

Royal Power  
and Authority  
in Shakespeare's  
Late Tragedies



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By

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements .....	vii
Chapter One.....	1
Power and Authority	
Chapter Two.....	10
<i>King Lear</i>	
Introduction.....	10
Three Heiresses.....	12
Divided Kingship.....	23
The Gift and the Bargain.....	52
Belongings and Exclusions.....	74
Conclusion.....	94
Chapter Three.....	97
<i>Macbeth</i>	
Introduction.....	97
Staging Stuart History.....	101
The Threat and the Reward.....	115
Kingship and Lineal Future.....	130
The Absence of Prudence.....	145
Social and Supernatural Rituals.....	170
Conclusion.....	203
Chapter Four.....	206
<i>Antony and Cleopatra</i>	
Introduction.....	206
From Rivalry to Rulership.....	209
Egyptian Queenship and Roman Power.....	230
Representing Authority.....	258
The Enduring Triumph.....	283
Conclusion.....	305

Chapter Five .....	307
Rulership in the Late Tragedies	
Bibliography .....	318
Index .....	339

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Alisa Manninen



## CHAPTER ONE

### POWER AND AUTHORITY

In the early years of the new Stuart king's reign, Shakespeare wrote three plays in which questions of royal rulership are vitally important. *King Lear* (ca. 1605-06), *Macbeth* (ca. 1605-06), and *Antony and Cleopatra* (ca. 1606-07) restore to prominence the political concerns of the English history plays of the 1590s, even as they follow the early tragedies' lead in making the individual central. The late tragedies are less rich in that they lack the portrayal of the wider, living societies whose everyday life is evoked in the history plays, but this lack is balanced by the increased complexity of individual development. The history plays are in many ways closer to the realities of England at the time they were written. They note the crowd's reactions to exercises of kingship and the consequent usefulness of a common touch to anyone who wishes to reinforce a claim through popular support. Indeed, even the plays set in the Roman republic stress this aspect of rulership – an aspect that Shakespeare sets aside in the late tragedies here under consideration. There is a marked development in these plays' approach to rule, which is conceived of as essentially a very intimate experience: those who are already powerful and in close contact with the monarch are the ones being persuaded to obey. On the whole, the individual subjects of the monarch matter more than the subjects as the populace of the realm. The tone of Shakespearean tragedy in general is more intimate than that of his history plays or Roman plays, and it accentuates interaction differently. When this intimate tone is combined with the prominence of the court, it results in plays where the necessities of political survival lead to intensely experienced crises.

The late tragedies emphasise the immediacy of power on the highest levels of society while the fuller structure of a monarchical society fades from view because of the playwright's reduction of the subjects' role. Another element that defines these three plays in particular and further warrants their grouping together is their interest in the separation of power and authority. For now, I wish to begin with a clear statement of what defines the two elements of rulership as I discuss them here. Power consists of the ability to enforce the royal will. The central means through

which it is expressed in the plays are control over law and judgement, the redistribution of titles and property, and the use of martial violence either personally or by the armed forces under the ruler's command. All these are based on material realities and lead to immediate, clearly observable consequences. Royal power is constructed out of the combination of these resources; they offer valuable protection against any challenges to the privileges of royalty.

Authority, on the other hand, is less easily definable: it can assume many forms and without clarification of my approach to it some crucial differences may be lost. In brief, authority refers to how rulers impose their will *without* force. Authority is not inherent to the ruler (though the ruler may seek to present it as such). It is marked by certain qualities and practices that are reinforced by the presence of power, but even in the absence of that power it may endure. By power, I refer to government by force; by authority, I refer to government by persuasion. While authority is commonly taken to refer to the ability to command and be obeyed, I must make the distinction between power and authority more visible. That is to say, I must consider authority separately from coercive authority-as-command.

When subjects believe in the monarch's innate authority, it produces a perceived right to allegiance that may prevail over the actual possession of material resources by a dangerously powerful subject. As numerous successful rebels demonstrate, material power can lead to victory over the ruling monarch if this concept of royal superiority is put to the test. Yet however the position of monarch was initially obtained, the successful endurance of rulership is bound to issues of authority. Authority may be exercised in ways ranging from the immediacy of personal charisma to the circulation of abstract discourses of justification, but at its heart is the process of obtaining the consent of the subjects to the illusion of superiority. The ruler is presented as inherently exceptional. The exercise of authority coaxes a response of respect from the subject, making it seem a matter of nature or divine law, not force, that the royal individual is set above the others. It works towards a conviction of legitimacy that persuades the powerful that their power is to be deployed only as the ruler wills it and that authority binds them to obey. Thus power is immediate while authority wins people over; one is able to dispense with consent while the other depends on it and in the process prepares against future need for the use of force.

The confrontation at the conclusion of *King Lear* can serve to point out some of the varied issues at work in these plays' conceptualisation of power and authority:

GONERIL: This is practice, Gloucester:  
 By th'law of war thou wast not bound to answer  
 An unknown opposite: thou art not vanquished,  
 But cozened and beguiled.  
 ALBANY: Shut your mouth, dame,  
 Or with this paper shall I stop it. . . .  
 Thou worse than any name, read thine own evil.  
*Shows her the letter*  
 No tearing, lady: I perceive you know it.  
 GONERIL: Say, if I do, the laws are mine, not thine:  
 Who can arraign me for't.  
 5.3.160-69<sup>1</sup>

Goneril evokes her legal authority by arguing that she possesses the power to ignore others in society because no law can punish her; this has echoes of authority-as-command. However, Albany reveals that she has lost her moral authority and her right to his allegiance as her husband and partner in rule. He will therefore use his power to depose her, which he can easily do since her co-conspirator Edmund, the new Duke of Gloucester, has lost his trial by combat and with it the viability of their allied claim to power and authority. Goneril's command, like that of Lear earlier in the play, is reduced to nothing: she lacks the power that would make her as invulnerable as her defiant statement regarding the laws suggests. Even so, her insistence on her legal authority and her following suicide, which prevents those laws from being used against her, uphold the image of her authority as an abstract, enduring quality not to be outdone by Albany's power. Many of *King Lear's* uses of power and authority are evoked in this short passage. The scene's contrast between reality and public claim also brings me to another issue regarding the nature of persuasion.

