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Interpreting Invisibility: In Defense of Regan

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INTERPRETING INVISIBILITY: IN DEFENSE OF REGAN

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Theatre at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

INTERPRETING INVISIBILITY: IN DEFENSE OF REGAN

By Brittany M. Ginder

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Theatre at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2014

Major Director: Dr. Noreen Barnes
Director of Graduate Studies, Associate Professor of Theatre

Most scholarship regarding Shakespeare’s *King Lear* rests on the analysis of Lear and Cordelia, with the odd reference to the eldest daughter, Goneril, and brief homages to the Gloucester subplot. Lear’s middle daughter, Regan, is rarely mentioned at all, unless it is in conjunction with one of her more scholastically popular sisters. Within these marginalized moments of notice, Regan is routinely simplified as being just another sinful sister, fitting nicely into the accepted binaries of good and evil outlined within the play. Despite the fact that most binaries, like characters, are flawed, Regan has been given little to no chance to be absolved of her supposed offenses. By looking at Regan through the lenses of a theatrical character study and also as a subject of iconography within the realms
of classical art, film, graphic novels, and the stage, I aim to prove that Regan, despite her consistent relegation to the shadows, is a three-dimensional character who has simply been dealt a difficult hand by her creator.
CHAPTER 1: WHO IS REGAN?

Most scholarship regarding King Lear’s family (and King Lear in general) rests on analysis of the mad king and Cordelia, with the occasional reference to the eldest daughter, Goneril. Regan, if mentioned at all, tends to be fused together with Goneril as a singular creature, or she is a passing thought mentioned in a footnote aimed at either her husband or her more scholastically popular sisters. Within these marginalized moments of notice, Regan is often simplified as being just another criminal entity that fits in with the binaries of good and evil set up in the play. She is rarely given any kind of defense against such attacks on her character. Most of the paintings and performances of Regan since her Shakespearean inception have continued to perpetuate these negative ideas of Lear’s middle daughter. I intend to shed some light on the metaphorical darkness shrouding her by delving deeper into her motivations, words, artistic depictions, and actions on stage (including her distinction as the only woman in all of Shakespeare to turn a sword on someone other than herself to inflict mortal damage).

To begin, we must first identify Regan as more than an insular, secondary character in the story. Without her, would the critical events of the play still happen? As in any fictionalized tale, there are a multitude of ways to eliminate and create characters anew without altering the ultimate end to the story. What I hope to prove is that Regan’s existence within King Lear does, in fact, help maintain the plot. Without Regan as
competition for Edmund’s affection, Goneril may never have needed to write her love note to him in Act 4. If that note had not been written, Edgar would never have had proof of Edmund’s deceitful nature and evil-doings. Without that proof, Edgar may have just killed Oswald for his attempted attack on the blinded Gloucester and then went on his merry way to Dover, hoping to find Lear and Cordelia there to help get the kingdom back into its rightful hands.

The contents of the letter are no less important than its existence. Goneril’s desperate need for Edmund behind the back of her husband, as well as details of their illicit affair are exactly what Edgar needs to make his case to Albany and, subsequently, slay his bastard brother. If Albany and Edgar hadn’t been so wrapped up in the idea of Edmund’s sexual (and militaristic) relationships with both of Lear’s eldest daughters, they may have, instead, focused more on the fact that Lear and Cordelia were sitting in prison waiting to be hanged. With that shift in their objectives, the end of Act Five may have been more about Edgar and Albany locating and releasing Lear and the new Queen of France from their threatened positions. As with many plays of this period, it seems as though the climax of the plot and subsequent denouement hinges on a single letter.

To help prove my point, I turn to Italian literary scholar and Stanford Comparative Literature professor Franco Moretti. Moretti is, perhaps, best known for his controversial method of literary analysis that uses quantification methods from the social sciences (vertices, nodes, probabilities, and coefficients for example) and adapts them for use in the humanities- quantifying plots of plays and other forms of literature by breaking down and
illustrating the relationships and connections between characters. His 2013 book, *Distant Reading*, explains his reasoning behind this choice in analysis and fully describes his concept of Network Theory.

