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"The lusty stealth of nature": Sexuality and anitifeminism in *King Lear*

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Human sexuality is an acknowledged crux of the play King Lear. Aside from numerous universalizing and derogatory references to sexuality, there is the puzzling relationship between Gloucester's sin of adultery and the sins against him, the significance of Goneril and Regan's lust for Edmund which is introduced into the plot so surprisingly and so late, and the dramatic function, if any, of the king's obsession with carnality. Closely connected to these matters is the remarkable extent to which sexual appetite controls the events of both the main plot and the echo plot. Not only does lust contribute directly to the downfalls of five of the major characters (Tom O'Bedlam[1], Edmund, Gloucester, Goneril, and Regan), but even Edgar, Albany and Cordelia whose sexual natures are scarcely an issue, suffer from the carnality of others. At the center of this sexual turmoil stands King Lear himself who dies because Albany is distracted from his safety by the rivalry between Goneril and Regan.

In its emphasis on carnality *King Lear* resembles *Othello* whose characters either voice or act out their view of Eros. Yet, while this aspect of the play is much discussed in *Othello* criticism, it is largely ignored in studies of *King Lear*, and even when it is considered (as in analyses of Lear's sex nausea), it is typically approached as a symbol of human brutality, rapaciousness, and hypocrisy.[2] Without denying the symbolic value of the play's stress on sexuality, I will argue that *King Lear* is much more concerned with lust in action than with lust as symbol and that an understanding of this fact clarifies at least two of its much debated and interrelated problems. First, it shows that the king's movement from his egocentric love of the first scene, through anti-eroticism and anti-femininism, to disinterested love (that is to say, his progression from Eros to Agape) is required before his awakening to Cordelia and involves rejecting both his early idealization and his later condemnation of women. And second, it reveals the relevance of the various sex dramas and fantasies of other male characters to Lear's experience by showing how they not only foreshadow his transformation but are contained and to some extent resolved in the king himself. Finally, to this complex vision of human sexuality, Edmund stands out as a notable and menacing exception.

In the first scene of Act I Lear challenges Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia not just as child-

ren who ought to love him, but as children who ought to love him in a certain way because they are *daughters*. In doing so he reveals unambiguously that his initial assumption about the nature of women is based on the myth of the "eternal feminine," the female who is nurturing, selfless, changeless, and mothering.[3] Lear's question, "Which of you shall we say doth love us most?"[4] is indeed ritualistic, but it is too often forgotten that he decided to give where he found most favor only because he had no sons to inherit the kingdom.[5] Although none of the male witnesses to the ritual objects to the nature of the question as addressed to daughters, it is impossible to envision their reactions had Lear made a similar demand of sons and equally difficult to imagine how sons would respond to it. Certainly, if they agreed to respond at all, their declarations would differ from those of Goneril and Regan which are determined by the fact that dowries are at stake and by their awareness of Lear's need for solicitous cherishing by women. Goneril cleverly vows her love in feminine terms of "grace, health, beauty, honour" (1. 58), and Regan swears that she is only "felicitate" in the love of her father (1. 75). No husband can rival him. When Cordelia, for whom both husband and dowry are at risk, calls Lear's assumptions about feminine nature into question, she is dowered with his curse and with his vow that "pride, which she call plainess, [may] marry her." (1.129) Had Lear been dealing with sons, tragedy may well have ensued, but it would undoubtedly have taken a significantly different form.

In the aftermath of Lear's blind judgment, the phrases which the king uses about his daughters show his stubborn reliance upon the myth of the "eternal feminine." Of Cordelia, he had "thought to set [his] rest/On her kind nursery" (I. iv.315). Unlike Goneril, Regan will be "kind and comfortable" (I. iv. 315); her nature is "tender-hefted" and her eyes "Do comfort and not burn" (II. iv. 173-75). When he at last sees both of their natues truly, he directs his epithets and curses, all the terror of his language, directly at their femininity. Goneril must never have "A babe to honour her!" (II. iv. 290) and the "fen-suck'd fogs" must "Infect her beauty" (II. iv. 167-68). In the end both daughters are passionately dismissed as "unnatural hags" (II. iv. 280). Although false to his own roles as father and king, Lear's parting words juxtapose Goneril and Regan's unnatural rejection of their presumed roles as daughters with the most common noun for female fiend,[6] and thus emphasize his astonishment at their behaviour as *women*.

