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Shakespeare's *King Lear*

The True Nature of Cordelia

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Abstract

This essay explores the nature of Cordelia, the youngest daughter of King Lear in the tragedy with the same name, written by William Shakespeare. Cordelia has often been portrayed as flawless, a “Virgin Mary”, a view that I would like to challenge. When confronted with Cordelia we meet a person harbouring many character features which do not always seem to be consistent with each other. The contradictions in her nature have fascinated theatre-goers for centuries, and I am one in a series of puzzled spectators. As I want to understand Cordelia a little better, I have pondered on her conduct as it has been depicted in the drama.

Cordelia's relationship with her father, her two sisters and with Edgar, Gloucester's legitimate son, has been examined. The tragedy's other characters have only been portrayed to the extent that they interact with Cordelia. The women in *King Lear* have been examined from a gender perspective but also with regard to the prevailing social conditions during the Elizabethan era.

Although *King Lear* is one of Shakespeare's most violent plays, it is continuously performed on many stages in several countries. The characters in this cruel drama, more or less mysterious, have always fascinated the audience. Cordelia's personality is probably one of the most intriguing in the play, which is why I have devoted it an in-depth analysis. My essay begins with a brief look at Shakespeare's main inspiration sources and a presentation of my thesis and the methodology applied. If we are to understand Cordelia's behaviour we need some knowledge of her youth, which is why a chapter has been set aside for this purpose. The first sub-chapter under these headings deals with the love test, and given its importance it has been thoroughly addressed. Then I contemplate Cordelia's various relationships and the tragic events that lead to her banishment and death. The conclusion emphasizes her best character trait; her willingness to forgive her father despite the harsh treatment he once subjected her to.

Key words: King Lear, Shakespeare, Cordelia, complexity, love test, gender perspective.

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1. Introduction

How is it that we are still fascinated by Cordelia, the king's youngest daughter in *King Lear*? More than 400 years have elapsed since Shakespeare published his master-piece, but we still marvel at her mysteriousness. Cordelia's contradictory character is the subject of my essay which is a modest effort to analyse her although her lines in the tragedy are few. I have endeavoured to place her in context by giving a picture of women's lives during the time the play was written, and I have looked at Shakespeare's sources of inspiration. I have compared Cordelia to her sisters, and I have been thinking about her position in Elizabethan England.

William Shakespeare's tragedy *King Lear* was first performed at court in December 1605. The dramatist was influenced by *The History of the Kings of Britain*, a medieval chronicle of British History which was written about 1136 by Geoffrey of Monmouth. Similarities to Shakespeare's *King Lear* are evident in Monmouth's *Book II.*, which is a tale about an ageing king who wants to step down from his throne and divide his country into three equal kingdoms, one to each daughter, provided they pass a love test. Monmouth himself wrote: "But to make trial who was worthy to have the best part of his kingdom, he went to each of them to ask which of them loved him most" (28-29).

According to Logan et al. Shakespeare's principal source was "an anonymous play called *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* (published in 1605 but dating from 1594 or earlier)" (1140). Shakespeare had also recently gained knowledge of an authentic lawsuit dated late 1603, the Annesley case, which according to Maynard Mack was the main source of the masterpiece. In his *King Lear in Our Time* he draws the reader's attention to the similarity to *King Lear*, or *King Leir* as the play was first named. The elderly Sir Brian Annesley, who faithfully had served Queen Elisabeth I for many years, was nearly deprived of his property by his eldest daughter and her husband, who "seem to have taken steps to have him declared incompetent, and to lay hands on his possessions" (45). Mack states that the vicious attempt failed thanks to his youngest daughter, "Cordell resisted the move, persuaded Sir Robert Cecil that her father deserved a better reward for his services to the late Queen, 'than at his last gasp to be recorded and registered as a Lunatic'" (45-46). In the Annesley case a father was betrayed by his eldest daughter, but there the similarities to Shakespeare's tragedy end; no one helped King Lear in his distress. In contrast to Monmouth's *Book II.*, where the king is saved,

King Lear ends in a trauma. The Annesley case also has a happy ending whereas *King Lear* is a nightmare which leaves no-one unaffected.

Upon a superficial comparison Cordell and Cordelia show similarities, but beneath the surface they are different. We could all agree that Cordell's character seems flawless, but the traditional view of Cordelia as a pure and innocent victim could be questioned; her character has flaws. Her complex nature is particularly evident during the love test which is a crucial scene in the play. Marvin Rosenberg elaborates on her conduct during the test in his *The Masks of King Lear* and so does Sharon Hamilton in her *Shakespeare's daughters*.