This is a theory that studies connections within large groups of objects: the objects can be just about anything... and are usually called nodes or vertices; their connections are usually called edges; and the analysis of how vertices are linked by edges has revealed many unexpected features of large systems, the most famous one being the so-called ‘small world’ property, or ‘six degrees of separation...’

(212-213)

In this way, Moretti’s network webbing better helps to illustrate how a plot relies on its characters and also how those characters rely on each other. The connectivity visualized in these networks illuminates the relationships that may not be present on stage, but are still known to the audience. “Here, nothing ever disappears. What is done cannot be undone... The past becomes past, yes, but it never disappears from our perception of the plot” (Moretti 215). In these visual webs, the invisible connections are made visible.

To better explain my purpose, I decided to take the work of Franco Moretti, vis a vis his Network Theory, and distill it down to show the major relationships between the main characters of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. In keeping with the most important links in the Lear story, the web shows familial lines, military lines, and lines of servitude. Looking at the original image, it is easy to see how Lear is, indeed, the main character of interest (he is the only character to have primary edges with all of the main characters presented in
the web). After Lear, the characters with the most connections are Goneril and Regan, respectively. The lines drawn to each of these women show the amount of power they have in the play- rivaling their monolith of a father. Goneril seems more aware of her connectivity to begin with, while Regan gains the knowledge of her connections as the play unfolds. Making use of these lines, we can watch the connections grow as the story unfolds for these women.

Something else to note in Moretti’s mapping is how the relationships change throughout the course of the play- and how, once those associations morph in response to certain actions, they are forever altered, even if they are not visible to the audience. In this
way, even when Regan is off stage, these quantified webs of connectivity help to make the invisible characters more visible. Referring specifically to Regan, the web makes it impossible to forget the death of her husband and the resulting start of her relationship with Edmund (despite his love connection to Goneril as well). Visualizing this, we can understand what drove Goneril to write that fateful letter in Act 4. Even though it is not in her line of sight at all times, the triangle between herself, her sister, and their shared lover is there to be felt.

This generalized mapping of the character relationships from start to close of the play, while very revealing, can also get a bit muddled. There are so many ways the characters connect that it is easy to get lost or lose focus on the vital links. Noticing the same muddiness in individual agency presented in these webs, Moretti, in evaluating the relationships in *Hamlet*, decided to first eliminate all relationships and, instead, note only the deaths in the play (Moretti 217-218). As *King Lear* is one of Shakespeare’s best and bloodiest tragedies (the play ends with the entirety of the royal family dead, center stage), this seemed like an easy jump to make. Interestingly enough, as I made this new web I noticed something that I couldn’t quite wrap my head around: absolutely everyone who dies in the play has a primary connection to Regan (not just an encounter, but an actual relationship with her). Taking this realization a step further, she is, in all cases, either one of the catalysts for their demise or she meets with them just prior to their death.

For example, Lear and Cordelia die, ultimately, as a result of the events of Act One, Scene One: if Regan and Goneril had not played along with Lear’s game and received the
entirety of the kingdom, they would never have been put in such positions of power that
would have allowed them to imprison the former king. In Act 3 Scene 7, Cornwall and
Regan’s choice to torture Gloucester leads to the 1st Servant stabbing Cornwall and, as a
result, Regan killing the insolent servant. Regan meets Oswald on his way to deliver
Goneril’s love letter to Edmund and, fully aware of the contents of the letter, allows him to
deliver it along with a message of her own. But, before he leaves her side, Regan also
mentions to Oswald that he who kills Gloucester will receive due payment from her.
Moments later, he comes across the blinded ex-Earl and, attempting to kill him for the
bounty on his head, Oswald is instead slain by Edgar, protecting his wounded father.

Fig. 2: Regan’s single degree of separation from all who die in *King Lear.*
Edmund is slain for his crimes against the King and his affairs with the royal sisters. Finally, Regan dies at the hands of her older sister and Goneril kills herself afterwards, seemingly out of guilt: “The one the other poisoned for my sake, /and after slew herself” (5.iii.288-289).

