

**The Phallic Women:
The Power and Desires of Goneril and Regan in *King Lear***

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A violation of the conventional androcentric system of succession germinates the women's continuous ambition to elevate themselves in the social status and the aspiration for the natural sexual desire. *King Lear*, interlaced with the dualistic conflict and affection between men and women, is undeniably one of William Shakespeare's profound tragedies that portrays women's desires and eagerness to have the power in the androcentric society. Goneril and Regan, the two women who succeed in obtaining the scepter in their supreme king father, decide to adopt measure for strengthening their preliminary political power and concurrently for abating the deep-rooted political conception regarding the male sex as primary. With *King Lear*'s androcentric politics developing into gynocentric sovereignty, how does William Shakespeare represent the two women's rise in the political struggle and how does he portray the two kingly women's decline in the drama? Women covet to have the power from men to center themselves in the politics so as to gratify their desire that is unsatisfied in the man-centered milieu. The power and desire has been harmonizing with each other in men; yet, when the power and desire converge into the two women, Goneril and Regan, the two elements do not appear to make the balance; conversely, the two elements seem to devastate each other. This essay

purports to examine William Shakespeare's representation of Goneril's and Regan's power and desires in their kingdoms under the circumstances of this androcentric system of succession and the two elements' impact on their rise and fall.

At the beginning of the play, at the room of state in the palace, King Lear, the emblem of the male authority over all hierarchy, announces that he would divide his kingdom and designate his daughters to inherit the realms. "[I]n dividing his kingdom, Lear has symbolically emasculated himself and turned his two daughters into phallic women" (Rose 935). Hearing the king father intending to bestow the power that is long reserved in his hand upon them, Goneril and Regan, as daughters without those "symbolic phalli," actively cajole the power out of their king father:

GONERIL. Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter;
 Dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty;
 Beyond what can be valu'd, rich or rare;
 No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honour;
 As much as child e'er lov'd, or father found;
 A love that makes breath poor and speech unable;
 Beyond all manner of so much I love you. (I.i. 54-60).

To some degree, Goneril's speech deprecates her status in the androcentric milieu and familiarizes herself with Lear; she initially pleases his ears with comparison between her love to the king with the shortage in women's life. She mentions that her love is more precious than the eyesight, space and liberty; simultaneously the eyesight, space, and liberty of a woman originate from a man. On the other hand, women's grace,

health, beauty and honor are also the requirement for pleasing the men's desire.

Goneril appears that she is subordinate to the men as her eyesight, space and liberty are granted by men; she insinuates that her "life with grace, health, beauty, and honor" is inherited from the lineage of the king father. As the flattering and self-deprecatd speech is heard, King Lear and Goneril's relation progresses into intimacy and he then bestows the devided kingdom upon her, weakening his power.

Besides, Regan, after her sister Goneril finishes her speech, spontaneously responds "Sir, I am made of the selfsame metal that my sister is" (I.i. 68). Regan appears to classify or identify herself with her sister so that King Lear would believe that Regan is also the one who is qualified to receive the heritage. However, she adds that "... I am alone felicitate/ In your dear highness' love" (I.i. 74-75). The "highness" again deprecates the women's identity and elevates the king's supremeness so that King Lear, being pleased, finally confers the kingdom on her. Therefore, the two sisters attain the seed to srengthen their power and the opportunity to reach the satisfaction of more demands.

"In Lacanian theory, the phallus is the symbol power, ruling the 'Symbolic Order,' that is, order of the signs and social and cultural life..." (Jaén 305). The male sex has long held the phallus in history, ruled the society and been the primary sex in the cultural community; in contrast, women have been alienated from the center

of the community. Their status has been situated in lower hierarchy, and their desire has been ignored in a long term. With the male king's intention to assign his power to the daughters, the two women in *King Lear* attempt to wield the scepter but at the same moment they also fear that the power would be seized back from their hands; as a result, Goneril says to Regan, "Pray you let us hit together: if our father carry authority/ with such dispositions as he bears, this last surrender of his/ will but offend us" (I.i. 336-338). The two women ultimately ally with each other as "one," decide to wrestle with men in power and endeavor to overthrow the patriarchal political system.

First of all, Goneril commands Oswald to "Put on what weary negligence [he] please[s]" when he hears Lear (I.iii.14). Lear, at this very moment, is no longer the center of politics and becomes an outsider of the gynocentric kingdom and also his knights and squires have the same treatment to that of the Lear.

GONERIL. ...Here do you keep a hundred knights and squires;
 Men so disorder'd, so debosh'd, and bold
 That this our court, infected with their manners,
 Shows like a riotous inn: epicurism and lust
 Make it more like a tavern or a brothel
 Than a grac'd palace. The shame itself doth speak
 For instant remedy: be, then, desir'd
 By her that else will take the thing she begs
 A little to disquantity your train;
 And the remainder, that shall still depend,
 To be such men as may besort your age,

Which know themselves, and you. (I.iv. 240-245).

In the time of King Lear's sovereignty and in the age when Lear and his knights form a ruling power over women, the androcentric political sculpts the society's focus on knights' lust whereas the women serve as the tools or are sexually objectified to fulfill men's desire. However, after Goneril holds the scepter from Lear, women now abominate the manner; thus Goneril utilizes her power to efface the custom in the palace. With the most of the male's power fading out, Goneril then treats Lear with commands, ignoring his will.

