Discoveries in Marriage and Power Dynamics in *King Lear* and *Julius Caesar*

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If we look at power relations in *Julius Caesar* and *King Lear*, especially between the husbands and wives populating these two plays, we find that in both Shakespeare’s ancient Rome and Britain, men and woman act in similar ways to get what they want. Their actions, though, require some unpacking. Despite a great amount of power vested in the women, all of them coming from powerful political dynasties, masculinity confers more power in both public and private spaces on the men, and femininity weakens all the women, with the notable exception of Cordelia. Thus, gender takes a base starting point of inherent power for men and inherent weakness for women. However, despite these base starting points, we find that masculinity and femininity are not wholly defined by physical gender. Men are not only masculine and women are not only feminine. To display or perform masculinity makes a character powerful; to display or perform femininity makes a character weak (again, with the notable exception of Cordelia). We cannot, however, state that “feminine weakness” is an absolute negative value, or that “masculine power” is an absolute positive. In some circumstances women display weakness in order to gain power over their husbands, or actively denigrate their husbands’ masculinity in order to weaken them. What does not change in any case is the fact that in *King Lear* and *Julius Caesar*, the inherent weakness of women and power of men guides character choices in the power dynamics of their marriages.

We cannot explore every exchange between husband and wife in each play, but we can approach several key scenes and take them as representatives of the whole. *Caesar* is the easier play to engage with and Caesar’s public display of masculine power during the feast of Lupercal is a good place to start. He displays his masculine dominance over Calphurnia by drawing
attention to her femininity in public when he calls upon Anthony to “Forget not in your speed . . . 
/ To touch Calphurnia, for our elders say / The barren, touchèd in this holy chase, / Shake off
their sterile curse” (I.ii.8-11). It is significant that the only words Calphurnia utters are “here, my
lord” (4). In a public exchange, Calphurnia defers to her husband. In comparing different
silences in Caesar, Esther Schupak notes that Calphurnia’s is the “silence of the weak” (108).
We note further, that since Caesar has drawn attention to his wife’s femininity by way of her
barren womb, Calphurnia has been signified as feminine, and Caesar as the opposite and
dominating gender, displays masculinity. In this exchange, Calphurnia the woman is dominated
by her husband the man and has no choice but to submit. Since there is no other public scene
with women, we are forced to conclude that in Caesar, the men act to dominate their wives in
public, and the women display submission.

In private, it is another matter. Calphurnia exerts far more effort to exercise power over
Caesar in an effort to stop him from going to the capitol. Caesar, for his part, listens and debates
and finally relents. How does Calphurnia accomplish this? Where in public her femininity
demonstrated complete weakness, in private her performance of feminine weakness turns into a
power move. When she kneels to Caesar as a final bid to persuade him to stay in, she appeals to
the nature of her marriage to Caesar. She acknowledges that Caesar is her guardian and that she
owes loyalty to him. Janette Dillon writes, “This tableau of a woman kneeling to a man to whom
she owes obedience is to / be often repeated in the tragedies, with a range of different
inflections” (60). In Caesar it is a display of the female pietas or “duty, devotion, and loyalty”
(Kamm 111) a woman owes not only to the state, but especially to her husband. Calphurnia’s
submissive display forces Caesar to acknowledge Calphurnia’s devotion and he relents. The
point we make here is two-fold. Calphurnia achieves power over Caesar, if only for a moment.
She kneels and Caesar agrees not to go out; however, by kneeling, Calphurnia performs a symbol of the submissive feminine. It would be unthinkable for Caesar to kneel in front of Calphurnia. She frames the power that she holds within the Roman concept of masculine dominance and feminine submissiveness and we cannot say completely that Calphurnia in any way subverts the Roman ideal of masculine dominance. She has influence over her husband, to be sure, but she gains this influence by playing to the hegemonic idea that males dominate and females obey. The paradox of Calphurnia attaining power through a display of weakness is encapsulated by her final, pleading statement, “Let me, upon my knee, prevail in this” (II.ii.58). Through submission, Calphurnia seeks to win.

We cannot tell exactly how Caesar’s response is intonated: “Mark Antony shall say I am not well / And for thy humor I will stay at home” (59-60). An actor could make it loving or frustrated, or any number of emotional notes. However, the stage directions include, “he lifts her up” (79), which suggests at least some compassion, in that he relieves Calphurnia from the position she has put herself in as he relents. It is a moment of intimacy between them.