I must note that it is not necessary for consent by persuasion to be won openly and honestly. Two styles of persuasion may be roughly differentiated by reference to the speeches of Brutus and Antony following Caesar's murder in *Julius Caesar* (1599). Brutus reasons with the crowd by stating his love for Rome and regret over what Caesar's ambition forced him to; Antony says he means no insult to Brutus's honour and proceeds to make him seem the worst sort of ungrateful villain. Antony's eulogy incites the people to respond emotionally and controls the growth of their anger towards Caesar's murderers. Between the two, Brutus seeks to persuade the crowd while Antony persuades it without revealing he is

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<sup>1</sup> All lines from Shakespeare's plays are quoted from William Shakespeare, *Complete Works*, ed. Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2008). Names are spelled according to the RSC edition.

doing so;<sup>2</sup> the latter style is by far the more common in the late tragedies. In them, subjects consent by believing in and committing to the individual monarch or the principle of monarchy, rather than by responding to rational argumentation that would lay out the benefits of making a particular decision and acknowledge the subject's free will in deciding to follow or not follow the ruler. Though the possibility of personal profit exists in the hope or promise of rewards for service, it is expressed as royal bounty that rewards ability without abandoning hierarchical separateness and therefore obscures that persuasion is taking place. The skilled persuader acts as though the subject had no power to decide while convincing the subject that service is right and natural, even the divinely approved choice. The unskilled persuader believes the above and fails to present the view with gracious benevolence, thus leading the mistreated subject to consider the possibility of defiance. In all, the concept of persuasion must be understood to include practices of scheming and dissimulation that work towards the purpose of winning the subject's assent to the monarch's superior role in society without always stating their reasoning outright.

In the late tragedies, the division between the elements of power and authority is key to Shakespeare's presentation of government as either effective or flawed. Control over the resources of power must be maintained, but authority is also necessary as the less explicit means by which challenges to rulership can be deterred; furthermore, it determines responses to acts that threaten to usurp the ruler's material power. I examine how representations of issues such as greatness, heroic or sacred virtue, and heritable right all participate in strengthening a belief in the separateness of royalty that can raise it above the petty struggles for power undertaken by the lesser nobility. In brief, the illusion of permanence is vital: it suggests that power and authority are indivisible in the person of the rightful monarch. I also focus on what is revealed when Shakespeare turns to the practical weaknesses of this idea of unity by emphatically dividing power and authority over the course of the late tragedies. To this aim, I will consider the royal responses, personal and political, to the efforts of acquisition, reacquisition, and reinforcement that are the

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<sup>2</sup> Though I note a division in the styles of the speeches given by Brutus and Antony after Caesar's death, they are nonetheless both examples of persuasion as rhetoric. In the late tragedies rhetoric is less important since persuasion expands to feature more prominently aspects such as display, reputation, and intimate interaction; the Antony of *Antony and Cleopatra* constructs his authority along these new lines, winning over those who experience his leadership at hand rather than swaying the public as he does in *Julius Caesar*.

inevitable lot of the monarch who wishes to retain the full measure of royalty.

Shakespeare presents power and authority as separate elements that are joined together in the ideal of successful rule but also operate independently. While authority in the form of discourses of absolutism and sacred right has received its share of critical attention, I turn towards a more extensive consideration of it as a principle that defines relationships of interaction within the small but significant community of the court. The persuasive and perceptive exercise of authority complements the tangible power that is founded on the monarch's material resources and their enabling of a system of rewards and punishments. That system, in its most valuable form, is not concerned with material power alone: it enforces royal authority by its creation of majesty, the sense of the monarch as the acknowledged superior of even the most powerful subjects and the one possessed of the right to decide the state of the realm and its people. The late tragedies focus on a form of rule by consent not in the open style of republics, but as the implicit undertone of the monarch's need to participate in the construction of authority.

My focus is specifically royal power in the plays in which Shakespeare dispenses with the interest in the popular dimension of rulership that he elsewhere develops. The relationships of allegiance are more intimate, formed between the monarch and the powerful subjects who have the potential ability to challenge royal supremacy. The partial exception is *Antony and Cleopatra*: it takes place in the setting of the Roman plays, but concerns the transition from republic to empire and reconfigures the relationships of the protagonists with their rivals and servants along the pattern of monarchical awe instead of popular influence. *Coriolanus* (ca. 1608) is also counted among the late tragedies, but in terms of practices of power it is far closer to the history plays and *Julius Caesar*.<sup>3</sup> *Coriolanus* revives Shakespeare's earlier interest in the acquisition and maintenance of power in a system where presenting yourself to the public in the right way is essential; the protagonist's refusal to act in the manner expected of

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<sup>3</sup> In the English history plays, military conflicts play a far more frequent role in determining power; greater prominence is also given to authority as lineal legitimacy and the sacred nature of kingship. Furthermore, authority is presented to the public and not the court alone, which is strikingly apparent in the condemnation of Richard II, the subjects' love for Bullingbrook, and Prince Hal's plan to ensure that he makes an impression, which he indeed does as Henry V by the martial authority of the warrior king who can present himself as one of the men without losing his exceptional stature. In *Coriolanus* and *Julius Caesar*, accountability to the public is also stressed.

a participant in the Roman republic becomes a disastrous case of self-representation gone wrong and is seized as a weapon by his political enemies. Yet the play's society differs so clearly from the monarchies of the three late tragedies of royalty that *Coriolanus's* portrayal of power (which I would term leadership rather than rulership) has a character of its own. Therefore I will here consider the play as I do the similarly practical-minded history plays and *Julius Caesar*: by noting the plays' relevance to issues explored in the late tragedies where it is appropriate, but without abandoning my focus on the specific vision that informs *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*, a vision that heavily stresses the presence of the nobility.