In addition to the above mentioned writers I have relied on Alan Axelrod's *Elisabeth I, Chef*, a historical biography which gives an overall picture of contemporary education. I also discuss Cordelia and her sisters in relation to gender; in this matter I have consulted Dympna Callaghan's books *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare* and *Shakespeare Without Women*. In addition to the works mentioned I have studied female theater directors' representations of Shakespeare's women on stage as described by Elizabeth Schafer in her *MS-Directing Shakespeare*. I have also been influenced by an essay titled "An excellent thing in woman" by Catherine S. Fox where she elaborates on "Virgo and Viragos" in *King Lear*. Finally I would like to mention that I have been looking for underlying causes for Cordelia's behavior which brought me to *Jung on Elementary Psychology, A Discussion between C.G. Jung and Richard I Evans*, written by Richard I. Evans.

The first sub-chapter of my essay deals with my thesis and the method I have used to substantiate it. To get a better understanding of Cordelia's conduct in the play she must be placed in the era to which she belongs, which is why a picture of women during the Elizabethan period is provided in the next sub-chapter. The following chapter dwells on Cordelia's youth and the love test, one of the most significant parts of the play. My essay continues with a description of Cordelia and her sisters in relation to gender. Cordelia has a soul mate in Edgar, Gloucester's legitimate son, and I have compared them although they never meet in the tragedy. Then I have elaborated on her brief reunion with her father, and the essay ends with Cordelia's tragic death. Finally, the conclusion gives an overall picture of Cordelia, her good as well as her less sympathetic traits.

1.1 Thesis and method

In my essay I would like to challenge the firmly rooted belief that Cordelia is genuinely good. According to my thesis she is not as one-dimensional as she often has been perceived, on the

contrary, she is multifaceted. Many theatre goers have during centuries seen her as the personification of goodness with a big G, as approaching the immaculate “Virgin Mary”. The popular image of Cordelia is that of an innocent young girl, somewhat proud, conceited but in essence good. Rosenberg observes that she on stage “sometimes, conventionally” has “worn white; this is dangerous, if it suggests that it is merely ‘purity’ or ‘charity’ or some bloodless image” (55). Lagercrantz refers to the famous English actor-manager Henry Irving, who more than a century ago portrayed Cordelia as humble and withdrawn. During the love test “she was separated from her elegantly attired sisters, clothed in a simple green dress. Her modest words, naturally reserved, concealed strong emotions” (17).¹ The fact that she refuses to flatter the king during the love test has in the literature been attributed to courage and personal integrity. In her essay Catherine S. Fox has elaborated on Cordelia’s refusal to give the king compliments: “...her reluctant participation in Lear’s flattery game is remarkable in its ambiguity”. Catherine S. Cox also quotes Gayle Whittier who “asks in her provocative psychoanalytic study of gender in *King Lear*: ‘Is she recalcitrant daughter or wronged saint? Victim of patriarchy or proto-feminist?’”(3).

Actually, she does not say much so it is tempting to over-interpret her few lines. Rosenberg claims that the famous nineteenth century female actor Ellen Terry found Cordelia difficult to portray on stage, he quotes her: “So little to say, so much to feel. Rarely does an actress fathom still waters” (57). Another plausible explanation for her silence is shyness. Rosenberg says that “Cordelia’s first answer, in the theatre is no answer at all. True, she sometimes answers at once, with shyness; but silence seems best” (56). Hamilton has, however, observed the mocking side of Cordelia’s nature as “[s]he adds sarcastically that if she could, she would wish him in ‘a better place’” (113-114). Sarcasm seems to be the only weapon available to her in this scene as she knows that any attempt at rebellion will result in penalties. The love test, orchestrated by her father, is a thorn in Cordelia’s eye and naturally she wants to revenge herself, but convention and patriarchy are holding her back. She can possibly imagine that the king will be affected by her taciturnity during the love test, but nothing can induce her to speak, her lips remain closed. Sometimes she is simply silent in her frustration, but on other occasions she shows courage. It is worth noting that she neither shows fear nor reticence in the scene where she asks the king why she has been unfairly treated:

¹ The translation from Swedish to English is mine

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 99-104)

This scene marvels the reader, where does she suddenly find all the words? Are they uttered by someone who a moment ago was almost speechless? These conflicting attitudes, wordiness versus reticence, show all too clearly how inscrutable she is. Already when the play begins we understand that Cordelia is complicated, and as observed by Rosenberg “Cordelia is the first to reveal her private self, her inner conflicts, and to expose publicly, much more than she is allowed to be consciously aware of, the underside of her nature” (56).