While she may not always directly influence their demise, Regan can undoubtedly be seen as a harbinger of death in Lear. Even though this is never distinctly pointed out by Shakespeare, the connections are there to be subconsciously drawn and it is easy to begin to understand why she is so often depicted in colors hinting to the blood constantly surrounding her (as I will explore later). Her presence in a scene creates a feeling of unease—almost as if we’re not sure who will fall prey to her touch of death next. Regan may be kept silent in the wings, but that doesn’t make her any less deadly.

Having these connections made visible, it is easy to see Regan’s importance to the overall plot and outcome of King Lear. She is far more than just another evil antagonist, and she has much to offer in light of the actions she makes throughout the course of the play. Yet, she is hardly more than a footnote in most Lear scholarship. The question I ask is “Why?” The answer, Moretti demonstrates with his webs—it is not until Regan’s actions and relationships in the play are physically outlined that her necessity is made fully perceptible.

In the following chapters, I hope to examine how Regan has been unfairly cast to the evil side of the “good versus evil” binary created in Lear, as well as how she has been visually portrayed throughout history. I believe that these two areas of interest have
adversely affected the scholarship surrounding her. Beginning with breaking down the
binaries she has been placed within, I will move into a discussion of Regan’s
representations in art, film, and graphic novels, ending with her portrayals on the
contemporary 20th and 21st century stage. I hope to prove that our artistic representations of
Regan have been remarkably sparse and that she is too often relegated to the background
of King Lear study. We have subconsciously made her invisible in our art and, thus, kept
her invisible in our scholarship. If I can point the spotlight back on her, I hope to show just
how much she, as a character, has to contribute to the story.
CHAPTER 2: BREAKING THE BINARIES

King Lear’s daughters have long been placed within the Manichean binary of ‘good’ and ‘evil.’ From the colors they are often seen in (lighter colors for Cordelia the good and darker colors for Goneril and Regan the evil), to their portrayals on stage (Cordelia is regal and Christ-like compared to the devilish bloodlust of Goneril and Regan), the sisters are expected to adhere to the dual oppositions they signify. The innocent Cordelia is the embodiment of feminine nature and the bringer of all things ‘good,’ whereas Goneril and Regan are categorized as ‘evil,’ jealous, and manipulative “monsters of ingratitude” (Speziale-Bagliacca 124). This binary scheme, like most, is flawed. Cordelia is rarely dissected past this clichéd image of Christ, and the judgments made in regard to the elder sisters are grossly out of proportion with their supposed injustices. In this chapter I will be focusing on how this middle daughter breaks not only the binary scheme of ‘good’ and ‘evil,’ but also the binary of acceptable ways for men and women to commit acts of violence on the Renaissance stage- thus further proving her importance to the story as well as to Shakespearean scholarship in general.

Despite speaking more than the idealized Cordelia in the text of King Lear, Regan is forgotten just as much in scholarship today as she was in her fictionalized family. She is described as a watered-down version of her older sister, a cold-hearted and ruthless villain a “pelican daughter” (III.iv.7). The term “pelican daughter” refers to the ancient myth-
predating Christianity— that claims that, in times of famine and distress, “the mother pelican wounded herself, striking her breast with the beak to feed her young with her blood to prevent starvation. Another version of the legend was that the mother fed her dying young with her blood to revive them from death, but in turn lost her own life” (Saunders 1). The symbolism Lear is using here places him in the position of the martyred mother bird, being wounded by his offspring. However, upon closer reading, Regan can be seen as the strategic soldier who has been forced to act out in various ways to gain recognition from her aging father. Regan’s actions, though often colored as evil, can be seen as more justified through the lens of the forgotten middle child, reaching out to the men in her life by parroting their destructive behaviors. Her masculinity is a threat to the patriarchy surrounding her, and her intelligence is seen as a weapon too unwieldy for a woman. After all, as Marilyn French points out, “Regan performs an act unique in Shakespeare: she kills, in her own person, with a sword” (231). She is the product of her dysfunctional upbringing and falls prey to the tragedy of her family all the more.