Next, Goneril, now having power in hand, switches the historical misogyny into misandry. It is certain that Goneril is not in love with his husband or she even abhors his husband. After Edgar and Oswald fight a duel with each other, the letter from the dead Oswald reveals some clues of Goneril's misandry by its demonstration of the diction and also discloses her desire to be separated from the man she regards with great detestation:

Let our reciprocal vows be remembered. You have many
 Opportunities to cut him off: if your will want not, time
 And place will be fruitfully offered. There is nothing done if
 He returns the conqueror: then am I the prisoner, and his
 Bed my gaol; from the loathed warmth whereof deliver me,
 And supply theplace for your labour.
 'Your (wife, so I would say) affectionate servant,
 'Goneril.'" (IV.vi. 256-265).

In Goneril's letter to Edmund, it illustrates the discordant relation between his husband and her. Nonetheless, this is not the fierce expression of her hateful attitude to her husband. Goneril's direct contempt for her husband shows in her dialogue before her husband the Duke of Albany's house. She reproaches him "milk-liver'd man!/That bear'st a cheek for blows, a head for wrongs/Who hast not in thy brows an eye discerning/Thine honour from thy suffering; that not know'st" (IV. ii. 51).

Goneril's attitude to the husband is domineering. She is not frightened of her husband, and even she now considers that her status is upon that of Albany.

Finally, the scene when Gloucester's eyes are blinded demonstrates the united power of the two phallic women:

REGAN. Hang him instantly.

GONERIL. Pluck out his eyes. (III.vii. 4-5)

Regan and Goneril's violence in this scene would be interpreted as a castration of patriarchy or a male which is very similar to that of Oedipus who stabs into his eyes making them blind. However, the eyes plucker is neither the elder sister Goneril nor the younger one Regan. The two women who holds the power merely stands as the commander, but the male, on the other hand, is the obeyer:

CORNWALL. See't shalt thou never.—Fellows, hold the chair.

Upon these eyes of thine I'll set my foot.

[Gloucester is held down in his chair, while Cornwall plucks out one

of his eyes and sets his foot on it.]

GLOUCESTER. He that will think to live till he be old,
Give me some help!—O cruel!—O ye gods!
(III.vii.77-82)

Here it is the Duke of Cornwall who plucks the eyes of the Earl of Gloucester. What makes Goneril and Regan's gynocentric kingdoms operate so smoothly is the antagonism between men. The two women collaborate with each other to strengthen their female kingdoms and all men's actions now are seen as a fulfilment of women's words. The men in *King Lear* fall from the high hierarchy to a lower social status in Act III and has been estranged from the palace, whereas the two women from the margin become the center of power and desire.

“In the beginning scene of *King Lear*, Regan and Goneril each vie to offer their father a rhetorical mirror that claims to banish all others from a perfect union of two...” (Reinhard & Lupton 148). It appears that the two women have “[n]o-difference [which] shows that Goneril and Regan are *identical*; but the doubled response to the demand shows that they cannot be *one*” (Zenón 135).

REGAN. Now, sweet lord,
You know the goodness I intend upon you:
Tell me,—but truly,—but then speak the truth,
Do you not love my sister?

EDMUND. In honour'd love.

REGAN. But have you never found my brother's way
To the forfended place?

EDMUND. That thought abuses you.

REGAN. I am doubtful that you have been conjunct
And bosom'd with her, as far as we call hers.

EDMUND. No, by mine honour, madam.

REGAN. I never shall endure her: dear my lord,
Be not familiar with her.

EDMUND. Fear me not:—
She and the duke her husband! (V.i. 10-24).

Despite the gained social power seized from men and their ruling as men, the two women are still biologically and sexually female; thus their affection to Edmund, the son of the Duke of Gloucester, is ineluctable and irresistible. The two women's desires are coincidentally casted on Edmund. In society where women become subjective sex, men retreat to the objective sex; therefore, women then have the option for her mates while men become the chosen. As the different women make the same response to the same "thing," the competition to win over the thing is unavoidable; thus, the two women who set the same goal to gain men's power now engenders the rivalry which would collapse the kingdoms that they created. Also, the "thing" that the two sisters attempt to obtain is not merely a thing; the thing "thinks," the thing "schemes," and the thing "tricks."

Edmund. 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: to take the widow
Exasperates, makes mad her sister Goneril;
And hardly shall I carry out my side,

Her husband being alive. Now, then, we'll use
 His countenance for the battle; which being done,
 Let her who would be rid of him devise. (V.i. 77-86).

Goneril and Regan draw excessive attention to their social status but neglect their natural characteristic. The original struggle for the phallus from men now evolves into the competition of biological instinct. They refocus the spotlight from men to them but are unaware that they eventually revolve around the man who stands in the center point. Finally, Goneril determines to poison Regan. And Regan, before her death, announces to Edmund “Let the drum strike, and prove my title thine” (V.iii. 100). The phallic women in *King Lear* initially desire for the power of a man, yet eventually lose the power in cause of the desire to have the men.

From the desire for power disguised in the inner heart, via the unrestrained indulgence of the gained power, to the retaliation of the misused power to fulfil the inexhaustible desire, the two phallic women exert themselves to the utmost to convert this androcentric society into a more radical gynocentric one. They attempt to demean the men’s social status, to elevate their social status, and to replace the men. They burn with ambition to annihilate the power giver and the males who used to be the primary sex in the past time and in the past space. These women appear to exaggeratedly focus on their sex, their desire, and their longing for power; nevertheless, they forget and are unaware that they still need the opposite sex and that

their action ironically violate their initial desire— to rank themselves over the men with the scepter. Thus the opposition shapes the tension in King Lear and the conflicts in the two characters.

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