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# Reclaiming Independence: Comparing the Daughters in King Lear and A Thousand Acres

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### Reclaiming Independence:

#### Comparing the Daughters in *King Lear* and *A Thousand Acres*

In his book, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, Douglas Lanier analyzes how authors adapt Shakespeare to the current era and provides some methods that authors use to do so. Jane Smiley adopts two of these methods of reoriented and interpolated narrative in her novel, *A Thousand Acres*, to shift William Shakespeare's patriarchal play, *King Lear*, into a feminist text through the perspective and actions of the three daughters, Ginny, Rose, and Caroline. Lanier explains that a reoriented narrative is one "in which the narrative is told from a different point of view" (83). *A Thousand Acres* shifts from the point of view centralized around *King Lear* to the eldest daughter in the novel, Ginny. An interpolated narrative is one "in which new plot material is dovetailed with the plot of the source" (Lanier 83), meaning that some plot points are added, subtracted, and/or altered from the original text. Smiley uses this method to create a more sympathetic link between the daughters and the reader by granting each daughter a level of redemption in their own lives and independence from their father.

Shakespeare's great tragedy, *King Lear*, is the story of Lear's fall from power after dividing his kingdom and subsequently being betrayed by his three daughters, Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia. Each of his children die because of their betrayal and Lear is recognized at the conclusion of the play as a hero and rightful king. The play is written mainly from the

perspective of Lear himself and follows his actions. The treatment Lear expresses to his daughters, as well as how they are portrayed throughout the text, point it in the direction of a patriarchal text.

Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* reimagines the story of *King Lear* on a large American farm in the late nineteenth century. The novel alters the plot to be more of a story about the three daughters and their eagerness to escape the influence of their father and the farm. Though many of the plot points from the play remain unchanged, Smiley writes her novel so that only Rose dies by the end of the text rather than all three of the daughters.

In Janet Adelman's chapter, "Suffocating Mothers in *King Lear*," from her book, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to The Tempest*, she claims that "much of the play's power comes [...] from its confrontation with the landscape of maternal deprivation" (104). Adelman analyzes all of the male characters in the play, but specifically analyzes Lear's relationships with his three daughters in the majority of the chapter, how they attempt to challenge and criticize his masculinity through their betrayals, and how Lear rejects femininity in favor of his own patriarchal mindset by resisting the help of his youngest daughter, Cordelia, until it is too late.

Juliet Dusinberre's chapter, "Women as Property," in her book, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, mainly discusses Cordelia's relationship with Lear and the opposing relationship with her husband, France. Dusinberre also mentions that Lear "finds that he himself is nothing to Goneril and Regan without the property of a king" (125) and that he "casts away those duties which bind legitimate children to their parents" (134) by the time of his death in the play meaning that he disowns both Goneril and Regan after giving them his kingdom and

rejecting him at their castles. By analyzing *King Lear* in these ways, both Adelman and Dusinberre read the play through a feminist lens and recognize the text as being patriarchal.

*King Lear* begins with Lear asking how much his daughters love him before granting his land and kingdom to them. His eldest daughter, Goneril, is the first to speak of her love for her father to determine her share, stating:

Sir, I love you more than word can wield the matter,  
 Dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty,  
 Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare,  
 No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honor;  
 As much as child e'er loved, or father found;  
 A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable.

Beyond all manner of so much I love you. (Shakespeare 1.1.60-67)

She claims an inability to speak of how much she loves Lear, but still finds plenty of words to exaggerate what the audience discovers to be a false claim of her love later on in the play. Her first speech sets the tone for being a malicious and unappreciative daughter; it “points the irony of Lear’s endowing of the daughters who bought his endowments with flattery, and loved him not for what he was, but for what he could give” (Dusinberre 125). By the end of Lear’s next encounter with Goneril at her palace, he labels her as “a disease that’s in [his] flesh” (Shakespeare 2.4.255) and describes her as “a boil, / A plague-sore or embossed carbuncle / In [his] own corrupted blood” (Shakespeare 2.4.256-58). Labeling her as such, she becomes “the sign of the specifically venereal disease that registers [Lear’s] own participation in the sexual fault” (Adelman 109). This means that Lear sees Goneril’s betrayal and wickedness as a result of

his endowment to her. Goneril personifies these diseased labels of Syphilis and Gonorrhea given to her by her father when she and Regan plot against Gloucester and suggests to “Pluck out his eyes” (Shakespeare 3.7.6) which solidifies Lear’s accusation. Goneril’s death completes her wicked plot line as she commits suicide not by her own agency, but by the agency of Gloucester’s bastard son, Edmund. Shakespeare uses Edmund to punish Goneril’s wicked nature because “the Elizabethans saw the bastard as an instrument of retribution for adultery not only in his birth, but in his nature” (Dusinberre 133).