Being a middle child has a certain sociological stigma attached to it, including the stereotypical traits of having self-esteem issues, a rebellious nature, and a constant desire for attention. Regan is no exception to this rule. But, before we can look at the nature of Regan, we must also consider the nurturing of her character. There are multiple versions of the King Lear/King Leir myth as well as adaptations that present interesting ideas on what happened to Lear’s queen and Regan’s mother. Perhaps best known, Gordon Bottomley’s short play, King Lear’s Wife, implies Lear’s unfaithfulness led to the fatal breaking of the
heart of Hygd, his queen of twenty years and the mother to all three of his daughters. (It is also worth noting that in this particular adaptation Regan is never seen and only spoken of twice, and very briefly at that.) Excluding Bottomley’s interpretation, the original King Leir myth opens at the funeral of the recently deceased queen. No matter the explanation, Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia are all raised without a mother. Regan’s only choices for role models are her older sister, her father, or their old family friend, the Earl of Gloucester. Based in the connections and conversations she has with each of these characters within the play, I believe that Regan learned certain survival tricks from each of these role models. From her father, Regan learns about power. From her sister, she learns how to manipulate the patriarchy. And from the Earl of Gloucester she learns military strategy. Most productions portray Regan as a lush, lusty, attention-seeking whore with daddy issues and a flare for the gruesome. She does not shy away from blood or from using her sex as a tool. These traits are misconstrued as being “unladylike,” and from that description stems her title as an “evil” sister. With the many allusions to birds and poisonous snakes that are made in relation to Regan, it is safe to say that there’s something that almost seems unnatural about her at times. My interpretation of this “unnaturalness” stems from her coping with her invisibility in her own family. Human behavior analyst Dr. Gail Gross describes middle children thus:

If you are a middle child, you are probably understanding, cooperative and flexible, yet competitive. You are concerned with fairness. In fact, as a middle child, you are likely to pick an intimate circle of friends to represent your extended family. It is
here that you will find the attention likely lacking in your family of origin. As a middle child, you receive the least amount of attention from family and as a result, this family of your choice is your compensation... Though often a late bloomer, you find yourself in power careers that allow you to use your negotiating skills... and get that all too-needed attention. (Gross 1)

While this is not the case with every middle child, it certainly seems like Regan fits the bill. “Understanding” and “cooperative” may be pushing things a bit, but she learns to be flexible in who she trusts and definitely shows her competitive nature (the first lines we hear from her mouth are in competition with Goneril for the love and land of their father).

The two oldest daughters are very aware of their father’s favoritism and this has never felt fully justified to either of them. With this injustice in mind, I believe Regan’s only true familial feelings are for Cornwall and Gloucester. While I go further into these claims later in this chapter, I will outline them briefly here. Regan has found in Cornwall someone who seems to understand her power and her ability to wield said power. They are reliant on one another and, despite Harold Bloom’s love for Katharine and Petruchio, I feel Regan and Cornwall may actually be one of the happiest couples in all of Shakespeare.

Cornwall’s death in act three shakes Regan to her core. In her home and in general, Regan is always the brains of their operation, and Cornwall the brawn. Edmund is aware of this and, opportunistic as he is, steps in to fill the void. I also believe Gloucester, a close friend of the family and military confidant, has stepped in at times almost as a surrogate father for Regan. She is militarily minded and a strong strategist (as is necessary for surviving
as a middle child, let alone the middle child of Lear) and Gloucester probably notices this and teaches her to sharpen her skills.

Of the three sisters, Regan is the latest bloomer, both in the play and in visibility to the world. At times, mostly in the opening act of the play, she is an afterthought. But, as the play continues and she becomes more powerful in her own right, Regan becomes a force to be feared. She stands up to her father, assists in the blinding of the traitor Gloucester, kills the man who kills her husband, steals the lover of her older sister, and attempts to help run an army about to be attacked by the invading French.