Though the public is occasionally glimpsed in the late tragedies, it is a shadowy figure lacking agency either on the whole or through the individuals it is comprised of: there is no devolution of power from the court. The settings of the plays do not reflect the gradually growing parliamentarism of early modern England; even the senatorial Rome that the empire in *Antony and Cleopatra* is about to leave behind has its own aristocracy. Power in these plays is in the hands of the few, a situation that is not entirely anachronistic. The process that transformed the English monarchy into a constitutional and mainly decorative one was still in the making and the monarch continued to hold personal power. Though Parliament asked Elizabeth I to marry and secure the succession, she sometimes politely and sometimes angrily but ultimately successfully refused to either marry or openly name a successor who might become a threat to her influence in her lifetime; Mary Stuart, James VI and the Earl of Essex were among those who found that Elizabeth would not be pressured on the matter of her personal prestige. Moreover, while the sense of exclusivity in politics was being eroded, both by general trends of social development and more localised instances such as James's personal generosity with titles, non-aristocrats were still the exception to the rule at the very top of the hierarchy, the sphere that is the concern of the late tragedies and this work. The decline in noble power that had occurred had been encouraged by the Tudors for the sake of benefiting their monarchical rule and making the nobility easier to manage. Thus in spite of the de-emphasis on the kind of public that Shakespeare's history plays had staged, the late tragedies deal with political issues that were still highly relevant. The characters negotiate their existence at court during moments in history that, real or mythical, were transitions that forced challenged rule to reaffirm or reshape itself. Therefore the late tragedies are by no means inconsequential to understanding how monarchy was perceived to function by Shakespeare, a subject of the crown who

represented royal rule to the other subjects, noble and common, who formed the audiences of his plays.

Over the course of these plays Shakespeare portrays the extremes of what happens when either power or authority is exercised in dangerous isolation, as well as moments in which their concerns achieve something close to the ideal state of balance between the two. In *King Lear* the loss of power is at its most intense, both in the individual king's fall and the seeming undoing of all societal certainties. Even after Lear's reconciliation with Cordelia, he fails to comprehend the full implication of her perspective on duty: that relationships imply mutual responsibilities, even when one participant is the acknowledged superior of the other. After the depths of royal despair and misjudgement in *King Lear*, *Macbeth's* presentation of rulership is marked by a practicality that sets it apart from its companions in this book. Neither the mistakes nor the successes are as grandiose as the ones to which Shakespeare turns his attention in *King Lear* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. There is a general solidity to the exercise of power, but it is disturbed by the presence of the supernatural and the potential continuation of the cycle of treason. *Macbeth* focuses on authority as persuasive cunning; the inspiration of awe is found in the as yet incomplete establishment of royal sanctity and the efforts of the future king's followers, but the king himself is not associated with majestic self-presentation. More accomplished displays of royal greatness are of central importance to *Antony and Cleopatra*. It is essential to note that the play foregrounds the importance of the successfully induced emotional response to representations of authority, an issue that is continuously present in Shakespeare's views on effective royal self-presentation. Therefore the play serves as a fitting conclusion to the discussion of the central role that royal power and authority have in the late tragedies.

While Shakespeare's extreme separations of power and authority stage the conditional side of royal authority, he also pays tribute to the continuities of allegiance secured by the principle of royal supremacy. The late tragedies consider how subjects may be enlisted to participate in the processes of maintenance: like the monarch, they have the opportunity to uphold authority. Royal authority must expand from the monarch's individual construct into a belief that becomes established as a standard that guards the monarch against treason, ambition and harmful re-representation. The subjects, as previously noted, are drawn from a limited circle of society; Lear's Fool and Cleopatra's maids are rare for having no personal stake in the conflict similar to the noble and military leaders who otherwise populate the three plays. Though the role played by popular support is lessened, Shakespeare nonetheless uses the subjects present to

convey the importance of authority as an aspect of rulership with external effects. Authority does not solely elevate the monarch's sense of self-importance but also prepares for future challenges by imposing itself on the hearts and loyalties of those powerful enough to contribute to or resist challenges to the monarch. The ability to judge situations accordingly is vital to a good monarch or to the claimant who wishes to unseat the current possessor of the throne. The plays are also committed to staging giving as a means of interaction. Whether in the form of royal bounty, invitations to the social or emotional circle of closeness, or an experience of greatness, giving has the potential to secure the relationship between monarch and subject.

The debate on the workings of authority within the intimacy of the court and in the relationship of individual monarch to individual subject is the most central and notable contribution made by the late tragedies to Shakespeare's conception of rulership. Nonetheless, even in a play, *Antony and Cleopatra*, that moves consistently towards ever greater elevations of authority, a full escape from the material victory of power is not possible. The principles of authority may effect a reversal of power relations due to their ability to secure the support of the monarch's powerful subjects, who then work to restore the powerless monarch to the former state of primacy. Yet the powerless monarch cannot count on that support as a matter of course. The danger posed by lack of power is frequently compounded by an accompanying inadequacy of royal representation. The rulers who replace the protagonists, offering a measure of hope for stability, suggest a capacity for the combination of power and authority.

