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The disruptive excess of Cordelia

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The Disruptive

Excess of Cordelia

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The Disruptive Excess of Cordelia

by

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Abstract

Using psychoanalysis as a lens, I critically examine James Barry's eighteenth century painting titled, *King Lear Weeping Over Cordelia*. With the help of Laura Mulvey's fetishistic scopophilia I determine that Cordelia functions as a fetish object to assuage male anxieties over the threat of castration. Barry's representation of Cordelia as a fetish object is by far more complicated than confirming King Lear's masculine identity. Rather, the fetish object constructed by James Barry, simultaneously, succeeds in affirming male identity, but more importantly it fails in deflecting male anxieties. Cordelia's fetishized body actually works to disrupt the comfort or reassurance that it should evoke. The hyper-fetishization of Cordelia's body actually reflects the anxiety of castration back to the male spectator. Within and without the painting, the male spectator must face his anxieties as a passive viewer.

James Barry's portrait, *King Lear Weeping Over Cordelia*, exhibits as the title suggests the spectacle of King Lear grieving over the death of his beloved and faithful daughter, Cordelia. Yet, the portrait's composition, depiction and arrangement of Shakespeare's great tragedy are peculiar and even provocative to a twenty-first century observer possessing feminist sympathies. Although the subject of the painting appears, at first glance, to be the unfortunate death of Cordelia by the hands of her sisters' treachery there is more than meets the eye. Cordelia, or rather her body, acts as a complicated site of representation. The princess's body functions as a superlative site of representation; she exceeds each representation that she is meant to embody. Upon first reading, it seems as if Cordelia's presence is not really needed or essential to the meaning of the work since her death is secondary to the homosocial bonding that occurs over her demise. Within the artwork, Cordelia is representative of Lear's pain and sorrow, but more importantly she acts as a pretext, not a genuine presence, to strengthen male-male bonds. Cordelia, or rather her dead feminine corpse, serves to confirm Lear's masculine identity since it works to create a kind of unity among men, those he can safely identify with emotionally without becoming the "Other", female/feminine body. Ultimately, this reading actually reduces the complicated representation: it disregards that Cordelia's body functions as a fetish that, simultaneously, succeeds and fails in deflecting male anxieties.

To examine James Barry's painting, I have utilized an uncommon approach to reading the eighteenth century artwork that employs psychoanalysis as a lens to critically examine the gendered ways of looking and thinking about men and women that the

painting exhibits. Specifically, I have employed Laura Mulvey's theoretical approach from Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema which, drawing heavily from Freud and Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, focuses upon the male need to achieve a physical and social dominance that remains safe from the threat of castration, or of becoming a woman. Mulvey transfers this Freudian psychoanalytic theory to a study of cinematic spectatorship, and how it constructs subject positions that are definitively male. As Mulvey argues traditionally the narrative film is constructed around the "neurotic needs of the male ego" (Mulvey 32). The cinematic spectacle assumes that the spectator is male, thus constructing the active pleasure of looking as male while females were rendered passive spectacles or objects to be looked at (Mulvey 34). Ultimately, the male spectator identifies with the male protagonist within the film thereby securing the penetrative power of the gaze or scopophilia (i.e. the pleasure in looking, traditionally, at women bodies as erotic objects). More importantly, Mulvey distinguishes between the modes of looking that are available to the male spectator: voyeuristic and fetishistic. According to Mulvey, voyeuristic looking is a controlling gaze that desires to control and punish an object. In contrast, fetishistic looking is a matter of transforming a possibly threatening figure into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous. It is Mulvey's notion of fetishistic looking that works to disrupt the traditional viewing pleasure that Barry's painting constructs.

First I assume, and think that Laura Mulvey would agree, that the male gaze not only penetrates cinema, but other mediums which institutions within society utilize to represent gender or gender roles. Thus, I feel confident in applying Mulvey's psychoanalytic tool of fetishistic scopophilia to unearth the complicated gender

representations within James Barry's painting. Within the painting, *King Lear Weeping Over Cordelia*, the image of Cordelia does not provide direct scopophilic pleasure for the male viewer. In other words, Barry's image of Cordelia does produce the ultimate, non-threatening fetish. Undeniably, Cordelia's corpse is an erotic object, but the hyper-fetishization of her body actually reflects the anxiety of castration back to the male viewer. Within and without the painting, the male spectator must face his anxieties, represented by Cordelia excessive bodiliness and adornment, as a passive viewer.

