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Think Again: The Decision Making Process in *King Lear* and Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*

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Abstract

This thesis is a feminist reading of Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Jane Smiley's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *A Thousand Acres* that applies psychological insights into human behavior to explain economic decision-making. Many of the traditional readings of *King Lear*, including the works of critics A. C. Bradley, Maynard Mack and Stephen Greenblatt, approach the play by accepting the patriarchal view of Lear as the rightful ruler, while Goneril and Regan are wicked for taking the kingdom from their father. Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, however, approaches the text from what she imagines Goneril's perspective to be and includes the incestuous implications of a relationship in which daughters love their father all. While both approaches are valid, I examined economic decisions the daughters make when Lear offers his daughters his kingdom and Larry offers his daughters the farm. These economic decisions reflect the psychological theories into how people decide, and I apply these theories to show both Lear and his daughters basing their understanding of economic gain on heuristics of cognitive ease, availability, and the anchoring power of the patriarch rather than Platonic rationality. This, then, frees Lear from his monstrous position in Smiley's novel and Goneril and Regan's wicked roles in *King Lear*, and allows for a reading of the plot that is rooted in the psychological depth of all human life. Lear, Goneril, Regan and Cordelia all make effective and ineffective, positive and destructive, emotional and rational decisions throughout the play making it impossible to simplify each character as simply legitimate or wicked, sinned against or sinning.

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“Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor.” (Genesis 4: 1-7).

1.

Introduction

In present day northern Iraq and eastern Syria lies Mesopotamia: the home of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. This is the heart of the Fertile Crescent, the part of the world made famous as the location of the Garden of Eden, outside of which the first murder—indeed, the first fratricide—was said to take place. Today, most scholars agree that this story is “by far the best-known story in the world [. . .] having been carried into every corner of the world by Christian missionaries” (Quinn 520). While it is usually credited to the manufacture of Hebrew mythology, the truth is that the story of one of Adam and Eve’s sons killing the other was already well known to the Hebrews’ ancestors, the nomadic Semites (Quinn 468). Today, the Judeo-Christian tradition tells this story as a way to illustrate our human desire to take more than we need, and in fact, this is in part the didactic center of the myth. However, an examination of the history of this ancient myth shows a story that has been used by differing power structures (what Marx calls ideologies)—from hunters and gatherers, to agriculturalists, to Anti-Semites—to

communicate the message of their particular values and agendas while oppressing the very culture that created the myth.

Most anthropologists agree that the story of the first fratricide can be traced back to the time of the Neolithic Revolution (Quinn 237). In it, the younger brother is a pastoralist or a herder of flocks of animals, a way of life most anthropologists agree came into existence around the Paleolithic era, in which hunting, gathering and herding defined the human way of life. Herders like the younger brother are nomadic; they give their flocks the food and water they need, then move on allowing the earth to restore itself (Quinn 687). The older brother, conversely, is an agriculturalist. As the story explains, he worked the soil, planting and harvesting, and his occupation is significant for two reasons. First, it is toward the end of the Paleolithic era that a great transition was taking place in the Fertile Crescent, hence the term *Neolithic Revolution*. People had discovered a non-nomadic lifestyle based on agriculture and settlement rather than herding, hunting and gathering gave them the opportunity to eat more calories, grow larger families and communities, and even build city-centers that allowed for a large accumulation of power without the threats to that power that naturally come from moving about to keep herds of animals fed and watered.

The second reason the older brother's occupation is important is that once the Neolithic Revolution began, it allowed those with agricultural resources to gain more and more power, which the agriculturalists then used to push the herders out to less fertile ground or kill them and use their herding grounds for cultivating crops. As Daniel Quinn describes it in his 1992 book *Ishmael*, "What was happening along that border was that Cain was killing Abel. The tillers of the soil were watering their fields with the blood of

the Semitic herders” (Quinn 479). The Semites had only two options: maintain their semi-nomadic lifestyle or become just like their neighbors—a sin the Hebrew prophets warn their people against over and over again throughout the Old Testament (Quinn 476).

The older brother’s occupation is the ancient equivalent of a well-funded invading army that sets out to destroy the nomadic herders. This is why Cain’s grain offering is not acceptable. To the nomadic Semites, Cain represents one of the invading agriculturalists who destroys the herders, and then has the audacity to give an offering to the herders’ Semitic God.

At this point in the story, the details start to sound very strange to the modern ear. The younger brother slaughters some of the firstborn of his flock and brings the fat portions of the animals as his offering. The older brother also brings an offering from his income: some of the fruits of the soil. The Lord looks on the meat offering with favor, but does not favor the grain offering; instead, the Lord lectures the older brother telling him to “do what is right” and master the sin that is “crouching at your door.” Thus begins one of the most memorable family conflict stories in all of human history. The older brother’s name is Cain, the younger brother’s is Abel (Genesis 4:1-7).

2.

The story of Cain and Abel is a story about how people make decisions when faced with the opportunity to gain property and increase their wealth. Likewise, the story of *King Lear* is about how Lear’s daughters make decisions when faced with the opportunity to gain property and increase their wealth. Within both stories, the characters must decide how they will live and feed themselves. Will they abide by the traditional system of

hunting, gathering and herding, or will they join the new agricultural system, risking the wrath of their family's God? Will they abide by the patriarchal rules of Lear and his love test, or make a scene and lose all their property?

When we look at the legacy of Cain and Abel, how it became one of the most well-known stories on earth, we also see a pattern in how differing ideologies choose to use the story to justify the way they use and distribute property. The meaning of the Cain and Abel story as told by the herders is totally different from the story spread by Christianity during colonization. As Quinn describes it, "with the spread of Christianity and of the Old Testament, the [agricultural economies] came to adopt as their own a story an enemy once told to denounce them" (Quinn 496-97). Meanwhile, the story has remained virtually unchanged; even in translation the original conflict between agriculturalists and hunter-gatherers is clearly in the language of both the fall of Adam and Eve,¹ and the story of Cain and Abel. And yet, as Quinn puts it, "most read the story as if it were set in a historical never-never land, like one of Aesop's fables. It would scarcely occur to them to understand it as a piece of Semitic war propaganda" (Quinn 490).

To this day theologians struggle to identify God's reason for favoring Abel's flesh offering over Cain's, especially because Leviticus 2 lays out rules for specific grain sacrifice; meaning, Cain's grain is not in violation of religious law. Again, Quinn explains that by telling the story of Cain and Abel over and over, "the Semites were telling their children, 'God is on our side. He loves us herders but hates those murderous

¹ To the nomadic Semites, living off the land was the equivalent of living in the garden. It was unthinkable to them that anyone would want to live "by the sweat of your brow" (Genesis 3:19) and toil to eat food from the ground (Quinn 503).

tillers of the soil from the north” (482). The story is at its heart the opposite of what colonizers do all over the world—it is a call for people to *refrain* from taking more land than they need for the sake of God, not a call to take what they can for God’s sake.

To the modern ear, the idea of killing animals for food seems barbaric and backwards compared to planting. We admire those who take care of themselves, punish those who do not plan for the future, and look with slight discomfort upon the act of slaughtering animals for food. However, nomadic living requires people to take only what they need, while an agricultural lifestyle led to many of the problems we still face today: a higher human population, large and damaging changes to the environment, the growth of urban spaces, and a need for a centralized government.

3.

This paper examines how characters and ideologies make decisions based on the potential for gaining or losing land. The characters of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and their 1970s American counterparts in Jane Smiley’s Pulitzer-prize winning novel *A Thousand Acres* are placed into a system of property inheritance and must make decisions based on what they understand to be the probability of loss and the probability of gain. Such family battles are ancient ones, and in many ways they resemble the mythic battle between Cain and Abel in that they are both about battles over property, families, systems of inheritance and leadership. The first chapter shows Cordelia faced with her father’s offer to give her and her sisters the kingdom; in exchange, all she has to do is tell her father that she loves him more than her sisters love him. Goneril and Regan go along with the rules Lear sets up for his system of inheritance, telling Lear they love him *all*. But

Cordelia makes a decision that psychologists and neuroscientists would recognize as one very few people make; she chooses to *lose* land and forfeit her inheritance saying, “Sure, I shall never marry like my sisters, / To love my father all” (1.1.105-106). Rather than making a decision based on the potential for property gain, Cordelia, it seems, makes a decision based on the potential for loss within a system where she is rewarded with property only if she lives and governs loving her father *all*, leaving no love left for her husband or for her kingdom. As the play progresses, the audience sees that her decision is wise, and often, this causes readers to see every decision she makes as saintly or self-sacrificing. But Shakespeare’s characters are much too complex for such a simplistic reading. Cordelia makes more than one decision throughout the course of the play, and the second decision I will examine is her decision to vindicate her father by returning to England with the army of France. This decision is also based on the potential for gain and the potential for loss, but it is not as farsighted as her decision during the love test.

The second chapter will examine Goneril’s decisions and how the story of *King Lear* changes when the storyteller changes in the same way the story of Cain and Abel changes when the organizing power structure moves from hunting and gathering to agricultural. Just like characters within a story, those who tell the story also evaluate the potential for loss and gain when passing on its central themes. Shakespeare tells *King Lear* in the form of a play, which does not show the point of view of just one character, but of many, making it a text full of opportunity for a feminist reading. And yet, I will argue that the great majority of Shakespeare’s critics over the past 400 years have read the play through the eyes of a patriarchal power structure.

Patriarchy, as Louis Tyson puts it in *Critical Theory Today*, “promotes the belief that women are innately inferior to men” (85) and “all of Western (Anglo-European) civilization is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideology, as we see, for example, in the numerous patriarchal women and female monsters of Greek and Roman literature and mythology” (92). As feminist critic Toril Moi put it in her book *Sexual/Textual Politics*, “One of the central principles of feminist criticism is that no account can ever be neutral” (xiv). Indeed, biological essentialism—the belief that women are born inferior to men because of biological differences—has been used “to justify and maintain the male monopoly of positions of economic, political, and social power, in other words, to keep women powerless by denying them the educational and occupational means of acquiring economic, political, and social power” (Tyson 86). Is it any coincidence, then, that women hold only 4.6% of CPO positions in all Fortune 500 companies? (Catalyst.org). Or that in *The Guardian’s* 2013 list of America’s top-paid CEOs, every single one is a white male? “Gender issues play a part in every aspect of human production and experience, including the production and experience of literature, whether we are consciously aware of it or not” (Tyson 92). Indeed, patriarchy changes the way readers interpret stories, and decision-making is at the heart of exposing patriarchy for what it is. As Gerd Gigerenzer, author of *Rationality for Mortals* puts it, “Bounded rationality is like a pair of scissors: The mind is one blade, and the structure of the environment is the other. To understand behavior one has to look at both, at how they fit” (Gigerenzer 86).

For example, according to the nineteenth century Shakespearean giant A.C. Bradley, Lear is a noble and beautiful example of “the effect of suffering in reviving the greatness and eliciting the sweetness of [his] nature,” and Goneril is “the most hideous

human being (if she is one) that Shakespeare ever drew” (Bradley 249). When Jane Smiley uses the novel form to rewrite the story of *King Lear* from Goneril’s perspective, offering motivations for the decisions of Lear, Goneril and Regan where Shakespeare omits a description of their motivations, the novel highlights parts of *King Lear* that encourage readers to think about the play from the perspective of the daughters. It exposes the structure of the environment Lear created and the human mind’s response to that environment, both within the play and upon it.

As literary critics and humans we are constantly searching for different perspectives from which to make value judgments. I begin that search by reexamining the story of *King Lear* from a feminist perspective. As with the story of Cain and Abel, when culture values security through hard work which, to the modern reader has involved farming, not nomadic herding, we fit our ancient myths around the structure of our environment rather than examine the myths in the original context. The same thing happens when we read *King Lear*. Reading from a patriarchal perspective, one might expect the patriarch and King of England to be the tragic hero showing, “the effect of suffering in reviving the greatness and eliciting the sweetness of [Lear’s] nature” (Bradley 249). And yet, let us look again at the lines Shakespeare wrote. After Lear asks, “Which of you shall we say doth love us most? / That we our largest bounty may extend,” (1.1.53-54) Cordelia puts her inheritance and financial security at risk saying:

Good my lord,

You have begot me, bred me, loved me: I

Return those duties back as are right fit,

Obey you, love you, and most honour you.

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. (1.1.95-105)

Cordelia is not just saying that she believes the test to be unfair or odd, but she first outlines what she believes to be “right and fit”: as Lear’s daughter, she acknowledges that he begot her, bred her and loved her. She too hopes to marry, give away half her love to her husband and half to her father; she will likewise give half her care and duty to her husband, and half to her father. She then critiques not merely her sisters’ vows of love, but how these vows are incongruous with the concept of marriage. As Lynda Boose puts it in her essay “The Father’s House and the Daughter in It,” within the tradition of Shakespearean and western marriages, “The power dynamic should fit into a perfect triangle with the father at the top, and the husband and daughter at the bottom two corners” (30). But this is not the shape of the power dynamic the love test is setting up. If the love test demands that Lear’s daughters love him *all*, then this makes *not* a triangle, but a family tree in which the daughters and father are incestuously linked.

However, what is more important is that the longevity of Shakespeare’s work suggests that he accurately reflects the ways humans behave. This allows for different perspectives to read the language so that ideology does not become the only storyteller. By examining characters’ individual decisions rather than labeling them simply great or hideous, I hope to offer a new perspective on the story of *King Lear*.

Too often traditional readings of *King Lear* tend to look at the actions of a character who protects the traditional, patriarchal power structure, like Cordelia in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and label everything she does as either bad or good, when that might not be the case at all. This is what psychologists call the "illusion of causality" and was tested in 1945 by Belgian psychologist Albert Michotte who argued that we see causality just as we see shapes and colors. More recently, statisticians Howard Wainer and Harris Zwierling demonstrated the illusion of causality by presenting people with this trick question:

A study of new diagnoses of kidney cancer in the 3,141 counties of the United States reveals a remarkable pattern. The counties in which the incidence of kidney cancer is lowest are mostly rural, sparsely populated, and located in traditionally Republican states in the Midwest, the South, and the West. What do you make of this? (Khaneman 109).

