

# Shaking Manhoods and Wandering Wombs: Castration, Hysteria, and Motherlessness in *King Lear*

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**WRITER'S COMMENT:** *At the time I was writing this essay for Professor Dolan's course in Shakespeare's Later Works, I was simultaneously working on my senior honor's thesis examining Renaissance ballads in correlation with "unbound" and disorderly women. Clearly, I had themes of gender and the body on my mind when I was looking at Shakespeare's King Lear. In this play, gender is made prosthetic as body parts become props and props become body parts, men play both masculine women and womanly men, and an imagined parthenogenic society "consequently damns itself into impotence and sterility." Professor Dolan has taught me to write analytical papers passionately—"Write what's interesting to you!"—and has encouraged me to engage with topics I thought were too quirky to work (bears, unbound bodies, and wandering wombs, oh my!). Under her guidance, my writing has become less about settling on a safe topic and reaching a page limit and more about challenging myself to pursue unusual threads. Plus, a peculiar title can't hurt.*



—Michelle Tang Jackson

**INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT:** *Ms. Jackson responded to a prompt in English 117C (Shakespeare: Late Plays) that gave students a lengthy quotation from critic Janet Adelman and asked them to consider the changes Shakespeare makes in adapting a source play (as Adelman summarizes it) into his King Lear and the implications of those changes. The prompt asked students to formulate a thesis in relation to Adelman's claim regarding where or who the mothers are in King Lear and why that matters. Jackson not only rose to the challenge of this very structured prompt but also managed to craft her*

*own original and ambitious interpretation of Shakespeare's play. Her essay argues that, in the absence of their wives, the play's two central patriarchs, Lear and Gloucester, become feminized and the play then charts their anxious response to that feminization. The paper combines bold argument and careful attention to textual detail.*

—Frances Dolan, English Department



IN COMPARING THE SOURCE PLAY *The True Chronicle Historie of King Leir* to Shakespeare's *King Lear*, critic Janet Adelman states that Leir's "decision to abdicate and divide the kingdom is presented in part as his response to [his wife's] loss . . . [His action] starts with the fact of maternal loss; *Lear* excises this loss, giving us an uncanny sense of a world created by fathers alone" (104). As opposed to the Leir that divides his kingdom as a response to grief, Shakespeare's Lear appears to act upon a subconscious fear of transformative female power. As Adelman points out, "in recognizing his daughters as part of himself [Lear] will be led to recognize not only his terrifying dependence on female forces outside himself but also an equally terrifying femaleness within himself" (104). Thus, the elimination of mother characters in Shakespeare's version models Lear into a kind of woman—creating a tension which manifests itself throughout the text in the form of allusions to metaphorical castration, hysteria, and womb imagery. In the case of Lear, hysteria is the counter to castration—or rather, its counterpart. The removal or transfer of (masculine) power represented by land, power, or the infliction of an injury results in an overwhelmingly (female) emotional response. These emotions, deemed too womanly, bring the victim closer to the female "realm" of bodily and emotional unboundedness—thus, characters like Lear and Gloucester are torn from their active power and suffer wandering hysteria as the outcome.

For Lear, the terrifying experience of metaphorical castration appears in several forms. Lear constantly speaks of "shaking off" and unburdening himself of power in his old age (1.1.39). In the play's very first scene, we find King Lear handing over his kingdom to two women—his daughters. Moreover, Lear makes this act physical by dividing a map and handing his daughters the pieces with his coronet (1.1.37-38). This image embodies the corporeal act of separating himself from his autho-

rial power—one might even imagine a staged version wherein the map is represented by a phallic rolled scroll. The next example of castration can be found in Act Two, when Goneril and Regan haggle over Lear's retinue. In 1.4, Goneril describes the knights as

Men so disordered, so debauched and bold  
That this our court, infected with their manners,  
Shows like a riotous inn. Epicurism and lust  
Makes it more like a tavern or a brothel  
Than a graced palace. The shame itself doth speak  
For instant remedy . . .  
A little to disquantity your train. . . . (1.4.236-243)