One need not resort to Freudian cries of "incest" to explain Lear's disillusionment. In his plans to abdicate he had relied on the humane characteristics of self-sacrifice and gentleness which the patriarchy had long demanded of women, and he holds the belief so strongly that to relinquish it requires Goneril and Regan's powerfully symbolic seizing of hands as they confront him with their united resistance to his demands in II, vi. With his doubly directed words, "O Fool! I shall go mad" (1. 288), Lear abandons forever the myth of the "eternal feminine" and replaces it with a virulent misogyny that will endure until his awakening to Cordelia.

Lear's desperate need to supplant a cherished belief with a more viable one is psychologically understandable, and that he should reflexively rely on yet another myth about women, the myth of the "insatiable strumpet,"[7] is unsurpising. Although in Jacobean drama this reaction is especially predictable from characters who suppose themselves cuckolds, any sort of female treachery may unleash the formulaic condemnation of women. Thus that Lear has been betrayed and that the betrayal is by women is enough to account for his condemnation of their sexuality and for his inversion of the "eternal feminine."

Lear hints at the myth of the "insatiable strumpet" quite early when he responds to "Goneril's accusations with "Degenerate bas-

tard!" (I. iv. 262) and later when he tells Regan that should she not be glad to see him he would divorce himself from her "mother's tomb, / Sepulchring an adult'ress" (II. iv. 132-33). True to her sex, the late queen was unfaithful. Clearly Lear finds the conventional response a comforting necessity, but for him the myth has the additional benefit of moral evasion. His blatantly desperate need to avoid the responsibility of paternity is manifest in his grim variant of a favorite Shakespearean joke about the inevitable uncertainty of fatherhood, with all its implications about female sexuality and to retain his illusion of innocence, he will malign the mother to the child. It is indicative, however, of the tumult in Lear's mind that he is unable to sustain the illusion for long. In his first encounter with Tom O'Bedlam he confesses that his flesh 'begot/Those pelican daughters" (III. iv. 74-75), and he adamantly admits to Gloucester that his daughters were "Got 'tween the lawful sheets" (IV. vi. 119). Yet, although as Riebetanz has noted, both Gloucester and Lear "come to acknowledege their children with their sins,"[8] Lear's restoration of his wife's honor does not preclude a more general condemnation of woman as, in the same scene, he indulges in a painfully ironic tolerance of the moral anarchy that engulfs him.

The culmination of Lear's anti-erotic tirade at Dover is the centaur image with which he exhausts his railings. In his final attempt to escape culpability, the explanation of evil and the damnation of man now lies in the sexual insatiability of all women:

> Down from the waist they are Centaurs,
> Though women all above:
> But to the girdle do the Gods inherit,
> Beneath is all the fiends: there's hell, there's darkness,
> There is the sulphurous pit-burning, scaldin, Stench, consumption; fie, fie, fie,! pah, pah![9]
>
> (IV. vi. 126-31)

That female lustfulness is the downfall of man and that woman's body serves the purposes of Satan was a commonplace of medieval Christian thought.[10] Yet Lear's compulsive and violent transformation of the classical centaur myth from males to females and his combining of it with the Christian view of women as satanic suggests his desperate need to believe his own imaginings and to project his self-hatred onto woman.[11] As Ferrante has so perfectly said of misogynist medieval poetry, "Woman, as the most obvious object of male concupiscence, is made to represent lust and thus is held responsible for it; *the object of temptation becomes the cause.*"[12]

Recently scholars such as Stilling and Kahn have demonstrated persuasively that the anti-feminist statements in the tragedies derive principally from self-anger, self-loathing, and the pain of disillusionment.[13] And Bamber has observed that by the end of the tragedies the hero has ceased projecting and can now "distinguish a good woman from a bad one (*Othello, Lear*) or has lost interest in the issue altogether (*Hamlet, Antony & Cleopatra*)."[14] In my view the second observation is far truer of *King Lear* than the first. Lear may have learned to distinguish one good woman from two bad ones, but he is not at all concerned with the issue of "good" and "bad" women either during his reunion with Cordelia or after their defeat. When the Gentleman in IV, vi, remarks that Lear has "one daughter,/Who redeems nature from the general curse/which twain have brought her to" (11 205-207), he speaks for the old Lear, not the new one. In Lear's mind the long delayed reunion is betweeen a man and a woman who is also his child ("For as I am a *man*, I think this *lady*/To be my *child* Cordelia" IV. vii. 69-70, emphasis added) and the welcomed imprisonment is a blessing on two mutually loving people. In brief, by the time of his *mea maxima culpa* in IV, vii, the evasion afforded by the projection of self-hatred onto women has been silently discarded, and thus by explicitly accepting the good

he has created, this "very foolish, fond old man" implicitly accepts the evil.