When presented with this information, most people search their memories for a hypothesis. Wainer and Zwierling describe their observations this way: "It is both easy and tempting to infer that the low cancer rates are directly due to the clean living of the rural lifestyle—no air pollution, no water pollution, access to fresh food without additives" (Kahneman 109). But of course this is the statistician's version of a trick question. The U. S. counties in which the incidence of kidney cancer is highest are also "mostly rural, sparsely populated, and located in traditionally Republican states in the Midwest, the South, and the West." Again, when Wainer and Zwierling ask people what they make of this statistic, they observe people searching their memories for causation, and it is easy to infer that the "higher cancer rates might be directly due to the poverty of the rural lifestyle—no access to good medical care, a high-fat diet, and too much alcohol,

too much tobacco” (Kahneman 109-110). The human mind makes connections and a story where there are only facts because our minds are always looking for causation. As Kahneman puts it, “The world makes much less sense than you think. The coherence comes mostly from the way your mind works” (51). In short, people often find causality in places where there is only correlation.

Another example can be seen in a made-up syllogism such as this: In 1940, all Nazis were German. In 1940, Kurt was a German; therefore, Kurt was a Nazi. This isn’t logical, of course; nonetheless, we now look at history and see Germans living in England after World War II struggling a great deal because of irrational bias. Stereotypes are shortcuts the human mind uses to quickly identify danger, and we do the same thing with the characters in well-known stories.

In the early 1970s, research psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky explored the difference between perceptions—what we believe is happening—and physical causality, or what is actually causing something to happen. This led Kahneman and Tversky to ask: Are people good intuitive statisticians in the same way people are good intuitive grammarians? Ask any four-year-old to describe the rules of grammar, and she will explain, while effortlessly conforming to grammar’s rules, that she hasn’t a clue what you are talking about. Do people have a similar intuitive feeling about the statistics all around them? What Kahneman and Tversky found was that people, including scholars, do not consider base rates when making decisions. This confusion between correlation and causality plays a large role in beliefs about characters in very old stories. For example, just because some of Goneril’s decisions are violent, this doesn’t

necessarily mean that her decisions *cause* the tragedy. Smiley's novel shows this to be true by telling the story from Goneril's perspective.

In the 1970s, psychologists agreed with such uniformity upon two principles of human behavior and decision-making that they rarely even acknowledged them as theories for debate. First, they believed people almost always behave rationally and, second, they believed emotions such as love, jealousy and fear inhibit this natural rationality. Kahneman and Tversky did not set out to dispel this belief, but after twelve years of working together, they almost certainly did. Their research resulted in a behavioral economic theory that describes decision making as an act in which people evaluate the possibilities of loss and gains based in certain illusions or shortcuts rather than the likely outcome of the decision. Furthermore, people's ideas of the likelihood of loss and the likelihood of gain are not based on an intuitive sense of statistical realities; rather, people evaluate risk and reward using certain heuristics—simple, efficient rules, biases or mental shortcuts that break a complex question into shorter, simpler questions, which often results in systematic mistakes.

For example, it is cognitively much easier to read a story about a good king offering his kingdom to his two evil daughters, while his one good daughter returns to save his life, than it is to stop and evaluate each decision each character makes as either rational and well-thought-out, or based on a simplistic rule or mental shortcut resulting in consistent errors of judgment. Simplifying characters into categories of great and sweet, or evil and hideous is the form of decision making that Kahneman and Tversky's theories of decision making describe. In an attempt to combat the systematic errors that result

from decisions that are made this way, I will examine characters' decisions first, and attempt to refrain from labeling a character as good or evil.

In order to demonstrate how people use mental shortcuts rather than logic or statistics to make decisions, Kahneman and Tversky presented their university colleagues, statisticians and research psychologists, with this question: "Steve is very shy and withdrawn, invariably helpful but with little interest in people or in the world of reality. A meek and tidy soul, he has a need for order and structure, and a passion for detail. Is Steve more likely to be a librarian or a farmer?" (Kahneman 7). The results were overwhelmingly in favor of the librarian. However, "there are more than twenty male farmers for each male librarian in the United States" (Kahneman 7). And their test group was, indeed, statisticians.

If even statisticians answer questions without at least *consulting* statistics or acknowledging that their career in the university primes them to believe a librarian is the answer, I propose that it is time to reexamine *King Lear* by acknowledging biases, shortcuts and the powerful storytelling power of patriarchal culture upon the way the human mind makes decisions about Lear and his three daughters.

Chapter 1

How Cordelia Decides

1.

In Meredith Skura's essay, "Dragon Fathers and Unnatural Children," Skura notes the marked difference between the moral balance in the old fairy tale, *King Leir*, and the imbalance in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. "In the old play, it is clear that Leir is wrong and Cordelia is right. She is sinned against, he is sinning" (Skura 122). However, in Shakespeare's version, Cordelia's lines offer no insight as to why she so courageously stands up for what she calls a father-daughter relationship that is "right and fit" (1.1.97), even when it means losing her prosperity. Indeed, Shakespeare never explains *what* is not right and fit about Lear's relationship with Goneril and Regan, leaving it to the audience to decide.

As the play opens, the map to which Shakespeare's Lear refers is already divided into three portions. Kent, Edmund and Gloucester approach the throne followed by Goneril and Albany, Regan and Cornwall. And then alone enters Cordelia, prepared for her betrothal ceremony in which Lear will present his third daughter as virginal and pure to either the King of France or the Duke of Burgundy, thus vowing to relinquish his authority over her as protector, and to pass that responsibility to her husband. Outside the question of which man Cordelia will marry is a larger question: which daughter will get (what is presented to be) the largest portion of the kingdom? Hence Lear asks his daughters: "Which of you shall we say doth love us most?" (1.1.51). It is not just a question of familial loyalty, but one of patriotism—a daughter's commitment to remain in her native country beside her aging father.

The transfer of daughters from father to husband, most anthropologists agree, is central to the origin of culture because it is “synonymous with the evolution of kinship” (Boose 19).² Historically, the role of the daughter is to be the most valuable gift a father can give, thus freeing trade relations between father and husband, and at the very least, preventing hostility between the two families while preventing incest within the family (Boose 25 & 70). But this isn’t the whole story. In Western myth, the father is more likely to protect his daughter from men, “retaining, not exchanging his daughter” (Boose 30). Thus we have fairy tales like Rapunzel, Gothic literature, and every other story in which a daughter obeys her daughterly obligations within her father’s home until a male outside the house tries to get her out; then after a long battle, voyage or journey the father finally allows the daughter to leave his house for the house of the aforementioned male, and everyone lives happily ever after (Boose 33).

While these traditions are preserved in the traditional language of marriage ceremonies today—“who gives this woman to this man?”—the situation is foreign to most contemporary American readers. Women no longer depend upon a dowry, and Americans don’t live in a monarchy. Of those who do live in a monarchy, only two or three people in the entire country would ever know the intimate transaction of political power from father to daughter. It’s fantastic, but emotionally out of reach—like the anger of some invisible but audible god who is displeased with a grain offering. Quickly, readers of these stories side with Cordelia and Abel, perhaps even conjuring memories of having been wronged by a father or brother only to be vindicated in the end. However,

² The problematic nature of defining “the origins of culture” in that such a definition implies the way we live now is “cultured” while the way those other people lived or live is something uncultured and other is duly noted by the writer of this paper; however, I have neither time nor space to go into that issue here.

the scene Shakespeare is creating is important to pause and examine because the distribution of land and the decision to accept or reject land-wealth is both as ancient as the Neolithic revolution and as modern as 20th century American farming. While the circumstances have changed, the decision-making process has not.

Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* takes this universal experience of decision-making concerning wealth and property and translates it into modern American terms. On an Iowa farm in the late 1970s Smiley gives her readers three sisters: Ginny (the Goneril character), a childless homemaker and her husband Ty (the Albany character); Rose (the Regan character), a cancer survivor and mother of two with her husband Pete (the Cornwall character), and Caroline (the Cordelia character), who left the farm after high school to become a successful lawyer in Des Moines. Ginny's and Rose's husbands farm with Larry Cook (the Lear character), until Larry decides to retire and form a corporation with their property, giving each daughter shares. Ginny responds to Larry's land offer with, "It's a good idea." Rose says, "It's a great idea." Caroline says, "I don't know" (Smiley 79). Caroline's apprehension humiliates Larry in front of his friends, but as far as she is concerned there is little other risk to her personally. There are no suitors present because—it being the late 1970s—she is already engaged to another lawyer who is back in Des Moines, so her father's rejection of her as his daughter does not affect her social or economic standing. When Larry slams the door in Caroline's face, she just drives back to Des Moines, back to her fiancé and her job. It is Cordelia's situation and actions set against Caroline's that insists readers revisit Cordelia's decisions during the love test in *King Lear* because Cordelia has so much more to lose than Caroline. Like Caroline's more lucrative career, Cordelia's marriage to the King of France gives her

more power and influence later in the story; however, unlike Caroline's low-risk decision to question her father's land, Cordelia's potential for loss is much greater.

Look at the characters watching Lear pass his property to his daughters: Goneril with her husband, Regan with her husband, and Cordelia waiting to be betrothed. After Lear gives Goneril and Regan their thirds, he turns to his youngest daughter:

Now, our joy,

Although the last, not least; to whose young love

The vines of France and milk of Burgundy

Strive to be interest'd; what can you say to draw

A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak. (1.1.82-86)

Lear not only asks Cordelia to tell him she loves him, but he also equates her worth as a spouse with her net worth, which can only come from him. And yet, Cordelia memorably responds: "Nothing, my lord" (1.1.87). Lear's demand for a proclamation of love, it seems at first, costs his daughters nothing more than words, and yet, Cordelia makes a scene by telling her father, and the entire room, that she returns his love only as is right and fit, suggesting that her sisters' love is neither right nor fit. She emphasizes this point by asking Lear, "Why have my sisters husbands, if they say/ They love you all?" (1.1.100-101).

While it is true that vowing to love one's father "all" is, indeed, incestuous, it seems either courageous or idiotic to risk poverty over a simple love vow that later on Goneril and Regan make little attempt to keep. Lear responds to Cordelia saying: "Let it be so; thy truth, then, be thy dower," (1.1.109) which exposes Cordelia up to humiliation and poverty. With her truth as her only dower, Burgundy rejects Cordelia. Then, instead

of offering France an opportunity to take her, Lear turns to France and says: “For you, great king, / I would not from your love make such a stray, / To match you where I hate” (1.1.210-12). Lear doesn’t even try to find an alternative living situation for his rejected daughter. In fact, he technically rescinds his offer to France and leaves Cordelia totally exposed and alone.

What happens next is the stuff of fairy tales. In the wake of Lear’s and Burgundy’s rejections, France reaches out for Cordelia’s hand arguing, “Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich being poor, / Most choice forsaken, and most loved, despised” (1.1.254-55). While this is romantic, it is also a stroke of incredible luck. Shakespeare gives no evidence that Cordelia knows France is exceptionally independent or antiestablishment, only this scene in which she refuses to give an offering to the all-powerful Lear and happens to fall into the arms of the one person who appreciates this action. Where does she get the courage to risk losing her home, her future, everything over something as silly as a love offering?

2.

The Advantages of Difficulties

The lines in which Cordelia states she is willing to displease her father for her belief in what she calls “the truth” shows a good deal about the way she is making a decision. Goneril and Regan, the audience is led to believe, are just as surprised by the love test as Cordelia, and yet they answer intuitively in a way that will please their father and, it seems, will bring wealth and power to themselves; they weigh the potential for losing the kingdom by displeasing their father, and the potential for gaining the kingdom by pleasing their father, and then speak accordingly. In terms of psychological research on

the way thinking and decision making works, Goneril and Regan use what University of Toronto researcher Keith Stanovich and his collaborator Richard West call Type 1 thinking (Kahneman 44). Type 1 thinking is what most people use most of the time. For example, when seeing the letters S-H-A-K-E-S-P-E-A-R-E written on a piece of paper, something related to the Elizabethan playwright comes to mind without any effort.

However, if on that same piece of paper is written the equation: $146 \times 17 =$, a number probably doesn't automatically come to mind; most people have to stop what they are doing, sit down and focus on figuring out the answer. This is what Stanovich and West call Type 2 thinking.

Management Professor Shane Fredrick has come up with an elegant exercise to show the difference between people who are inclined to use Type 1 thinking and those who are more likely to use Type 2 thinking:

A bat and ball cost \$1.10

The bat costs one dollar more than the ball.

How much does the ball cost?

Most people who read this question answer intuitively that the ball costs 10 cents (Fredrick 27). This demonstrates Type 1 thinking. Type 2 thinking would involve stopping to add 10 cents, plus one dollar more than 10 cents—\$1.10—which makes \$1.20. The correct answer, of course, is 5 cents. How people answer the question depends on many factors, including an understanding of the social cue that, if the answer to this question is as obvious as it seems, why would anyone ask it? (Kahneman 44).

When Lear says tell me how much you love me and I'll give you everything I own, it is possible that Goneril and Regan don't stop to really consider why he would

force them through such a seemingly pointless exercise. Cordelia, it seems, does. Is this because Cordelia is more socially adept than her sisters, or even more intelligent? I don't think so.

Fredrick developed the bat and ball question into a three-question intelligence quiz called the CRT that he then gave to college students across the nation. The results were, at first, a bit troubling: "90% of the students who took the CRT made at least one mistake in the test" (Kahneman 65). And then psychologists Adam Alter and Daniel Oppenheimer discovered something strange. When they printed the test in a font so light it was difficult to read, students' scores went up dramatically (Gladwell 103-104). Unlike the low ten percent of the students getting all three questions correct when they were printed in a normal font, when the font was barely legible, sixty-five percent of the students got a perfect score. The reason for this, Alter concluded, is that making the questions "disfluent" causes people to "think more deeply about whatever they come across. They'll use more resources on it. They'll process more deeply or think more carefully about what's going on" (quoted in Gladwell 105). Trying to decipher words on a page that are hidden in light ink evokes Type 2 thinking, which is necessary for solving the bat and ball question.

The students who answered the question correctly when it was presented to them in the lighter font were experiencing what Elizabeth and Robert Bjork call a desirable difficulty. "Desirable difficulties, versus the array of undesirable difficulties, are desirable because they trigger encoding and retrieval processes" (58). Retrieval and encoding is what Type 2 thinking is all about.