Towards the end of the play Cordelia shows benevolence and concern for her father, past events are forgotten and forgiven. The following lines reflect bliss: “LEAR For, as I am a man, I think this lady / To be my child Cordelia. / CORDELIA And so I am, I am / Be your tears wet? Yes, faith. I pray, weep not” (4.7 70-73). Her many character traits make her difficult to analyze, but I will make an attempt to examine the mysterious Cordelia. The purpose of my essay is to give the reader a nuanced picture of her instead of the embellished one that we are used to meet, and my analysis also takes the historical aspect into account.

Cordelia’s lines in the play have been analyzed according to a hermeneutical method, which means that her words have been put in context and reflected against the prevailing social conditions. I have tried to understand her lines from a logical perspective but this does not mean that my interpretation necessarily is objective. However, I have endeavored to find an explanation to Cordelia’s sometimes irrational behavior. In my search for guidance I found statements from scholars and knowledgeable theater people, statements which I have tied to my own arguments.

1.2 Women in the Elizabethan era

Life in England during Medieval times was similar to life in other European countries: social class, religion and gender decided the fate of the residents. *King Lear* was written under the Elizabethan era, a period dominated by patriarchal structures. It was a society with numerous restrictions, especially for women. Schools were not open for girls, just for boys. Girls in wealthy families were often tutored at home. Axelrod observes that “theoretical knowledge was considered as important as rhetorical ability; eloquent people were seen as educated”

(61).² The same author claims that during the Elizabethan age “women were treated as chattel, but not with the same care and attention as other personal and household belongings” (Axelrod 23).³ Most Elizabethan women were subservient, destined to blind obedience, although there were exceptions as the Queen herself, Elizabeth I, who had enjoyed a sophisticated training in disciplines deemed necessary for a head of state. Ordinary women had a different lot, and as Fox-Davies, Stone and Williams observe: “wives were the property of their husbands, but widows could own their own property and run their own businesses”. According to the same source: “except among the lofty nobility, most people arrange their children’s marriages with children of neighbours and friends. The lower on the social scale you are, the more likely you are to have a choice in the matter” (Fox-Davies, Stone and Williams, Web). Consequently, royal daughters had no saying in matters of marriage. We have reason to believe that the same rules applied to Cordelia, who not was free to choose a spouse but had to obey her father as was custom and usage.

However, there are signs that Cordelia was shaped in a different form than her female peers as she in some scenes seems to ignore ruling conventions. This is demonstrated by her silence during the love test and the fact that she dares to ask why she has no husband while her sisters have. In the latter scenes she seems oblivious of any danger, but she is not brave enough to defy Lear when he sends her into exile. The most likely explanation of her failing courage is that she realizes that protests are useless. Cordelia is banished and depends on the good will of France, but he seems reluctant to marry her which can be deduced from “Be it lawful I take up what’s cast away” (1.1 255). It does not take much imagination to understand that she feels vulnerable; no one protected her and her prospective groom refers to her as something that can be “cast away”. Eventually she comes to terms with her husband, but anyone can envision that she is disappointed in her father.

² The translation from Swedish to English is mine
³ The translation from Swedish to English is mine

2. Cordelia's youth

In her book *MS-Directing Shakespeare 1998*, Elisabeth Schafer quotes the female Australian theatre director Gale Edwards who expresses the opinion that Cordelia was much younger than her sisters: "With Cordelia being a late child, Lear had been able to dote on her and hug her in a way that he hadn't for the first two. That was our turn on the play and that's why there was so little love between Goneril and Regan and Cordelia; they seemed to be a generation apart" (132).

In *King Lear*, Cordelia is closer to her father's heart than the other children, and she in turn knows him better than her sisters do. There is a bond between these two, the aged monarch and the daughter. The king expects warmth and affection from his darling daughter. Hamilton claims that "...it is the youngest whom the father 'love[s] the most' [I.i.290]. Such doting, Shakespeare implies, does not necessarily spoil the child. Cordelia is deserving of Lear's favour" (94). Whether she is spoiled or not, she certainly has received a good education like other upper-class people at this time. She is used to frank and open encounters with people, a result of her upbringing. Although her father is dominating it does not seem that he has suppressed her; quite the contrary, he has pampered and instilled self-esteem in her. She is schooled in preparation of a future life at court, which implies duties and responsibilities. Her conduct in the play shows that she is bright; she is able to equip an army to his father's defense, which takes intelligence and managerial talent. Her courage to remain silent during the love test and her bold answer in "LEAR so young, and so untender? / CORDELIA So young, my lord, and true" (1.1 107-108) signify that she enjoys more freedom and independence than her female equals. Her upbringing was probably not as strict as her sisters'. Although the girls were born and raised under the same roof they are different, and as observed by Hamilton: "For a few of Shakespeare's daughters, such as Lear's Goneril and Regan, the issue is not only domestic but also political power. Already married and supposedly content, they are spurred to heights of ambition and malice by their father's sudden unfounded favour" (2). Cordelia was certainly also encouraged during her childhood, just as her sisters, which might explain that she feels strong enough to remain silent during the love test. Cordelia misjudges the situation, Lear does not at all appreciate her silence and she is rejected. The king is disappointed in his favourite daughter, he finds her ungrateful and takes his hand from her: "I loved her most, and thought to set my rest / On her kind nursery.