She is flawed but, in my reading of Regan, she is only emulating the role models she has been given. Her father drinks publicly and profusely (giving Goneril a reason to kick him out of her home in Act One, Scene Four). Her sister uses sex (specifically with Edmund) to get what she needs for her own survival. And the Earl of Gloucester is not only a military strategist, but also rather vocal about his various lusty affairs (one of which leads to the bastard son that later turns Regan’s world view upside down). In a way, Regan’s only fault is exercising her masculine traits too openly in a world where they are prohibited. Yet, they are all she knows and the only means for her to garner consistent attention. This attention may not always be positive, but attention in any form is what Regan has been taught to desire from an early age. As the play progresses, so, too, do Regan’s desires. She learns that going unnoticed by her peers is not what she most despises— it is being underestimated by them that drives her to extreme action.
Furthering this point, when her family, friends, and household fail to notice her as a powerful member of the group, she tends to act out more fervently. And when she is disappointed or deceived, her lashing out increases. Consider the gruesome blinding of Gloucester. Regan, Goneril, Cornwall, and Edmund are all in Gloucester’s home confiding in one another recent intelligence claiming that the Earl of Gloucester has sent the lunatic Lear away from their trap. Upon finding out his plans to help her father, Regan’s feelings of betrayal are strong enough that she verbally lashes out, wishing to “hang [Gloucester] instantly” upon his arrival (III.vii.5). Like the temper tantrum thrown by a child in a supermarket prohibited by a parent from getting a treat, Regan is infuriated that her plans against Lear are foiled by someone whom she trusted. In true tragic form, this is a foreshadowing of her over-arching hubris that will eventually lead to her fall (and death).

Goneril, responding to Regan’s threats against the life of Gloucester, escalates his peril to a fate worse than death: “Pluck out his eyes,” she suggests, thus leaving him to live his life hearing the frightened screams of those that see his battered face and living with the memories of his fallen family (III.vii.6).

Knowing that servants will reach the castle soon with the Earl in tow, Cornwall recommends Edmund to take his leave of his childhood home and remove Goneril with him for “the revenges we are bound to take upon your traitorous father are not fit for your beholding” (III.vii.8-11). The choice of wording here is paramount- we, meaning Cornwall and Regan, are bound to take revenge upon Gloucester. In their minds, Gloucester is a traitor to their alliance and to the state. He has betrayed them as friends and as a military
strategist by giving asylum to the madcap king. Regan, who has known Gloucester her whole life (and who, I hypothesize, was the first to teach her the ways of the military in her youth), is hurt. “Ingrateful fox,” “O filthy traitor,” she painfully proclaims as she plucks his beard in a sign of what is soon to be his sad fate if he should not renounce his new allegiance to Lear (III.vii.27, 30). Gloucester turns on her, “Naughty lady, these hairs which thou dost ravish from my chin/Will quicken, and accuse thee,” bringing her anger to a boil (III.vii.36-38). As she continues to question him (she has obviously been taught the ways of torture and questioning), he (just as well trained in this art) gives nothing away, thus revealing his duplicity against her. “Wherefore to Dover?” begs Regan of the Earl’s choice to lead Lear away from their trap (III.vii.64). His venomous reply sends daggers into her unsympathetic heart: “Because I would not see thy cruel nails/Pluck out his poor old eyes…I shall see/The winged vengeance overtake such children” (III.vii.69-70).

In a moment of rage, Cornwall lunges forward to release one of Gloucester’s eyes from his head. It is worth pointing out that this act of violence was only mentioned before this moment by Goneril and by Gloucester himself, both in conversations with Regan. Textually, the act does not seem to be premeditated by Cornwall— it seems, instead, to be an idea pulled out of his subconscious from eavesdropping on his wife’s earlier conversations and then performed on a whim fueled by betrayal-driven hatred. Once the act is done, Gloucester yelps in pain, cursing the gods and man alike in true tragic fashion. Regan then gives the order for Cornwall to gouge the remaining eye from its socket: “One side will mock another; the other too” (III.vii.70). (Whether this act is a continuation of her
fury, a calculated final attack on a traitor to her kingdom and, more importantly, to herself, or a kind of twisted mercy for the Earl is a question of performance to be addressed in a much longer discussion of Regan’s possible character choices.) Cornwall hesitates momentarily, “If you see vengeance—,” but moves quickly to follow her command (III.vii.87). In this moment it is clear that Cornwall may be the brawn of their operation, but Regan is the true brain. She has learned well from their most recent opponent; she has become a better strategist than her teacher could ever have imagined.

