

# Gender, power, and economics in King Lear

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



A common practice that William Shakespeare employs in many of his works is the experimentation with gender politics. Shakespeare often shows how notions of gender become unstable as a result of social forces. To discuss Shakespeare's treatment of gender in his plays, it is helpful to use Joan Wallach Scott's definition of gender, which she presents in her book, *Gender and the Politics of History*. Scott defines gender as "an element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power." She notes that gender is constructed, in part, through relationships, including kinship as well as broader gender relations, based on politics and economics. Scott also asserts that the binary between males and females is unstable, and that gender gets constructed and reconstructed as conditions in society change. This phenomenon is played out in one of Shakespeare's most complex plays, *King Lear*. A historical event in the context of *King Lear* that influenced relationships and reconstructed gender roles was the decline of feudalism and the emergence of capitalism. In his article, "King Lear and the Decline of Feudalism," Paul Delany discusses how the move from feudal politics to capitalism resulted in a corresponding change in relationships, which represented a period of crisis for the aristocracy. Delany suggests that the division of Lear's kingdom is symbolic of the emergence of capitalism and the decline of feudalism, and that the tragic ending of the play shows Shakespeare's "attachment to traditional and aristocratic values, combined with a distaste of the fear of the acquisitive, unscrupulous bourgeois values . . . that are taking its place." To expand on Delany's premise, I will argue that, while using *King Lear* as a vehicle for criticizing the fundamentals

of capitalism and promoting feudalism, Shakespeare also uses King Lear's fate to express a fear that aggressive females will be able to take on power roles within the new political structure, and male authority will thus be threatened. Before proceeding with this argument, it is important to examine gender roles as they exist in the overall realm of King Lear. In a book chapter he entitles, "The Situation of Women," Russ MacDonald describes how gender and power relations in feudal society stemmed from primitive societies, where the greater physical strength of males led to the belief that men were superior to women. MacDonald notes, "that women occupied a position subordinate to men in the early modern period is beyond dispute." In the larger cultural background of the play, this gender/power relationship (i. e., male superiority) is exhibited, particularly since the women in King Lear are defined with respect to their husbands. This is clear from the first line of the play, delivered by Kent: "I thought the King had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall" (1. 1. 1-2). Note that he does not say "I thought the King had more affected Goneril than Regan." The daughters are not truly receiving the kingdom - despite their having to "earn" it by way of Lear's games of flattery; it will really belong to their husbands. Additionally, since Cordelia does not have a husband, her portion of the kingdom is intended to serve as a dowry. Thus, the female is situated at the start of the play as a marginal figure in the male-dominated world. However, as the play progresses, the females (i. e., Lear's daughters) become empowered, undermining traditional patriarchal notions that are already threatened by the new capitalist order and the loss of feudal values previously enjoyed by King Lear. The first scene is representative of Lear's attachment to

feudalistic values, such as the accommodation of patriarchal wishes, and the importance of honor and obedience in feudal relationships. Also, Shakespeare immediately connects the loss of Lear's feudal-aristocratic traditions to the change in gender and power dynamics. King Lear is portrayed as a traditional aristocrat, and one who prizes subservience from his daughters. Although he is giving up power by dividing his kingdom, he clings to his authoritative position, and demands that his daughters publicly express their love and affection for him. Cordelia infuriates him because she refuses to engage in the love game. When asked to put her love for her father into flattering words, she states, " Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave/ My heart into my mouth. I love your majesty / According to my bond, no more no less" (1. 1. 92-93). Because Cordelia refuses to play along with Lear's flattery game, Lear feels that she is usurping his patriarchal authority, so he berates and banishes her. Two different readings of Cordelia's remarks support the notion that is at the heart of the critique of capitalism going on in the play: the new politic order results in the instability of gender roles, as well as the degradation of relationships. Acknowledging both interpretations helps to illustrate Shakespeare's clever crisscrossing of these two implications of the emergence of capitalism. First, there is Paul Delany's reading, based on the Marxist theory of the cash- nexus, which holds that capitalism reduces all relations to rates of economic exchange, and makes the only human connection one based on monetary value. As Delany states, " The new order . . . having set up cash payment as the only measure of social obligation, ruthlessly attacks all customary bonds . . ." . He notes that Cordelia's remarks serve to remind Lear, Regan and Goneril, whose