Interestingly enough the artistic scene by James Barry has the women bound within a semi-circle of men. Although slightly on the fringes of the circle, Cordelia is displayed by Lear to several male on-lookers while two other female bodies lie in the center of the pack of grief stricken men. Perhaps, utilizing some artistic license, it appears as if Barry inserts Goneril and Regan into the neo-classical death scene to emphasize or remind the viewer of the destruction and madness unleashed by the pair of monstrous viragos in Shakespeare's play. Goneril and Regan's presence emphasizes the threat of the masculine woman whose assumption of masculine traits and overt sexuality lead to the instability and the eventual ruin of the patriarchy. The position of both bodies lying in the circle expresses male anxiety to contain and even subdue the female threat therein avoiding possibly the inversion of the hierarchy. Both female figures are deep within the circle of the group of military men with their faces somewhat inscrutable to the viewer. A shadow darkens one of the phallic sister's body and face rendering her as unimportant or merely an accessory prop rather than real subjects. To the left the other "marble hearted fiend" lies with her face, specifically her mouth and eyes, near completely covered by a piece of her own clothing (1.4. 236). While to the right, the

“detested vulture’s” face remains open to view, though a bit shadowed by the boys club stepping over her (1.4. 285). But, what troubles the viewer is her arms, which look as if they are constricted behind her back; this feminine corpse does not lie flat on the ground but seems to be elevated or propped up by her arms which do not come into view. Even in state of death, these Gorgian sisters’ subjectivity (i.e. the face and eyes) and visible signs of agency (i.e. the arms and mouth) must remain unrecognizable or obscured despite their obviously inanimate condition. The privileged sites of the symbolic, the mouth and the gaze, pose as threats to the phallic fortification surrounding these two feminine effigies. The representation of Goneril and Regan as fragmented and/or amputated figures reveals a dread of the female/feminine power. The female body is a threat of violence; Goneril and Regan’s female bodies appear just so they can disappear. The superlative lack of a bodiliness or materiality suggests a desire to limit the possible space and control of the feminine. Barry’s rendition, literally and figuratively, cuts off the women’s [social] space. Literally within the painting, the armed men crowd and threateningly encircle the female bodies, which intimate to the viewer the painter/culture’s uneasiness with sanctioning women positions within social spaces. The painting strongly expresses a desire to exercise control over women even in the most fragmented spaces.

While the images of Goneril and Regan might be consumed and silenced by both painter and spectator(s), the women’s incomplete images are not silenced. I like to think of these fragmentary forms as subversive since wordlessly they elicit a meaning and feeling that cannot be controlled. As a spectator, I take pleasure in the two feminine corpses on the ground not because they are adequately subordinated by male figures

around them, but because their notable lack of bodiliness might speak to more than the desires of patriarchy. The anxious moves, of James Barry and the men within the painting, to diminish the women's sPECTORAL mastery and various modes of agency in their deaths suggest that what is silenced, clamors and is heard. The portrait does not mute the female voices entirely since the excessive fragmentation or incompleteness betrays male anxieties, as well as illustrates the dehumanization of women, but even more important it also avoids pure representation. Like Cordelia's multiple and complicated representation, the women do not represent, singularly, figures such as death, love, lack, virgin or whore for a culture. Both women expose men's fear over the female agency or power, yet both Goneril and Regan defy representation as an abstraction. The feminine corpses are, simultaneously, a presence and an absence that seems to be autonomous from the patriarchal delineation of femininity.