Interestingly, even in this intimate moment, Caesar applies humours, or (in this case) fancies or dreams, to Calphurnia, and agency or “will” to himself, thus neatly making his acquiescence to Calphurnia a masculine choice. He continues to insist on making this choice by his own will, as when Decius Brutus interrupts this private scene to take Caesar to the Capitol: “. . . tell them that I will not come today. / Cannot is false, and that I dare not, falser. / I will not come today” (66-68). Decius Brutus persuades Caesar to change his mind again partly by chiding the emasculated nature of his decision: “it were a mock / Apt to be rendered, for someone to say / “Break up the Senate till another time, / When Caesar’s wife shall meet with better dreams” (101-104). Where Calphurnia can perform feminine weakness as a power move, femininity only effects a loss of
masculinity for Caesar. There are many ways in which Caesar faces feminization in his play, but it will suffice here to say that part of Caesar’s decision to go to the Capitol is because he is in danger of losing face in front of Decius Brutus. He admits as much when he says he is “ashamèd [he] did yield to [Calphurnia’s fears]” (111) in an attempt to place the weakness upon his wife.

In contrast to Calphurnia, Portia displays both femininity and masculinity. She appeals first to her feminine qualities, her “once commended beauty” (II.i.292), and “charms” (292) Brutus by the ideals of their marriage and the fact that she is his wife and thus deserves to know all of his thoughts. Portia underlines her feminine appeal with the same symbolic performance of submission as Calphurnia: kneeling in front of her husband. Portia, however, continues to challenge Brutus by displaying manly qualities in addition to feminine. It is a famous moment in the play when she reveals that she has stabbed herself in her own thigh:

Tell me your counsels; I will not disclose ’em.

I have made strong proof of my constancy,

Giving myself a voluntary wound

Here, in the thigh. Can I bear that with patience,

And not my husband’s secrets? (321-325)

Portia separates this act from her femininity. She “grants” (315) that she is female, but she appeals to the fact that the man Brutus is her husband, and that a powerful man is her father. She proves her “constancy” (322), a masculine trait, by stoically bearing the pain of sustaining a stabbing wound in her thigh. The point is that in order to exert power over Brutus, she performs gender. Her feminine performance is encapsulated by a symbolic gesture of submissiveness, kneeling in front of her husband. Her masculine performance is encapsulated by a symbolic gesture of fortitude, stabbing herself in the thigh. Portia’s gender performances align with the
Roman societal concept of the weak feminine and the powerful masculine. Portia gains power over her husband by negotiating the weakness of femininity and the strength of masculinity.

The scene is very much Portia’s. Brutus has only just been left by his fellow conspirators and spends his time trying to get Portia to go back to bed. He appeals to the feminine, “good” and “gentle” (II.i.280, 300) Portia and, like Caesar, he physically lifts Portia out of her kneel in a moment of intimacy. The difference between Calphurnia and Portia’s scenes, however, lies in the fact that Brutus begins to demonstrate great respect for Portia after she performs masculinity. He prays to the gods to render himself “worthy of this noble wife” (327). Portia’s venture into masculine performance earns her respect from her husband. Calphurnia, though momentarily successful in her feminine plea, is derided for her femininity. Although femininity achieves power in both scenes, it is masculinity that remains more respectable and more honoured.

We turn to Lear to find it is clear that Cornwall and Albany stand to gain from their matches. Even though Goneril and Regan will be queens of their respective domains, land has been given to them according to Lear’s approval of their husbands. As Gloucester observes, “it appears not which / of the dukes [Lear] values most, for equalities are so / weighed that curiosity in neither can make choice / of either’s moiety” (I.i.4-7). It is the men who appear to determine the gift of land, not the women. However, Lear’s daughters are forced into the strange circumstance of giving speeches proclaiming their love for the king. In a sense, they are ceremonially courting their father. A male is supposed to court the female. For example, sonnets in their earliest forms in England (imported from Italy) were emblems of male love for women (Abrams & Harpham 369). Regan and Goneril do not go into raptures over King Lear's attributes, but they still sue competitively for his attention. No matter the importance of the ceremony to the women’s dowries, Lear has positioned himself as the receiver of persuasive
appeals, the feminine in the equation, and he has positioned Goneril and Regan in the male position of having to demonstrate and prove their worthiness to him, the male of the equation. It is not the only time Goneril and Regan will embody masculine characteristics in order to gain or wield power.

Cordelia is made into a more stereotypically feminine character by Burgundy and France. Burgundy sees only her land as her power: “I crave no more than hath your Highness offered” (221), he says, turning Cordelia into a vessel whose value has to do with what is inside. Emptied of her dowry, Cordelia is nothing to Burgundy, an instance of the objects women were turned into in order to confer power on men by joining political dynasties. France, however, makes interesting rhetorical moves in pursuit of Cordelia. He makes the rejected Cordelia “herself a dowry” (278), and, like a hero, rescues her from her predicament. However, in doing so he also refers to Cordelia as “queen of us, of ours and our fair France” (299). Unlike any of the men we have seen in either play, he willingly places himself in a subordinate position to Cordelia, thus elevating her public power.