Mack's observation that when the tragic heroes are absent from the stage for some time we should "be on the watch for a new phase in the development of character"[15] is especially applicable to *King Lear*. The changes in the king between his exit in IV, vi, and his awakening in the following scene are profound ones and are largely undramatized. It is especially telling that Cordelia's kiss that repairs the violent harms done to him cannot be granted until the king "hath slept long" (IV. vii. 19) and that the king cannot accept it before he has dreamed the dreams of the damned. The allusion here to myth and folklore in which sleep is a necessary prelude to self-acceptance and new vision is a powerful one. In Lear's case this involves not just acknowledgment of guilt but acceptance of the feminine in himself, that capacity for gentleness and unqualified love that he had so recklessly rejected when he cast Cordelia from his heart. With this acceptance the unconscious need to project self-loathing vanishes and Lear is free to love or to hate himself as he consciously chooses. Having long known that he is more sinned against than sinning, Lear's idyllic vision of a future life with Cordelia implies his belief that he deserves the joys of Agape and, just as important, that such a life is worthy of him. Unlike Tom O'Bedlam's self-imprisoning nightmares when he "slept in the contriving of lust," (III. iv. 88) Lear's dreams have set him free.

The king's life-enhancing resolution of the "women problem," contains, comments upon, and fathoms attitudes toward women, sexuality, and love that to some extent remain mysterious in other male characters. In other words, Lear's experience fills out the silences about these matters as they are presented in the Fool, Tom O'Bedlam, and Gloucester, and by doing so, allows us to make sense of them. At the same time, however, the sexual attitudes and experiences of these intuitively faithful men, cast further light on Lear himself.

It is the Fool who first introduces negative images of sexuality which, as McElroy remarks, "invariably depict it in grotesque, denigrating terms, with the emphasis on codpieces, prostitutes, bawds, old lechers and veneral disease."[16] His early sexual jokes serve as a sinister prophecy that Goneril and Regan will eventually betray his master, and later, his voice functions as a kind of chorus to the fact of Gloucester's adultery and to the anti-erotic speeches of Poor Tom. Although it is Goneril and Regan's psychic violence and the startling appearance of Tom O'Bedlam that directly elicits Lear's obsession with lust in IV, vi, the Fool's insistence on human animality and sexual hypocrisy is clearly related to the king's conclusion that at heart all women are whores and all men, lechers. Indeed, the Fool lectures Lear directly about the frailty of human bonds by warning that "he's mad that trusts in the tameness of a wolf, a horse's health, a boy's love, or a whore's oath" (III. vi. 18-19). At the very least he feeds Lear's fantasies about the sexuality of women, and the line just quoted looks very much like the imaginative source of Lear's transformation of the centaur.

If the Fool's jokes go surprisingly beyond the traditional license allowed to the clown, so does his loving commitment to his master and to Cordelia. Fidelity, not bawdry, is his most telling characteristic. Rosenberg rightly observes that despite his anti-erotic songs, "there is one part in Fool's mind that will yet sing for love. *What he his heart should make.*"[17] Yet, it is important to note that unlike Touchstone, who acknowledges that "man hath his desires" and decides to participate in the universal folly, this Fool's sole commitment is to the king and it is toward him alone that he directs the irrational devotion of the lover despite his awareness of the perils involved. The fool comes close to acknowledging this stance after Lear accuses the elements of joining with his daughters "'gainst a

head/so old and white as this" (III. ii. 21-24). In his rejoinder the Fool picks upon the word "head" glances at Lear as the master and the Fool himself as the "codpiece" whose devotion to the unhoused king brings misery. When Kent inquires "Who's there?" and the Fool responds "Marry, here's grace and a codpiece; that's a wise man and a Fool" (ii. 39-41), he presents himself as the "codpiece" whose alignment with the powerless is as irrational as that of the lover whose desire overwhelms his reason.

Welsford is right to say that in *King Lear* the Fool "is the sage-fool who sees the truth," but wrong, I believe, to conclude that "his role has even more intellectual than emotional significance."[18] The Fool's decision to tarry and "let the wise man fly" (II. iv. 82-83) is dangerously foolish, but at the same time it is the play's first unambiguous example of intuitive love surmounting self-interest and rational policy. Goneril and Regan hate the Fool precisely because they sense this devotion as a threat to their pragmatic rationalism. Nor are his loving impulses lost on the king as the conflation of the Fool with Cordelia in "And my poor Fool is hang'd" (V. iii. 305) so movingly suggests. To the end the contradiction in the Fool's ability to hold a thoroughly negative view of Eros and to hold to the king with the commitment of a lover remains unresolved. Yet it does alert us to the same contradiction we later see in King Lear's more imaginative misogynist visions which occur, ironically, as he makes his way to Cordelia at Dover where he works out a dichotomy that remains unexamined in his Fool.

