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Dramaturgical Report: Stage 4

William Shakespeare's plays when they were first being produced all the female characters were played by young teenage boys. During Shakespeare's times, society was patriarchal. Women could not own land, and could not get a education unless it was from a private tutor and those were only for families that were able to afford them. Shakespeare has written the play, *King Lear*, which challenges the idea of gender norms and the traditional relationships between fathers and daughters. I will discuss how Shakespeare handles gender in his play *King Lear*, and how the contemporary production of *King Lear* deals with gender.

The story of *King Lear* starts with King Lear giving his land out equally to his three daughters. But to get the land they must say how much they love their father. The two oldest daughter, Regan and Goneril, who are married, pleases their father with their love. Pleased with their affection, King Lear gives them their share of the land. Now it is the youngest daughter, Cordelia, turn to please her father. She is unmarried and King Lear must choose between the King of France and Duke of Burgundy to be her husband. But when King Lear asks Cordelia what does she have to say, Cordelia said "Nothing" (Act 1, Scene i), and explains that her love for her father is just a love between father and daughter. Furious, King Lear banishes Cordelia from his kingdom without giving any of his land to her. She ends up leaving with the King of France because the Duke of Burgundy only wanted marriage with land. Throughout the play, the two eldest daughters do everything they can do to get rid of their father since King Lear has

given them the land and has not left. His army is still there so Regan and Goneril feel threaten. Towards the end of the play war breaks out throughout the kingdom. Goneril ends up poisoning Regan and right after that Goneril commits suicide. Cordelia returns in with France's army and tries to save King Lear from the disorder that was surrounding him. Sadly throughout the process Cordelia ends up dying. King Lear finds her body and is devastated. Saddened from Cordelia death, King Lear ends up dying while he has her in his arms.

There is also a sub plot in the play King Lear's friend and nobleman, Gloucester, and his two sons Edmund and Edgar. In the beginning of the play Gloucester explains how Edmund is his illegitimate son. He is a bastard, meaning that Gloucester had sexual activities with another woman who ends up getting pregnant and having Edmund. While Edgar is his oldest legitimate son. Edmund throughout the whole play plans to get rid of his father and his brother. He ends up writing a letter saying falsely how Edgar plans on killing his father. When Gloucester read it he sent out his men to find him, but Edgar was told by his brother beforehand and end up disguising himself as Poor Tom and leaving the kingdom. After some time has past and Edgar has left, Edmund been working with King Lear's eldest daughters, Regan and Goneril, to get rid of the King himself and his father Gloucester with him. At one point Regan's husband ends up stabbing Gloucester's eyes, making him completely blind. But then the war in the kingdom happens and his happiness comes to a end. His brother, who has disguised himself as Poor Tom, enters and has a duel with Edmund. He ends up killing Edmund. Poor Tom than reveals himself as Edgar and tells his story.

In the production of *King Lear*, there were three characters in total who were played by the opposite gender, which is different from the production that were during Shakespeare's times.

Tony award winner Glenda Jackson was cast to play the main character King Lear. In the first scene of Act I, King Lear is shown to us as someone with power and well respected by all throughout his kingdom. Because of his age he has to divide his kingdom for his three daughters. After the two oldest daughters praised him and showered him in love, the youngest daughter, Cordelia did not, saying that her love for her father is just that and nothing more. Furious, King Lear tries to give her daughter away to Burgundy, who declines since no land would be involved with the marriage. Then he gives away his daughter to France saying, "Than on a wretch whom nature is ashamed Almost to acknowledge hers." (Act I, Scene 1). In the play, King Lear is excited to hear his favorite daughters words about how much she loves him only for her to say "Nothing" (Act I, Scene 1). In the production, Glenda Jackson done a amazing job passing as a man. Passing as define by Jennifer Drouin in her paper "Crossing Dressing, Drag, and Passing: Slippages in Shakespearean Comedy" and she defines it as "passing is for the illusion to signify as real in the public sphere." (Drouin, 8). Glenda Jackson shows this because she is passing off as King Lear as she is playing a man. She does not want the audience to think she is just playing the character as a joke, for example how Drouin explains drag as being more of a comical performance, but takes it in a very serious action. For a women to play as a father role and show the disappointment on their faces. The tone of voice Jackson uses is very easy for the audience to understand what was going on in the scene. King Lear is very polite and kind to his two oldest daughters but when it was time for his youngest you can hear him get a bit more energy in his voice, This shows how Jackson wanted to make it clear that Cordelia is his favorite. How the tone of voice changes from excitement to confusion to anger. Jackson uses her voice in a more masculine way, and raises her voice in a deep tone whenever King lear was suppose to be angry.

Another character that stood out the most for challenging gender norms is Cordelia. She starts off very nervous in the first scene of Act I, trying to figure out what to say to her father, only to have said nothing. Cordelia acted as a woman who went against the rules, something that wasn't allowed during Shakespeare's times. Even though King Lear was furious at Cordelia he still made sure that Cordelia got married. And the King of France has decided to take her since the Duke of Burgundy didn't want her due to the fact that he wasn't going to get any land if he were to marry Cordelia. But the King of France took her and felt sorry for her. After being banished from her family, Cordelia comes back to save her father towards the end of the play when war breaks out throughout the kingdom. She reunites with her father in Act IV Scene 7, Cordelia says, "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!" (Act IV, Scene 7).