This description paints Lear's hundred knights as the extensions of Lear and his masculinity, a presence which threatens to turn Goneril's female-ruled palace (and kingdom) into something as base and masculine as a brothel wherein men rule over women. Goneril's solution is to cut off Lear's "train," an action that mirrors the earlier division of the kingdom wherein Lear divides the map. As Lear has no male heirs, the knights serve as extended male family members as well as a masculine force within the play. In this way, Goneril's demand can be likened to both a literal and metaphorical physical castration as it affects a body of males. Besides a decreed separation from land and power, Lear is forced to cut down his corps, his unit of men. As Lear's daughters join forces and wield their newly acquired power to "cut off" Lear's retinue of rowdy knights, we find the formerly raging Lear clinging to his last masculine attribute. Moreover, the sisters figuratively cut down his manhood quite cruelly. Lear desperately begs, upon his knees, yet the sisters first demand half, then three-quarters of the men, and then finally insist upon the whole of Lear's unit—in doing this, the sisters instill in Lear a false sense of hope while reducing the king to petty bargaining. The final decision by the sisters is a powerful conjunction of text and action, the image of the two women with clasped hands menacing their elderly father, the former king, and Regan uttering the words: "What need one?" (1.4.263). This sentence acts as a sentencing, a declaration that diminishes nearly all of Lear's remaining masculine power and can even be understood as a joke on the sisters' part—who needn't one penis between the two of them (with the exception of the divisive power of Edmund later in the play). Perhaps the Fool best points out the inevitability of metaphoric castration when he tells Lear that he has been "full of songs"

e'er since thou mad'st thy daughters thy mothers; for when thou  
gav'st them the rod, and put'st down thine own breeches,  
Then they for sudden joy did weep. (1.4.167-169)

Here we see not only the inversion of daughters turned mothers for a “child-changed father,” but also the gender and role reversal and sexual innuendos of Lear pulling down his pants, surrendering his “rod” willingly, and inviting punishment from his daughters.

Lear's emotional response to metaphoric castration puts him on perilous ground, distancing him from the masculine sphere and drawing him closer toward the sphere of female hysteria. Lear's reaction to Goneril's demand in Act One demonstrates his anxiety over this separation:

. . . I am ashamed  
That thou hast power to shake my manhood thus!  
That these hot tears, which break from me perforce,  
Should make thee worth them. (1.4.293-295)

With this statement, Lear expresses both his shame and grief with weeping while simultaneously recognizing that it is a woman, *Goneril*, who “hast power” to threaten his masculine prowess. Interestingly, Lear uses the verb “break” to describe how his tears are physically wrenched from his body against his will. This shadows the idea of hysteria and castration as counterparts—once Lear is stripped of his land and men, he is reduced to tears and thus sees himself as womanly. Lear repeats this dual reaction of grief and shame in Act Two, Scene Four, when he acknowledges that there is no hope for retaining even one of his knights:

. . . let not women's weapons, water drops,  
Stain my man's cheeks . . .  
. . . .  
You think I'll weep.  
No, I'll not weep.  
(*Storm and tempest*)  
I have full cause of weeping, but this heart  
Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws  
Or ere I'll weep. O fool, I shall go mad! (2.4.276-277, 282-286)

Not only does Lear fear the femininity of tears, but he considers them a type of female weapon. Here, hysteria rises above the affliction of castration, as it has the power to actively incite rather than cripple. Furthermore, Lear draws the line between what is masculine and what is

feminine—hysterical, womanly tears have no place on his “man’s cheeks.” Yet a few moments later, we find Lear at a critical psychological juncture: defiance (“You *think* I’ll weep”), denial (“No, I’ll not weep”), and finally descent into a hysterical storm of emotion. Lear not only defends his fit as having “full cause,” he also excuses himself, reutilizing the verb *break* to describe his emotional state. He would rather his heart break before he weeps; yet, the break between Lear and his kingdom, power, men, and heart have led to a break in his stoicism as well as a break with the masculine realm, making way for a floodgate of female emotion—a prediction he makes with “I shall go mad!” This overwhelming sensation threatens his masculinity further, as he senses the encroaching peril of ultimate “feminine madness”: hysteria.