Hence, and avoid my sight!” (1.1 124-125). Hamilton notes that he is relentless: “Nothing, however, deters Lear from his rash and vain decree, and he orders Cordelia into exile, charging her never to cross his path again” (171). Cordelia is of course very upset over the unjust and incomprehensible treatment. Her life is fundamentally changed and she is an exile dependent on others’ discretion.

When the drama ends Cordelia shows mercy of biblical dimensions; although her father almost crushed her she is ready to forgive him. That if anything shows how multifaceted she is. Hamilton elaborates on her forgiving nature: “She would be fully justified in taking his command literally and cutting herself off forever from a father who has misjudged and rejected her. Instead, when next we hear about Cordelia, it is clear that her filial love has remained steadfast” (171).

2.1 The love test

What was life like at the time of the king’s resignation? Lear is an ageing man who wants to divide his kingdom justly between his three daughters as he is “...an old man weary of burdens of office and his daughters young and capable” (Hamilton 111). Before the daughters are allowed to enter their domains they must pass a love test, a competition. Lear, who is a widower, is lonely and emotionally dependent on his daughters. He is old but he still has a clear head, so he would have been able to anticipate that a contest between his daughters would encourage hypocrisy which is exactly what happens. The older sisters outbid each other with loving and affectionate phrases, which “...will echo ironically through the torments that the sisters later visit on their gullible benefactor” (Hamilton 112). With a life’s experience of ruling a country Lear should be able to see through the older daughters’ empty words. With so much at stake, an entire kingdom, it is not astonishing that their words are sugared. The test can be likened to a game, a lottery, where the prize is proportionate to the bet. In this game the bet is comprised of words, words of flattery or love. The rules are set by the king, the participants have no say. The elder daughters overwhelm their father with compliments whereas Cordelia tells him in a few simple words that she loves him as much as it is expected from a daughter. Goneril pretends that she is prepared to sacrifice her own life if this is desired by the king. Regan goes on the same line when she claims: “Sir, I am made / Of the same metal that my sister is” (1.1 68-69). When it is Cordelia’s turn to be cross-examined Lear asks her:

LEAR ...what can you say to draw

A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.
 CORDELIA Nothing, my Lord.
 LEAR Nothing?
 CORDELIA Nothing.
 LEAR Nothing will come of nothing, speak again.
 CORDELIA Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave
 My heart into my mouth. I love your majesty
 According to my bond; nor more, nor less. (1.1. 85-94)

Cordelia's few brusque syllables give no evidence of affection; they just provide formal information. She understands that her cold words will cause her father pain but she ignores his feelings. She deliberately wants to annoy him as she has a grudge against him; she cannot come to terms with the love test which to her is an insult. Why should she, his favourite, be subjected to a public examination? The official hearing is staged as an official show that Cordelia dislikes. Her firm belief is that her father already knows that she loves him, so she finds it offensive that he wants to expose her to this censure. Rosenberg claims that "Cordelia's troubled asides have minor dissonances in Lear's swelling, triumphant mood. He clearly expects a sigh, a laugh, a tear, a gush of love. Instead a shock of silence warns of threatening dominant" (56). Rosenberg analyzes her first aside:

Cordelia's first aside - the monologues come conveniently as she watches Lear show up map and affection to her rival siblings - indicates that she feels she really loves her father; but she cannot readily speak her feelings. She thinks this, and it raises in her the self-pitying, self-dramatizing impulse that also colors Lear's self-awareness: Then poor Cordelia! (57).

Maybe she harbours warm feelings but the few words that leave her lips indicate lack of concern. Her silence is appalling which has been noted by Rosenberg: "When Lear insists upon a response from her, the complexity of their relationship is tested. We will learn in a moment that Lear is thinking of living with her and her - and with her husband? Are husbands themselves a threat to him - will his anger at Cordelia partly be fired by her reminder that her sisters are married?" (57).