Not only do the crowd of men disregard Goneril and Regan's bodies, but the painter purposely injects them into the emotionally fraught scene disregarding, or rather re-inventing these two phallic women outside the "wolvish" depictions of Shakespeare's play. Neither, female corpse's bodies emphasize their excessive appetite for power; there are little to no semiotic adornments, which communicate their superlative desires and/or castrating powers. Overshadowed by the men lording over them, Goneril and Regan's bodies are rendered insignificant in comparison to Cordelia's body. Excessiveness is mapped onto Cordelia's body. Cordelia's body is the object of several gazes opposed to the phallic sisters modestly covered frames. In a direct comparison, the depiction of Goneril and Regan screams of a prudish humility once contrasted with the sensual necrophilic pose of Cordelia who, within Shakespeare's play, is trumpeted as a woman of

modesty, virtue and even chastity. A deliberate inversion manifests itself within Barry's painting. The very embodiment of lasciviousness, narcissism and immorality, Goneril and Regan remain in the manner becoming of demure and fair women even though Lear attributes Goneril and Regan with the "power to shake his manhood" or socially castrate him (Shakespeare 1.4.274). Yet, it is Cordelia's body that is open and exposed to the scrutiny of others. Her hair is loose, disheveled, and a good amount of skin, shoulder and bosom although not entirely visible, is exhibited. It appears as if Barry eroticizes the death of Cordelia. She becomes this figure, not of pity and sorrow, but of sensuality with her languid yet slightly provocative posture and the presence of an almost sexually gratified expression on her face.

The eroticization of Cordelia's body confuses a spectator familiar with William Shakespeare's play, since within the literary work Cordelia's body is considerably absent. Within the play, she is described as anything but body. Cordelia is described as fair and virtuous woman who, as the play suggests, abstains from the body by putting energy and time into shaping her virtues and/or values. Overwhelmingly within the play, it is Goneril and Regan who play the phallic, castrating women who rob Lear of his sensation of the phallus or his identity as a male. But upon a closer reading of the text, Goneril and Regan merely follow the suit of Cordelia in the emasculation of their father; Cordelia is the first to unman Lear. Within the play, Cordelia refuses to take part in the artificial display of affection for King Lear. She disrupts his Law; she resists positioning herself within a competition between other women to prove her love for him. Placing herself outside the patriarchal contest, Cordelia resists the paternalistic control of Lear by voicing, in front of a room full of men, her answer—"nothing." Lear can only echo her

nothing, which resounds to him a loss of familial respect, but more importantly a loss of his paternal identity. She will only abide by the bond between a father and a daughter; her duties to him are not her only duties since she will one day have a husband to love and obey. With her excessive and steadfast honesty, Cordelia alludes to Lear's fervent and insistent need for affection actually exceeds the hetero-normative love between father and daughter. Cordelia's announcement ultimately registers to Lear a loss of authority and power that his right as Father provides him. Ultimately, the painting displays this fear of loss or the sensation of lack with its excessive eroticisation of Cordelia's body. The artist, James Barry, renders Cordelia as a fetish object in order to contain the possibly castrative female threat. Overwhelming, Shakespeare's play and James Barry's painting expresses the anxiety and even loss that men feel when the hierarchy of sexual difference is destabilized by women.

Gazing intently at Barry's painting, the observer can undoubtedly detect the ways in which the painting attempts to reflect "socially established interpretations of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking, and spectacle" via Cordelia's hyper-fetishized corpse (Mulvey 28). Employing psychoanalysis as a lens, Cordelia's body reveals the unconscious of the patriarchy with its fetishized state; she operates as a cover that allows the male viewers, within or without the painting, to deflect their anxieties. Laura Mulvey's formulation of fetishistic scopophilia from Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, although pertaining to the medium of film, complicates and opens up the painting's excessive eroticisation of Cordelia. Laura Mulvey says:

In psycholanalytic terms, the female figure poses a deeper problem.

she also connotes something that the look continually circles around

but disavows: her lack of penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure. Ultimately, the meaning of woman is sexual difference, the absence of the penis as visually ascertainable, the material evidence on which is based the castration complex essential for the organization of entrance to the symbolic order and the law of the father. Thus, the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified. The male unconscious has two avenues of escape from this castration anxiety: preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma [investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery], counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment, or saving the guilty object [an avenue typified by the concerns of the film noir]; or else complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous [hence and over-valuation, the cult of the female star]. This second avenue, fetishistic scopophilia, builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into the something satisfying in itself.

(Mulvey 35)

Barry's representation of the excessive, feminine corpse of Cordelia is meant as a reassuring object that does not pose a threat to the looker, the male observer. Cordelia's body is hypersexualized; she is an erotic object that should please the eye, nothing more.