Tom O'Bedlam represents visually the Fool's view that sexuality is predatory and destructive. As he makes clear in his preachings to Lear, there is a direct causal relationship between his history of debauchery and his madness. In his response to the king's self-reflexive question, "What hast thou been?" Tom paints a picture of the daily life of the gallant court servant whose hours are devoted to sensual pursuits:

> A serving man, proud in heart and mind; that curl'd my hair, wore gloves in my cap, serv'd the lust of my mistress' heart, and did the act of darkness with her; swore as many oaths as I spake words, and broke them in the sweet face of Heaven; one that slept in the contriving of lust, and wak'd to do it. Wine lov'd I deeply, dice dearly, and in woman out-paramour'd the Turk: false of heart, light of ear, bloody of hand; hog in sloth, fox in stealth, wolf in greediness, dog in madness, lion in prey.
>
> (III. iv. 84-95)

Although Tom mentions several sins, his main emphasis is on bodily appetite: the curled hair, the casual oaths broken, the seductions plotted, all relate to his obsession with sexual conquest. Even his catalogue of animals, so evocative of the Seven Deadly Sins, creates a composite picture of the libertine. The self-description ends with a plea for sexual discipline: "Let not the creaking of shoes nor the rustling of silks betray thy poor heart to woman: keep thy foot out of brothels, thy hand out of plackets, thy pen from lenders' books, and defy the foul fiend: (11. 95-99). It is that final "and" which implies that it was Tom's mindless engagement in impersonal and intemperate sex which allowed the "foul fiend" to triumph.

Tom's fixation on sexual depravity differs from that of the king in that he refers principally to male sexuality, speaks from personal experience, and reaches a different conclusion. Unlike Lear who projects so much of his sexual revulsion onto women, Tom's principal emphasis is on his own corruption. Where Lear fancies that woman's genitals are possessed by the devil, Tom acknowledges that "Five fiends have been in Poor Tom at once," including Obidicut, the devil of lust. (IV. i. 58-59). In contrast to Lear's plea for moral disorder, Tom preaches the way of the orthodox: "Obey thy parents: keep thy word's justice; swear not; commit not with man's sworn spouse; set not thy sweet heart on

proud array" (III. iv. 80-83). Tom's warning about lust, then, does more than express the Bedlamite's conventional fixation. However inadequate his morality may ultimately be to Lear's total experience, the king could do worse than seize upon Tom, as he instinctively does, as his "learned Theben."

Although Tom's self-blame contains and thus anticipates that of Lear, his self-descriptions do, however subtly, imply a view of women that differs little from the king's misogyny and are just as clearly an imposition of internal male fantasies onto the despised "other." Not only does Tom label sexual intercourse as an "act of darkness," (thus connecting it, as does Lear, with the satanic), and depersonalize women with the synecdochic "plackets," but his conviction that by succumbing to temptation he "serv'd the lust of [his] mistress' heart" presignals Lear's assertion that all women are centaurs "Down from the waist." In keeping with this view, man, Tom warns, must not betray his "poor heart" to the needs of woman's body. Tom does, in some respects, serve importantly as a mirror to make Lear see better, but the king's vision, as we have seen, comes to surpass even that of his philosopher.

By the time Lear encounters Gloucester at Dover he has, so he fondly believes, found answers to his questions concerning human animality, and he is initially oblivious to his old friend except as a living example of his conclusions. Gloucester is assigned the role of adulterer and audience as Lear passes judgment based on the false premise that Edmund was true and addresses a Gloucester who no longer exists. The Gloucester who in I, i, could display the "spirit of a gentleman and the manners of a rowdy"[19] disappeared with his "Then Edgar was abus'd" (III. vii. 90) and became the man before Lear after his "henceforth I'll bear/ Affliction till it do cry out itself/ 'Enough, enough,' and die" (IV. vi. 75-77). Lear's obliviousness to these events accounts for much of the scene's pathos. In another respect, however, his taunts of Gloucester are even more heart-rending, for Gloucester's sexual sin was neither hypocritical, nor calculated, nor totally bestial. It is surely not to excuse his act to point out that it is qualitatively different from Lear's examples of "luxury," that one's judgment of it is affected by his unspeakable misery, and that, in the context of the play, it is not as relevant to questions about human nature as it is to the problem of the relationship between the gods and humankind.