The task of exercising both power and authority in the manner that best secures their continued viability is a challenge with which Shakespeare confronts his protagonists. In *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* this task is never carried out with full success. What the plays say of the central failures and partial triumphs of the protagonists, as well as those of their challengers, nonetheless indicates the necessity of the processes that seek to uphold the monarchy, both institutionally and individually. In *Richard II* (ca. 1595-96), the king expresses his confidence through Shakespeare's most direct reference to the belief of divine right:

KING RICHARD: Not all the water in the rough rude sea  
 Can wash the balm from an anointed king;  
 The breath of worldly men cannot depose  
 The deputy elected by the Lord.  
 For every man that Bullingbrook hath pressed  
 To lift shrewd steel against our golden crown,

Heaven for his Richard hath in heavenly pay  
A glorious angel. Then, if angels fight,  
Weak men must fall, for heaven still guards the right.  
3.2.49-57

Yet Richard falls to Bullingbrook, the future Henry IV. While the history plays stage with all too great a clarity the vulnerability of the English crown, in the late tragedies Shakespeare progresses from the study of a destabilised realm towards his intensified interest in individual experience. When the individual is a monarch subjected to the dissolution of power and self, the consequences of these losses are staggering. Good rulership is not a question of divine justification but of the ability to face challenges and undermine threats to the stability of the throne and the realm. This ability is founded on the awareness of the monarch's role in the realm, the necessity of power and the importance of authority. To reiterate, authority is not quite sanctity, but its principles prove durable especially when they are evoked with skill. The combination of practical concerns with the emotional response is the basis of Shakespeare's presentation of the exercise of power and authority in the late tragedies.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *KING LEAR*

#### **Introduction**

If the contrast between the perception of authority and the reality of power is a significant part of the late tragedies, it is nowhere more openly apparent than in *King Lear*. Lear's plan for the division of Britain makes explicit the separation of the two components, power and authority, that form the full expression of royal majesty when joined together. Kingship is not so easily and painlessly divisible as the kingdom on the map that is brought onstage in the first scene. Lear's decision to leave himself the privileges of royal authority and grant the duties of royal administrative power to his heirs leads to the realisation of how helpless the former may be in face of the latter.

To begin with, I will discuss one particular aspect of the play that should be addressed before looking at the exercises of power and authority that occupy Shakespeare in *King Lear*. This is the topic of Lear's three daughters as individual characters. While they undergo an obvious division into the loyal Cordelia and the ungrateful Goneril and Regan, it inaccurately reflects their roles as participants in the struggle for power. In order to examine the play's portrayal of rulership, I consider the distinct associations of each daughter in relation to issues of power and authority. Some of the well-known assertions about their natures will remain unchallenged; for one, the shared participation of Goneril and Regan in the language of pitiless reason presents a case in which the surface similarity holds true on the wider level as well. Yet to emphasise the play's treatment of morality can result in the obscuring of differences between the elder daughters as claimants to power: they often illustrate separate elements of the practices that Shakespeare designates as essential to capable rulership. My intention is to detail these aspects in preparation for the more general discussions I will undertake; the task is a necessary one because of the extent to which Goneril and Regan have been viewed as one, united by their qualities of mercilessness and ingratitude. Cordelia is treated as an individual character in Shakespeare criticism, but even she needs to be

considered alongside her sisters in relation to issues of power rather than as virtue in opposition to vice.

The play stages events through which Lear is brought to the recognition of the fact that in giving up power he loses it: a simple statement, but one to which Lear is oblivious due to his privileging of authority. The key error of his kingship is that he does not respect the necessary connection between power and authority. Authority continues to exist internally in the eyes of those subjects who are willing to honour the institution of kingship, but in *King Lear* it is nonetheless most emphatically vulnerable to the challenges that power enables to be launched against it. Lear's own reduction to the state of the petitioner of his former flatterers is an indication of what becomes of kingship without power. His authority is damaged by the loss of his power to judge speeches and pronounce sentences; through the divergent ways in which Goneril and Regan deal with the exercise of this form of power that may be used to legitimate rule, Shakespeare continues his separation of power and authority even in the portrayal of the seemingly interchangeable sisters.

Among the issues prominently established by the opening scene is the connection of power and material resources. Lear will no longer be respected by those who disdain the principle of allegiance to authority because he has surrendered his ability to support it through the measured redistribution of royal resources. To Shakespeare, it is a great and undeniable error of kingship to make a gift so total that it erodes the distinction between king and subject. More than that, it reverses their roles as patron and recipient since the patron no longer has the means to reward assertions of allegiance. The love contest is an invitation to antagonism and introduces the language of property that becomes the means by which Shakespeare reduces Lear to his barest essentials. While language that materialises into gifts and punishments is prominent in the more elevated courtly settings, Shakespeare deals with another form of materiality during Lear's wanderings. The need of shelter for the body, which also leads to the question of shelter for the self, brings about the envisioning of different ways to have what is necessary for the individual and not only for the king. Lear's fall makes undeniable the potential for extreme mobility in the hierarchy: his abdication of duties, in combination with the elevation of his heirs and the hints of their future resistance to his authority, establishes this question as a central part of the play in the opening scene. The accelerated inheritances of the heirs undo the customary transmission of power from one generation to the next. The unsettling of boundaries signified by the king's reduction to a wandering madman also provides

those willing to grasp it with an opportunity to work towards the establishment of a new order.

Hierarchy becomes unstable when Lear's remaining title of king fails to prevent the now materially superior heirs from bringing about the reduction of his status. Shakespeare also turns to this issue through the character of Edmund, who actively works against the customary transmission of property that would exclude the bastard; his is an illegitimate inheritance, even more explicitly so than the one given prematurely to Lear's daughters. Yet even the acquisitive individualists of the play must seek to restabilise the hierarchy in order to confirm the advancement made possible by the unsustainable period of chaos. Edmund illustrates upwards mobility, temporary though his rise might be, but his is not the play's primary experience of abrupt change in status. Lear's exclusion from his customary position at the head of society, portrayed through his losses of both property and self-identity, leads him to see the degrees of privilege at work in society and how they obstruct the claims of justice and compassion. Shakespeare does not here imagine, as he notably does in the history plays, the kingdom as a full society comprising various social classes. The presence of lower orders is evoked by the nobles' imaginings of helplessness: Shakespeare brings social inferiors onstage and into the discussion in relation to the role they play in the superior's experience of rank. The deprivation of power and authority is bound to the topic of service, and Lear's loss of his attendants becomes the issue debated between him and his elder daughters as they seek to settle who holds supremacy.