In Act 1.1 of *King Lear*, Goneril and Regan are both married, standing at the feet of their father but next to their husbands who are the source of their financial and social security. They have already gone through what seems to be a nerve-wracking ceremony of husband selection and betrothal, and as a result they are socially and financially rooted in England. Whatever Lear decides will be the outcome of the love test, the two older sisters still go home with their husbands; hence, their more skeptical, analytic Type 2 thinking probably isn't engaged. Cordelia, however, is thinking about much, much more than just her inheritance, so when Lear asks her to tell him how much she loves him, she turns on her sisters. "Why have my sisters husbands, if they say / They love you all?" (1.1.100). It's a good question—almost a mathematical equation: 100 percent of one's love leaves no room for love anywhere else. Also, this odd test is being administered at Cordelia's own betrothal ceremony, a time when she is thinking about love and commitment to a man who is not her father. Goneril and Regan, it seems, have already committed to settling in England with their husbands—to them this test probably seems like a question so simple it is hardly worth thinking about.

Many critics have cited Cordelia's bravery in this scene as moral integrity, and in a way it is, but that forces readers to see Goneril and Regan's pandering as duplicitous and selfish, setting the entire play on a course that will divide Lear's daughters into the good one and wicked ones. However, Cordelia's declaration of "Nothing, my lord," can also be seen as a savvy, even cutthroat negotiation technique. First, Cordelia begins with an aside: "What shall Cordelia speak? / Love, and be silent" (1.1.62). This seems a strange problem for her to be pondering. If she loves her father, and he is asking for a public confession of this love, why not just tell him she loves him without comparing her

declaration to her sisters'? And if she's opposed to the declaration because of the property attached to it, why doesn't she just say that instead of humiliating him? Even A. C. Bradley notes the absurdity of a play in which Cordelia could not at least conjure up a "thank you" (Mack 4). By standing up to her father and telling him she will love him in ways that are right and fit, however, Cordelia is not just rejecting her father, but her sisters, too.

After Regan's speech, Cordelia says in another aside: "Then poor Cordelia! / And yet not so; since, I am sure, my love's / More richer than my tongue" (1.1.77-78). Again, this is strange language. Perhaps she does love her father more richly than her tongue can express, but there is no reason to make a scene the way she does unless she is not thinking about her familial connection to her father at all, but renegotiating the terms of his proposed arrangement. Perhaps she is even signaling to France that she wants her own kingdom. This is certainly the way Smiley interprets it, showing Caroline running away from the farm, its work and her familial obligations to pursue a more lucrative career in DesMoines.

After France accepts Cordelia as his wife, she says rather callously to Lear, "If for I want that glib and oily art, / To speak and purpose not; since what I well intend, / I'll do't before I speak" (1.1.228-29). For the first time we see Cordelia drawing a line between performance and intention. Lear asks for a performance from his daughters.

Goneril and Regan recite their lines, but it is Cordelia who puts on a performance—"I'll do't before I speak"—and in so doing she redirects the course of the test and the play.

3.

The Love Test and The Anchoring Effect

Was Gandhi more than 114 years old when he died? According to Daniel Kahneman, when the question of Gandhi's age is phrased this way, most people will end up with a much higher estimate than if the question were phrased: Was Gandhi more than 35 when he died? (120). This is an example of what psychologists call an *anchoring effect*, and it occurs when "people consider a particular value for an unknown quantity before estimating that quantity [...] [t]he estimates stay close to the number that people considered—hence the image of an anchor" (Kahneman 119). Anchors can also be emotional. When an individual hears other people laughing, he or she is much more likely to laugh—hence the reason sitcoms play laugh tracks. Several times throughout the play, Lear presents the other characters with emotional anchors in the form of anger, which in turn makes them angry and defensive. Thus, when Lear says to his three daughters:

Know that we have divided
In three our kingdom: and 'tis our fast intent
To shake all cares and business from our age;
Conferring them on younger strengths, while we
Unburthen'd crawl toward death

and then, "Which of you shall we say doth love us most? / That we our largest bounty may extend" (1.1.44-51), he is using this anchoring effect to his advantage in three ways. First, he is drawing attention to his approaching death and away from his high-maintenance retirement. Notice, he does *not* say he will confer the kingdom on younger

strengths so that the younger strengths will set aside their comforts for the sake of Lear's knights and entertainment; rather, he says he will confer his business and then crawl toward death. Second, he frames his daughters' inheritance as a transaction: the daughter with the most love gets the largest bounty. Third, and perhaps most interestingly, he is implying that within that transaction, his daughters have power over the outcome while laying out the exact terms of their power—there will be a direct correlation between how much love and how much property. Cordelia's response redirects the focus of all three of these anchors.

Thinking about Cordelia's response to Lear's test in this way may help explain why she decides to humiliate her father when he offers her a gift; indeed, it also helps explain why she cannot conjure up so much as a thank-you. Kahneman explains that when he used the anchoring effect to teach negotiations at the university level, he would tell his students:

If you think the other side has made an outrageous proposal, you should not come back with an equally outrageous counteroffer [. . .] Instead you should make a scene, storm out or threaten to do so, and make it clear—to yourself as well as to the other side—that you will not continue the negotiation with that number on the table. (126)

This is exactly what Cordelia does by responding with her speech about returning her duties that are “right and fit” (1.1.97) and “Sure, I shall never marry like my sisters, /To love my father all (1.1.104-105). First, she draws attention to the fact that this declaration of love isn't easy—it's really difficult, and the lines her sisters have spoken aren't just in response to a quixotic exercise from Lear's feudal heritage; rather, they are

vows that will require them to take serious action after they speak them. Lear isn't really giving anything away; he is simply using this Trojan horse of a gift to keep his daughters in his country and by his side.

Second, Cordelia's rejection of the love test shows that this inheritance is not a transaction at all, and she reminds Lear of the reality that when he dies, the kingdom will likely fall to them with or without his blessing. Reading Cordelia's decision to reject Lear's love test with "Nothing, my lord" (1.1.87) as a reminder of Lear's mortality goes all the way back to Freud, who argued that silence—and by silence, Freud is taking literally Cordelia's line "Love, and be silent" (1.1.62)—in dreams is always symbolic of death because the dead cannot speak. In his essay "The Theme of the Three Caskets" Freud argued that it is not only Cordelia's silence that evokes the image of death and time, for also her very position as the third of three daughters evokes the Greek myth of the three fates, the third of whom is the goddess of death (Freud 73). Cordelia's performance, her refusal to use language, and even her visual evocation of the goddess of death all remind Lear of the real rules of being human, which when framed by Cordelia here do not appear to favor the king.

Third, Cordelia's "Nothing my lord" response breaks Lear's anchor by demonstrating that what she intends she does before she speaks it, and what she intends to do is dismantle Lear's terms of the love test and replace them with her own. Her "truth" is that perhaps this property transfer is a good idea, but Lear is not all-powerful in deciding the terms of his land negotiation. Their entire futures stand before them, while Lear's days are numbered, but not gone. Also, this tactic is unexpected in the sense that

it is neither violent nor submissive, and this—combined with the luck of France’s decision to marry Cordelia—is what makes it so successful.

This brings us back to the two types of thinking: the easy Type 1, intuitive thinking and the more difficult Type 2, critical, analytical thinking. It is Type 1 thinking that Lear probably used in creating the anchor for his question: “Which of you shall we say doth love us most?” (1.1.51). It is also Type 1 thinking that everyone but Cordelia uses to respond—Lear asks for a profession of love, and Goneril and Regan speak about their love. Only Cordelia stops to think about the correlation between the performance of a love declaration and the action of loving, probably because in her betrothal ceremony she must perform vows and then act out fidelity. Her unique situation has primed her to use Type 2 thinking in the same way a smaller, lighter font primes students to think more deeply about how they answer a math question. In so doing, Cordelia decides to destroy the anchor—incurring a tremendous amount of risk to her—and changes the rules of the test. As a result, it seems only France is wise enough to see that her thinking has given her the courage to be herself a dowry.

Smiley’s interpretation of the love test gets at the two types of thinking and the demolition of Larry’s anchoring effect by making Caroline a lawyer—a career that requires her to use Type 2 thinking to examine arguments from different angles—who has no desire to farm for a living. Instead of responding to Larry’s offer like Ginny and Rose do, affirming that his decision to divide the farm and give it to the three of them is a great idea, Caroline responds skeptically, according to how lawyers are trained to think in law school. It is also important to note that when Larry makes the offer, Caroline is at her childhood home on the farm using lawyerly tactics when a daughterly response is

expected. In this situation, even if she were a mediocre attorney, she is still far better at lawyerly thinking than her father and sisters. In a sense, she takes a difficulty—dealing with Larry during his retirement—and makes it a desirable difficulty by responding to him as a lawyer would rather than a daughter should. This is how she destroys Larry’s anchor. As Rose puts it: “She doesn’t have to be careful. She’s got an income. Being his daughter is all pretty abstract for her, and I’m sure she wants to keep it that way” (Smiley 204). Ginny and Rose’s decision to accept the farm is based on a prediction of potential for gain and risk of loss. If they accept the farm they lose nothing, but they gain land, a bigger harvest and larger income, and more respect in the farming community. For them, being Larry’s daughter doesn’t just mean they will care for him in old age—which they are positioned to do anyway—but also that their financial future depends on his generosity. Likewise, Caroline’s decision is also based on potential for gain and risk of loss. If she gains the farm, she also gains a tremendous amount of responsibility to either rent the land or farm it herself. This would also place her in a position of financial debt to her father, which might very well translate into more responsibility to care for him in retirement. For Caroline, all of this adds up to a giant loss of time to advance her career, and her life, in DesMoines.

Smiley makes it clear that Larry is not a father who encourages Type 2 critical thinking or debate; instead, she takes pains to point out that Larry sees himself as a dictator who ought never be questioned. For example, when Larry’s wife tries to object to his decision to beat Ginny for losing her shoe, Larry tells her: “There’s only one side here, and you better be on it” (Smiley 600). He then proceeds to whip Ginny with his belt. With a father like this, there is no daughterly response that will mollify him *and*

negotiate the terms of the inheritance. The daughters must either side with Larry and accept his gift, or reject it and move elsewhere. Caroline's decision results in her losing her shares in the farm and her subsequent banishment to Des Moines where she must live and make decisions as a lawyer, not Larry's daughter. For her, this is more gain than loss.

Caroline's second decision is her choice to sue her sisters to get the farm back, or as Ginny accurately puts it, to "push things out of the personal realm into the legal realm!" (Smiley 792). While Caroline's true motives are, like Cordelia's, never stated outright, Caroline certainly isn't going to move back home and become a farmer. It seems, then, that Caroline has the power to forgive her sisters and move on in daughterly fashion, caring for her father in his old age as she sees right and fit. But she does not.

This time, the potential for loss and gain are far different, and they depend upon her area of expertise in the courtroom. This time, if she wins in court, she will most likely inherit the entire farm, worth several million dollars, after her father dies. When it comes to taking the side of Larry or the side of her sisters, she doesn't use Type 2 thinking and say "I don't know" (Smiley 28) like she did at the beginning; rather, she takes the most direct, intuitive path by which she will gain the farm by challenging the deed that makes the farm legally Ginny's and Rose's using the court. With Caroline's second major decision, her potential for loss is only emotional—she will look foolish losing a case she herself brought to court—as she has no shares in the farm. However, if she wins the court case, the multimillion-dollar farm will be hers and hers alone.

Unlike Caroline's first decision to use Type 2 lawyerly thinking to question the soundness of Larry's decision to give away the farm, thus using her desirable difficulty to

argue her point against her less educated family, her second decision employs the same Type 2 thinking, but this time the anchors are based in the legal realm, not the familial realm. When taking her sisters out of the domestic sphere and into *her* public sphere, it matters a great deal if Caroline is a good lawyer or not. When she uses her lawyerly advantage in a daughterly capacity, she exposes herself to two kinds of undesirable difficulties: she now must be a better lawyer with a better case than her sisters' lawyer (Jean Cartier), and because she has now officially severed the tie between herself and her sisters she needs to win to defend her dignity as the loyal daughter.

Smiley shows this elegantly by having the judge say to Caroline: "There is merit in the argument that this may have constituted a frivolous misuse of this court, and Mr. Rasmussen and Ms. Cook [Caroline and her husband], in particular, should have bethought themselves before they decided to carry a family fracas this far" (Smiley 1054). When Caroline brings her family problems into the court to solve them in a place where she has the advantage, she is humiliated in the same way Larry is humiliated when Caroline responds in a lawyerly rather than daughterly way to Larry's offer to give his daughters the farm in the beginning. Yes, she uses Type 2 thinking *within* her job, but she does not stop to use Type 2 thinking when analyzing the outcome—whether or not to bring her family's problem into the public sphere.

Likewise, Cordelia also makes two separate decisions based on two very different sets of circumstances and anchors. In Act I, when Cordelia chooses to abstain from the verbal competition she is taking the approach of a pacifist, accepting the risk of poverty for the sake of destroying what she sees as a problematic anchor: If she loves her father all, she will not be able to love her husband. As a result, she becomes a victor showing

France that she is stronger than the pull of a large dowry, thus becoming herself a dowry. However, her second decision is far different. This time, she has already lost her family and property in England, but has gained property in France. This is why her communication with Gloucester causes the tragedy in the end. In Act III, scene 3, Gloucester tells Edmund that Lear has been cast out of his house, saying: "I have received a letter this night; 'tis dangerous to be / spoken; I have locked the letter in my closet. These injuries / the King now bears will be revenged home; / there is part of a power already footed" (3.3.10-13). This is the first hint of Gloucester's communication with Cordelia in France and allows for an examination of Cordelia's potential for gain and loss when she decides to return to England with the army of France in Act III, scene 7.

While it is difficult to determine the risk characters face a play like *King Lear*, which A. C. Bradley and Maynard Mack call a play in which Shakespeare "drew up a long list of gross improbabilities that no one has succeeded in arguing away" (Mack 3), we can say that any element of war involves risk of death, but it also offers the opportunity to gain property. The kingdom legally belongs to Goneril and Regan; however, if Cordelia, the Queen of France, defeats them in a war, it only follows that England will be hers to either take, or give back to her father before he dies, at which point it will be hers again. In short, Cordelia is faced with the potential for great gain if she defeats her sisters in a war. Whereas in Cordelia's first decision, she demolishes the anchors with the pacifist "nothing, my lord" response, this time, the injuries Lear bears cause her to collaborate with Gloucester for revenge.