But, more importantly, Barry's portrait communicates Lear's castration at the hands of his daughter with the superlative sensuality, which he unsuccessfully attempts to contain by fetishizing her body with excessive accessories and/or jewels that are displayed upon her feminine corpse. The painting seems to indulge in both avenues that Mulvey's theoretical apparatus outlines. Barry's artwork is preoccupied with the male specular control over Cordelia's body to establish and secure at least a symbolic sense of maleness. As a feminist spectator, I do not share in the gaze of the male viewers, within and possibly without the painting, or in the "pleasure" (i.e. securing sexual difference/maleness) in the controlling gaze that Barry sutures with the spectator through the images of Edgar and the other men in the crowd. Ultimately, I think that the pleasure Barry's painting desires to construct actually debunks itself or, at least, can be broken down since the image of Cordelia communicates to the spectator a hyper-fetishization that breaks down the illusion of the fetish object. The multiple representations of Cordelia as death, lack, whore and virgin are communicated through the accessories that adorn her body, which function to make visible the conscious aims of the men in the crowd to desperately assuage their anxieties.

Now, I will turn my eye toward an examination of the accessories that adorn Cordelia's feminine corpse delineating the complicated and overtly conscious uses of materials by Barry to conform Cordelia to the perfect fetish object that he desires to create, yet cannot produce. The most prominent accessory that Barry emphasizes is the jewel-encrusted chain that crosses over her shoulder to rest between the valley of her breasts. The ornate chain does not appear to serve a function in keeping her dress together or providing some kind of support. Rather, the jeweled chain calls to the

observer's attention to the wealth of flesh bared to the male spectators. The chain of precious stones succeeds in dehumanizing Cordelia rendering her a thing that can be commodified and objectified at someone else's will. Furthermore, the jeweled shackle brings to mind images of slavery or suggest confinement, captivity. The gemstone chain around Cordelia's body stresses her relationship to her father or perhaps her husband which both echo the enslavement of women to the role of domesticity whether she be loyal daughter or dutiful wife. The chain could work to symbolize the bond or father-daughter relationship based on the subservient role of daughter to love and serve her Father, the provider. The daughter is the possession of the father; she belongs to him and as his property is used to brochure deals and political alliances to ensure the father's advancement. Within the world of Shakespeare's play, Cordelia's body was supposed to help Lear advance politically and socially in the world through a dynastic alliance that would produce and ensure bonds with other influential men. In the play, she is sought after by the Duke of Burgundy and the King of France, yet the Duke of Burgundy withdraws his suit after King Lear's passionate attack on fair Cordelia for her silence. The Duke's decision is twofold. He wishes to receive some monetary compensation in the form of a dowry of which Lear refuses to part with, but more importantly the Duke desperately wants to remain in favor of Lear. Nothing can be gained politically or in monetary terms for the Duke if he marries Cordelia. The play underscores the importance of homosocial relationships since they are materially beneficial or rewarding, whereas the painting hints at this with the presence of the jeweled chain, which ultimately represents female inferiority and, more importantly, the notion of a woman as a gift to strengthen ties between men.

The string of pearls wrapped around both Cordelia's wrists is another accessory which constructs a startling and disturbing contradiction. Pearls were associated with purity and often attributed to the Virgin Mary in the iconography of the Medieval and Renaissance by such artists as Fra Lippo Lippi. In Barry's work, Cordelia's exposed flesh and pearls create a troublesome contrast here. Cordelia appears to be innocence eroticized. The bareness of her bosom and the juxtaposition of the strings of pearls on her wrists heighten the sensuality of Cordelia. However, the sensuality lies in the underscoring of carnal and maternal qualities, which constitutes Woman as a contradiction in terms. The virgin-whore complex is subtle, yet pulsing, in the likeness of Cordelia, which works to express the unwavering anxiety, fascination and fear over the female body and female sexuality. Woman was either the virgin or the whore; there were no other avenues or potentialities for women during the period of pervasive patriarchal hegemonic discourses (e.g. legal, medical, religious, political, philosophical etc.) of the 17th and 18th centuries. Even within the portrait both the virgin and whore are in attendance, yet neither the positive nor the negative presence dominates or even outweighs the other. Cordelia, or rather her feminine corpse, functions as a cultural symbol of femininity here. Her body is a text inscribed with the contradictory patriarchal notions of the female/feminine so she may serve in affirming the gender identities of the men around her. Her body acts as boundary lines that demarcate male/masculine from female/feminine. Cordelia's physical body functions to set up a binary or dichotomy in which the female/feminine form operates as the Other who is desired as an agent or vessel of wholeness for men. Ultimately, as spectators informed by the accessories and sensuality of the lifeless Cordelia, we see the culturally inscribed

body or text of female/femininity while her physical body is obscured or even remains invisible to us.