Regan mimics Goneril in almost every aspect and characteristic. She begins the play by exaggerating her love for Lear to receive a piece of his endowment. She claims that she is “made of that self mettle as [her] sister / And prize [her] at [Goneril’s] worth,” but that Goneril “comes too short” (Shakespeare 1.1.76-77, 79) in her love for their father. When Lear suggests going to Regan’s castle after being shunned by Goneril, his Fool tells him that “thy other daughter will use thee kind- / ly, for, though she’s as like this as a crab’s like an / apple, yet I can tell what I can tell” (Shakespeare 1.5.14-16). The Fool is warning Lear that Regan will welcome Lear in the same manner that Goneril had. The Fool was correct in assuming Regan’s nature as she sides with her sister’s decision rather than Lear’s when she says that “[Goneril has] restrained the riots of your followers, / ‘Tis on such ground and to such wholesome end / As clears her from all blame” (Shakespeare 2.4.160-162). Also like her sister, Regan gains a desire for Edmund which becomes her ultimate end. Before killing herself, Goneril poisons Regan out of jealousy and rage for their mutual desire. Though Adelman never discusses Regan individually, she does mention that:

The play simultaneously illuminates [Goneril and Regan's] genesis in Lear's need and embraces Lear's vision of them, making them monstrous as he himself could have wished: as it progresses, they are increasingly identified as the source of evil; finally removed wholly from the realm of human sympathy—as Edmund never is—they die as monsters, consumed by their own excess. (115)

Adelman's claim is supported because both Goneril and Regan treat Lear poorly after he gives away his kingdom to them; it makes them 'monstrous' as he loses his power over them and they no longer need him. They are never redeemed from that evil state and end up killing one another over the hunger for more power.

Unlike her sisters, Cordelia is demonized by Lear in the beginning of the play when she does not exaggerate her love for Lear, but simply says, "Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth. I love your Majesty / According to my bond, no more nor less" (Shakespeare 1.1.100-102). Lear refuses to give Cordelia any part of his endowment and thus "defies sacred charities not through physical adultery, but through disowning his legitimate daughter" (Dusinberre 134); by alienating Cordelia, he creates a bastard out of her because she refused to "mend [her] speech a little" (Shakespeare 1.1.103) to Lear's liking. Adelman sees Cordelia's loss of endowment as Lear's "retaliation for her abandonment of him and in order to gain control over her loss" (118). Cordelia is then absent for the majority of the play until the French invasion and becomes Lear's last hope for retaining control over any of his daughters. She sympathizes with him, seeing her sisters as the cause of his downfall, yelling for the Doctor to "Cure this great breach in his abused nature! / Th' untuned and jarring senses, O, wind up / Of this child-changed father!" (Shakespeare 4.7.17-19). By the end of the play, Cordelia is

redeemed in the eyes of her father, but she becomes demonized by the other characters and loses the war against her sisters. As she and Lear are taken to prison, she still wants to please her father, saying, “We are not the first / Who with the best meaning have incurred the worst. / For thee, oppressed king, I am cast down” (Shakespeare 5.3.4-6). Though France actually led the invasion and Lear sides with them, Cordelia receives the greatest punishment for it as Edmund informs Albany that “[a messenger] hath commission from thy wife and me / to hang Cordelia in the prison, and / To lay the blame upon her own despair” (Shakespeare 5.3.303-5). After all three daughters have perished, Albany attempts to give control of the kingdom back to Lear, saying, “we will resign, / During the life of this old Majesty, / To him our absolute power...” (Shakespeare 5.3.362-4). Even though Lear perishes soon after regaining his kingdom, he still succeeds in his mission to overcome the wickedness of his two eldest daughters and Cordelia’s “sacrifice of her separateness [from Lear] can allow for [his] fantasy to return” (Adelman 122), meaning that he is able to regain his throne right before his death and after the deaths of his three children. This solidifies *King Lear* as a patriarchal text.

Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres* alters the stories of Lear’s daughters; rather than having Goneril and Regan die as monsters and Cordelia die trying to please her father, all three daughters gain a level of independence from their father, Larry. Susan Ayres evaluates Smiley’s text in her article “Incest in *A Thousand Acres*: Cheap Trick or Feminist Re-Vision?” and claims that “Smiley provides a counter-narrative [to *King Lear*], a possible story of the silenced sisters” (147). She analyzes the relationship that each of the girls have with their father and how the incestual relations affect Ginny and Rose. Ayres also mentions that some critics see Smiley’s inclusion of an incestual relationship as a “cheap-trick,” but responds with textual evidence that

it is rather a “re-vision [that] appeases our sense of a solution to a feminist problem of patriarchal oppression” (154). The difference being that a ‘cheap-trick’ is used to be controversial, but a ‘re-vision’ is used to bring forward a topic of the feminist agenda.

Mary Paniccia Carden uses her article, “Remembering/Engendering the Heartland: Sexed Language, Embodied Space, and America's Foundational Fictions in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*,” to show how *A Thousand Acres* exposes gender construction and paternal ownership within American society. She goes into detail of the relationships each daughter has with their father as well as the society they are placed in, stating that “Smiley's vision of a daughter's place in the culture of paternal ownership is ‘almost Lacanian,’ [meaning that Smiley] does not close off possibilities for resistance, knowledge, [or] memory” (Carden 187) regardless of Larry’s treatment of his daughters. This is important to the women’s reclamation of their independence because it states that regardless of their poor relationship with Larry, they are able to overcome his patriarchal influence.

Sinead McDermott mainly focuses on Ginny in her article called “Memory, Nostalgia, and Gender in *A Thousand Acres*.” Though her article does not incorporate Rose or Caroline, it is important to note that “Ginny’s story thus foregrounds the sexual politics of memory and forgetting, suggesting that remembering can be a form of resistance to the erasure of women’s lives and of domestic histories of abuse within patriarchal discourse” (McDermott 394). This means that Ginny remembering her incestual relationship with her father actually assists her in becoming more independent from him as it helps her to reasonably want to resist his influence. These three articles help prove how each daughter gains a level of independence from their



father through their relationship with him, the relationships they have within society, and, in Ginny's case, how memories affect that independence.

Ginny, the eldest daughter, becomes the most independent from her father, Larry, by the end of the novel. The reader gets the most insight from her because she is the narrator of *A Thousand Acres*. They can live in her head space as opposed to Rose and Caroline who are only given dialogue and physical description. Her first mention of wanting to get away from the farm and her father comes with her interaction with Jess, the replacement for Edmund and the love interest of both Ginny and Rose, as she hears the word "freedom" (Smiley 108). She states that the word "always startled and refreshed [her, but she] didn't think of it as having to do with [her] life" (Smiley 109). Though this is just a passing thought, it foreshadows Ginny's later leaving of the farm to build her own life. Her next step is standing up to her father after he crashes his truck which she describes as "exhilarating, talking to [her] father as if he were [her] child" (Smiley 148). Ginny's newfound resistance to her father "means expressing and exercising defiance rather than hiding it; it means disrupting normalcy" (Carden 189). Ginny eventually recalls her father raping her and Rose early on in their lives, but had blocked it out of her mind for many years. She lapses a little when she recounts these memories and mentions that the "one thing Daddy took from [her ...] was the memory of [her] body" (Smiley 280). The incest plot eventually works as "an alternative narrative of violence stemming from the viewpoint of the silenced evil sisters" (Ayres 142), meaning that the incest plot works to justify Ginny's hatred for her father and her wanting to leave, whereas Goneril is never given a reason so she is left as an evil character throughout all of *King Lear*. In a similar way, McDermott presents that the "rejection of Larry in the aftermath of the farm's division is presented as an attempt to escape his

oppressive influence rather than as an act of motiveless evil” (393). Ginny finally achieves true independence when she abandons her husband Ty, the farm, and ultimately the presence, influence, and memory of her father. When Ty comes to see her at the diner where she gets a job, Ginny tells him:

“Do I think Daddy came up with beating and fucking us on his own? [...] No. I think he had lessons, and those lessons were part of the package, along with the land and the lust to run things exactly the way he wanted to no matter what, poisoning the water and destroying the topsoil and buying bigger and bigger machinery, and then feeling certain that all of it was ‘right,’ as you say.” (Smiley 343)

This shows that Ginny has a realization of why she was held back by her father for so long and how his actions were taught to him by the people around him. By escaping that, Ginny achieves total independence from Larry and the farm to create her own self sustaining life in the city.