As it turns out, facing a verbal or military challenge without accepting the verbal or military anchor is difficult, and it is to Cordelia's credit that she chooses to demolish Lear's anchor in Act I. However, during her second decision she accepts the military anchor, using the spoils of her pacifist victory in the love test—the army of France—to battle her family; the result, of course, is that she dies in battle, because of the anchor she accepted. In other words, when she accepts the anchor, in this case the violence of battle, and combats it using more battle, she dies in that battle. When she demolishes the anchor in the love test with “nothing, my lord” she is empowered to set the terms of her own negotiation.

There is one particularly apt theory as to why Cordelia and Caroline are so successful in their first decisions when they ignore the anchor and use their own advantages against great powers like Lear and Larry only to fail when they accept the anchor in situations where it appears they will have the advantage. In Smiley's version of the story, she describes Caroline and her husband Frank's appearance of advantage in the tiny Iowa court compared to her sisters' small-town lawyer, Jean Cartier: “[E]ven Jean Cartier looked ruffled compared to Caroline and Frank, with their charcoal gray suits from Minneapolis or maybe New York, their oxblood briefcases, and their hundred-dollar shoes” (1027). Using Type 1 thinking to interpret this scene, it appears as though Caroline and Frank are going to be better lawyers with more resources, and as such will probably win the farm. But of course they do not.

According to the theory of desirable difficulties, the reason Caroline and Frank do not win in court, and why Cordelia is killed even with the entire army of France supporting her is because both characters fail to utilize their desirable difficulties. Rather,

they simply accept the assumed anchors of the conflict—the courtroom for Caroline and warfare for Cordelia. This is the sort of decision-making that happens in the face of conflict all the time. In 2005 political scientist Ivan Arreguín-Toft published a study questioning why so many armies and individuals accept the rules (anchors) of the more powerful even when these rules do not favor them or their cause. While researching for his book, *How the Weak Win Wars*, Arreguín-Toft added up all the wars over the past two hundred years that occurred between small armies and armies that were at least ten times bigger; then he calculated which side was most likely to win. What he found was that when these small armies ignored the anchor of organized, well-funded battles presented by the larger armies and fought using unconventional or guerilla tactics, they won 63.6 percent of the time (Arreguín-Toft 21-22). This startling statistic suggests that Cordelia’s decision to combat Lear’s anchor of a verbal competition with an unconventional “nothing my lord” approach is more likely to reset the anchor in her favor than if she were to accept his anchor and combat it verbally. Maybe France’s decision to take Cordelia as herself a dowry isn’t so serendipitous after all; by defying the anchor, Cordelia demonstrates the greatest of strengths in the face of difficulty.

Still, winning the King of France puts Cordelia on footing higher than her sisters in their divided kingdom. The next time she goes into a conflict, however, she abandons her unconventional “nothing my lord” approach and responds as the Queen of France with military force. This is exactly what England expects, and they come prepared and with the home-field advantage.

Cordelia’s first decision shows the strength of her integrity: she is willing to risk poverty for what she sees as right and fit. However, to judge this decision as good, right,

even Christ-like is one thing, but to then jump to the illogical conclusion that Cordelia's first decision shows integrity; therefore, all of Cordelia's decisions will also show integrity is quite simply false. This is the cognitive bias psychologist Edward Thorndike called *the halo effect* in which a reader's (or observer's) overall impression of a person affects the reader's beliefs, intuitions and thoughts about person's "character or properties" (Thorndike 27). Indeed, the halo effect is one of the cognitive biases that allows A. C. Bradley to state that Lear is a noble and beautiful example of "the effect of suffering in reviving the greatness and eliciting the sweetness of [his] nature," and Goneril is "the most hideous human being (if she is one) that Shakespeare ever drew," (Bradley 249).

If Cordelia had applied the same pacifist risk of her first decision to her second decision, perhaps by traveling from France to England without an army, the course of the entire play could have been different. For instance, Gloucester might not have been punished as a traitor because his traitorous actions could not have resulted in the infamous torture scene where Regan and Cornwall gouge out Gloucester's eyes: "The army of France is landed.—Seek out the traitor Gloucester" (3.7.2-3).

This pattern of success when desirable difficulties are accurately identified and utilized that is seen in situations where the less powerful battle a powerful opponent shows itself to be true over and over again. In William Polk's book *Violent Politics*, a history of unconventional warfare, he writes that the famed American "minutemen" and farmers succeeded not despite their lack of training, but because of it—the British were better trained, but they had trained for the wrong kind of war. This, however, wasn't a source of pride for the Americans, and so "[a]s quickly as he could, Washington devoted

his energies to creating a British-type army, the Continental Line. As a result, he was defeated time after time and almost lost the war” (Polk 32). Likewise, Cordelia’s success during the love test came from her ability to use unconventional negotiation techniques in the face of a powerful king. When she fought against queens like a queen, however, she opened herself up to a battle against her sisters where they had the home field advantage.

4.

Cordelia’s Two Decisions

Cordelia’s negotiation technique in Act I is smart and incredibly courageous, and centuries of critics have struggled to understand her actions within the context of Shakespeare’s changing world. After Cordelia rejects the love test, Lear cries, “I loved her most, and thought to set my rest / On her kind nursery” (1.1.122-23). And yet, she rejects him arguing that she loves Lear, “According to my bond; no more nor less” (1.1.93), which, unless everyone in the room notices the incestuous nature of the love test, seems heartlessly honest in front of France, Burgundy, Gloucester and the like.

Somehow, however, scholars have found her decision to lose her inheritance for the sake of her integrity so unexplainable, so outside traditional human behavior that she represents the divine or Christ-like, often ending the play with Cordelia in Lear’s arms in the same way Michelangelo sculpted *La Pieta*. Freud even pictured her as the goddess of death, and indeed, he is not the only one who has tried to place her actions into the realm of the supernatural or the evolutionarily inexplicable.

As David K. Anderson points out, until the 1960s it was commonplace to read *King Lear* as “a drama of Christian redemption,” showing Cordelia’s death as sacrificial,

which makes her the ultimate, Christ-like “good” acting on Lear’s behalf and against her sisters (261). Then in 1968 William R. Elton published *King Lear and the Gods* in which he asks: If in the last scene Lear clutches Cordelia’s dead body while proclaiming: If she lives and breathes “[i]t is a chance which does redeem all sorrows / That ever I have felt” (5.3.271-72), then who, exactly, is redeemed, and by whom? A year after Elton asked this question, Roy W. Battenhouse tried to answer it arguing that the redemption is implied: “Lear’s feelings (like those of an onlooker at Calvary) are caught up within a frame of grief-stricken tragedy” (288). The problem with Battenhouse’s theory, of course, is that readers of the gospels are given an act six, in which bodily resurrection is not implied, but described and used as the crux of all Christian theology. Meanwhile, Lear and Cordelia both die, and the play is over. As Stanley Cavell points out, perhaps this isn’t a play about Christian redemption after all, because even when we place Christian mythological structure upon *King Lear*, the best we are left with is “the moment of crucifixion, not resurrection” (73).

Setting aside the problematic nature of Christ, “the sacrifice for many” (Mark 14:24), in *any* country’s army, the reason Cordelia ought not be depicted as a Christ-figure is this: Cordelia stands to gain significant wealth and power if she defeats her sisters in the war that begins in Act III. Cordelia is not a poor Jew demanding the powers that be sell everything they own and give it to the poor (Matthew 19:21); she is the Queen of France doing what the French do best in Shakespeare’s plays—threaten to take land from England. When she dies, she is executed because she has responded to a letter from Gloucester, who is technically a traitor to Goneril and Regan, the rightful rulers of the kingdom per Lear’s decree in Act I. After Goneril and Regan declare their love for Lear,

he proclaims: “To thee and thine heredity ever / Remain this ample third of our fair kingdom / No less in space, validity, and pleasure / Than that conferr’d on Goneril” (1.1.70-74). Indeed, Gloucester is so afraid anyone will learn of Cordelia’s letter to him that he says: “I have received a letter this night; ’tis dangerous to be / spoken; I have locked the letter in my closet” (3.3.10-11).

In Act I Cordelia rejects her third stating that she refuses to love her father “all” (1.1.95). One might conclude, then, that her intentions with the second decision is not to give her *all*, in this case her life, for her father in the same way Christ gave his life for humanity. Such reasoning on Cordelia’s behalf would not leave France even half her love and duty (1.1.92). It requires her to love her father *all*—the one act she refuses over and over in Act I. As a result, the play offers two potential motives for Cordelia’s return: Either she had hoped to defeat her sisters in a war, which would vindicate her father and leave her the throne of England after Lear dies, or she had planned to take the throne of England from the beginning.

The reason most critics rarely read *King Lear* this way is that patriarchal culture invites readers to side with Lear over Goneril and Regan. As Peter L. Rudnytsky observes, even the modern critics including Maynard Mack and Harold Bloom “accept Lear’s demonization of Goneril and Regan” which “is a crucial symptom of the misogyny of *King Lear*” (292); thus, they don’t see Gloucester as a traitor to the rightful rulers; they see him as a sort of Robin Hood, going behind the rightful rulers’ backs for the sake of the “good” character. I hope at this point such an intuitive reading seems at least suspect. It is always easier to use Type 1 thinking, to accept that because Goneril and Regan commit acts of violence there is a direct correlation between them and

wickedness, or to erroneously conclude that because they cause part of the tragedy, they must be responsible for all of it. However, reading the play alongside Smiley's adaptation shows that demonizing Goneril and Regan fails to account for the psychological depth of all of Shakespeare's characters in *King Lear*.

The play's critics are no more to blame than any other human being for using Type 1 thinking; it is simply the way the human mind is inclined to think. Rather than sorting through all the statistical possibilities for a character's actions or behaviors, we often assign a stereotype—mad Lear, evil Goneril, loyal Edgar—and then interpret all of the actions in a way that fits with this stereotype. In 1944 psychologists Fritz Heider and Mary-Ann Simmel made a one minute, forty second film demonstrating our tendency to assign personalities, intentions and emotions to characters. In the film, a large triangle, a small triangle and a circle move around what looks like a house with an open door: "Viewers see an aggressive large triangle bullying a smaller triangle, a terrified circle, the circle and the small triangle joining forces to defeat the bully" (Kahneman 76). Even when the plot of this very short film involves shapes rather than people, it is almost impossible to watch it without perceiving the intention and emotion of the shapes, and then assigning terms like "bully" and "victim;" perhaps even "good" and "bad" to these shapes. In the study, only people with autism did not experience the emotion and intention of these shapes (Kahneman 76).

However, in film as in reality, the "experience of freely willed action is quite separate from physical causality" (Kahneman 77). For example, it may be a man's hands that tie his shoelaces, but he does not think of it in terms of a chain of physical causes. He experiences it as caused by "a decision that a disembodied [he] made" (Kahneman

77) because he wanted to tie his shoelaces. This is why it is so difficult to remove the perception of stereotypes—e.g., a saintly Cordelia and a wicked Goneril and Regan. It is an offense to what we imagine is the freedom of our soul or our invisible, decision-making self. This is also why it is so important.

Indeed, in 2005 psychologist Paul Bloom went so far as to argue that our readiness to separate physical and intentional causality, resulting in the illusion of causality, explains the human desire for religion. He writes “we perceive the world of objects as essentially separate from the world of minds, making it possible for us to envision soulless bodies and bodiless souls” (Bloom). Likewise, when we watch a play we imagine our minds, the very essence of our thinking and feeling selves, are coming to a rational conclusion about what is right and good, versus what is wrong and wicked.

Viewing Cordelia’s decision to return to her homeland with the French army in relation to the story of Cain and Abel where Abel is the leaver, the one who does not accumulate more wealth and property than he or his family needs, while Cain is an agriculturalist, bent on taking as much land as he can without concern for his brother the herder, it seems quite possible that where Cordelia’s first decision in Act I positions her as an Abel-like character, her second decision to return with an army makes her more like Cain, coming back to collect more land than she would have had if she had pledged her love to her father in the first place. The problem with this theory is that Cordelia’s mission is thwarted by Edmund and her sisters’ military power, so she is killed before she has the opportunity for either peace talks or a coup. The last lines she utters lines are while she is being taken to jail: “Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?” (5.2.7). The question Shakespeare leaves the audience with is, *see them for what?*

Perhaps her only desire is to take her father back to France while leaving her sisters in peace, or to die by her father's side as a well-defended martyr (if such a thing exists). But then again, maybe Cordelia comes back with her army for a more self-serving reason.

Still, even if Shakespeare never intended Cordelia to be depicted as a Christ-figure, there is a great deal of redemption language throughout the play. The interesting part about this language is how much of it comes from Cordelia herself. When she returns from France she says to Lear:

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! (4.7.27-30)

She is calling to make herself the restorer of her father, who, when he does finally speak tells her, "You do me wrong to take me out o' the grave" (4.7.46). Kent doesn't say anything about her redeeming anyone when she first enters the scene; neither does the doctor. Gloucester alludes to the idea that France will avenge Lear's having been sent into the storm: "These injuries the King now bears will be revenged home; / there is part of a power already footed" (3.3.11-13). Because Cordelia and the French army are the only power that come to defend Lear, one can only assume that Gloucester is referring to Cordelia. Still, revenge is not the same as redemption.

Then in Act V, scene 3, after Lear and Cordelia are arrested because they are indeed in a war, Cordelia says:

We are not the first
Who with best meaning have incurred the worst.

For thee, oppressed King, I am cast down;

Myself could else outfrown false Fortune's frown. (5.3.3-6)

It is as if Cordelia, not just Lear, has forgotten where she is. Shakespeare gives Cordelia no lines of communication or even attempted communication between herself and her sisters, just this announcement in Act II, scene 7 that the army of France has landed. It is Cordelia who changes the anchor from a family argument to a war between France and England. Noticeably, she is not in peaceful France, caring for her elderly father who is noticeably *not* the king; she is in the middle of a war between the invading army of France, which necessitates a defense by the military powers of England. Of course when she comes back Lear tells her, “for your sisters / Have, as I do remember, done me wrong. / You have some cause, they have not.” To which Cordelia replies, “No cause, no cause” (4.7.74-77). Allowing that the scene Cordelia makes during the love test is in fact a powerful negotiation technique, is it such a stretch to see her positioning of herself as a martyr after her army apparently fails her?