Despite Lear’s attempts to avoid the womanly sphere of emotion, hysteria occurs throughout the play as a consequence of the tension between motherlessness and motherfulness. The foremost example of the parallel between femininity and hysteria is uttered by Lear as he feels himself slowly descending into madness:

O! how this mother swells up toward my heart;  
*Hysterica passio*, down, thou climbing sorrow;  
Thy element’s below . . . (2.4.56-57)

Merriam Webster denotes that *hysteria* has its roots in the Greek word *hysteria* meaning womb. The concept of “hysteria” is explained fittingly by Kate Chegdzoy in her essay on early modern “Impudent Women”: “[the womb was] imaged almost as a creature with an independent existence . . . [that] would wander its owner’s body in search of satisfaction, overpowering her speech, senses, and mental faculties” (1). This poses an interesting tension for Lear, who describes his hysteria as a swelling, climbing sensation. As well as being an overwhelming of emotion, the diction here mirrors what Adelman describes as the “terrifying femaleness” inherent in Lear. It also illustrates the action of Goneril and Regan—the external female forces climbing determinedly towards Lear’s heart. A few moments later, Lear again attempts to smother his welling emotion: “O me, my heart, my rising heart! But down!” (2.4.119). Here, Lear understands his own feelings as a womb overtaking his body. His heart is transformed to a wandering womb that longs to be expressed. This transformation also causes a transition of location—Lear’s emotions are erupting from what he deems the lower, feminine sphere of the body. Not only do these speeches describe King Lear’s emotional fit; they also

demonstrate his attitudes toward female status. As Lear declares “Thy element’s below” (in the womb or abdomen), he draws attention to his receding manhood and the increasing femininity taking its place. Lear also points ironically to the idea that a woman’s rank should be below a man’s while simultaneously being overtaken by feminine sentiment. Later, it is this irreconcilable emotional state that forces Lear to actually leave the refuge of the palace and roam through the stormy heath—thus Lear becomes a walking metaphor for hysteria, the wandering womb.

The lack of mothers in the play results in a text laden with examples of a strange juxtaposition of violence and reproduction. Edgar describes the blinded Gloucester as his “father with bleeding rings, / Their precious stones new lost” (5.3.188-90). Gloucester’s blinding is similar to castration as well as to violent violation of the female body. In Act Three, Gloucester loses his “precious stones.” While “stones” is a common euphemism for testicles, they could also be a reference to children as in Act One, when Cordelia calls her sisters “The jewels of our father” (1.1.274). Thus, Gloucester’s “bleeding rings” could signify the wounds resulting from castration, the bleeding after-birth of a pregnancy, or even blood rendered at the loss of virginity. Again, we return to the idea of the “wandering womb”—once Gloucester has had his eyes brutally separated from his body, he is aligned with the feminine and with wandering. The eyes are an integral part of his active power. With a crippling handicap dealt to his masculine clout and the wombs of his eye sockets now empty, Gloucester is forced (much like Lear) to wander the heath in an emotional hysteria.

The problem with hysteria acting as a counter to castration is the fact that it leaves wombs barren—any chance of reproduction seems utterly impossible. The fact that Lear has produced only daughters can be seen as a type of (hysterically-inclined) barrenness in itself. Culturally, a monarchy would have desired a son. Furthermore, in a kingdom seemingly bereft of mothers, the lack of a Prince Lear eliminates the possibility for continuing that “uncanny . . . world created by fathers alone” (Adelman 104). And yet, *King Lear* does include a type of mother-loss in its first moments when Cordelia says “nothing” in response to her father’s request for love (1.1.89). Because of her barren statement, Cordelia actually shatters this uncanny world created by fathers—she devotes only half her love to her father; the other half is pledged to the King of France. Because of her good nature and devotion, Cordelia is the one of Lear’s

three daughters that carries the most potential to become an actual child-bearing mother. Yet this is incongruous within the motherless world created in *King Lear* and so Cordelia must be eliminated so that the order of Lear's kingdom may remain intact and sterile.

Whereas the source play—*The True Chronicle Historie of King Leir*—describes a world (according to Janet Adelman) birthed from the emotional loss of a Queen mother, Shakespeare's adaptation of *King Lear* imagines a world built upon a solely parthenogenic society and consequently damns itself into impotence and sterility. Lear and Gloucester are metaphorically castrated, the daughters are either cursed with infertility (in a sense, a type of hysteria) or killed, and Lear's unsettling desire for Cordelia's love can never come to fruition because of her resistance and her eventual death. Thus, *King Lear* began with a motherless society and concludes with a bleeding and barren kingdom with no hope of procreation, as its characters have eradicated every possibility for motherhood.



## Works Cited

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