Not only is Cordelia rendered as representations such as the virgin and the whore, but her image also duplicates the age-old motif of woman as death. Cordelia's death is marked by a bodily excessiveness that does not make itself visible within Shakespeare's play, *The Tragedy of King Lear*. Obviously, Barry's artwork is reinforcing a connection between death and excess through his re-invention of Cordelia. Yet, within the play the daughter of Lear is portrayed as nothing less than perfect. Cordelia defies description; she is beyond what is human. As the paradigm of perfection, she exceeds what is human with her inordinate self-sacrifices to help the men in her life, especially her father for whom she forfeits her life. Within the play, Cordelia displays an excessive absence of the body; there is little to no decoration or artifice ornamenting Cordelia's body. But, Barry's painting is not directly remarking on the excessive purity or perfection of Cordelia with such an inordinately erotic pose of the princess. Rather, I think that Barry's hypersexualizes the image of Cordelia since her excessive perfection was read as a sexual threat. The good princess' utterance of 'nothing' to the great patriarch Lear was tantamount not merely to castrative effect, but an annihilation of self—death. Cordelia is a figure of death (i.e. castration=death) to Lear. But as a figure of death or nothingness, Cordelia's corpse should represent a lack. Rather Cordelia's body dominates much of the scene. The feminine corpse is overabundant with its mounds of flesh particularly the ample breasts and swollen belly. Cordelia's body size actually rivals some of the men present within the circle; she is physically larger or much more massive than some of the petite male figures. The plump corpse still intimates a possibility of pleasure and even

fertility with its erect nipples thrusting through the bodice of Cordelia's gown. Cordelia's body represents a paradox, all at once the idealized body of the life giver (i.e. the maternal body) and pernicious vagina dentata that could easily consume or annihilate life. The complicated site of the maternal body has long been associated with the death drive; the instinct that leads what is living to death. The feminine corpse's reproductive capability possibly represents loss, division and the loss of unity experienced by an individual post-birth. Within the play, the maternal body's power is perceived as counter productive and even destructive to culture, rather than productive and healthy, since Cordelia, Goneril and Regan successfully bring Lear and his prosperous kingdom to ruin.

The puritanical in the Name-of-the-Father law violently inscribes various types of femininity that actually spills over in dead corpse of Cordelia. Each cultural construct of woman as whore, virgin, lack, and death disrupt each other obviously making visible the inherent contradictions of patriarchy's constructions of femininity. The painting creates an undecidability with the noticeable plurality of patriarchy's notion of Woman leaving this feminist observer in an odd position. The excessiveness and/or fluidity between each representation generates for the observer an ambivalence that makes it difficult to safely place Cordelia within strict representational boundaries. I take pleasure in the excessive dead figure of Cordelia since I believe she is disruptive figure that holds possibilities—potential interpretations. I consider Cordelia's excessiveness as a weird kind of power that although she does not get to wield it to create her body into an object/subject for herself, since it keeps from her from non-existence; she will not disappear into pure representation.

Overwhelmingly, James Barry's artwork desires to extol the male figure rather than the female form. The depiction of Cordelia is full figured, soft, fat and lacking in muscle tone. Although this female shape might have been the desirable womanly shape of the period, the onlooker gains the impression that the male form is not merely to be admired, but herald as perfection. The figure of Edgar, with his arm outstretched towards Cordelia, physique is quite remarkable. Barry depicts a young captain whose body is young, fit and muscular, quite nearing perfection. Edgar's boots attract attention to a shapely calf, but the observer's eye does not halt there but keeps on moving up. The criss-crossing of the garters is deliberate, working their way up Edgar's thigh to meet just under his posterior in admiration of the male body. The figure of Edgar serves quite a practical purpose in that he sutures the observer's gaze toward the action of the painting. The hesitant outstretched arm and the contrived arching of Edgar's foot lead the spectator to survey the feminine body. Barry's employment of Edgar's gestures is meant to confirm the power of the masculine gaze—men look, women are the spectacles to look at.