Caroline begins the novel on the opposite side of the spectrum as her sisters; she lives away from the farm and has a well paying career as a lawyer in the city. She also does not inherit shares for the farm and, like Cordelia, is absent throughout most of the story until she reunites with her father. “When Caroline demurs, Daddy cuts her out, and the family is further divided as he feels he has lost the ‘respect’ that goes with ownership [of his daughter]” (Carden 188) which solidifies her independence at the start of the novel. Ginny “had such hope for [Caroline], such a strong sense that when [they] sent her out, in whatever capacity, [Caroline] would perform well, with enthusiasm and confidence that were mysteriously hers alone. If [they] kept her home, she would languish, do badly, seem like nothing special” (Smiley 243). Ginny had always wanted Caroline to become and remain independent, but as the novel

progresses and Larry re-enters Caroline's life, she becomes his property again until he dies.

When Ginny encounters Caroline and Larry while out shopping, she hears Caroline and mentions that her voice was "falsely enthusiastic, the way [Ginny's] had always been" (Smiley 271).

During the same scene, Larry misremembers Caroline wearing Rose's coat and "it rapidly becomes clear that Larry is amalgamating aspects of the childhoods of Ginny and Rose and attributing them to Caroline" (McDermott 401). This also means that Caroline has sacrificed her independent lifestyle for someone that does not even give her the credit for doing so. Even after Larry dies, she remains in his shadow of influence; when Ginny meets with her at the farm to distribute the personal property, Caroline tells Ginny, "I just won't listen to you! You never have any evidence [of Daddy mistreating you]! The evidence isn't there! You have a thing against Daddy. It's just greed or something" (Smiley 363). This outburst shows that Caroline is being held back from her old life of independence and that it will take a significant amount of time to undo the influence Larry has given her.

Rose receives the least amount of independence from her father by the end of the novel. She harbours the most hatred for her father, saying that "[she wants] him to die, and to go to hell and stay there forever, just roasting!" (Smiley 150). This hatred is what holds Rose back from gaining independence because she is more bent on revenge against Larry than anything else. Unlike Ginny, Rose never repressed the memories of being raped by their father and said, "I thought it was okay, that it must be okay if he said it was, since he was the rule maker. He didn't rape me, Ginny. He seduced me. He said it was okay, [...] that I was special. He said he loved me" (Smiley 190). By not repressing these memories and validating them with seduction over rape, Rose remains under the influence of Larry even though she uses it as fuel to seek revenge

against him. “The anger that Rose will not suppress to mollify father [...] fuels her insistence that Daddy’s ownership is ‘not innocent’” (Carden 197). Carden is stating that Rose recognizes that what her father did was wrong, but is never given redemption for it in her own mind. Rose admits that she attempted to gain independence from her father and that “all [she] wanted when [she] met Pete was someone exciting enough to erase Daddy. And [she] thought sure Pete would end up [...] somewhere Daddy wouldn’t even visit” (Smiley 298). Aside from Rose and her alcoholic and abusive husband, Pete, remaining on the farm, the issue is that Rose is relying on a second male influence to help her escape the first. She is “enmeshed and implicated in the economy generated by lust for ownership [of women]” (Carden 198). Rose is also the only of the three daughters to die and while she is on her deathbed she admits the failures of her life to Ginny, saying, “I have no accomplishments. [...] I was as much of a nothing as Mommy or Grandma Edith. I didn’t even get Daddy to know what he had done, or what it meant” (Smiley 355). With her confession, Rose is saying that she was never able to achieve independence from the male influence in her life, much like her mother and grandmother never did.

Lear’s three daughters are never taken out of the shadow of male influence. They all end up perishing from the desire to please one of the male characters; Goneril and Regan both die because of their love and desire for Edmund and Edmund has Cordelia executed for allying with her father. Jane Smiley reverses this idea. She grants Ginny complete independence at the end of the novel. Caroline, though still influenced by her father, also escapes the farm and lives a life on her own with a successful career. Rose attempts to free herself from her father, but is overcome by rage and the thought of revenge which causes her to die while still claiming ownership to the farm in the shadow of her father. By using methods defined by Douglas Lanier

as reoriented and interpolated narrative, Smiley is able to create *A Thousand Acres* as a feminist drive for an independent life for Larry's three daughters from the patriarchal influence originally experienced by Lear's children in Shakespeare's tragedy of *King Lear*.

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