While this ambiguity surrounding the language and symbolism of Cordelia as a Christ-figure is unsatisfying in a modern context, it would not have felt this way to Shakespeare's audience. Because there were so many public executions of religious martyrs during the English Reformation, those who saw real-life executions were rarely unified by the victim's intent. In the sixteenth century, the national church changed between Catholic and Protestant four times without establishing a sense of permanence, and the great irony of religious persecution during the English Reformation was that the persecutors of the religious victims and the victims themselves “worshiped the same suffering servant as their God” (Anderson 265). Likewise, the three sisters are all

children of the same father, and where nineteenth century audiences would have been primed by their stories of daughters to see Cordelia's death as a result of daughterly obedience, sixteenth and seventeenth century audiences may have seen even a self-sacrificing death as unwise within the context of such an unstable religious system.

Examining Cordelia's individual decisions, her potential for loss and gain, rather than attempting to categorize her as either generous or greedy, leaves us with the conclusion that Cordelia's early negotiation techniques were successful in the play and would still be so today. Her bravery during the love test shows someone who recognizes the futility of seeking a happy life within a system that values her as a gift exchanged between two men. She does not occupy the space of the traditional daughter, improving foreign relations between England and France, and she most certainly does not free trade relations between England and France. Her accomplishment is recognizing the marriage ceremony/love test as a vow to play by the patriarchal rules that will not benefit her or her sisters, and her courage to risk poverty by standing up for a relationship with her father that she believes to be right and fit.

Where the story of Cain and Abel shows only two sides of a struggle for property, *King Lear* gives us three sides. First, there is Abel's traditional herding side and Lear's feudal aristocrat side with a devotion to noble ceremony (Delaney 431) and a commitment to the traditional way of life. On the other hand, Cain, Goneril and Regan want to change the system, but lack the courage to break the anchor and stand up to their god or their father. Cordelia makes the decision to leave, to refuse the legacy of Lear the Lion and to risk diminishing the centralized power of the Lear family. In both cases, the result is tragedy, and while all three are flawed, it is Cordelia's bravery that the culture,

or as Marx calls it, the *hegemony*, of Western civilization has supported throughout the test of time. This is why it is so important that Smiley and others have given the Goneril character the opportunity to speak again; it breaks the anchoring voice of patriarchal culture and forces readers to examine the play for what it actually says rather than what we expect it to say.

Chapter 2: Listen Again

1.

The Problem with Invisible Storytellers

In present day Iowa, nestled between the Mississippi, the Missouri and the Big Sioux rivers, is the center of the American Corn Belt. After the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, settlers—mostly English, Scandinavian and French—laid the foundation for an agriculture-based economy in what they hoped would be a new world. It is here that Jane Smiley places the fictional Zebulon County, an area so flat, the sky so domed that the narrator of *A Thousand Acres* describes it as the “one spot where a sphere (a seed, a rubber ball, a ball bearing) must come to perfect rest and once at rest must send a taproot downward into the ten-foot-thick topsoil” (29). Smiley’s Zebulon County is not just a center of agriculture, but also a new land for the mythological Cain to wander through, a place where he, a character forced by an angry god to wander the earth, can finally stop wandering, come to perfect rest and once again repeat the story that centuries of agrarian generations have already repeated.

In the introduction I discussed that the story of Cain and Abel was originally told as a way to discourage people from taking more than they needed, a way of explaining why the Semitic Lord loved the herders and would not tolerate offerings from the agriculturalists. But the ubiquity of agricultural-based economies around the modern world shows the original *meaning* of the story has not been passed down with the story itself. This is because the original Cain and Abel story has lost its narrator. In the absence of a specific—in this case nomadic—perspective, the voice of the agricultural economy has stepped in to tell the story. Obviously, this ideology isn’t nomadic; rather,

it is consumer-based, which means that it values establishment and an accumulation of wealth over wandering and only taking what one needs.

Likewise, looking at the language of *King Lear* and then stepping back to ask why it is that patriarchal culture invites audiences to see Lear as the legitimate ruler and Cordelia as his good daughter, it is difficult to find a reason that is not rooted in a general assumption that the goodness of Cordelia's first decision makes all of her decisions good. However, the actual language of the play shows Lear giving up his kingdom, Gloucester (and Kent) finding the new leadership problematic and then sending word to Cordelia to return with the army of France. This turns a family problem into a war between nations. England fights back, but still, Lear never asks for the return of his kingdom. The reason Lear is traditionally seen as the rightful ruler can be explained using two decision-making shortcuts or heuristics. Heuristics are ways the mind simplifies a big question that require Type 2 thinking, statistics, and research, into a shorter, more simplistic question that can be answered rather quickly. The problem with heuristics is that they often produce logical errors.

The first heuristic that leads readers to see Lear as the legitimate ruler is called cognitive ease, which uses Type 1 thinking and relies upon information that comes to mind quickly and easily.³ It is the type of thinking engaged when reading the bat and ball problem in a dark, legible font. The second is the substitution heuristic, which is the

³ Causes and consequences of cognitive ease (Kahneman 60).

human tendency to replace a difficult question—who do I *think* should be on the throne, Lear or his daughters?—with a simpler question, who do I *feel* should be on the throne?

Since Plato gave the allegory of the human soul as a charioteer pulled by two winged horses—the noble horse of rationality and the wild horse of emotion—humans have imagined themselves making rational decisions unless they give into the wild impulses of human emotion (Plato 41). However, making rational decisions is quite unusual. What is more common is an intuitive substitution of an easier question in the place of a more difficult question. When applied to the questions presented in Lear, heuristics produce all sorts of systematic errors.

As discussed earlier, the human ability to think through a question using actual base rates or facts that are *not* linked to causality or a stereotype (e.g. mad Lear, loyal Edgar, thankless Goneril) isn't very good. For example, in the 1990s, German psychologists led by Norbert Schwarz asked: “How will people’s impressions of the frequency of a category be affected by a requirement to list a specific number of instances?” (Kahneman 131). So, the team asked a large group to do the following: “First, list six instances in which you behaved assertively. Next, evaluate how assertive you are” (Kahneman 132). Schwarz and his team then asked another group of individuals to list twelve instances of assertiveness before asking each person to evaluate how assertive he or she was. What Schwarz found was that people probably found it much easier to recall the first six assertive actions than the second six. The results of this experiment were clear:

[P]eople who had just listed twelve instances rated themselves as less assertive than people who had listed only six. Furthermore, participants

who had been asked to list twelve cases in which they had not behaved assertively ended up thinking of themselves as quite assertive! (Khaneman 132)

This was one of the major advances in the study of availability heuristics, and it demonstrates the psychology of availability: the ease with which a trait or category comes to mind influences our judgment of that category. If it *feels* easy to recall examples, then I must be an assertive person. What most people do in a situation like this is accept an anchor that is not there. Look at the substitution automatically taking place: twelve instances of assertiveness must mean I am assertive. It's hard for me to think of that many examples, so I must not be assertive. But that is not the question Schwartz's team asked.⁴

The problem is that the ease with which something comes to mind depends on many factors, including environmental triggers all around us that we rarely even notice.

Environmental triggers enhance cognitive ease and allow the human brain to use the most available memory or thought and then judge that the most *rational*. Remember, we are examining *The Tragedy of King Lear*, a play based on the story of *King Leir*, who had

⁴ On page 98, Kahneman generated a list of target questions and heuristic questions to illustrate substitution:

Target Question

How much would you contribute to save an endangered species?

How happy are you with your life these days?

How popular will the president be?

Heuristic Question

How much emotion do I feel when I think of dying dolphins?

What is my mood right now?

How popular is the president right now?

one good daughter and two evil daughters. But this is not King *Leir*. Shakespeare has made his characters' motivations opaque. As Stephen Greenblatt put it, "By stripping his character of a coherent rationale for the behavior that sets in motion the whole ghastly train of events, Shakespeare makes Lear's act seem at once more arbitrary and more rooted in deep psychological needs" (Greenblatt 328). Because of this, there is room for many cultural and social influences, biases and heuristics to factor into how the human brain feels and thinks about the play and its characters. One important social influence is modern mythology.

Modern Americans rarely acknowledge the influence of mythology at all in much the same way the ancient Greeks would not have recognized their tales of Zeus and Athena as mythology—they believed these stories to be true. Philosopher Daniel Quinn put it this way: "If you went up to a man of Homeric Greece and asked him what fanciful tales he told his children about the gods and the heroes of the past, he wouldn't know what you were talking about. He'd say: 'As far as I know there is nothing like that in our culture'" (133). Mythology is so ingrained into human thinking that we rarely stop to acknowledge it, let alone question it. It's like psychologists through the 1970s believing that people who are not impaired by emotion make rational decisions.

A more interesting way to understand this concept is through an anecdote David Foster Wallace told the graduates of Kenyon College in 2005: "There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, 'Morning, boys, how's the water?' And the two younger fish swim on for a bit and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, 'What the hell is water?'" ("So This Is Water"). What this story shows is that

often it is the invisible and omnipresent values, values that support our way of life and exist as an invisible mythology that we do not stop to acknowledge or question. This is why it is so very important to read ancient stories from new and previously silenced perspectives; as the studies of heuristics have shown, the mind most often makes decisions based on everything *but* reason, and the least we can do is become aware of our biases.

The modern, western world does indeed have a mythology that structures which memories and thoughts are most readily available to us, and these are then judged to be the most rational. This mythology then permeates how we read and tell all of our stories; how we formulate and interpret our scientific theories, how we do business, and the way we read and interpret our literary and sacred texts. Simply put, this mythology sees Earth as existing to enhance the life and happiness of the humans who occupy its surface. This requires, of course, a hierarchy of all living things according to their level of usefulness to humans. For example, the amoeba has traditionally been of little use to humans, and as such is placed toward the bottom of this hierarchy, while hogs (an important theme in *A Thousand Acres*) are bred with the express purpose of becoming *more* useful to humans. Humans also organize themselves into hierarchies, and since before Shakespeare's time, women have been deemed less useful in leadership roles; indeed, when applying the psychology of availability and the cognitive ease heuristics to western civilization, one quickly finds it is still invariably *easier* to recall examples of men in leadership roles than it is to recall women. This then influences how societies conduct business, read stories and understand language. According Rudnytsky, "Shakespeare's plays are written from a male perspective and depict predominantly conflicts of

masculine identity,” while Lear’s daughters are “polarized into ‘good’ and ‘evil’ figures” (292). This is the problem, and it is also the reason for reading the language of *King Lear* in a way that takes into account the mind’s natural tendency to substitute what it feels for what it thinks, thus, to correlate perception and causation.

A Thousand Acres tells the stories of *King Lear* and Cain and Abel from the perspective of Goneril, a woman, a failed leader and a silenced Other who is too often simplified as “the wicked Goneril [...] who in effect strips away [Lear’s] social identity” (Greenblatt 360). Because Goneril is so often silenced, her perspective is not readily available in our memories. Giving Goneril a voice is like a dolphin describing water to fish; it puts our unspoken biases and mythology into language that can be acknowledged and critiqued in much the same way fish might acknowledge and critique the water in which they swim.

In *A Thousand Acres* Jane Smiley retells one of the most famous and repeated stories of the pre-modern era, *King Lear*, in a way that is highly conscientious. The story exists not as a singular plot, but as a constantly repeating cycle that supports our mythology, a way in which the archetypal Cain and Abel battle over whose life is more valuable to the archetypal Hebrew Lord. Goneril is silenced in discussions of *King Lear* in much the same way Cain is silenced in the storytelling of Genesis; both characters kill their sibling and are assumed to be evil. However, when reading the Cain and Abel story as the nomadic Semite’s war propaganda against the invading agriculturalists, it becomes clear that we the readers are the agriculturalists. We have more in common with Cain and Cordelia than we do with Abel and Goneril. Smiley gives Cain a voice by drawing comparisons between Ginny (the Goneril character) and Cain. However, neither is totally

innocent or favored by an all-powerful God—per se. Rather, by reading the story from the perspective of Ginny (who has traditionally been labeled “wicked” and silenced as a storyteller as a result) and Cain (another “wicked” character who, interestingly, wandered off leaving the agrarian revolution in his wake), the reader gets to see the artificial (albeit very real) power structures that we as modern humans support, thus making these power structures seem rational because they are cognitively easy to recall.

When *A Thousand Acres* begins, it is fall in the late 1970s, after President Carter has granted amnesty to the Vietnam draft dodgers. With this pardon, Jess Clark (the Edmund character) returns to his father’s Iowa farm after ten years spent in Canada as a conscientious objector. Jess is a reader, an organic farmer, a liberal and a markedly handsome one at that. His brother Lorne (the Edgar character) welcomes him back—albeit with an air of self-righteous indignation: “I notice he waited till we busted our butts finishing up planting before staging this resurrection” (Smiley 38)—with his father Harold (the Gloucester character), and together they host a pig roast at their farm. Rose and Ginny approach Jess together, their dishes-to-pass in their hands, and Rose says: “I remembered that Jess used to like his mom’s Swiss steak, so that’s what I brought.” She lifted the lid on her dish and Jess raised his eyebrows. He said, ‘I haven’t eaten meat in seven years.’” Rose walks away but Ginny stays, noticing, “Jess didn’t watch her. Instead, he lifted the lid on my dish. It was cheese garbanzo enchiladas” (Smiley 54). Notice how, in this example, Ginny and Rose approach Jess with food in much the same way Cain and Abel approach the Hebrew Lord—Ginny with grain and Rose with meat. However, in an agricultural-based economy, the god figure, here Jess Clark, temporarily favors the grain offering. This is a very real, very modern scene, and yet it is strikingly

similar to the story in which Cain and Abel approach the Almighty in the hope of pleasing him. Smiley's story mimics human behavior while acknowledging the power structure: the liberal, handsome Jess Clark clearly stands in as the Hebrew Lord, both uniting the sisters and eventually dividing them, sending Ginny east of Iowa to contemplate the decisions that led her to try to murder her sister.