### Three Heiresses

*King Lear* depicts processes by which control over rebelling entities can be gained or contested.<sup>1</sup> The play is notable for the role played by its female characters as potential rulers of Britain and its subjects. In *Antony and Cleopatra* Shakespeare stages a queen regnant's performance of her authority, which becomes a means to reverse the expected flow of power from imperial Rome to conquered territories. Cleopatra begins the play in a position that, though diminished by the influence of Rome, is nonetheless acknowledged as providing her with a valid claim to rulership: she is Egypt. In contrast, the inheritances of Lear's daughters are yet to be

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this chapter was published as "Unstable and Gendered Authority in Shakespeare's *King Lear*," in *Authority of Expression in Early Modern England*, ed. Nely Keinänen and Maria Salenius (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009).

actualised by the usual course of the reigning monarch's death followed by the heir's succession to the throne and full monarchical power. His intention to abdicate his duties and rights only partially means that the inheritances they receive in the play's first scene are conditional ones and do not grant the title of queen; they do, however, grant a power that may be used to undermine his title of king. Though this royal decree of division aims to retain for Lear a measure of majesty, he finds it disputed: Cordelia resists the love contest, and Goneril and Regan challenge its particulars by refusing to acknowledge any remaining claim to royal authority once Lear has surrendered the material resources on which power is based. The untraditional division of the realm leaves it with no queen to succeed the king: rather, the three heiresses present different claims to allegiance and power. The instability that results from the presence of these multiple claims, which conflict with those of the still-living king and increasingly with the other daughters' purposes, forms a central challenge to the stable government of the realm.

Criticism of *King Lear* that treats the elder daughters as interchangeable does a disservice to the complexity of the power relations depicted in the play and can be refuted by focusing on the three daughters' exercise of power and capacity for self-government (which relates to the capacity to add personal authority to power). Regan is characterised by an overall lack of control, Cordelia's authority is significant on the moral level but less successful on the political one, while Goneril is most often able to take charge of the situation. Even analyses that refrain from moral judgement of the elder daughters seem to have a tendency to downplay or ignore those differences between them. As one example of this approach I may refer to Cristina León Alfar. She sees Goneril and Regan as being very much aligned with the existing system of power and as wielding it in an essentially traditional manner: according to her, the elder daughters

both resist and reproduce 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.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cristina León Alfar, *Fantasies of Female Evil: The Dynamics of Gender and Power in Shakespearean Tragedy* (New Jersey: Rosemont Publishing & Printing Corp., 2003), 85. In contrast to this reading of Goneril and Regan as essentially conservative in their approach to power, it has also been claimed that they represent a Machiavellian view on the pursuit of power and do not so much reproduce the old hierarchy as take it in a new and unsettling direction; I will consider this argument in a later chapter.

This briefly summarises her view of both the transgressive and the conservative elements present in the depiction of these women in their positions of power. But these comments and Alfar's analysis in general, even as they seek to resist the notion that the elder daughters were born evil, reproduce the common idea that they are so closely connected that what can be said of one applies to the other as well. As I will discuss, this has the effect of devaluing Goneril's accomplishments by tying them to Regan's inferior ones and thus undermining the fact that the eldest daughter is far more competent on both personal and political levels.

Before addressing the individual characters of the daughters, it should also be noted that they are indeed positioned within a certain political structure. To maintain the hierarchical divisions of this structure, actions must be taken which at worst assume the form of selfish violence, and even at best require the use of power and establishment of superiority over the other. Abuse of power may be seen as inherent to monarchy in that it always has the potential to emerge when the individual monarch does not see the benefits of moderation. Power also has a predetermined quality in that it is so tightly bound up in deeds traditionally perceived as masculine that its exercise, by necessity, requires an abandonment of the submissiveness that formed the core of idealised femininity. Goneril and Regan, even Cordelia, must embrace the readiness to make use of violence (personal or martial) if they are actively to pursue their different goals.

The elder daughters perpetuate the system of violent monarchy and are denounced for it when the combination of their exploitative agency with the threatening choice of targets becomes a challenge to Lear's authority. Yet they are not the first to express power through acts of violence and exclusion: their treatment of Lear bears resemblance to his banishment of Cordelia and to Gloucester's response to Edgar's supposed treachery. However, due to the conflict between expectations of femininity and the actions of these female characters, the existing flaws of the system of power become more starkly apparent. Male characters, such as Cornwall, may also make use of their power in a brutal manner, but violence by women (actual physical violence in Regan's case, but more generally the violence of material and emotional exclusion) deprives the acts of the veneer of respectability. Yet even at the play's beginning that veneer hides little when Lear banishes his formerly beloved daughter for having dared to question the validity of the love contest. Those who imitate his behaviour, responding to challenges with unmoderated fury, further the damage he first causes by his misrecognition of what the duties of monarchy and the familial bond give him the right to claim: they are separate entities, not to be mixed in the public manner of the love contest.

Of course, all three daughters approach the prospect of receiving Lear's royal rights from a different angle than they would if they were sons due to the differing social expectations that were in place for both female rulership and inheritance, issues that had occasioned much contemporary debate in Tudor England. Barbara C. Millard writes that

Lear never laments the lack of a son but compensates himself instead with his demand for the full measure of his daughters' feminine virtues: obedience, love, servitude. With shattering clarity the events of the play dramatize the ramifications of Lear's attempt to impose these virtues rather than encourage the development of a true sovereignty in his daughters.<sup>3</sup>

The king does indeed insist on obedience, love and servitude without being willing to adjust his requirements according to the words of the daughter in question or the particulars of the situation. The very gendered terms in which he curses his daughters imply that his disappointment when they do not meet his expectations is heightened in ways it would not be when dealing with a man such as Kent, who defies him with words more openly insulting than Cordelia's. Thus his daughters are poised to force him both to such bitterness and such thorough re-evaluation of his existence as any perceived betrayal by sons might not have been able to cause; at the very least the latter would have allowed gender to maintain a comforting permanence.