Based on the idea that Cordelia is educated she is not unaware of the impression she makes on her father when she solemnly declares that she has nothing to say, but she is frustrated and thinks her blunt answer serves him right. Elisabeth Schafer implies that Cordelia is turning down the entire test procedure, the division of a kingdom "...on the basis of their public declarations of love for their father. Because Lear's youngest daughter Cordelia refuses to go along with this idea, she is rejected and gets nothing" (128). Hamilton has also elaborated on this crucial scene which caused Lear dismay, surprise and disappointment: "Cordelia does not

show much empathy – or even tact. Perhaps she is so revolted by her sisters’ ‘glib and oily art’ (I.i.224) and her father’s vanity that, with adolescent self-righteousness, she refuses to play their game” (112).

We could all agree that Cordelia’s words during the test “Nothing my Lord / LEAR Nothing? CORDELIA Nothing” (1.1 87-89) are not particularly diplomatic. Her conduct is ambiguous; she does not explicitly tell the king that she does not care for him, but he interprets her evasiveness as indifference. Her silence can be interpreted as a way to distance herself from Lear. There is reason to remember Axelrod’s words: Eloquence was considered important during this era. Cordelia, a well-educated lady, is certainly verbally gifted, which is why it seems strange that she does not make use of this ability during the love test.

Could there be other explanations for her inability to express her feelings in words? She might be unaware of her own limitations, a usual phenomenon described by psychologists. In his discussion with C.G Jung, Richard I. Evans reports on Jung’s “association tests” which are surveys of reactions to various stimuli: “...that the inhibition came from the unconscious and hindered the expression in speech” (42). Evans states that it was a matter of what Freud called “repression” (43). Although the “repression theory” is plausible, it is also possible to interpret Cordelia’s inhibition as frustration over the dreaded test procedure. It should also be kept in mind that she cannot give her emotions free rein in the prevalent surroundings.

Cordelia’s environment forces her to control herself and to hold her emotions back but sometimes they cannot be suppressed. The opening scene shows her rebelliousness when she refuses to talk despite the king’s urgent request, but she can never be accused of dishonesty. Elisabeth Schafer observes that “...she can’t lie, she has to tell the truth” (132). She is compelled to tell the truth whether it hurts or not. Diplomatically trained people know that it is not always wise to tell the truth, but Cordelia has no interest in diplomacy. She rather has similarities with truth-tellers seeking excuses for their discourtesies. Truth-telling without regard of other people’s feelings is an act of selfishness and obviously Cordelia has a streak of it. It is within her reach to give her father what he yearns for but she refuses. Eventually she declares that she is willing to compromise; she is prepared to give him half her love. This clarification makes Lear furious, he explodes with anger and likens Cordelia to a “barbarous Scythian” (1.1 117). This scene evidences that she is not all-good, her decision to deny the king what he wants shows that she is not entirely angelic. At this stage of the play there are strong emotional tensions between the king and Cordelia, her “nothing” has overturned everything in her life. In her muttering of this single word she declares that she neither has the intention to flatter him nor to claim her property. Lear, surprised that she gives up her rights,

admonishes her condescendingly: "How, how, Cordelia! Mend your speech a little, / Lest it mar your fortunes" (1.1. 93-94). Cordelia withholds her "nothing", she is relentless and has no intention to change her mind. It seems as if she does not care for earthly assets, at least she is not prepared to sacrifice her soul for them. Her indifference to material values can be attributed to her high integrity.

There are religious interpretations of Cordelia's restrained attitude, which is not astonishing as she often is compared to biblical figures. Her taciturnity can be likened to Peter's denial of Jesus Christ and as Rosenberg suggests: "... the first answers are insistently there: the searcher out of religious parallels should perhaps observe that they are outright denials; and that altogether she denies Lear thrice" (58). Cordelia is not a saint, but she is the only child who has some sympathy for Lear, although she does not show it until it is almost too late.

2.2 Cordelia and her sisters in relation to gender

Although fundamentally different, Cordelia and her sisters must be viewed in the light of women's prevailing situation in the Elizabethan era. This society was governed by men and equality between men and women as we today understand the term will not be discerned for many centuries. Male dominance is reflected already in the first act of *King Lear*. Lear expects submission and reacts with anger at Cordelia's blunt words during the love test. Catherine S. Fox observes that "this is the passive, feminine behaviour Lear admires. But when called upon to speak as a woman and as a daughter, her unwillingness to conform to established and expected codes incites Lear's rage. Her blunt words undermine her virgo image, for she speaks as a daughter but like a son" (5).