relationships resemble the cash-nexus, that relationships should not be based on rates of exchange, such as the use of flattery to obtain financial security. Relationships should instead be based on a natural relationship, which were associated with feudal economics and politics. In this context, Cordelia seems to endorse traditional feudal bonds and relationships, and to repudiate the new capitalistic relationships. Secondly, Cordelia's refusal to flatter her father could also be read as a rebellion against her prescribed gender role and a direct challenge to her father's expectations. As Catherine Cox points out, she contradicts her own silence and becomes defiant toward the patriarchal order, when she tries to justify her silence and questions her sisters' flattery, saying that they would not have room for loving their husbands if they loved King Lear as much as they proclaimed. Cordelia says, Good my Lord, You have begot me, bred me, loved me. I Return those duties back are right fit, Obey you, love you and most honour you. Why have my sisters' husbands, if they say They love you all? Haply when I shall wed, That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry Half my love with him, half my care and duty. Sure I shall never marry like my sisters To love my father all (1. 1. 95-104) Cordelia's statements can be considered aggressive, and therefore, threatening to Lear's patriarchal power. As Cox notes, " when Cordelia betrays her own silence, she abandons her identity as a daughter; apparently affronted at having to compete with her sisters in so ludicrous a game, she exhibits a masculine sense of entitlement, as if the ' bond' she and Lear share should rightly ensure her place as Lear's successor and exempt her from public display." Accordingly, her act of rebellion against Lear can thus be viewed as an attempt to invert the social structure in which

she lives. This reading emphasizes the threat of female power that is emerging with the new political order. By acknowledging both readings of Cordelia's opening remarks concomitantly, one can see that a double context for the critique of capitalism is immediately set up: (i) how it reduces relationships to rates of exchange; and (ii) how it destabilizes gender roles. This double play of the negative results of capitalism is continued throughout the text. While condemning the new order, Shakespeare simultaneously critiques the effects that the changing society has on gender roles. He shows how Lear's downfall is in part due to the reconstruction of power and the destabilizing of gender that resulted from the changing political order and the breakdown of Lear's kingdom the end of his natural patriarchal stability. This is further developed through Lear's relationships with his daughters after the division of Lear's kingdom. Before the kingdom is divided, Lear's daughters provide a sense of stability through their affection and loyalty, which Lear considers to be their duty. His daughters were subservient to him while he was King, but that is no longer the case once they claim Queenship. Lear expected his daughters to fulfill his needs, and was dependent on their gratitude and affection. They failed to live up to Lear's expectations, and he becomes enraged. Lear's dependence on them for attention depended on their reciprocal reliance on him, since he was the source of their power. When the situation changed and his daughters became empowered, Lear, with his patriarchal values, could not emotionally handle the new power dynamics. He even entertains the notion of regaining his kingdom, during his conversation with his Fool, when he says, "[t]o tak't again perforce! Monster ingratitude!" (1. 5. 37). Lear's statements reinforce the notion that going

back to feudalism would enable him to regain his power, which would create a reversion back to his previous relationships with his daughters, when they used to fulfill their role of giving him pleasure through obedience and affection. So, the breakdown of his kingdom perpetuates a change in gender dynamics, and results in the deterioration of Lear's power and the destruction of his most important kinship his daughters. In this way, Shakespeare connects the decline of strong feudal relationships with the threat of female power both of which followed the emergence of capitalism. We see a similar connection in Act II, when Lear's daughters deny him his full retinue of knights. Paul Delany discusses how the new social order created "the opposition between a feudal-aristocratic ethic that promotes display, generosity and conspicuous consumption, and a bourgeois ethic that values thrift because it promotes the accumulation rather than the dissipation of capital." Lear's insistence that he maintain his full retinue of knights shows his dependence on such feudal values, and it is interesting to observe that Shakespeare makes Lear's daughters, with their greed and ambition, the power source that deprives Lear of his knights. Lear expects that, of all people, his own daughters should grant his wish, and when they tell him that his retinue and his power are to be cut even further, his remarks serves to express his anger over his daughters' disobedience, and also to provide an endorsement of feudal consumption: O, reason not the need! Our basest beggarsAre in the poorest thing superfluous. Allow not nature more than nature needs, Man's life's as cheap as beast's (2. 4. 259-281). Lear's justification for his knights exemplifies his bond to strong feudal, patriarchal values. He is saying that humans would be no different from the animals if