Costumes during a production of the play are a key factor to help the audience understand the plot and to reveal on each character's gender roles in the production. Women wore fitted dresses to show off their figure while the men wore baggier clothes. In the production, King Lear wore baggier clothes, making Glenda Jackson more masculine for the audience. While the actress, Ruth Wilson, who played Cordelia was a bit different. She played Cordelia and the Fool, someone who is always by King Lear's side while Cordelia wasn't there. The Fool is a male character who is played by a female. So the costumes for Cordelia were very slim and showed her figure in a flattering way. While for the Fool, she wore baggier costumes. She even wore a wig for when she played the Fool. You can say that Ruth Wilson is also passing when she plays the character the Fool. She doesn't act as Cordelia at all but does show how both characters have a huge impact on King Lear. Although at one point of the production the actress decided to take

their wig off during the Fool's monologue. You can consider that as cross-dressing. Drouin describes cross-dressing as "an attempt to imitate the "real" (Drouin, 3). So when she took off the wig it shown the audience how Ruth Wilson is saying how the two characters, the Fool and Cordelia, are very similar. They are both there to help King Lear face reality and say the truth, even though the King does not listen.

Another interesting thing about the production is that Gloucester, one of King Lear's loyal friend is also played by a women. Both father figures are played by a women. Both characters end up being betrayed by their unloyal children, King Lear by his two eldest daughters and Gloucester by his son Edmund. Both character also end up losing their favorite child at the beginning of the play. King Lear banishes Cordelia because she did not show him the love he wanted to hear. Although Gloucester case was different since Edgar, Gloucester's first son, ended leaving the kingdom due to the fact that Edmund wrote a fake letter saying how Edgar was going to kill Gloucester. Which then made Gloucester send his men to go after Edgar. Another thing to notice is how the mother figure throughout the whole play is never mentioned and the fact that there is none. It is only mentioned when Gloucester is talking about Edmund's mother. He says, "Sir, this young fellow's mother could, whereupon she grew round-wombed, and had, indeed, sir, a son for her cradle ere she had a husband for her bed. Do you smell a fault?" (Act I, Scene 1). Gloucester talks about how Edmund is an illegitimate son since his mother isn't the one that Gloucester married. Another thing to notice is how King Lear hows no sons. Showing how important it was for him to arrange a marriage for his daughters to ensure that they get his land, although during Shakespeare's time it was a different case.

During Shakespeare's time, it was Queen Elizabeth on the throne during a monarchy state. Queen Elizabeth did not end up getting married and chose to stay that way since she wanted to be for her people. And so she became the Queen in charge of England. The first ever without a King. Diane Elizabeth Dreher explains in her paper, "Domination and Defiance: Fathers and Daughters in Shakespeare" that although Queen Elizabeth broke the rule of not getting married, many renaissance women usually ended up getting married and do "a life of cooking, cleaning, bearing children, assisting her husband, and managing a busy household." (Dreher, 17). But she then talks about how under the Elizabeth throne, there was a way that children had to obey their parents. As Dreher says "They were repeatedly reminded of the fifth commandment: "Honor thy Father and thy Mother" (Dreher, 21). Dreher then explains how children were told if they were disobedient they would be doing a sinning. She then explains since they were their flesh they were considered as poverty. But there was a difference between their children and their servants. Children were, "expected to kneel and ask for their parents' blessing every night to bare parental discipline with patience and humility, even when they were punished wrongfully" (Dreher, 22).

Dreher then discussed about the relationship between King Lear and his daughter Cordelia. She talks about how Cordelia ends up being the opposite of what was expected of the children. She did not obey her father's orders, which were to shower him with love, the way he wanted it. But ends up saying that she had nothing to say. And of course she was punished with banishment. Dreher then talks about how the older generation, King Lear, Gloucester, and Kent, were stuck in the old hierarchy. Because of that the newer generation, Goneril, Regan, and

Edmund, were able to lie and manipulate their words to their father. Talking about how they love them and wouldn't disobey them but really they were tricking them all along.

King Lear and Cordelia's relationship between each other is how traditional renaissance families were during Shakespeare's time. Dreher talks about how Shakespeare like to portray people in his plays, and mostly the father figure. She said, "particularly the fathers, we have the traditional assumptions about authority, prejudice, privilege for some and domination for the others and the demand for unconditional obedience from women and children." (Dreher, 39). She explains how Shakespeare's plays are more than about love and how his usual stories end up in tragedies, but more on the respect on the relationship between the characters. This includes King Lear and his daughter Cordelia. How the older generation accept a certain way of respect from the younger generation. This was the reason behind the first scene of *King Lear*. As the confusion on what respect they want from each other. Or more on how King Lear wants Cordelia to respect him and how Cordelia wants him to understand her.

Shakespeare handles gender in his play *King Lear*, and how the contemporary production of *King Lear* deals with gender. The production was a huge deal with gender roles due to the fact that many of the male characters were played by female actress and shown a amazing job in doing the part. For example on how Glenda Jackson was passing as King Lear or how Ruth Wilson was passing as the Fool but at one point could play it off as cross-dressing. They shown how a women takes on a male's role by changing their tone of voice and through the way they act as their character. Just like how men would play women's roles during Shakespeare's time.

Bibliography

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