Daughters should not speak, men and their sons had the power of words in the late sixteenth-century English culture. Inequality and pure misogyny has been elaborated on by Phyllis Rackin in her contribution to Dymphna Callaghan's *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*. Patriarchal structures predominated and according to Rackin "[o]ne reason the story of patriarchal oppression has become so influential is that it has been disseminated in recent textbooks" (42). In her essay Rackin quotes numerous scholars who are confirming a male-dominating view but she also observes that

...these quotations are misleading because they are taken out of context, and they belie the subtlety and complexity of the arguments from which they are taken. Nonetheless, I believe the excerpts are significant because they indicate how often even the best feminist scholarship feels the need to situate itself within a patriarchal master narrative. (43).

The Elizabethan society was a patriarchal one but it is a mistake to believe that women were entirely submissive; such an approach would reduce them. Callaghan quotes Rackin's contribution to her *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare* who suggests that "[r]eminders that women were expected to be chaste, silent, and obedient probably occur more frequently in recent scholarship than they did in the literature of Shakespeare's time" (xvi). Consequently, women have retrospectively been victimized which can be likened to falsification of history. Women were not so submissive as often believed although many areas were closed to them. An activity that clearly was prohibited for women during this era was the performing on theater stages, a fact which Callaghan has pondered on in her book *Shakespeare Without Women*: "Exclusion from the stage, in my view, indeed bespeaks an aspect of women's secondary social status and is not remedied by those rare instances of female performance, but such recognition of women's oppression does not *de facto* render women abject victims of patriarchal culture, or deny them agency" (8). Stage floors are not available to Cordelia or her sisters, but in other environments they seem to have at least some autonomy. They deviate from the conventional model for Renaissance women as they dare to speak, women during this era are expected to be quiet. However, there is an amazing difference between their manners of speaking, the older sisters are outspoken whereas Cordelia is restrained. Her taciturnity need not be a sign of subordination but rather an expression of annoyance over the love test.

Cordelia's guarded attitude shows how multifaceted she is. Her personality shows a number of different traits as callousness and forgiveness, a contrast between the extremes. She is proud, haughty, cold and dismissive but she is not wicked whereas the elder sisters usually are described as malicious, even "reptilian". Hamilton has observed that "[i]n *Lear* the sisters' roles are reversed, the elder are accomplished hypocrites and the younger a model of integrity" (94). In order to illustrate their spitefulness we could take a look at one of the most dramatic acts in the play, the second, where the elder sisters are throwing out their defenseless father in the storm: "KENT I know you. Where's the king? / GENTLEMAN Contending with the fretful elements; / Bids the wind blow the earth into the sea" (3.1 3-5). Mack observes: "The motivation of the sisters lies not in what *Lear* has done to them, but in what they are. The fact that they are paradigms of evil rather than (or as well as) exasperated spoilt children whose patience has been exhausted gives them their stature and dramatic force" (32). They are the epitome of evil, how can anyone treat a father so heartlessly? Before *Lear* is brutally thrown out he exclaims: "Stain my man's cheeks! / No, you unnatural hags, / I will have such revenges on you both" (2.4 276-277).

Goneril and Regan are prepared to kill anyone who stands between them and the throne, kinsfolk included. They strive for supremacy exactly as male heirs have done throughout history and in their desire for power they develop a ferocity that is unnatural for women. But have not kings and tribal leaders in all times been prepared to kill for power? Another conspicuous example of male behavior is shown by Cordelia when she equips an army in defense of her father. How many women are able to accomplish such a task during this era? We also interpret the sisters' behavior as masculine when they appear as power-hungry heirs and army generals, consequently the gender perspective has been overturned both by Cordelia and her sisters.

The sisters are insecure because they do not know what lies ahead of them. Hamilton claims that Goneril is terrified when Lear rejects Cordelia as "...both she and Regan immediately suspect that they may be the next victims of Lear's rashness" (114). They have reason to be frightened and so has Cordelia. Finally they all meet the same fate in this sad drama and it does not help Cordelia that she is morally superior to her sisters.

2.3 Cordelia and Edgar

Gloucester's legitimate son, Edgar, one of the play's sympathetic characters, has many features in common with Cordelia. Hamilton says: "Edgar and Cordelia, the children their fathers have long and deeply loved, put all their efforts into comforting and restoring them even after those fathers have wronged them. Being loved has taught them to reciprocate..." (173-174). Both Edgar and Cordelia offer forgiveness to their fathers where vindictiveness would have been understandable. Exile is not the only severe hardship that Cordelia and Edgar have to suffer, they will both be betrayed by the wicked Edmund whose scheming causes Edgar's banishment and Cordelia's execution.