Shakespeare's concern with this matter is reflected in the three strikingly different images of Edmund's conception: the bastard's sarcastic "My father compounded with my mother under the dragon's tail, and my nativity was under *Ursa major*; so that it follows I am rough and lecherous" (I. ii. 135-38); Edgar's image of the "dark and vicious place" of the bastard's begetting (V. iii. 173), and Gloucester's jocular and racy confession, "though this knave came something saucily to the world before he was sent for, yet was his mother fair; there was good sport at his making, and the whore son must be acknowledged" (I. i. 21-24). Gloucester's description, as often noted, is certainly prideful and insensitive but it is preceded by a declaration of affection for Edmund; it is recalled with delight; and its spirit is essentially life-affirming. This is especially clear when it is compared to the sexual loathing of the Fool, Tom, and Lear, to the joyless possessive carnality of Goneril and Regan, and to the cool sexual plots of Edmund.

It has not, I believe, been noticed that unlike Tom and Lear, Gloucester places no blame for his sinful sexual indulgence on the lust of woman's heart. In his recognition that Edmund's "mother was fair" and that there was "good sport at his making" there is no hint of the insatiable and diabolic female. Gloucester may have "the manners of a rowdy," but in coming to terms with his own sexuality, his inner strength and his self-awareness rule out the moral evasion afforded by the traditional scapegoat. In this res-

pect, his strength is far greater than Lear's. Yet the connection between his refusal to project his guilt and the desperate question "Dost thou know Dover?" which concludes his confession in IV. i., is surely one of Shakespeare's finest ironies. Since the anger that such projection always arouses toward its object sustains the king, a similar reaction might well have saved the despairing Gloucester.

To Edgar, on the other hand, the relationship between Edmund's conception and Gloucester's physical torment is simple and direct and a clear indication of cosmic justice:

> The Gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
> Make instruments to plague us;
> The dark and vicious place where thee he got
> Cost him his eyes
> . (V. iii. 170-73)

Edgar's notoriously debatable pronouncement may not be, as many critics claim, mean-spirited, but it is most certainly based on a radically limited understanding of Gloucester's experience. Both blessed and tormented by a broader understanding, the audience knows that although Gloucester undergoes physical torture because his marital infidelity produced the betraying bastard, it is his fidelity to the king that makes Edmund's betrayal possible. Thus, in an ironic transformation, Gloucester's frivolous and bawdy "Do you smell a fault?" (I. i. 16) becomes Regan's deadly serious "let him smell/ His way to Dover" (III. vii. 92-93). If the gods made Edmund as an instrument to plague Gloucester, then they also made a man whose intuitive decision that he "must incline to the king" (III. iv. 14-15) mirrors the Fool's example and anticipates Lear's movement from Eros to Agape.

Too often commentators dismiss Gloucester as a stereotype and refer to his casual attitude toward adultery as commonplace. Although it is true that the dramatization of carnality in *King Lear* derives initially from stereotypes, Shakespear's development of his characters takes them far beyond the simple and the familiar. The playwright certainly used the traditions which allowed the Fool to be "free to utter uncouth and obscene language," the Bedlamite to manifest possession erotically, and obsession with lust to be a common manifestation of madness,[20] but he also used his imaginative expansion of such traditional characters to clarify and comment upon the protagonist's response to his self-created tragedy.

A similar method is evident after Act IV in the imposition of the "insatiable strumpet" sterotype onto the characterization of Goneril and Regan. At this point the rationality that had guided all their policy gives way to a lust that is blind, irrational, and self-destructive. Goneril is entirely serious when she says, "I had rather lose the battle than that sister/Should loosen him and me" (V. i. 18-19).[21] Perhaps Edgar's instinctive response to Goneril's designs ("O indistinguish'd space of woman's will!" (IV. vi. 273) best shows that the issue here is specifically the lust of women. Although this female stereotype was required to round out the play's concern with destructive carnality, a principal effect of introducing it is to show how Edmund, who moves into the main plot after Act IV, creates and controls the world he lives in, and how Goneril and Regan become dupes of his political goals and consequently act out a fantasy that is not entirely their own.

One of the few pleasurable ironies in *King Lear* is that the evil daughters who take such pride in their perceptiveness and foresight are so easily deceived by Edmund's appearance of sexual interest. Bethell's description of him as "pleasing to women, debonair, and with all the courtly graces" and Knight's that "he has an impudent charm of conscious superiority and sex attraction,"[22] may speak for many in the audience. Yet Edmund's assertion that he would

have been "rough and lecherous" whatever his nativity, his disarmingly comic reference to lust, and even his apparently erotic responses to Goneril and Regan should not be taken at face value. Each of his actions, dialogues, and soliloquies concerning carnality shows that he values it solely as a means of acquiring power.