Here a few words should be said on the topic of Shakespeare's addition to the story of Leir, the subplot of Gloucester and his two sons. It presents the audience with a conventional depiction of conflict over inheritance and the transferral of authority from one generation to the next. This subplot stages the standard problem of how to provide for an illegitimate son and the likely possibility that he and the legitimate son will do battle for the inheritance; as an additional parallel of (un)deserved familial love, the flippant Gloucester claims to Kent that he loves his sons equally but in practice Edgar and Edmund engage in their own version of the love contest. That the familiar inheritance conflict is attached to the legend of the ancient king of Britain yet relegated to the background draws attention to the possibility of examining these issues in a more traditional manner. Instead Shakespeare chooses to offer a different perspective by focusing on the kinds of authority and inheritance conflicts that his society was not structured to accommodate but which it had been forced to grapple with since Mary I and Elizabeth I had succeeded to the throne. He covers less

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara C. Millard, "Virago With a Soft Voice: Cordelia's Tragic Rebellion in *King Lear*," *Philological Quarterly* 68 (1989): 148-49.

well-known ground by approaching rulership from the point of view of its possession by women and, as a result, throws the structure of society and gender into disarray. Through its secondary position, the conventional Gloucester subplot emphasises the overall distinctiveness, of which gender is an element, of the main plot's treatment of the struggle for power and authority. A focus on the more common form of inheritance conflict between sons would not contribute to the sense of a world upside down, falling into chaos, to the same enhanced degree that a betrayal by daughters here achieves: authority is undermined four times over, as royalty, paternity, experience and gender all fail to ensure the respect of the younger generation.

Even as Lear's daughters contribute to this undoing of order, they are themselves deprived of their positions. At the end of *King Lear* none of them can be said to have triumphed in any tangible sense.<sup>4</sup> Yet despite these shared losses, the daughters nonetheless remain distinct characters if they are considered in relation to the exercise of authority as control over their personal and political selves: in Regan the control turns out to be largely illusory, Cordelia possesses it to a notable degree, and Goneril exemplifies it.

While Cordelia's own notable role is acknowledged in criticism, that Goneril and Regan receive little attention as separate characters obscures crucial aspects of the play's presentation of monarchical rule. Stephen Booth is one of the few writers to draw attention to the elder daughters' differences:

As the play progresses, they earn the joint title 'unnatural hags,' but we come to recognize Goneril's superior intelligence and managerial skill and to see that Regan trails behind her, compensating for dullness with exaggerated brutality. By act 5, when their mutual antagonism has become the most virulent in the play, Goneril and Regan are surely no longer a

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<sup>4</sup> Though a triumph of principles can be claimed for Cordelia, as for example in Diane Dreher's reading of play: "the important fact is not that Cordelia dies. . . but that in the space of this play she lives to make courageous moral choices in a dark and confusing universe" ("Shakespeare's Cordelia and the Power of Character," in *Shakespearean Criticism* 93, ed. Michelle Lee [Farmington Hills: Thomson Gale, 2006], 135). Bruce W. Young agrees with the principle of this argument regarding Cordelia's victory: "to die in a condition of freedom from acquisitive desire and murderous rivalry is better than to live as Goneril, Regan, and Edmund do, in tormented and self-deceived bondage to rivalry and desire" ("*King Lear* and the Calamity of Fatherhood," in *In the Company of Shakespeare: Essays on English Renaissance Literature in Honor of G. Blakemore Evans*, ed. Thomas Moisan and Douglas Bruster [Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002], 56).

single unit; but in their squabble over Edmund they again seem interchangeable to us.<sup>5</sup>

Though Booth points out some of the qualities that separate them, it might also be beneficial to note that even the seeming interchangeability brought about by the love triangle with Edmund still retains a touch of their earlier characterisation. Herbert S. Weil Jr. writes that

Shakespeare gradually leads the beholder to notice that the similarity of personal traits and roles of the evil sisters becomes much less consequential than their differences, especially when each describes Edmund and her feelings for him. Spectators may have expected such sisters to destroy themselves, but the actual agent and manner of murder and suicide should not be predictable early in the play any more than were the ways that Cornwall and Edmund should die.<sup>6</sup>

However, perhaps it still should not come as such a surprise, nor be so forgettable, that Regan is the one who is outwitted and murdered when the two daughters pursue the same goal but can no longer be joint winners. Discussing the daughters not according to age but their ability to exercise power and authority draws out the differentiation between their characters that exists in the play.

Regan, the least of the daughters, is suited to outward displays of power: Shakespeare assigns to her an eagerness to participate in violence and punishment. Despite this brutal strength, she has less control over herself than her sisters. Her speeches show her to be repetitive, as in her confrontation with Lear in Act 2 Scene 2. She begins to echo her argument of 2.2.320-36 and stops abruptly: “For those that mingle reason with your passion/ Must be content to think you old, and so –/ But she knows what she does” (2.2.419-21). She also leaves herself more vulnerable than she need be when dealing with Oswald and Edmund, and she surrenders quite thoroughly to the latter in the end:

REGAN: Take thou my soldiers, prisoners, patrimony:  
Dispose of them, of me: the walls is thine:  
Witness the world, that I create thee here  
My lord and master. . . .

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen Booth, “On the Greatness of *King Lear*,” in *William Shakespeare’s King Lear*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 59.

<sup>6</sup> Herbert S. Weil Jr., “On Expectation and Surprise: Shakespeare’s Construction of Character,” in *Shakespeare Survey* 34, ed. Stanley Wells. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 48.