they did not need more than the fundamental necessities of life to be happy a feudalistic value and a strong opposition to capitalism, which supports practicality and frugality. Lear needs knights and attendants not only because of the service that they provide him but because of what their presence represents: namely, his identity, both as a king and as a patriarchal figure. Further, Goneril and Regan's refusal to accommodate Lear's requests infuriated him because, again, women challenged his authority, and not just any women, but his own daughters. Despite his attempt to assert his authority, Lear finds himself powerless; all he can do is vent his rage and, ultimately, go mad. Again, capitalism is criticized, and ill effects of female power are concurrently portrayed. This crisscrossing of gender, power and politics adds to the complexity of the play and shows Shakespeare's genius. It is interesting that, right after his daughters undermine Lear's authority by denying his requests for knights, Lear seems to find himself slipping into a feminine role. He associates himself with the female gender by his discussion of crying a device he attributes to women. He states fearfully, " And let not women's weapons water drops / Stain my man's cheeks" (2. 2. 456-457). Lear is concerned that the new power dynamics are robbing him of his masculinity and patriarchy, and making his daughters the new hierarchy of power. In addition, just as Lear associates himself with weakness and femininity, he later aligns his daughter, Goneril, with masculinity and seniority, when he says of her, " Ha! Goneril with a white beard?" (4. 6. 96). With these remarks, Lear himself acknowledges the reversal in gender and power roles that has resulted from surrendering his kingdom and granting his daughters Queenship. By this point in the play, Lear's entire patriarchal



order of the world that he so long was accustomed to has become to him a world of disorder and chaos. Lear expresses his disgust with the reversal of authoritative roles and the shattered order of the world during the mock trial scene. He talks about authority, and how it is full of deception and confused roles: And the creature run from the cur there thouMighest behold the great image of authority: a dog'sObeyed in officeThou, rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand; Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thine own back, Thou hotly lusts to use her in that kindFor which thou whipp'st her. The usurer hangs the cozener (4. 6. 153-159). Here, Lear criticizes capitalism and the new societal order by describing a world that has been turned upside down, and where images of authority become disconnected from reality. The harsh language in this passage shows how disturbed Lear is by the current order of England, one that is now controlled by a capitalist society as opposed to the stable, feudal hierarchal order that Lear initially represents. When feudal values fall apart, disorder takes over the realm. The theme of disorder and reversed roles in this scene runs parallel to Lear's previous references to gender reversal, particularly because he then returns to his discussion of crying. He states, " We came crying hither: / thou knowst the first time that we smell the air we wawl and cry" (4. 6. 178-179). Whereas Lear previously referred to tears as " women's weapons," now that he has lost everything and gone mad, he takes on a feminine position by acknowledging that he will end his life in tears. Clearly, the perceived difference between males and females and the gender dynamics that existed prior to the division of Lear's kingdom have been broken down, and the relationships that Lear depended on for his authority have been overturned. Thus, the play ends with King Lear

as a conquered man, stripped not only of power, but also of masculinity. Through the tragic ending of King Lear, Shakespeare shows how the change in politics completely altered relationships and reconstructed concepts of gender; he shows how the decline of feudalism adversely affects power relations and the natural patriarchal order, and changes female roles so that they become threatening to society. Of course, by today's standards, such anxiety over capitalism and feminism is absurd. In fact, I wish the Bard could be around to see just how powerful capitalism can be for America, especially once a woman, like Hillary Clinton, is elected President.

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