But Barry's delicious detail of Edgar's form renders him an erotic, and thus feminized, object as well. There is a hypnotic quality to Edgar's male body that is not unlike the bewitching quality of Cordelia's feminine corpse. However, Barry's portraits seems to suggest that Edgar's beauty does not lie in bodily excess, but his sensuality lies in curbed or restricted physical spectacle. It is not unusual that it is the legs of Edgar's that is put on display since they are the symbolic objects that represent agency. Nevertheless, his legs are fetishized; they are highly erotic objects. The contrasting image of Cordelia does not keep Edgar from being eroticized and even feminized. Barry's

construction of a male gaze, ultimately, creates an uneasy position for the male spectator. Chloe Chard's Effeminacy, Pleasure and the Classical Body investigates the uneasiness of male spectatorship within the sphere art criticism in the eighteenth century. Chard delineates in depth the anxious and equivocal moves made by male critics to secure their masculinity or maleness. The act of gazing by male spectators, ultimately, results in a process of identification with the male statue or figure thus an avoidance of femininity is necessary. Critics such as John Moore and Lancelot Temple desired to extol the classical male figure, which should signify a god-like nobility that is graceful and beautiful without the common or low quality that and excessive muscularity signifies (Chard 150). Both eighteenth century art critics desired to establish the ideal male as a part of a particular class. Moore and Temple seem to be obsessed with the representation of an upper-class male body. The classical male figure should evince a male strength and a female grace which basically constructs the image of a smooth-limbed body of leisure (Chard 150). Femininity acts as a polish or veneer that tempers the male figure producing an elegance or grace that communicates nobility.

Yet, although the feminine produces this nobility, the injection of femininity possibly creates a feminized man. Both critics desperately try to emphasize the masculine qualities of the male figures; the masculine qualities must outweigh the feminine to prevent the male spectators from becoming effeminate as well. Thus, Chard argues that the eighteenth century critics Temple and Moore attempt to avoid the dual risks of taking pleasure in the sexualized body of the male figures and possible feminization that the gaze produces by disavowing such a spectatorship as possible. Looking at male bodies is a part of female spectatorship which art critics such as Temple

and Moore construct in order to discuss safely the pleasure they actually experience from gazing at the male figure (Chard 151).

Similarly, Barry's painting possibly produces the same anxiety within a male spectator gazing at *King Lear Weeping Over Cordelia*. Barry's sensual depiction of Edgar possesses the dual threat of feminizing the male spectator and/or even eliciting homo-erotic pleasure. It appears as if Cordelia is not the perfect fetish; she does not deflect the men's fear of the feminine. Incapable and even uninterested in creating a male spectatorship like the art critics, Temple and Moore, Barry attempts to structure the pleasure of Edgar's male form within a phallic economy that safely appropriates the feminine. Unlike Cordelia, Edgar's bodiliness does not spill over the cultural markings of his body like those of Cordelia. Cordelia's flesh cannot be contained by the symbolic objects of exchange, such as the jewel encrusted chain crossing her bosom, but the straps or garters winding up Edgar's leg represent a successful appropriation of the feminine. Unlike Lear, the feminine of Edgar is tightly bound or contained to [symbolic] legs; it is a phallic agency organized around the [male] body. The older gentlemen, probably Albany, standing next to Edgar firmly structuralizes Edgar's body as a phallus, or within the phallic economy, with the positioning of the phallic sword rising from/leaning on Edgar's calf. Edgar can appropriate or seize the feminine without experiencing a loss of his phallus as long as he is amidst phallic substitutes (i.e. the sword). The deliberate and contrived placement of phallic substitutions turns the male anxieties upon itself. Not only must Edgar and other male spectators face their anxieties as onlookers, but those anxieties can face them back.