When compared to the other husbands in the play, France achieves a successful union with Cordelia through his public statement of submissiveness. Has he surrendered any of his masculinity? We propose that in this case he does not. All declarations of love in the opening scene are couched in poetry and eloquence, and France becomes truthfully what Goneril and Regan only perform: a poetic suitor, an emissary of courtly love into Lear’s bleak world. Rather than emasculating himself, France endows Cordelia with power, which she demonstrates clearly by her armed return to Britain to wage war on the houses of Cornwall and Albany, and rescue her father.
Power as a strictly masculine performance finds two prominent modes of display in Goneril’s treatment of Albany and Regan’s competition with Cornwall. When Albany attempts to defend Lear during the act one altercations about Lear’s retinue, out of a sense of service to the old monarch, Goneril cuts her husband off and calls for her servant Oswald, basically stopping the conversation. Goneril, of course, wants nothing to do with service. She is in the process of whittling down Lear’s retinue, and as a woman of action she will not be held back by her husband. Goneril chastises Albany’s “milky gentleness” (I.v.364), feminizing his wishes to do service to Lear and steamrolling his attempts to discuss the matter. Compared to either of the marriages in Caesar, there is no discussion in this marriage, no negotiation of power, however tenuous, only conflict and domination.

Though there are many more examples of Goneril and Albany’s exchanges, we add only that even as Albany tries to feminize Goneril and make himself more masculine when he says he would tear Goneril limb from limb if “a woman’s shape did not shield thee” (IV.ii.83), Goneril will simply have none of it. She is dismayed that Albany is not ready to go to war against France’s armies, led by Cordelia, calling him a “milk livered man” (62) and when Albany talks of not hurting her because she’s a woman her response is vicious emasculation: “Marry your manhood – mew” (83). Goneril reduces Albany’s attempts at masculine performance to that of kittens meowing. Goneril evinces a will to power and in her emasculation of her husband she endows herself with a masculine spirit of action. We might observe, using gendered terms, that Goneril wears the pants in the family. Albany might nominally have power, but it is Goneril who dominates the proceedings through emasculation of her husband and active moves to gain more power.
When Regan and Cornwall arrive at Gloucester’s house (evading Lear’s arrival at theirs), Regan quickly takes control of the opening conversation. Cornwall opens with salutations and a report that they have heard of the apparent betrayal of Edgar, however Regan jumps in, echoing Cornwall’s statement and Gloucester proceeds to talk to her. By the end of the exchange, Regan has this to say of Lear’s retinue: “That if they come to sojourn at my house / I’ll not be there” (II.i.119-120). By claiming ownership of Cornwall’s house, Regan draws on her royal lineage, familial ownership of all of England, but more importantly she publicly demonstrates dominance in her marriage. Cornwall is forced to catch up to her in his interjection, “Nor I, assure thee, Regan” (121). Regan again takes control of the conversation when Cornwall attempts to get down to the business of why they have come to Gloucester’s house. Cornwall begins, “You know not why we came to visit you-” (139). Regan picks up the line and finishes it, “Thus out of season, threading dark-eyed night” (140). From here she begins to lay out the developing situation between Lear, his knights, and Kent’s journey to Gloucester’s house. By the end of her speech, Gloucester replies, “I serve you, madam” (130), and though he welcomes both Regan and Cornwall inside, it is clear that Regan has dominated the conversation, and thus, her husband.

R. A. Foakes calls attention to this trait in Regan’s character in the Arden King Lear Third Series, with the observation, “Regan typically intervenes, asserting her authority” (233). Regan’s authority takes authority away from Cornwall, and though there is no overt use of gendered language, her behaviour is clearly blocking Cornwall’s supposed masculine authority to be the ruler of the house. We can speak in terms of masculinity and femininity since the opening scene, with debates over Cordelia’s dowry and talk of the king’s preferences for the men, has demonstrated that men stand to gain power and men expect to rule. Regan, however,
draws on her royal heritage and acts as the queen of her land. Regan competes to assume the male role in the marriage, and thus the power.

Regan and Goneril’s marriages are emblematic of conflict and refusal to negotiate any power when total power is the prize. However, we see in Regan and Goneril’s competition for Edmund where their wills to power are attracted and we see the destination in gendered terms. Goneril gives context to her attraction, speaking after Edmund’s exit: “[O, the difference of man and man!] / To thee a woman’s services are due; / My fool usurps my body” (IV.ii.33-35). Edmund quests for control of his household and Goneril (and Regan) see in him a more effective partner for gaining control of the entire realm. More to the point, Edmund’s will to power, and his claim to be a natural man, attract Goneril to him and persuades her to her speech defining the kind of man to whom she is willing to give her services, including her body. Albany is a “fool” in comparison to Edmund. The point is that Goneril is willing to be a wife to a man who deserves her service. She is willing to act a more feminine way with a man whom she deems to be more masculine. Thus, in the absence of a suitable male partner for Goneril and Regan, the sisters perform the roles that are traditionally expected of men. Femininity is placed in a submissive position to masculinity, and successful masculinity, whether performed by men or women is deemed the more powerful mode of behaviour.