Cordelia is wronged by her kinsfolk, a fate she shares with Edgar. They are both banished by their fathers, Cordelia due to her failure in the love test and Edgar due to his evil brother Edmund's plotting. As pointed out by Marika Lagercrantz "the events which led to their falling out of favour have vividly been debated among scholars as no real people could possibly have acted so stupidly as Lear and Gloucester; that they should have misjudged their children seems unbelievable" (2)⁴ Lagercrantz, whilst referring to Freud, declares that she disagrees with the scholarly interpretation; she argues that the banishment can be explained by the doctrine of the subconscious.

⁴ The translation from Swedish to English is mine

Certainly there are major differences between these two characters, one is genuinely good and unselfish and the other utterly complex, but they also have much in common. They both have restrained attitudes in some scenes; Cordelia's conduct during the love test bears similarities to Edgar's in the first scene of the second act. His few words show fear: "EDGAR I am sure on't, not a word" (2.1 28). Rosenberg observes: "Edgar's second brief appearance still reveals little, in verbal part, of his design, except that he is dazed by the suddenness of danger, the confusion of the dark night, the curious play-acting of his brother" (143). Cordelia and Edgar are reticent for different reasons, we read stubbornness and pride in Cordelia's silence and fear in Edgar's, but they both say much without actually saying anything.

The greatest similarity between Cordelia and Edgar is that they both are offering consolation and forgiveness to fathers who have betrayed them. This is a victory of goodness in more than one way as the ambiguous Cordelia now shows that she is not just cold and proud but also warm and passionate. These qualities are evident when she declares that she wants to make up for her sisters' betrayal. Hamilton claims: "At the attending Doctor's urging, Cordelia rouses him, praying that she can 'repair [the] violent harms' that her sisters have done him with the 'medicine' of her 'kiss' (IV.vii.2)" (174).

3. Banishment and reunion

Cordelia and Lear are trapped in mutual dependence. The king, the patriarch, has unlimited power over her; she will not survive if he deprives her of his support and he is equally dependent on her; without her love his life is dark and empty. Lear believes that his youngest daughter loves him unreservedly, but when she throws in his face that she will only give him half of her love he becomes furious and bursts out: "I loved her most, and thought to set my rest / On her kind nursery. Hence, and avoid my sight!" (1.1 124-125). Her silence during the love test and her statement that Lear can only take half of her love into account becomes too much for him and he takes sides; Cordelia is no longer his favourite. Hamilton observes that as she has crushed him he cannot bear to see her any more as "[s]he, his 'joy' whom he has openly favoured in the past has mortified him" (113). Shaken and deeply wounded the king banishes Cordelia and as to cause her additional pain he exclaims: "Hadst not been born than not to have pleased me better" (1.1 236). Cordelia is heartbroken and she submits to her inevitable fate, condemnation and banishment. Lagercrantz has elaborated on Cordelia being a wronged child who: "...wishes that Lear, who prefers her elder sisters to her, should get into trouble. When his pain is no longer bearable he will recognize the good daughter, who will come back to him and help him" (4).⁵

Cordelia is now an exile but still in everyone's mind. Her father's decision to banish her is discussed by Goneril and Regan in a condescending manner: "GONERIL You see how full of changes his age is" (1.1 290). They also talk about the "...infirmity of his age" (1.1 294) and "...the imperfections of long-engrafted condition, but therewithal the unruly waywardness that infirm and choleric years bring with them" (1.1 298-300). Cordelia, resident in a foreign country, soon learns that her father is in a desperate state. Hamilton says: "Although exiled to France, the kingdom of the husband who has provided her succor, Cordelia has continued to follow Lear's fortune through the agency of the loyal Earl of Kent" (171). Act 5 in the tragedy shows that Cordelia has colours in her emotional palette, which she has not yet shown, as compassion and readiness to forgive even though she has been mistreated. Hamilton observes that her "devotion to her father abides even through his rash rejection and abuse" (2).

⁵ The translation from Swedish to English is mine

As soon as Cordelia learns that her father's position is critical she returns to him. Her father's precarious situation affects Cordelia who now shows another side of her nature, a compassionate one. Her former callousness is gone and all grudges seem to be forgotten, she is even prepared to do penance for her sisters and exclaims:

O my dear father! Restoration hang
Thy medicine on my lips; and let this kiss
Repair those violent harms that my two sisters
Have in thy reverence made! (4.7 26-29)