To show how this power structure—which is to say a power structure favoring the masculine Lear, Edgar and Albany while spurning the feminine Goneril and Regan and the illegitimate Edmund—works both within *King Lear* and upon the play's critics, I return to Paul Delaney's Marxist reading of *King Lear* in which he describes Shakespeare's depiction of the struggle between the declining feudal aristocracy and the rising bourgeoisie of the English Renaissance by dividing the characters into Lions and Foxes. Delaney describes the Lions (Lear, Gloucester, Kent, Edgar and occasionally Albany) as "aristocrat(s) of the old style: noble, open, and generous, but flawed by [their] devotion to the formal ceremony and the quixotic gesture" while the Foxes, Goneril, Regan and Edmund, are "cunning, ruthless and Machiavellian" (430). Of these eight characters, only Edgar, Kent and Albany survive to tell the story. This is important because, as with the story of Cain and Abel, the storyteller, or mythological perspective of the storytellers, has the power to influence the values and power structure of the next generation using the story. Survivors are more available in our memories. No matter how many changes patriarchal culture has undergone since the seventeenth century, the storytellers are still the male survivors due to the illusion of causality (the way we read success/survival as caused by goodness) and the tendency to read Shakespeare through

the lens of a masculine identity even when, as so often happens, Shakespeare does not give us the language to do so.

Therefore, *A Thousand Acres* must retell the story in a way that argues against the patriarchal readings of *King Lear*. Through Ginny's eyes we see how, after centuries of allowing Goneril to be simply labeled not worth the dust that blows in her face and then silenced as a result, we have built up an anchor that silences the very cause of her actions while supporting a very specific mythology. The opacity of Shakespeare's characters allows us to invent causes for their actions in much the same way we assign personalities to the shapes in a film. The problem is, with 400 years of patriarchal readings of *King Lear*, there are too many explanations for Lear's behaviors and not enough for Goneril and Regan's. Add in 500 years of decision-making based on cognitive ease, anchoring and substitution, and the problem is Herculean. Thus, it is time for a new storyteller.

Ginny understands the role of storytellers and the silencing of story's participants by the end of *A Thousand Acres* and says: "Do I think Daddy came up with beating and fucking us on his own? [...] No. I think he had lessons, and those lessons were part of the package, along with the land and the lust to run things exactly the way he wanted no matter what" (Smiley 1102). Smiley's version of the story allows the silenced female characters to speak again, showing readers the lessons and values that have allowed the story to survive while doing significant damage to both the female characters and the roles in which patriarchal culture has placed women.

When we read *King Lear*, we are reading a story handed down and preserved in centuries of mythological thinking. What is incredible about Shakespeare's storytelling, however, is that he often hides the motives of his characters so that we can revisit their

actions through differing mythological lenses while still respecting the story. Indeed, it was Edgar and Albany's masculine perspective that continued to be retold throughout the 19th century with Nahum Tate's rewriting of *King Lear* in which Cordelia lives to care for the aging Lear and marry Edgar. And it is Edgar and Albany's story that allowed A. C. Bradley to defend Tate's version writing: "I find that my feelings call for this 'happy ending' [...]. What we desire for him [Lear] during the brief remainder of his days is [...] what Shakespeare himself might have given him — peace and happiness by Cordelia's fireside" (quoted in Brauner 654). This perspective on the characters and the story goes into the 20th century with critics like Delaney remembering Lear as noble in nature, and even into the twenty-first century with one of the most prominent Shakespeareans, Stephen Greenblatt.

In *Will in the World*, Greenblatt acknowledges that it is indeed the property that "triggers the whole, hideous train of events" (358): "What surrounds the characters with their loves and hatreds and torments is the most ordinary of worlds—'low farms, / Poor pelting villages / sheep-cotes, and mills' (2.3.17-18)" (Greenblatt 357-58). There is no avoiding that this tragedy is based on the decisions of characters to take or leave property under specified terms. However, Greenblatt argues that Lear's decision to create the love test "is a disastrous failure because it leads him to banish the one child who truly loves him" (358). At this point, I hope it is clear that this is precisely the overly simplistic reading that has been haunting criticism of *King Lear* for centuries.

As examined in chapter one, Cordelia's actions can be credited to her desire for property in the same way Goneril's and Regan's actions can, and Lear's decision to wander out into the storm is his idea. After he leaves, Regan explains she needs to close

the doors against the storm, but, “For [Lear’s] particular, I’ll receive him gladly, / but not one follower” and Goneril agrees, “So am I purposed” (2.4.294-96). Even Gloucester, it seems, cannot convince Lear to come back in. Finally, Regan concludes, “O, sir, to willful men / The injuries that they themselves procure / Must be their schoolmasters. Shut up your doors” (2.4.305-07). Yet, to this day, patriarchal readings of *King Lear* seem to remember Lear as being cast out into the storm.

In this same patriarchal fashion, Greenblatt goes on to argue that retirement customs in the seventeenth century were unstable and “age’s claim to authority was pathetically vulnerable to the ruthless ambition of the young,” moreover, Shakespeare himself identified with Lear, and “[r]etelling the Leir story was one way that Shakespeare and his contemporaries articulated their anxiety” concerning “the fear of humiliation, abandonment, and loss of identity in the wake of retirement” (359-60). This section is particularly problematic because it is the nature of drama to tell a story without a singular narrative voice; moreover, Shakespeare’s particular gift, as Greenblatt cites earlier in *Will in the World*, is that “[b]y stripping his character of a coherent rationale for the behavior that sets in motion the whole ghastly train of events, Shakespeare makes Lear’s act seem at once more arbitrary and more rooted in deep psychological needs” (Greenblatt 328).

What Greenblatt fails to note here is that Shakespeare strips not only Lear’s character of a coherent rationale, but he also omits Cordelia’s motivation. In other versions of the *Leir* story, Cordella’s motive is her vow to only marry for love. In *King Lear*, we never get a straight answer as to why she chooses to outright reject her father’s decision to give her a third of the kingdom. The problem is that patriarchal culture has stepped in to tell the story in a way that supports the masculine perspective too often assumed to be the one

Shakespeare shared with the modern, most often male critic, and without an alternative story, patriarchal culture will continue to tell it in this way.

This is why Goneril must be resurrected as Ginny, and why Smiley must tell the story again. As critic David Brauner puts it, *A Thousand Acres* does not “merely tell another story, [it tells] the story of an Other, specifically, a silenced female Other. [...] By retelling the story of Lear from the perspective of one of the evil sisters, [Smiley] clearly seeks to show that such simplistic moral labels are problematic” (655). Ginny sums up the need for a sisterhood of retelling the story rather than just accepting it during her last conversation with her husband Ty (the Albany character). She tells him,

It’s good to remember and repeat. You feel good to be a part of that. But then I saw what my part really was. [...] You see this grand history, but I see blows. I see taking what you want because you want it, then making something up that justifies what you did. I see getting others to pay the price, then covering up and forgetting what the price was. (Smiley 1101).

Ginny shows over and over that it is painful to realize the story she once thought supported her way of life, her happiness and survival is actually society’s most powerful members’ “blows,” the way her father and grandfather and great grandfather took what they wanted and then told the story in a way that made the wives and daughters, even the land, pay for it. As Smiley points out in a quote from Meridel Le Sueur in her preface: “The body repeats the landscape. They are the source of each other and create each other” (Smiley 16). *A Thousand Acres* is about the way the powerful treat the powerless—the way human societies treat women, hogs and property—and the way the

powerful tell the story to silence the powerless, giving the next generation a story in which the success of the powerful is still the most available image.

In the story of Cain and Abel, the omniscient narrator acknowledges the fratricide as wrong, and then does something very interesting by having the Lord say to Cain, “Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground” (Genesis 4:10). Yes, Cain has killed Abel, but he is not totally silenced; rather, the agricultural economy silenced Abel the herder when it became advantageous to support agriculture. This makes it all the more important to tell the story again. As Smiley demonstrates in *A Thousand Acres*, stories are difficult to destroy, but it is possible to change their meaning.

2.

Resurrecting the Critics: Violence and the Science of Availability

In his opening sentence to *King Lear in Our Time*, Maynard Mack writes: “King Lear is a problem” (3). The writer Charles Lamb called the role of King Lear “unactable” (205). A. C. Bradley came up with a long list of “gross improbabilities” within the plot, and Mack added to them the “improbable fact that Gloucester is blinded for his treason without being killed” (4). Indeed, the scene in which Cornwall and Regan blind Gloucester proves equally problematic for Smiley when writing the plot of *King Lear* from Goneril’s perspective. Instead of omitting the scene, however, Smiley includes a modern version of it while keeping Larry’s misogyny the larger spectacle of her plot. What the daughters do to Harold is violent, yes, but what Larry and patriarchal culture does to them is far, far worse.

The day of the storm, Ginny doesn't remember thinking her father was behaving strangely. Ty has hired a team of workers to put up new buildings so they can expand their hog operation and run the farm like a business. Ginny, in an attempt to smooth things over after she told her father in no uncertain terms he was not to drive around drunk, asks Larry if he would like to watch the workers pour the footings with her, but her father, in his strong, silent way, doesn't answer: "I could, of course, read by his demeanor that he was displeased," Ginny remembers, "but how this displeasure would incubate I could not and did not know" (Smiley 581). But the events of this day, however banal, lead up to a physical and emotional storm, *the* storm from Act III of *King Lear*. During the storm scene in *A Thousand Acres*, Smiley reintroduces Larry's motivation for his verbal abuse of his daughters, and that is his complete disregard for the value of women as human beings demonstrated by his sexual abuse of Ginny and Rose as teenagers. The effect of Smiley's decision to place Cordelia's allusion to Lear's sexual abuse in Act I—"Why have my sisters husbands if they say they love you all?" (1.1.97)—at the front of readers' minds in the same way Shakespeare puts it in the beginning of the play is that it utilizes the science of availability to point out the language of the play that patriarchy has kept hidden.

The science of availability comes out of research Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky did in the early 1970s when they asked themselves "what people actually do when they wish to estimate the frequency of a category," such as (and these are my own examples), the amount of evil Regan commits or Lear's threats to the bodies of others. The answer, Kahneman and Tversky discovered, is straightforward: if retrieval of instances from memory is easy and fluent, the category will be judged to be large

(Kahneman 129). For example, think of three of the most memorable scenes in *King Lear*. If you are like most people, you probably included at least one of the following scenes in your list: Lear in the storm, Cornwall and Regan gouging out Gloucester's eyes, and Lear carrying Cordelia's body at the end. As it turns out, there is a scientific reason why these scenes are so memorable.

Consider the following research on public perceptions of risk conducted by Paul Slovic at the University of Oregon. Slovic asked participants in his survey to consider "pairs of causes of death: diabetes and asthma, or stroke and accidents. For each pair, the subject indicated the more frequent cause and estimated the ratio of the frequencies."

What he found was that "death by accidents was judged to be more than 300 times more likely than death by diabetes, but the true ratio is 1:4" (Kahneman 138). That's a dramatic difference. The reason for this difference is that the human brain retrieves shocking images, memories and thoughts much more easily than banal images, threats and risks, which explains why people feel nervous to fly after news of a plane crash. The statistical risk of a crash hasn't increased, but the ease with which we recall the risk has. "Slovic eventually developed the notion of an affect heuristic, in which people make judgments and decisions by consulting their emotions: Do I like it? Do I hate it? How do I feel about it?" (Kahneman 139). As psychologist Jonathan Haidt put it in a different context: "The emotional tail wags the rational dog" (1).

Still, a feminist reading does not explain away Shakespeare's decision to include the scene in which Regan and Cornwall grind out Gloucester's eyes. Indeed, he included it knowing the way this onstage torture would affect his audience. Critic Tim Turner calls *King Lear*, "the play that contains the most famous scene of torture in all of Shakespeare

(indeed, probably in all Renaissance drama)” (“Torments Will Ope’ Thy Lips”). In this sense, Shakespeare’s inclusion of this scene alone partially supports Bradley’s, Delaney’s and other critics’ judgments of Goneril and Regan. For in *King Lear*, the language of the play shows clearly the sisters’ active role in Gloucester’s torture when they could have just as easily hung him. Before gouging out Gloucester’s eyes, Goneril—in a statement that is at best hyperbolic—responds to Regan’s “Hang him instantly” with “Pluck out his eyes” (3.7. 4-5). But then, after Cornwall has his servants bind the markedly aged Gloucester—“Bind fast his corky arms” (3.7.30)—Regan points out a significant truth: “Hard, hard. O filthy traitor!” (34). Indeed, Gloucester is the one who contacted Cordelia in France, and as Cornwall notes in the first line of this scene, the French army has now escalated this family conflict to a battle between nations. Why should he not be tortured as a traitor in the Elizabethan fashion?

A Thousand Acres’ take on the blinding is sympathetic towards Harold (the Gloucester character), but it is far less hands-on than Shakespeare’s, and the reader doesn’t learn that Rose is the one who is responsible for what otherwise seems to be a farming accident until later in the novel. Ginny explains what happened after only hearing the story herself, and makes sure to note that all of the main characters were occupied elsewhere when the accident happened:

Anhydrous ammonia isn’t ‘drawn to the eyes because of their moisture, the way people sometimes say, it only feels that way, because the moisture in the eyes reacts with the fumes and creates a powerful alkali. In spite of the pain, Harold staggered to the water tank [...] The water tank was empty. (751)

In that last sentence Smiley uses the passive voice; there is no holding of the chair and plucking out of the eyes alongside comments such as, “One side will mock another. The other too” (3.7.74). In both versions, the reader easily recalls the blinding because it is unusually grotesque, but removing the culprits from the scene of the crime significantly lowers the availability of the scene in the reader’s memory and frees Ginny from any involvement in a way that Goneril is not, even if she is not present.

By creating a scene more horrific than Shakespeare’s blinding of Gloucester, Smiley changes the information that is most memorable in the play. That scene, of course, is told through Ginny’s flashbacks and is Larry’s repeated rape of Ginny and Rose as teenagers. It is a truth so horrible it mirrors Harold’s actual blindness by blinding Ginny’s memory of the event. By applying the science of availability to Smiley’s rewriting of Gloucester’s blinding, it becomes clear that Smiley is pointing out how Cordelia’s implied sexual abuse of Act I—“Why have my sisters husbands if they say they love you all?” (1.1.99-100)—changes the true horrors of the play. Where traditional, patriarchal readings of *King Lear* do not even see the allusion to sexual abuse, Smiley makes it central in her novel. “The availability heuristic, like other heuristics of judgment, substitutes one question for another: you wish to estimate the size of a category or the frequency of an event, but you report an impression of the ease with which instances come to mind,” which is problematic, even in fiction because the “[s]ubstitution of questions inevitably produces systematic errors” (Khaneman 130). While a torture scene ought to make the audience ask what we *think* about torture, it inevitably causes the human mind to ask how it feels about a character who would do something so grotesque on stage. Smiley puts incest, the rape of one’s own children, in

front of her readers, and this balances the amount of horror brought to mind easily when the audience makes decisions about how it feels about the allegedly “wicked” sisters and the allegedly innocent Harold.