Let the drum strike and prove my title thine.  
5.3.76-79, 84

With these blunt, militaristic words Regan is throwing away the individual political sovereignty that she, as a widow, had for a moment possessed to an even greater degree than the married Goneril. If she is hoping to triumph over Goneril by claiming Edmund, she can only find a way to win a personal victory by transferring her power to her hoped-for husband. Goneril, on the other hand, suggests a relationship in which there exists a conspiratorial balance between two ambitious participants: in her letter she urges Edmund to remember their “reciprocal vows” (4.5.267).

Regan’s surrender, with its immoderation and personal motivations, is in keeping with her presentation throughout the play. Stanley Cavell characterises Regan in strongly negative terms: “she has no ideas of her own; her special vileness is always to increase the measure of pain others are prepared to inflict; her mind is itself a lynch mob”.<sup>7</sup> She is indeed marked by a tendency towards extremes. Regan rarely initiates conflicts but can be relied on to seek to finish them most thoroughly, yet even in this she fails if she attempts it without the aid of someone who can temper her worst flaws with a measure of caution and reason. She is the representative of a brutal, direct worldview made explicit by her participation in the placing of Kent in the stocks and the blinding of Gloucester, but also expressed in her words when she transfers her rights to Edmund. Regan’s speech often resembles an aggressive thrust to the point. In the context of the last scene it is used to illustrate that her show of strength is ultimately shallow, as there is a contrast between her military-minded words and the act of surrender she performs through them. Cordelia’s readiness to kneel before Lear in Act 4 Scene 6 is rooted in her political duty as well as the personal one of blood and affection: her emphasis on his royal status makes the scene more than a reunion between daughter and father.<sup>8</sup> But Regan’s show of submission is occasioned by

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<sup>7</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 63.

<sup>8</sup> Judith Weil notes the interpretations that are available for Cordelia’s behaviour after Lear wakes: she may honour him as his daughter, seek to increase the confidence of her leader, or act in accordance with the advice of the unnamed attendant (*Service and Dependency in Shakespeare’s Plays* [Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005], 113); in the Quarto the attendant is named the Doctor but he becomes Gentleman in the Folio, reducing the number of necessary parts as well as the implication of medical authority. Michael Neill comments on the importance of the pronouns (*Putting History to the Question: Power, Politics, and Society in English Renaissance Drama* [New York: Columbia

her private feelings. Even with the title of Gloucester granted to him (an earlship inferior to the ducal status of Regan's deceased husband), Edmund does not have the rank that would warrant such a complete surrender of her own rights. Unlike Regan's, Cordelia's kneeling (actual as well as figurative) is, in its way, an impersonal submission. By acknowledging the importance of a stable hierarchy while keeping those issues separate from her own personal or material conditions, Cordelia does not risk her right to independent thought and action in the manner that Regan does. A focus on the immaterial both reinforces the principle of royal authority and keeps Cordelia herself at a certain distance from her words.

Cordelia's kneeling is an extension of the principles that lead to her noncompliance in the first scene. She respects authority without being willing to condone its extension into absolute power over inner feeling. During the reconciliation the threat to her personal duty of honest love no longer exists and so she may honour the public one in full. Cordelia behaves respectfully towards Lear without forswearing the expression of independent thought that turned him against her. Shakespeare could well have made her submission more explicit,<sup>9</sup> but the assignment of blame remains notably absent from the scene. The reconciliation does not require Cordelia to give away all she has: despite deferring to Lear as king she does not renounce the right to her choices, in contrast to Regan's declaration that she and her power are subject to Edmund (whose commitment to her is far from reliable). The favourable way in which Cordelia is portrayed after her return is marked enough that it can be argued that Shakespeare wished to absolve her of all possible previous

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University Press, 2000], 7): Cordelia moves from "thou" (4.6.38) to "you" (4.6.49) in addressing Lear asleep and awake. She transforms her honouring of him into a matter that goes beyond fatherhood with her references to Lear's royal rank. Consequently the political echoes of her submission are the strongest ones, as I argue in my analysis of the principles of allegiance with which Shakespeare associates Cordelia. Yet it can also be noted that the religious readings of Cordelia as a Christ-figure offer another possible avenue for interpreting her submissiveness to her father's will, as a positive sign of agency in service of a divine cause.

<sup>9</sup> As was done in the anonymous *King Leir* first performed some ten years before Shakespeare's *King Lear*. In that play Cordella responds to Leir's request with "But I will never rise from off my knee/ Until I have your blessing, and your pardon/ Of all my faults committed any way" (anonymous, *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* [London: Simon Stafford, 1605], sig. D). This version presents a far more patriarchal vision of the reconciliation, with a benevolent Leir passing judgement as God's representative on earth and Cordella as the one who acknowledges fallibility.

sins. More importantly, he does not insist on a public judgement that would emphasise that her actions were meant to be seen as sins by the play's audience as well as by Lear. Cordelia shows herself to be willing to support authority deriving from rank and paternity, but this does not invalidate the courage she displayed earlier when seeking to correct Lear's view of what he, as king and father, can rightfully demand of her. She is the moral centre of the scenes in which she appears; though some critics are troubled by what they deem her rigid stubbornness in the first scene,<sup>10</sup> Shakespeare does not make her recant.

However, in addition to presenting a different kind of submission, the reunion scene also connects the two younger daughters through a similarity. It shows the audience a Cordelia overcome by emotion, quite a contrast to her firm and logical replies in the first scene. This aligns her briefly with Regan, who is similarly at a loss for words at important moments. Regan's temperamental nature manifests itself throughout the play, frequently as an aggressive response to what she witnesses but also in reaction to moments of uncertainty: she becomes frantic and enables others to observe her feelings. This is most pronounced in the scene where the threat of Goneril affects the way Regan approaches Oswald when she is trying to persuade her sister's servant to enter her own circle of influence:

REGAN: Why should she write to Edmund? Might not you  
Transport her purposes by word? Belike,  
Some things, I know not what. I'll love thee much,  
Let me unseal the letter.