A reunion between Lear and Cordelia follows, an encounter filled with strong emotions. Lear dreams of a life in harmony with Cordelia and they "alone will sing like birds i' the cage" (5.3). Even though the reunion makes Cordelia happy, she cannot hide that she is worried over the unfortunate war between France and England which just ended with the French defeat. Cordelia was the captain of the French army in the absence of her husband but she was not successful and her troops were beaten. She is distressed, she is crying and Lear sees her tears and tries to comfort her: "Wipe thine eyes" (5.3 23). He wants to calm her, but as he is aware of their vulnerable position he calls the gods: "LEAR Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia, / The gods themselves throw incense. Have I caught thee? / He that parts us shall bring a brand from heaven" (5.3). The brief moments when Cordelia and Lear are reunited will be followed by an escalation of the tragedy. Hamilton establishes that "[i]n this stark tragedy, however, the gods do not intervene: cruelty wins the day and the human misery is absolute" (176).

3.1 Cordelia's death

Cordelia's death has attracted less attention in the literature than Lear's, which is understandable, given that her role is a minor one. Cordelia is killed in her prime; the murder is instigated by Edmund, Gloucester's illegitimate son. Edmund is assisted by his mistress, the malicious Goneril, who does not seem to shrink back from any evil. Their vicious plan involves the hanging of Cordelia and making it look like suicide. "EDMUND He hath commission from thy wife and me / To hang Cordelia in the prison, and / To lay the blame upon her own despair, / That she fordid herself" (5.3 253-256). Edgar intervenes and he tries to rescue her, but his efforts come too late, Cordelia is already dead. She is executed in prison and in the last sorrowful scene we see her dead body in her father's arms. The loss breaks his heart and he dies of shock and grief. "LEAR Howl, howl, howl, howl! / Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd used them so / That heaven's vault should crack. She's gone forever" (5.3 257-

259). The king's last words, so bitter and forlorn, have strongly affected readers and theatregoers during centuries. Lear did not have to endure the pain for long, he soon followed her daughter on her last journey.

The word "heart" carries weight in the play as it is the root of the name Cordelia. It is "a feminine give name, popularly associated with Latin *cor* (*genitive cordis*)" (Web). It was no coincidence that Shakespeare let Lear name his youngest daughter Cordelia, "heart". As she has a special place in her father's heart, it is not surprising that his heart bursts when she dies. Her death is supposed to look like a suicide, but it is soon evident that she has been killed. according to Lagercrantz "her life was over already when she was imprisoned" (43).⁶ We believe that Cordelia is an intelligent young lady so she probably understands that the game is lost. Perhaps she spends her last hours wondering why she has ended up in jail. We are not told of any outbursts of grief or any lamentation, so we may assume that she kept her presence of mind until the very end, suggesting a controlled personality.

⁶ The translation from Swedish to English is mine

4. Conclusion

My interpretation of Cordelia's character is based on the historical and patriarchal context in which she is anchored, the play itself, and various scholarly claims and statements referred to in this essay. Cordelia's lines are few but subtle, which is why they require close-reading and much thought. I have paid attention to singular words and phrases and I have made an attempt to read between the lines. She is mysterious; the more you analyze her, the more complicated she appears. She possesses an abundance of human traits, which is why the general picture of her as entirely good is highly simplified. She has integrity, a trait which also is called pride and haughtiness. It is worth remembering that pride was a deadly sin in early Christian time. The term is differently interpreted nowadays; it is no longer associated with sin but rather with self-confidence. Pride is Cordelia's most prominent feature, and it is this property that puts her in difficult situations. In consideration of the gender perspectives it seems like Cordelia was born in the wrong century; her military commitment can be associated with female emancipation. Not only her location in time seems wrong but also her gender; she makes us believe that she is a modern woman.

Her character is contradictory, sometimes she lacks words and on other occasions she is eloquent, for example when she loudly complains that she still has no husband. Other observations that I have made is that she shows no fear although she certainly has reasons, and no-one can accuse her of lying. On the minus side is her behavior during the test, she must have been able to anticipate her father's reaction to her evasiveness, but she ignores his feelings. The test sparks her anger, so flattery which normally is against her principles, now definitely is out of the question. It is, however, amazing that she dares to show her displeasure considering the prevailing conventions. One explanation to her bravery is probably that she had enjoyed a more liberal education than was customary in this era.

Treachery and distrust control the sequence of events in this play which is one of the most sorrowful of Shakespeare's tragedies. According to *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*: "Even passionate admirers of King Lear, however, continued to express deep uneasiness, questioning whether the tragedy was suitable for the stage" (Norton 1141). Many of the characters in King Lear are unspeakably evil and show no signs of improving during the play. Cordelia is neither wicked nor angelic. She is complex, her character has flaws, but her ability to forgive evil deeds gives her an aura of goodness.

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