Even King Lear's figure communicates virility and/or potency that is reminiscent of venerable biblical and even classical figures such as Zeus, Noah or God. His massive frame and flowing white hair and beard allude to the personage of a distinguished, revered and esteemed individual, while in the painting the female body is a site of contradiction, anguish and death. But, it is King Lear's clothing and the gross protrusion of his belly that proves an interesting combination and/or feature within the painting. The eighteenth century artist, Barry, does not don his subjects in the clothing of his period nor in the garb of Shakespeare's era, but chooses the Roman or Greek articles of clothing. The artist chooses a neo-classical scene that harks back to the Roman Empire or is lightly reminiscent of Hellenism both of which were considered the times of the Pater, the Father. Essentially, the children were the property of the father, who assumed the procreative rights of the mother. The child, when born, did not belong to the mother even though she physically brought the child into the world. Rather, the Father takes possession of the child and then would decide if the child lives or dies. If the child was not thrust outside the home of the Father and thereby denied, then it would take the name of the Father thus belonging to him. Hence the tradition within kinship structures to bestow upon the children the last name of their fathers was born, but even more important the tradition resulted in the Father taking on the attributes of the sole (pro)creator. Whether intentional or not, the extension of King Lear's belly is quite large and rotund, thus suggesting pregnancy or the promise of fertility. The pregnant belly is attributed to King Lear implies the male or the Father as the only creator. This is an unusual reversal of the belly as sign of power on the part of Barry. Particularly in Medieval and Renaissance paintings (e.g. Botticelli's *Primavera* and Jan Van Eyck's *The Marriage of*

Giovanni Arnolfini), women's bellies were increased in size to allude to one of two things. Either the external womb of the woman was to exalt male potency, or more importantly to emphasize the promise of fertility that secures the man's immortality of his name through the production of offspring, especially male offspring. Yet, Lear's belly does not render him entirely effeminate but emphasizes his male potency since the fertile looking belly is couched in such a paternal body/figure. Thus, it seems as if Lear's belly is an allusion to the external womb thereby implying the appropriation of female procreativity (power).

In addition, Lear's womb is not an ungrounded sign of his paternal power or authority. His pregnant belly speaks as a sign of social rebirth or maintaining his creative power in the face of death (i.e. woman=death). Cordelia's death marks his [possible] regeneration since according to the painting death is something that only happens to women. Like the biblical figures that are a close likeness, Lear is beyond the realm of death. Death is the work of women; men do not die. She is the physical marker that protects him from death; only the female/feminine is mastered by death. Once the threat of castration/death (i.e. Cordelia) is "dead", so Lear's creative power remains intact. Not only does the body of Cordelia represent mastery over death for King Lear, but the painting suggests a cultural rebirth. In the background the ill-defined representations of men and women are grouped together in what appears to be a celebration over the recovery of the kingdom from the hands of Goneril and Regan by the soldiers of the King of France. Just as the circle of Lear's sympathizers solemnize, yet at the same time, celebrate their homo-social bonds, the people rejoice over the restoration of the old order (i.e. patriarchy) which appears just beyond the image of Cordelia's body within the circle

of men. The composition of the painting shifts our eyes toward what Cordelia's death represents. The activity above the crowd and toward the left of the painting directs us to see beyond her death toward change, productivity. Culture can exist once death/femininity has been conquered.

But, Lear's swollen belly may simultaneously serve as a sign of his anxiety over this feminized state. As asserted previously, Cordelia is not the perfect fetish; her excessive femininity spills over and threatens to affect the men in the circle. The presence of the external womb compounded with the emotionally hysterical visage of King Lear alludes to the realm of the feminine. Lear's womb and visible hysteria are traditionally feminine sites, which keep him fluctuating between male/masculine and female/feminine in a limbo state where he does not accept or reject the castrative affect of the Other. With his fecund belly, Lear's body becomes a nourishing and/or life giving site; he becomes a mother figure. Thus, Cordelia's image is a matter of the men, especially Lear, knowing the Other in themselves.

Yet, King Lear must resist the Other (i.e. the feminine/death) since it would reduce him to 'nothing', a woman. Lear must shun his desire for his own lack in order to gain a sense of wholeness. Ultimately, Cordelia's body is the articulation of the Other that must be disavowed. Her feminine corpse is the externalization of Lear's disavow of the feminine; he can literally bury his anxieties. Furthermore, the grief stricken party in the painting seems to be more concerned with King Lear than poor Cordelia. The men comfort each other or mourn the loss that Lear feels rather than weep for the loss of Cordelia. To the rights of Lear, an old warrior's face is engraved with the looks of concern and sympathy for the mad King, not Cordelia, whom he is obviously watchful of.