4.5.22-25

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<sup>10</sup> Michael L. Hays views Cordelia as displaying the "self-love of reactive virtue. . . the play tells us that [her] answer should have expressed affection for Lear because she loved him; whatever his need, she should not have reasoned it and should not have reasoned hers" (*Shakespearean Tragedy as Chivalric Romance: Rethinking Macbeth, Hamlet, Othello, King Lear* [Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003], 207). As Catherine S. Cox comments, "Cordelia's scolding remarks trouble some critics who wonder at her belief that love is a fixed commodity, divisible in a zero-sum game" ("An Excellent Thing in Woman': Virgo and Viragos in *King Lear*," *Modern Philology* 96 [1998]: 148). Yet when Cordelia speaks those seemingly cold words, "That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry/ Half my love with him, half my care and duty" (1.1.101-2), she is trying to explain her opposition to Lear's demand for quantifiable, expressible love by using his mathematical language. His failure to interpret her silence correctly forces her to expose the flaws in his plan, first by refusing to participate in a trial that devalues love and then by turning Lear's own logic against him.

This attempt to exercise authority over a social inferior does not only fail, it exposes Regan's lack of control over the events to Oswald and provides a stark contrast to Goneril, who is able to provide arguments in defence of her position even under duress. This scene solidifies one significant difference between the elder daughters. Yet it can also be noted that despite their prevalence, Regan's emotional outbursts remain shallow. It is easy to incite Regan to anger or passion; less certain is the longevity of those feelings. Consequently, the variation in the emotionality of the two younger daughters also becomes visible. Shakespeare depicts Cordelia as possessing the capacity for deep and sincere feeling. She risks what might be assumed to be a life of comfort and safety in France for the sake of a father who disowned her and seemed to shut out the possibility of a reconciliation forever. Her choked, repetitive replies when, against the odds, that reconciliation does occur suggest that she should indeed be seen as one who correctly assesses her own character when saying "my love's/ More ponderous than my tongue" (1.1.69-70). While this emotion that leaves her speechless is born out of lasting love, it does still place her with Regan and their rash father Lear in the group of characters for whom self-government presents challenges. Cordelia is not as impulsive as Regan, but neither is she as self-controlled and controlling as Goneril.

Goneril may not wield her power with admirable goals in mind but I wish to emphasise that she does indeed wield it, and more consistently than any other character in the play. While Regan is unable to engage in long-term planning and Cordelia is governed by the importance she places on acting in accordance with principle, Goneril is very much at home in the chaotic world that the Britain of *King Lear* descends into. She seizes what is of use to her and discards the rest so that she may better consolidate her authority in the form she chooses. From the moment she takes charge of the conversation with Regan upon their being left alone in the first scene to her defiant response when Albany reveals the proof of her collaboration with Edmund,<sup>11</sup> she is a dominating personality. Once

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<sup>11</sup> This applies to both versions of Shakespeare's play. The Folio, which is generally regarded as more accurate in naming the likely speakers in this scene, has Goneril exit after "Who can arraign me for't" (5.3.169) whereas the Quarto assigns "Ask me not what I know" (5.3.171) to her instead of Edmund. Both are direct refusals of Albany, and despite the slight variation in content both allow Goneril to leave the stage with the impression of her desperation amended by her still remaining forcefulness. Randall McLeod argues that the Folio presents a stronger vision of evil by giving Goneril a less shaming exit than the Quarto through its reassignment of 5.3.171 and the additions that suggest Goneril views the events as a farce ("Gon. No More, the Text is Foolish," in *The Division of the Kingdoms: Shakespeare's Two Versions of King Lear*, ed. Gary Taylor and

the division of the kingdom is past, Goneril never allows her agency to be subverted by those around her. She is caught off guard at the last moment by Albany's revelation of her treasonous letter and Edgar's challenge to Edmund. Even in the face of disaster, she makes a final grasp for power by claiming the right of judgement as hers:

GONERIL: This is practice, Gloucester:  
 By th'law of war thou wast not bound to answer  
 An unknown opposite: thou art not vanquished,  
 But cozened and beguiled.  
 ALBANY: Shut your mouth, dame,  
 Or with this paper shall I stop it. . . .  
 Thou worse than any name, read thine own evil.  
*Shows her the letter*  
 No tearing, lady: I perceive you know it.  
 GONERIL: Say, if I do, the laws are mine, not thine:  
 Who can arraign me for't.  
 5.3.160-69

It is possible that she does not actually have sufficient legal basis to stand on, because Edmund willingly accepts the challenge to single combat and disdains the delaying tactics that are available to him. This attempt is still illustrative of Goneril's tendency to use administrative right to reinforce her claims or disguise personal biases under a cloak of tradition. Earlier in the play she, more so than Regan, presents the dismissal of Lear's knights as arising from what Philippa Berry terms the "defence of a normative courtly ethos",<sup>12</sup> aligning herself with social order and the rights derived from her position.

Goneril's final words are a denial of defeat very much like that of the Lear who, though separated from the tangible resources that maintain the king's strength, long continues to attempt to assert his authority despite the ineffectiveness of those attempts. Her suicide is a recognition of the fact that she has lost her position beyond any reasonable hope of its recovery.

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Michael Warren [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983], 187-88). Though I agree that the Folio is the more forceful assertion of her remaining authority, I do not find the Quarto without its own potential. The speaker of the line in question, whether Goneril or Edmund, assumes the position of Iago in denying the interrogator and will not contribute to a narrative that would seek to make sense of the events from the victors' perspective. Edmund, however, is moved by the events that follow and does not hold fast to this initial conviction: thus Goneril is closer to Iago and his rejection of his society.

<sup>12</sup> Philippa Berry, *Shakespeare's Feminine Endings: Disfiguring Death in the Tragedies* (London: Routledge, 1999), 54.