: it will not only restore peace but will achieve divine dimensions, with Cordelia's Christ-like death demonstrating the true depth of love's legitimate bonds.

Works Cited

Belsey, Catherine. "Gender and Family." *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespearean Tragedy*. Ed. Claire McEachern. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 123-141. Print.

Caldrewood, James L. "Creative Uncreation In King Lear." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 37.1 (1986): 5-19. JSTOR. Web. 28 Aug 2014.

Cooley, Ronald W. "Kent and Primogeniture in King Lear." *SEL: Studies in English Literature* (Johns Hopkins) 2008: 327–348. Web. 7 June. 2014.

Dillon, Janette. "King Lear." *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Tragedies.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 103-113. Print.

Jaffa, Harry V. "The Limits of Politics: An Interpretation of King Lear, Act 1, Scene 1." *The American Political Science Review,* 51 (1957): 405-427. Web. 3 Aug 2014.

Leggatt, Alexander. "King Lear: We have no such daughter." *Shakespeare's Tragedies: Violation and Identity.* New York: Cambridge University Press. 2005. 145-176. Print.

McNeir, Waldo F. "The Role of Edmund." *Studies in English Literature,* 1500-1900. 8.2. (1968): 187-216. JSTOR. Web. 25 Aug 2014.

McCoy, Richard C. "Look upon me, Sir": Relationships in King Lear." *Representations.* 81.1 (2003): 46-60. JSTOR. Web. 25 Aug 2014.

Rose, Mary Beth. “Where are the Mothers in Shakespeare? Options for Gender Representation in the English Renaissance.” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 42.3 (1991): 291-314. JSTOR. Web. 25 Aug 2014.

Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. Ed. G. Blakemore Evans. The Riverside Shakespeare. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1974. 1249-1305. Print.

West, Robert H. “Sex and Pessimism in King Lear.” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 11.1 (1960): 55-60. JSTOR. Web. 25 Aug 2014.