Setting aside the feelings the torture scene and rape scenes evoke in both works, there remain two purely logical problems with the blinding of Gloucester and Harold. In *King Lear*, Goneril, Cornwall and Regan have already established that France has landed, and they do not torture Gloucester to get him to reveal military information; rather, their motivation appears to be strictly based upon a sense of revenge quite average for the time period. What the mind does is accept the anchor (the standard assumed to be true but not rooted in base rates or reality) of warlike violence with which Gloucester presented them when he contacted Cordelia and the French army—the act that made the whole family fracas an actual war—and use this same anchor against him. The complication is that violence is not Goneril and Regan’s strength, or even their desirable difficulty; they don’t know how to use violence without creating a readily available image of cruelty in the minds of the other Lions, those they ought to be strategically befriending if they hope to battle France. Hanging Gloucester would be a just punishment for a traitor, but gouging out his eyes creates a walking spectacle, an old man for all the characters to see and then *feel* sorry for. The *thought* that Gloucester is the one central to the entire war never comes up again, but the *spectacle* of Edgar’s loyalty to his aged and tortured father, (in Edgar’s words Gloucester is, “my Father with his bleeding Rings, / Their precious Stones new lost” (5.3.292-93)) is seen over and over again.⁵ It is one of the most available images of the entire play.

⁵ Rudnytsky argues that this line symbolizes Gloucester’s symbolic castration—stones

Likewise, Smiley's reading of *King Lear* with Larry raping his teenage daughters makes us *feel* terrible, but the second logical error Rose makes is that when we stop to *think* about it, Larry's acts of violence do not involve Harold. All Harold does is let Larry stay at his house after the storm and then make an embarrassing scene at the church potluck (see Smiley chapter 28). The reason Rose doesn't direct her horrible sense of revenge at Larry, Lynda E. Boose explains, is that women hardly ever kill their fathers in myth, fiction or real life. Women kill husbands, children and siblings, but hardly ever their fathers (Boose 38). Even Lady Macbeth says the reason she is unable to kill Duncan is because he "resembled / My father as he slept" (2.2.12-13). When women do commit patricide, social anxiety erupts as it did in the case of Lizzie Borden (Boose 39). Regan targeting Lear rather than Gloucester would have been perhaps the most horrible, most anxiety-inducing event in all of Shakespeare, and even if everything else she did were benign, such a scene would lock itself in social memory to be recalled almost instantly. Still, this is yet another example of feelings taking over what could be more logical, Type 2 thinking that any underdogs need to be using if they hope to compete against a power structure—in this case a solidarity between male farmers who call Ginny and Rose, a "pair of bitches" (Smiley 715) at the church potluck. Yes, being called a bitch, especially at church in front of a large group, emotionally wags the rational tail, but *if* Ginny and Rose had rejected the anchor of verbal abuse and stood up to this by turning the other cheek, by just *showing* forgiveness in front of the community, they could have likely swayed a larger portion of their community's support—something they badly need if they hope to battle an age-old power structure like the solidarity among male farmers.

refer to testicles, sockets to vaginas—thus demonstrating a deep level of misogyny within the language of the play and calling for a feminist reading (293).

But Smiley isn't the first to utilize the science of availability to create a powerful scene. Shakespeare, too, evokes readily available images from biblical mythology in his depiction of the struggle between Lear, Goneril and Regan. During the love test, Goneril and Regan take the peacemaker's approach, accepting without demanding an explanation in return. When they do finally demand Lear put limits on his knights, Shakespeare does something very interesting by writing the scene in such a way that it evokes another incredibly memorable scene from classic literature, the scene when Abraham pleads with the Lord on behalf of Sodom. According to Stephen Greenblatt, throughout Shakespeare's career he drew upon the language of the morality plays of his youth and "used words deeply familiar to Shakespeare and his contemporaries from endless repetitions in church" (35). Consider the language of Genesis 18 from the Bishops' Bible [1568], "the version Shakespeare knew and used most often" (Greenblatt 35): "If there be fiftie ryghteous within the citie, wylt thou destroye and not spare the place for the sake of fiftie ryghteous that are therein?" (Genesis 18: 24) Now look at the language Regan uses with Lear:

What, fifty followers?

Is it not well? What should you need of more?

Yea, or so many, sith that both charge and danger

Speak 'gaist so great a number? (2.4.239-42)

Both are negotiations concerning a problematic few. Both begin with the number fifty, and both phrase the negotiation as a question. As Shakespeare does so often, he is scrapping "the piety that marked the [morality] plays of his youth" (Greenblatt 35) but keeping the language that occupies a powerfully available place in the memories of his

contemporaries. Where Abraham argues with God, Regan argues with Lear; where Regan asks Lear to keep fewer knights, Abraham asks God to keep more members of what Shakespeare's contemporaries would no doubt remember as the wicked city of Sodom.

After these lines, of course, Regan reduces Lear's knights to twenty-five, then ten, then five then zero. Likewise, Abraham reduces the number of righteous people from fifty down to ten, only to find that there are no righteous people in the city. By borrowing the form of this violent and memorable story or morality play, Shakespeare shows that Lear is negotiating with his daughter to *keep* the people of Sodom. His daughters, then, have the right to get rid of those who violate their commands in the same way the Lord did: "Then the Lorde rayned vpon Sodome and Gomorrhe brymstone and fire, from the Lorde out of heauen" (Genesis 19: 25). Both the blinding of Gloucester and the burning of Sodom are images that stick in readers' and audiences' memories, but imagine how much differently the story of Sodom and Gomorrah would be if any of the Sodomites had survived with horrible burns all over their bodies, walking reminders of the brutal sense of judgment of the Hebrew Lord. Interestingly, the way Smiley has Rose blind Harold from a comfortable distance is more like the way the Lord sends down burning sulfur out of the heavens in that the lack of physical connection frees the Lord and Rose from a truly sadistic place in the reader's memory.

What Goneril and Regan did to Gloucester is grotesque, and what Rose did to Harold is at best psychological projection of anger onto the wrong man. As Aristotle put it, "Anybody can become angry - that is easy, but to be angry with the right person and to the right degree and at the right time and for the right purpose, and in the right way - that

is not within everybody's power and is not easy" ("Aristotle"). However, what Larry did to his daughters and what the patriarchal culture of western civilization has done to women is far, far worse. What Smiley shows using the science of availability is that it is finally time to put all these horrors into perspective.

6.

Undesirable Difficulties

When Ginny and Rose finally talk about their father sexually abusing them as teenagers, they ask each other a significant question: "What about Caroline?" (Smiley 624). The answer Rose comes to is that Larry probably did not sexually abuse Caroline: "I suspect he never tried anything with her, mostly because she acts like she feels differently toward him than we do. [...] He doesn't overwhelm her the way he does us" (Smiley 624). And here Smiley helps to understand the difference between undesirable difficulties and desirable difficulties. According to the researchers who coined the term desirable difficulties:

Desirable difficulties, versus the array of undesirable difficulties, are desirable because they trigger encoding and retrieval processes that support learning, comprehension, and remembering. If, however, the learner does not have the background knowledge or skills to respond to them successfully, they become undesirable difficulties. (Bjork and Bjork 58)

Losing a parent at a young age, as all three girls do in *A Thousand Acres*, psychologists such as Felix Brown cite as a potentially desirable difficulty. After researching trends in

“creatives,” artists and entrepreneurs, and finding a far larger than normal percent of this group of people had lost a parent at a young age—of the 573 eminent people he studied, 45 percent had lost a parent before the age of 20 (Gladwell 141). Brown writes, “the existence of eminent orphans does suggest that in certain circumstances a virtue can be made of necessity” (Brown 444). This hypothesis is based on the idea that someone who has endured the worst and survived is more willing to take greater risks throughout his or her life, and risks are required for above average success.

However, sexual abuse, especially at a young age in a situation where the abuser is also the only caretaker, does not “trigger encoding and retrieval processes”; rather, in Ginny’s case it teaches her to submit to her abuser, her father, without developing skills that come naturally from problem-solving on one’s own. According to a review of psychological studies on the long-term effects of child sexual abuse:

When the sexual abuse is done by an esteemed trusted adult it may be hard for the children to view the perpetrator in a negative light, thus leaving them incapable of seeing what happened as not their fault. Survivors often blame themselves and internalize negative messages about themselves. Survivors tend to display more self-destructive behaviors and experience more suicidal ideation than those who have not been abused. (Hall and Hall 3)

Blaming oneself for being sexually abused and repeating negative messages about one’s self interfere with encoding and retrieval processes. In Ginny’s case, as is common in cases of sustained sexual abuse, the sexual abuse triggers blocked memories of the abuse—retrieval blindness (Hall and Hall 3). Larry’s physical and sexual abuse forces Ginny to

see the world as having only one side, Larry's side, and as he put it before beating her, "There's only one side here, and you'd better be on it" (Smiley 600). It anchors her thinking to her father's "side" and prevents her from thinking for herself.

The chapter on Cordelia discusses the difficulty of standing up to a character like Lear, who, when questioned threatens to eat his own children like the barbarous Scythian; however, Cordelia's difficulties are desirable. In terms of psychological research, Cordelia's difficult position in the love test evokes Type 2 thinking. Meanwhile Goneril and Regan are committed to remaining in England with their husbands, and Ginny and Rose have already settled back on the family farm. The offer of land, for them, requires no self-control, and going along with their father's plan evokes cognitive ease. Arguably, Goneril and Regan might be substituting Lear's difficult question, "Which of you shall we say doth love us most?" (1.1.51) with an easier question, perhaps, how do you feel about me now that I've decided to give you the kingdom? This also induces cognitive ease which, in the absence of a desirable difficulty, requires Type 1, intuitive thinking.

Smiley explores the undesirable nature of Rose and Ginny's psychological predicament in terms of Larry's extreme misogyny seen in his verbal and sexual abuse. Rudnytsky observes that traditional Shakespearian critics including Maynard Mack and Harold Bloom "accept Lear's demonization of Goneril and Regan," but fail to expound upon "the splitting of the image of women into diametrically opposed good and evil aspects, which is endemic not only to Lear's individual psyche but to the structure of the play as a whole, and is a crucial symptom of the misogyny of *King Lear* that calls for feminist analysis" (292). Misogyny, I will argue, is a difficulty that Shakespeare makes especially troubling in *King Lear* where power is used in political, economic and

domestic realms, and Lear's fist is closed around all three. It makes his anchors significantly more powerful than the anchors of the other characters. Within the play, there are two ways in which Goneril's and Regan's difficulties turn undesirable and either push or force them into the role of Delaney's Foxes who must fight for political and economic influence using the rules Lear, their husbands, their country and their mythology have given them.

The first of these major conflicts is when Goneril decides Lear must go to stay with Regan because, she says to Lear, "You strike my people, and your disordered rabble / Make servants of their betters" (1.4.253-4). This is not a Fox-like decision but a decision more in line with Cordelia's decision in Act I to confront Lear for pressuring her into a love that is neither right nor fit. However, where France defended Cordelia, Albany sides with Lear. Look at the language Lear uses to curse his own daughter:

Hear, nature, hear! Dear goddess, hear!
Suspend thy purpose if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful!
Into her womb convey sterility;
Dry up her organs of increase
And from her derogate body never spring
A babe to honor her! (1.4.272-9)

Is this what we are to expect from a character Delaney describes as noble in nature? As Brauner comments, "[w]hat is so striking, and shocking, about Lear's language in this scene [...] is not simply its extremity, but its misogyny. This is as bad as any of the crimes "committed by the women whom he terms 'wicked creatures' and 'unnatural

hags' later in the same scene" (659-60). And yet, this is not what makes such a difficulty undesirable for Goneril. Setting aside Lear's sexual abuse, Lear's verbal abuse of Goneril's female body and Albany's refusal to support his wife do that.

When Cordelia defied her father during the love test, Lear did everything in his power to prevent her from marrying and having a child to carry on Lear's legacy. While this is indeed as Kent put it "hideous rashness" (1.1.152), it also seems unnatural as preventing one's own child from procreating violates the unspoken mythology and biological imperative emphasizing the growth of the human population. Likewise, when Goneril stands up to Lear, he—no longer in a position to prevent her from marriage—curses her womb in a markedly unnatural attempt to prevent her from carrying on his own legacy. Then, Lear vows to go to Regan and again attacks Goneril's femininity saying: "When she shall hear this of thee, with her nails / She'll flay thy wolvisish visage" (1.4.305-6). Goneril agrees that this is a good idea, matching Lear's anchor of intense anger with: "Do you mark that?" (1.4.309). This is where Albany steps in driving home the difficulty of Goneril standing alone against those who ought to be her allies. Instead of supporting his wife as France supports Cordelia, Albany says nothing about his father-in-law's curse of his wife's body, but rather says: "I cannot be so partial, Goneril, / To the great love I bear you—" (1.4.310-11). With this removal of support, the audience sees that Lear has successfully isolated Goneril especially at this moment when Albany takes the side of his wife's dowry over his wife's body. In Act I, Cordelia's decision to abstain from the love test shows that Lear cannot force her to say she loves him all, even when her inheritance is on the line, and so he disowns her. France then takes her saying that Cordelia "is herself a dowry" (1.1.244). This shows that France takes Cordelia for who

she is as a woman and an individual, not for who she is as an heir to the throne. In Act I, scene 4 however, Albany shows that his relationship to his wife is based on her inheritance, not on who she is as a person. Goneril's decision to accept the kingdom in Act I shows that she accepts the idea of herself as an heir over an individual. Lear's curse of Goneril's body and Albany's decision not to defend his wife shows they see her the same way. Lear presents Goneril as a worthless woman who ought never have a child to honor her. Albany, by not refuting Lear's curse, accepts it. However, what is more problematic is that Albany survives to tell the story of this tragedy, and his perspective comes from a place where: "Proper deformity [shows] not in the fiend / So horrid as in woman" (4.2.60-61).

Goneril—perhaps in her first Fox-like move—does not dwell on Albany's failure to defend her, but Ginny spends a great deal of time ruminating about Ty's silence in the face of her father's caustic accusation: "Things were awkward between Ty and me.

What I looked for him to say was that he didn't believe anything Daddy had said, didn't believe the unspoken gist of his denunciation, either—that I was a worthless and unlovable person" (Smiley 608). The problem is that he never says anything. Ginny's only ally is her sister Rose, and when Rose betrays her by sleeping with Jess Clark, Ginny, like Goneril, finds herself all alone.