Edmund's disinterest in sex *per se* tends to be obscured by the fact that with the exception of the Fool, he functions in a play which is almost entirely devoid of humor. The comic images he uses on several occasions are so contrary to the deadly seriousness of the others that they cloud his basic cynicism, his scorn for those who, unlike himself, succumb to "goatish disposition," and his pragmatic manipulation of that quality in others. Take, for instance, his droll image of the adulterer begetting a more energetic offspring than those fops conceived "within a dull, stale, tired bed." Although the lines might seem to evince a lively sexuality, his unambiguous conclusion, "Well, then,/Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land," immediately negates this impression. Even the cleverly obscene lines at the end of this soliloquy indicate the connection, always in his mind, between sexuality and power:

> Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed,
> And my invention thrive, Edmund the base
> Shall top th'legitimate - : I grow, I prosper:
> Now, gods, stand up for bastards!
> (I.ii. 11-22)

The first image, which shows that Edmund conceives of his ambition in sexual terms, is typical of his attitude; the bastard will "top the legitimate son just as Gloucester "topped" Edmund's mother. The relationship between sexuality and power is even more blatant in the second image with the quick pun on tumesence which turns his prayer into a kind of "phallic ritual,"[23] and conveys the unabashed union in his mind between prosperity and sexual potency. However charming Edmund may be, his clear-eyed, rational, and pragmatic use of sexual passion links him to other Shakespearean villains, such as Iago and Richard III, whose exploitation of the sexuality of others is one important indication of their lack of humanity.

That Edmund feels no genuine attraction to either Goneril or her sister is clear in both "wooing" scenes. In IV, ii, where he must make a hasty retreat to Cornwall's palace because of Albany's changed attitude, he shares a brief farewell with Goneril whose desire is scarcely disquised by her genteel rhetoric:

> This kiss, if it durst speak,
> Would stretch thy spirits up into the air.
> Conceive, and fare thee well.
> (11. 22-24)

The subtle bribe and the rather obvious sexual puns show her strange combination of cunning and crassness. Edmund, however, is permitted only one response—"Yours in the ranks of death." (1. 24) The powerful ironies of Edmund's line should not detract us from its cold formality. In the parallel encounter with Regan in V, i, he is even more remote when he assures Regan that he has not found his way (in her amazingly delicate phrase) to Goneril's forfended place," by his evasive "That thought abuses you" (11. 10-12).

In his soliloquy at the end of V, i, Edmund first expresses his feeling about the two rivals. Far from revealing his "rough and lecherous" nature, the lines show how he uses his sexual attractiveness to manipulate:

> To both these sisters have I sworn my love;
> Each jealous of the other, as the stung
> Are of the adder. Which of them shall I take?
> Both? one? or neither? Neither can be enjoy'd
> If both remain alive...
> (11. 55-59)

In this passage Goneril and Regan disappear as people (note that they are not even named); from Edmund's point of view the enjoyment of "these sisters" is worthless except as a way to the crown.

The latter part of the play, then, moves beyond Lear's fantasy of a world in heat to the new, perhaps even more terrifying, world of Edmund's unfeeling manipulation of sexual instinct. Because Lear's imaginings are based entirely on the old order, the only one he can possibly know, they cannot begin to encompass the dangerous methods of the new one. And even Goneril and Regan whose early Machiavellianism aligned them with Edmund are as mistaken about him as they are about their father and die as oblivious to Edmund's true feelings as he does to theirs. Edmund's strategy is the antithesis of Lear's "rascal beadle" who longs to "use" the whore he whips (IV. vi. 162-64) and of the "simp'ring dame" whose appetite is more riotous than the "fetchew or the soiled horse" (ii. 120-25). Both strategies are profoundly hypocritical, but the one Lear detects (and he speaks as if he were the first to observe it) is as old as mankind, and the one Edmund represents displays the *modus operandi* of a new sexual politics. Ironically, in the world of Edmund, Lear's reliance on the old myths is dangerously naive. But besides exposing the naivete of Lear's mad visions, Edmund's sexual exploitation of women also exposes the sexual imaginings of the other male characters by making it unavoidably clear that such fantasies are not about women at all: they are about the men who have them. In a very real sense, Goneril and Regan must sink to the play's requirements.