Surprisingly, there is little commentary that speaks directly to the power negotiations we have been discussing that might provide more context for what Shakespeare is exploring. For Caesar, Dillon points us to Plutarch’s concept of virtue in his Lives: “‘in those days, valiantness was honoured in Rome above all other virtues: which they called virtus, by the name of virtue itself, as including in that general name, all other special virtues besides’” (Plutarch quoted in Dillon 59). Coppélia Kahn too, discusses “the manly independence of the early republic” (85).
Caesar, at the end of the Republic, exemplifies the pursuit of virtue when he declaims, “Cowards die many times before their deaths; / The valiant never taste of death but once” (Caesar II.ii.34-35), thus tying his virtue, his manhood, to bravery yes, but more importantly, to his decision to carry through with his journey to the Capitol and his potential to rule the state. It is Caesar’s masculinity that Cassius argues against when he characterizes him as a “sick girl” (I.ii.135). Part of Cassius’s argument against Caesar as any form of ruler is that he is no longer man enough. Kahn makes the astute point that in the conspiracy to assassinate Caesar, even “Brutus competes to distinguish himself as the Roman most devoted to the republic. His character no less than that of Cassius, and that of Caesar, is conceived and shaped in terms of the contradiction between republican virtue and Roman emulation” (96). Emulation here refers to the spirit of manly competition to see who can be the best Roman, the best exemplar of virtue. Manhood, then, becomes tied up in ruling the state.

Scholars such as Leslie Kordecki and Karla Koskinen have provided valuable feminist revisions on Goneril and Regan’s motivations, arguing “that the actions of all three daughters, like those of most of the men in the play, are a result of Lear’s erratic and irresponsible behavior in the first scene” (2); however, we have no specific discussion of the power dynamics between the royal husbands and wives. Stephen Greenblatt gives us a possible point of entry when he writes of the nameless servant’s intervention into Cornwall and Regan’s torture of Gloucester: “Though his act has important political consequences, the servant is not acting out of political motives, and still less out of personal ambition. He has an ethically adequate object – the desire to serve the duke his master by stopping him at all costs from performing an unworthy action” (76). We have mentioned in our discussion Regan and Goneril’s wills to power. Greenblatt gives
us the other end of the spectrum: a will to service. It is this service that Albany wishes to argue with Goneril that gets him emasculated by her.

Masculinity is therefore, on a political level as well as the social level of families, linked to the ability to rule. Femininity is linked to the instinct for service. That being said, Shakespeare presents masculinity and femininity in highly ambivalent forms. The two women of Caesar both achieve power in their relationships partly through displays of submissiveness. Though they do not subvert the hegemonic power structure of Rome, they do achieve power over their husbands through submission, thus introducing irony into the constant displays of dominant masculinity by the men. The women of Lear are made villainous by their masculine pursuits of power, and monstrous in their dominance over their husbands. Cordelia, on the other hand, endowed with power by France, becomes a power of an altogether different sort, as she embodies an avenging angel in pursuit of the rescue of her father. What Shakespeare has done is subvert the stereotype of masculine dominance.

We find, then, in Julius Caesar and King Lear, a subtle exploration of masculine and feminine value in Shakespeare’s treatment of power dynamics in marriage. In both plays, men are compelled to display masculinity in public situations and are chastised if they do not. In Julius Caesar, the men will be affected by femininity and even act in ways that could be called feminine, behind closed doors. We find also that since masculinity is the more worthy trait in these societies, it endows both male and female characters who display masculinity with power. However, the fluid nature of gender display introduces ambivalence to any conclusions we can draw about the ultimate value of masculinity or femininity. Albany tries on masculinity in front of Goneril and is soundly rejected. Edmund the villain cannot be a good role model for masculinity. Nor can the men of Julius Caesar be good role models who all contribute to the
downfall of the Roman republic through an obsession with public displays of masculinity. Not even Portia is invulnerable to gender ambivalence, for when Brutus does go to the Capitol she becomes extremely anxious and attributes her feelings to her weak femininity, thus undermining any conclusive observations we can make about the power of femininity in Rome.

The odd couple out is France and Cordelia. France’s act of endowing Cordelia with power cuts through power dynamics. He does not emasculate himself and he does not claim anything for his own. Cordelia has nothing to say to him in reply, but she does go with him when he beckons her and they exit together, retaining her dignity and without submission. *King Lear* is not only about gender performance and display, of course, and neither is *Julius Caesar*, but Shakespeare seems to makes a profound discovery about power dynamics. When they are shared and not fought over, they transcend traditional notions of gender.
Works Cited