This situation is the opposite of Cordelia's *desirable* difficulty. Where Cordelia made an enemy of her father, she gained a friend in France. Conversely, Goneril loses Lear and Albany in one scene, and throughout the rest of the play she gains only one friend—Edmund—who ultimately isolates her by taking her sister Regan. Part of this can be explained as luck. Due to unforeseen circumstances, France turns out to be a

better ally than Albany. However, part of it is Goneril's flawed decision making.

Goneril's greatest mistakes—her failure to mend any of her broken relationships, the blinding of Gloucester, and her decision to kill Regan—occur when she uses impulsive, Type 1 thinking rather than considering the outcome of her actions. Likewise, Cordelia's failure to think through the outcome of her decision to invade England with the army of France results in her demise. If we attempt to look at this play again, without assigning blame or causation or previously assumed judgments, it seems all three sisters die at the hands of their own Type 1 thinking.

Another example of Lear's misogyny as an undesirable difficulty is directed at Regan in the scene preceding the storm, and this example shows even more clearly how the female characters' reputations have suffered through centuries of patriarchal readings of *King Lear*. When Lear finally arrives at Regan's after he leaves Goneril's, she greets him, saying: "I am glad to see Your Highness" (2.4.127). Lear responds to this with:

Regan, I think you are. I know what reason
I have to think so. If thou shouldst not be glad,
I would divorce me from thy mother's tomb,
Sepulch'ring an adulteress (2.4.128-31)

At this point Regan has not so much as questioned Lear's authority, and yet his lines here impulsively project all of his anger on to Regan and do so in a way that make it clear he believes he has the authority to decide the fidelity of his dead wife and the legitimacy of his children based on something as arbitrary as how his daughter greets him. Yet, through the twentieth century critics were reading Lear's character as exemplifying "honorable simplicity" that "ensures his defeat by the Fox" (Delaney 430). Likewise,

considering that Lear is setting the anchor or example of the amount of irrational and highly emotional emotion behavior involved in decisions about his knights—Regan’s mother’s fidelity has nothing to do with her “I am glad to see Your Highness” (2.4.127)—it makes patriarchal readings that blame Goneril and Regan for Lear’s emotional decisions even more irrational.

However, what takes Lear’s misogyny from providing difficulty to providing overwhelmingly undesirable difficulty is the way Lear presents a powerful, emotional standard or anchor for decision making to the two women who seem incapable of destroying his anchors in the way Cordelia did in Act I. Regan and Cornwall remain on Goneril’s side against Lear. Cornwall, unlike Albany, actually stands up for Goneril against Lear saying “fie, sir, fie!” when Lear curses Goneril using the damning language of: “All the stored vengeances of heaven fall / On her ingrateful top! Strike her young bones” (2.4.163-64). Then, when Goneril enters during the argument about putting Kent in the stocks, Lear says: “O Regan, will you take her by the hand?” (2.4.195) (*A Thousand Acres* includes almost every part of this scene, and at this point Larry says sardonically, “That’s right. Hold hands” (Smiley 593).) In front of this small crowd, he mocks his daughters for their solidarity.

The sisters’ alliance up to this point is still strong, strong enough that Cornwall and Regan stand up for Goneril while she is not even in the room, and apparently strong enough that the sisters hold hands against Kent and Lear. What Goneril says to her father after this: “Why not by th’ hand sir? How have I offended? / All’s not offense that indiscretion finds / and dotage terms so” (2.4.197-8) is an accusation of Lear’s failed logic and an attempt to stand up for herself, but if we look at their decisions in terms of

heuristics, we can see Lear storming in and presenting a highly emotional, violent anchor. Instead of responding with *nothing* and changing the anchor, she accepts his anchor and tries to argue with him on the issues he brought up. This is the same strategy Cordelia used by accepting Gloucester's anchor,—a request for vengeance—which culminates in her death, and the same strategy most smaller armies use when battling larger armies.

But as we saw in the section on The Love Test and the Anchoring Effect (page 27), the way humans defeat dragons is not by learning how to breathe fire, it's by changing the anchor.

However, this use of Type 1 thinking where Type 2 thinking would have been better is not unusual, and it in no way makes Goneril and Regan wicked. As we saw with the bat and ball question, 90 percent of college students use Type 1 thinking when they needed to use Type 2 thinking. Lear's indiscretion is that he finds offense where there is none—all Goneril has asked is for his knights and servants to stop beating the people in her house. However, the male, Lion-like perspective is so powerful throughout the play that for years the best Shakespearian scholars of each generation failed to notice that Goneril tells Lear that his "indiscretion finds" (2.4.197) her to be a wicked person while the bigger picture shows this to be a fairly straightforward discussion about Lear bringing violence into her home.

Smiley confronts the failures of these traditional readings in *A Thousand Acres* by showing how reasonable Ginny's and Rose's requests are by replacing Lear's people's fights with Larry's drunk driving: "You simply can't drive all over creation, and you especially can't do it when you're drinking. It's not right. You could kill somebody. Or kill yourself, for that matter" (Smiley 483). Larry's response to this request is to steal

Pete's truck, curse his daughters, and then set off in a rage into the storm. Smiley continues to confront the misogynistic readings of *King Lear* that divide Lear's daughters into good and evil by showing all the damage Larry has done to his daughters, and yet, how well respected he is in the community. After Pete dies, Rose says to Ginny, "he did fuck us and he did beat us. He beat us routinely. And the thing is, he's respected. Others of them like him and look up to him" (977). This language certainly jolts readers out of Schehr describes as a false understanding that,

[W]e as readers often lull ourselves into [...] we take it to be such a great and powerful work, whose profundity is so "real" and "true," and hence, immediate, that we fail to question it. The work communicates despite its opacity; the reader resolves the difficulties of the play into simple, if not to say simplistic, oppositions and accessible, comprehensible structures where there is a seeming transparency of signification: Lear is "mad," Goneril and Regan are "ungrateful," and Cordelia is "loving" and "heroic." It could not be so simple, for a simple (simplistic) solution along these lines of psychological typology cannot do justice to the work's complexity. (51)

For far too long critics have interpreted the play using patriarchal thinking that assumes Lear is the rightful ruler. Smiley transforms this "disabling fiction" into an "enabling fiction" through the use of memory and a changed perspective (McDermott 390). This is why it is so important to read the story within the context of the unspoken mythology.

Ginny's act of remembering the story of *King Lear* told in *A Thousand Acres*, however, turns the story itself from disabling to enabling. At the end of *A Thousand Acres*, Ginny

asks Ty what he thinks after Rose explains Larry's sexual abuse of her and Ginny as teenagers. Ty responds: "'Maybe it happened. I don't say it didn't. But it doesn't make me like her any more. I think people should keep private things private'" (1093). Ty begins by answering the question, *what do you think*, but immediately substitutes the question, *what do you feel*, implying that how he *feels* about Rose matters in any way to the issue of sexual abuse. Ginny's response shows how the male-dominated mythology has permeated her thinking observing, in response to Ty:

I was tempted to nod, not because I agreed, but because I recognized how all these things sorted themselves in his mind, and I realized that with the best will in the world, we could never see them in the same way, and that, more than anything else, more than circumstances or history of will or wishing, divided us from each other. But the Ty I'd known was always on the lookout for agreement, reconciliation, so I didn't nod, knowing how he'd take it. I kept private things private. (Smiley 1093-94)

This is the best that can be hoped for in a world where the reigning mythological view is that those who are the most useful to humans are to be favored above all else. Mythology permeates everything, and for women like Goneril and Regan, trying to take legitimate power in a world where their very existence is deemed illegitimate because they are women, fathers and husbands become undesirable difficulties. Still, during the love test Cordelia demonstrated that abolishing the anchor of patriarchal culture, which sees her as simply a gift to be exchanged between men, is possible; it just takes a great deal of courage. In the end, however, all three sisters give in to the violence and impulsive behavior Lear presents, beginning with his 100 knights. The question I am left with is,

how could Goneril and Regan have broken the decision to use violence? What a reading of *King Lear* based on decision making suggests is that the only way to break the powerful anchor of patriarchal culture is to reject all of it, even the parts, like the offer of land, that at first seem like they will elevate the individual.

IV.

Conclusion

Speak Again: A Call for Humility Within Patriarchal Culture

For centuries theologians have speculated about what happened to Cain because in Genesis, it seems as though he just wandered off, never to be heard of again. What the Bible does say is that after he killed his brother, the Lord promised that “anyone who kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over,” and then he “put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him” (Genesis 4: 16). This punishment, it seems, is designed to make sure he would always be a wanderer, a person like his brother Abel who does not accumulate more property or power than he needs.

But this is not the part of the story that has arrested imaginations for centuries. Indeed, Cain’s immortality combined with an absence of his recorded death has made his story last longer than the figure of Abel. As theologian R. W. L. Moberly observes, the mystery surrounding Cain’s life and mark has “teased the imaginations of readers endlessly” (11). Unfortunately for Cain, all this mystery and *life* have not made him into a hero. In *Beowulf*, the villainous Grendel is said to be descended from Cain. In medieval Christian art, Cain was painted as bearded and Jewish, always killing the

blonde Abel (de Vries 75)—a cultural fact that demonstrates darkly, albeit clearly, the power of the invisible storyteller to change both the story and the available image from herders being slaughtered by agriculturalists to the medieval landowners as victims of the systemically oppressed Jews. Even in America, Mormon culture has stories about a quasi-big-foot character wandering in the woods of the States, asking to be killed and finally released from his curse. The story of Cain's immortality has, it seems, made his plot immortal as well.

However, Cain is the agriculturalist; therefore, Cain represents not some Grendel-like other, but human history. The human mind, with its evaluation of losses and gains as a way to optimize happiness is indeed more like the mind of Cain than that of Abel. And yet, human stories depict Cain as some horrific other. From the agrarian revolution to patriarchy, history is filled with the human tradition of taking what we want from the earth and from each other, and then forcing others to pay the price for that taking. Still more problematically, human history has stories that try to reflect this truth, but naturally the powerful turn them into something else, something that favors the agenda of the powerful.

Shakespeare may have learned a lesson in storytelling from Cain's refusal to die in that the mimetic nature of his plays contributes to the longevity of his stories. As Stephen Greenblatt writes: "Shakespeare simply cut out the motive that makes the initiation action of the story make sense" (328). This technique also allows plenty of room for the retelling of his stories. When patriarchal culture's voice gets too strong, there is always room to tell the story again.

The study of biases and heuristics shows that the voice of patriarchal culture has gotten too strong. The way the human brain makes decisions is far from rational most of the time, and the power of anchors, the cognitive ease of substituting an easier question for a more difficult question and the psychology of availability all demonstrate an alternative perspective on readings by patriarchal culture.

Rose, like Abel, dies trying to make the old farming life work. Ginny, like Cain, wanders East of the farm, to Minnesota. Her life east of Zebulon County is one of loneliness, or making sense of the story she both inherited from her father and shaped with her sister. Where Goneril and Regan both die, Ginny has the opportunity to view her story in hind sight, to explore the parts of her story she inherited versus the parts of her story she created using Type 1 thinking.

In the epilogue Ginny discusses her inheritance in depth, saying, “regret is part of my inheritance. Solitude is part of my inheritance, too” (Smiley 1183). Her future is the same as Cain’s; it is one of remembering, of making sense of the past. But by retelling her story she changes it from a disabling fiction in which she as the victim is silenced and remembered as ungrateful and wicked, into an enabling fiction in which the reader identifies with her and sees her accepting her inheritance as an anchor in the water-like power structure washing all around all the players and characters (McDermott 390). Yes, Ginny used Type 1 thinking throughout her story, anchoring herself to the farm, to a place where she exists in a state of cognitive ease, but where her father and husband treat her as a worthless human being. As readers we see the whole world all around Ginny, a world where she can (and eventually does) go back to school to earn a degree in

psychology, or leave Ty and the poisoned well water, and take her sister and her nieces with her. And by the end she sees this world too.

But the farm isn't her only inheritance and anchor; relationships also have an anchor for her. Smiley emphasizes this showing the power of the dead crying out to her through her memory: "Let us say that each vanished person left me something, and that I feel my inheritance when I am reminded of one of them" (Smiley 1189). After going through each person in her life who has given her an inheritance—Rose an inheritance of the cold, hard truth; Larry an inheritance of resisting while remaining respectful according to her bond. Ginny then turns to the inheritance she created for herself when she tried to poison her sister: "And when I remember the world, I remember my dead young self, who left me something, too, which is her canning jar of poisoned sausage and the ability it confers, of remembering what you can't imagine" (Smiley 90). She remembers what happened when she remained silent and accepted the anchor, attempting to swim while chained to it. Finally, she accepted the anchor of violence her father set, and applied it to her sister. Ginny's redemption, then, is in her ability to remember how her father abused her and proceeded without blindness. Once she does she recognizes her inheritance as Larry's anchor, an anchor that is not a gift from a loving father, but a context for abuse. Freed from this, she then tells the story again, knowing what it is like to be anchored, and then freed.

The crux of Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky's theories of decision-making is that people do not naturally make logical decisions; in fact, making logical decisions requires what is usually really difficult, counterintuitive Type 2 thinking. Rather, people make decisions based on perception. We ask ourselves, what *appears* to be the potential

for loss and what *appears* to be the potential for gain? If I accept my father's kingdom, I will have a kingdom, but I will also have to live in an abusive environment. If I do not accept the kingdom, I might be poverty stricken, or I might become the Queen of France. The purpose of this paper is to point out that perception is dependent upon a partial picture of all the forces operating on a situation's outcome, including our constant failure to see the way patriarchy affects decision-making.

Ginny is a wandering memory of what happens when the patriarchal standard of violence is greeted with more violence. Her story, however, both the telling of it and the remembering itself shows that patriarchal culture means "taking what you want because you want it, then making something up that justifies what you did [...] and getting others to pay the price, the covering up and forgetting what the price was" (Smiley 1101). Her story breaks this anchor, this pattern of taking and then silencing those who pay the price. It's not easy because it means accepting the fact that she has a serious difficulty, and then making it into a desirable difficulty instead of another patriarchal lifestyle. It means putting herself in a vulnerable position, like Cordelia did during the love test. And it means living as a reminder of the worst things power, greed and families can do to each other.

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