If *King Lear* had followed the model of *Othello*, its sinister picture of sexuality would be countered by at least one character similar to Desdemona whose passion for her husband is so pitifully ingenuous. Instead, no counterview to the destructive or selfish sexual activities is offered. Kent's role of faithful servant precludes such matters. When Lear queries him about his age, Kent replies in terms that dismiss sexual concerns as irrelevant: "not so young, Sir, to love a woman for a singing, nor so old to dote on her for anythng" (I. iv. 40-41); and with the exception of his comment on "woman's will" Edgar is silent on the subject. Albany, who is offered a recognizable sexual role, quite simply refuses to play it. His self-declared "great love" for Goneril and his stock situation of trusting husband betrayed by the cunning wife could have led easily to a soliloquy on the depth of his love, the frailty of women, and the moral necessity of revenge. Remarkably, in his exposure of Edmund and Goneril in V, iii, Albany's first concern is not with his position as cuckold but with the fact that Edmund has threatened the state by plotting the murder of its Prince. The absence of expressed sexual jealousy is consistent with Albany's progressive moral growth as he is forced to make choices that challenge his commitments and his honour. Thus, although we see him in only one sexual role, his refusal to play it as prescribed is as significant as Goneril's eagerness to play hers.

With Cordelia and France, Shakespeare deemphasized both the romantic and the physical. That France genuinely loves his "unpriz'd precious maid" is not open to question; he does, after all, define love in terms adequate to the play's action when he insists that "Love's not love/When it is mingled with regards that stand/ Aloof from th' entire point" (I. i. 238-40). But he is not drawn to Cordelia because of her dazzling beauty as he is in nearly all of the sources,[24] and he does not fall in love at first sight as he does in *The Chronicle*. (I. 7) On the contrary, not once does he refer to Cordelia's physical appearance and he passes an exteded period in Lear's court before accepting her. When he at last accepts her dowerless, his reasons are unambiguous: "Thee and thy virtues here I seize upon" (1. 252). Similarly Shakespeare denies Cordelia the role of the Princess who will marry only for love. In *The Chronicle*, when Cordelia first encounters the Gallian King, she declares,

"Except my heart could love, and heart could like,/Better then any that I ever saw, / His great estate no more should move my mind, /Then mountaynes move by blast of every wind" (I. 7. 667-70). In contrast, Cordelia's silence in response to France's offer of marriage and to his lyrical expression of joy at having won her, is striking.

Shakespeare's emphasis on Cordelia's devotion to her father at the expense of *The Chronicle's* romantic sexuality, and on the contrast between her selflessness and, to use Hazlett's apt phrase, "the cold, calculating, obdurate selfishness of the elder daughters,"[25] is consonant with his polarization of all attitudes and characters through this play. Tate's version may have fulfilled conditioned expectations for an alternative to sexual cynicism and bestiality, but it did so at the expense of the playwright's larger design.

In the conclusion to his study of this play Maynard Mack suggests that "man's tragic fate, as *King Lear* presents it, comes into being with his entry into relatedness, which is his entry into humanity" and adds that by ultimately choosing Cordelia Lear "has made the choice that he should have made in the beginning."[26] It is equally telling, on the other hand, that from the beginning others intuitively choose relatedness to Lear. Cordelia rejects her father's clumsy and misquided bargain of love in order, paradoxically, to preserve it; Kent ignores Lear's order of banishment in order to serve where he stands condemned; Gloucester puts his own life in peril that his old master might be relieved; Albany chooses justice, honor, and gratitude over his "Most barbarus, most degenerate" wife (IV. ii. 43); and the Fool decides to tarry. Unlike Hamlet or Macbeth, Lear is never isolated, and however indirectly he may express it, he is gratefully aware of the presence of others. Lear's entrance into humanity is not, it seems to me, so much a choice as a progressive awareness of the value of disinterested love which grows, in large part, out of his awareness of the behavior and choices of others, and which entails, perhaps above all, the rejection of private misogynist fantasy.

After the defeat of Cordelia's forces, Lear tries to comfort her with a vision of mutual blessings that their imprisonment will bring. The pastoral life of spiritual contentment and personal harmony that he foresees is patently idealistic and illusory. One need not conclude, however, that Lear has learned little from his experience or that the catastrophe negates Agape as a supreme value. From the first scene onward he has witnessed nothing between animality and transcendent love. Little wonder that he envisions an extreme example of the latter in which to Cordelia's request for paternal blessing, he will ask filial forgiveness. It is with this image that the play's movement toward Agape is complete and with it that its elaborate stress on Eros takes its place in the whole design.