If one looks closely a few tears can be detected rolling down the old man's face. The circle of men is more about homosocial bonds than expressing grief over a woman. Equally important, the visible expression of grief through tears is considered a feminine behavior, yet these are not a woman's tears nor are they shed for a woman. Rather, the tears King Lear sheds seems to be about making himself into not only an object of sympathy, but an object of respect to his fellow men. As Julie Ellison argues in Cato's Tear's "the man of sensibility is thoroughly masculine, for his emotional nature is crucial to the drama of homosocial relationships" (Ellison 20). Ellison's insistence upon the aspect of drama in homosocial relationships displays itself prominently within Barry's artwork. Ellison discusses at length the image of the "dignified, stoic male sufferer's staged and temporary loss of self-control provokes his friends to vicarious tears" (Ellison 10). Barry's painting displays the self-discipline of a noble, paternal and stoic figure eliciting emotional responses of concern from the men around him. Carefully, Barry heightens the grief or suffering felt by the men and Lear by making visible the emotional reserve of King Lear who does not shed tears but possesses an anguished and tortured visage. But more importantly, Ellison's study of male sentimentality highlights that it is the staged exposure of King Lear's humiliations or personal tragedy that cement the bonds between the men which is what Barry purposely contrives this frozen moment that concerns Cordelia's demise, but ultimately suspends the death of King Lear (Ellison 10).

Ultimately, the representation and the tears of the old warrior creates a balance between male sentimentality and stoicism since his physical and emotional responses do not make him effeminate but rather they represent an emotional bond to his fellow men. The death of Cordelia sanctions the expression of King Lear's and others sorrow, but

more importantly would be readily accepted since the men expose their vulnerability (i.e. emotions:tears) and thus become dependent upon each other. I think that Claudia Johnson's work within Equivocal Beings on the sentimental politics of the eighteenth century figures within James Barry's painting. Johnson discusses the unwillingness and fear that the men of the eighteenth century expressed over being perceived as feminized through public displays of emotion. Thankfully, sentimentality offered men a way to escape such feminization since it sanctioned the expression of feelings that were traditionally associated with women without losing their symbolic sense of maleness by refiguring behaviors such as crying, hysteria, and blushing as masculine. Ultimately, male sentimentality eliminated the threat of social castration by constructing an immense authority behind affective displays. To express emotions within the public sphere was a means of confirming masculinity or manhood that was considered prestigious and even resulted in forms of agency via one's sensibility. Thus, the spectacle of Cordelia's death is the prime opportunity for the men to establish themselves as men of feeling (i.e. men of authority) which the men obviously legitimize or authenticate in the presence of each other. But, more importantly, within James Barry's painting the act of purging the feminine performed by the men is valued since, ultimately, the feminine is not expunged but recoded and valued as masculine (Johnson 14). The death of Cordelia allows the men to cry together once they renounce the feminine. The recoding of the feminine as masculine keeps the men safe from being rung through the dangerous process of feminization, which could weaken or harm them. The death of the two women especially Cordelia distance them from the feminine, the Other, since death visibly works to erase them for the men.

James Barry's painting *King Lear Weeping Over Cordelia* is a provocative and peculiar painting that emphasizes the homo-social bonds between men while, at the same time, it expresses male anxieties over the female body and sexuality. Barry utilizes the body of Cordelia to stress male-male ties, but also use the feminine corpse to establish the subjectivity of Lear. Yet, despite her use to certify male identity, Cordelia's excessiveness functions to keep her from disappearing altogether; she disrupts the pure representation by the patriarchy but her excessiveness does not deconstruct patriarchal notions of femininity. Cordelia's body reveals the inherent contradictions within patriarchal notions of woman (i.e. virgin, whore, lack, death, life) that Barry's portrait inscribes upon her body which ultimately reveal the instability of the gender/sex hierarchy. The excessiveness of Cordelia turns against James Barry and even possibly the observer's positions against itself since the very representation or cultural text they build undermines itself leaving open possibilities—further feminist interpretations.

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**END OF
TITLE**