NOTES

1. In discussing Tom O'Bedlam as a character separate from Edgar, I follow the example of several critics. See, for example, S.L. Bethell, *Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1944), pp. 76-77 and Marvin Rosenberg, The Masks of King Lear* (Berkeley: Univ. of Claifornia Press, 1972), p. 160.
2. See William R. Elton, King Lear and the Gods (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1966), p. 269; Robert Heilman, *This Great Stage* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1947), p. 100; Irvin Ribner, *Patterns in Shakespearian Tragedy (London: Methuen, 1960), pp. 128-29; and Robert Speaight, Nature in Shakespearian Tragedy* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 17.
3. For an informative discussion of the theological and social history of this myth, see Mary Daly, *The Church and The Second Sex* (Rev., ed., New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1974), pp. 147-65.
4. The Arden *King Lear*, ed. Kenneth Muir (1952; rpt. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1959), I. i. 51. All further references to *King Lear* will be made to this edition and cited in the text.
5. This explanation is given explicitly in *The Mirror for Magistrates* (1. 48) and *The True Chronicle Historie of King Leir* (Act 1, scene 1) and it is implied in *Historia Anglicana (Book IV. Chapt. XI)* and Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (Book II, Canto X, 27). All are reprinted in *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, VII, ed. Geoffrey Bullough (London: Routledge, 1973). All further references to these works will appear in the text.
6. In discussing the witches in *Macbeth*, Willard Farnham shows that "the most common name in Shakespeare's age for the worst sort of female demon to be found in fairy mythology was 'hag'" and that "by the sixteenth became an inclusive term for female fiend..." *Shakespeare's Tragic Frontier: The World of*

the Final Tragedies (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1950), p. 96.

7. The term is used by Katherine Rogers in *The Troublesome Helpmate: A History of Misogyny in Literature* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1966), pp. 68 f.
8. John Reibetanz, *The Lear World: A Study of King Lear in its dramatic context* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1977), p. 29.
9. Muir notes that Lear borrows much of his language for the last three lines of this passage from a section in Harsnett's *A Declaration of Egregious Popishe Impostures* which describes how to exorcise the devil from female genitals. See "Samuel Harsnett and *King Lear*," RES,NS, II (1951), 21.
10. The allegation is too well-known to need documentation, but perhaps Robert Burton best summarized this medieval legacy to Renaissance thought when he declared that woman's body "*is the way to Hell, and goes down to the Chambers of Death.*" *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Floyd Dell and Paul Jordan-Smith (New York: Tudor Publishing Co., 1927), p. 252.
11. For a detailed discussion of the significance of Lear's substitution of female genitals for the lower half of the centaur, see my "Goneril and Regan: 'So Horrid as in Woman,'" *San Jose Studies*, 10 (1984), 61-62.
12. Roger Stilling, for example, argues that in *Othello* Shakespeare shows "misogynous iconography to be mainly a fantasy of the diseased male imagination and the failure of love"; *Love and Death in Renaissance Tragedy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1976), p. 5. See also Coppélia Kahn, "'The Savage Yoke': Cuckoldry and Marriage," Ch. 5 of *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* (Berkeley: Univ. of California press, 1981).
14. Linda Bamber, *Comic Women, Tragic Men: A Study of Gender and Genre in Shakespeare* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1982), p. 16.
15. Maynard Mack, "The World of *Hamlet*," *The Yale Review*, XLI (1952), 512.
16. Bernard McElroy, *Shakespeare's Mature Tragedies* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), p. 188.
17. Rosenberg, p. 194.
18. Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (1935; rpt. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1966), p. 256.
19. H.N. Hudson, *Lectures on Shakespeare* (1848; rpt. New York: AMS, 1971), II, 222.
20. For discussion of this aspect of the Fool, see Robert Hillis Goldsmith, *Wise Fools in Shakespeare* (East Lansing: Michigan State Univ. Press, 1955), p. 33; of characteristics of the Bedlamite, Rosenberg, p. 212; and of sex and madness, Kenneth Muir, "Madness in *King Lear*," *Shakespeare Survey*, 13 (1960), 31.
21. Goneril's remark recalls St. Jerome's assertion that woman's lust "engrosses all thoughts except for the passion which it feeds." "Against Jovinianus" in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1893), Bk. I, VI, 367.
22. Bethell, p. 64, and G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire* (1930; rpt. Methuen, 1965), p. 200.
23. Heilman points out that since Edmund puns on tumescence, "his prayer becomes phallic ritual." p. 319.
24. In *Historia Anglicana* Geoffrey of Monmouth writes that the King of the Franks "having heard of the Fame of *Cordeilla's* Beauty" wanted to marry her. Bullough, p. 312. And Holinshed records that "Aganippus, hearing of the beautie, womanhood, and good conditions of the said Cordeilla, desired to have her in marriage. . ." Bullough, p. 17.
25. William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (1817; rpt. in *King Lear: Text, Sources and Criticism*, ed. G.B. Harrison and R.F. McDonnell (New York, 1962), p. 88.
26. *King Lear in Our Time* (1965; rpt. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1972), pp. 111-12.