Yet, before the complete blinding of Gloucester occurs, one of the servants of Cornwall speaks out against their torture of the Earl and begins a sword fight with the Duke. As they ready to duel, Regan does not wish to waste any more time and is sickened by the impudence of one of her supposedly well-trained subordinates. The servant taunts her and her husband, “If you did wear a beard upon your chin, I’d shake it on this quarrel” (III.vii.77-78), implying not only that Cornwall has not served enough time as a Duke to be obeyed, but also that while Regan’s “beard” may be elsewhere, if she were the man she pretends to be, he would fight her, too. This enrages Cornwall further and they thrust their swords at one another. Cornwall sustains injury in his foolhardy approach to the fight, giving Regan the bearing to step into this public attack. Hastily taking a sword from a nearby retainer, she proclaims her anger towards the impudent servant, flanks her opponent, and stabs him.

She has been raised to be a soldier in a household where she had to find her own ways of protecting herself, physically and emotionally. Regan has learned the mental
strategy behind the military (as we see in scenes between her and her husband regarding their knights and their informal war against Lear), so it stands to reason that she has also been taught the physical strategies of a soldier. She kills without mourning. She cries out prior to her attack to make sure that her prey is aware of its assassin. She flanks the servant to have a better position to kill without being killed. In her mind, there is more honor in her slaying of the servant who mortally wounds her husband than in the servant’s attack on him in the first place.

Regan’s slaughter of the servant in Act III is a “man’s killing” done by the hand of a woman. It is the moment in the play where we see Regan fully take up the mantle of “masculine” by seizing the sword of another man (her metaphorical phallus) and stabbing her foe. In physically attacking her husband, the servant denies that Regan is the one in charge. In her killing of the servant, she solidifies her place in the hierarchy of the Cornwall and Lear households. Regan is no longer seeking the power or attention expected to be sought by middle children. She has both of these things prior to this murderous act. The moment she kills the servant is the catalyst of her hamartia- it is what leads to her undoing as the play progresses.

Textually, there is no reaction from Regan about her killing of the servant. It is presented as if she has done this before. We have already seen her subvert the norm of womanhood by calling the shots inside and outside her household. But this is a rebellion unlike any other in all of Shakespeare’s canon. During the Renaissance, a woman’s way to kill was with poison. In following with tradition, men are the hunters that kill with their
specially built weapons. Women were the gatherers and the keepers of the home and hearth. Poison could be made from herbs that women gathered while fulfilling their prescribed everyday duties. These poisons would then be put into wine or food—both of which come from the hearth, the woman’s domain. This method of killing was seen as too weak for men—it provided no honor (when a man killed with poison, as Claudius does in *Hamlet*, it is seen as cowardly and unthinkable). Poison, as we see later in the killing of Regan by her sister, is the woman’s way to kill. The only reason for a woman to ever kill with a weapon was if she should turn it upon her own breast. Then, and only then, was it acceptable for a woman to engage in a more gruesome means of death. Yet, Regan kills a servant with a sword in the middle of Gloucester’s home with a room full of witnesses and no one seems to find this action terribly out of the ordinary.

Regan is a flawed character, of that there is no debate. But I feel that she has been unfairly relegated to the corner of “evil” for far too long without proper justification. I do not mean to say that she does not commit evil acts, for she does just that as the play progresses. What I mean to prove is that there are shades of gray within these binaries and that she slides along this spectrum throughout the course of *King Lear*. She is not innocent and child-like as her younger sister is. She does not intentionally manipulate the world around her for her survival as her older sister does. She may have started her life as innocent and she is often manipulated by those around her. But Regan has carved out her own niche as the soldier/strategist among men. Her cold, calculated words and actions are a result of much more than simply being “evil.” She has learned to be the way she is.
through watching the actions of her role models. She is a woman consistently breaking the 
stereotypes of what it meant to be female during the renaissance. Regan is not a “good” 
character. Nor is she “evil.” She is a three-dimensional woman that has been dealt a 
difficult hand by her creator. And, as we will see represented in art and performance, she is 
not afraid to get her hands dirty.
CHAPTER 3: REGAN IN ART

Iconography, as defined by art historian Erwin Panofsky and quoted in a piece by theatre historian Judith Weschler, is a “description and classification of images [which] furnishes the basis for further interpretation” (201). Theatrical scenes and characters have long been the studies of such iconographic portraits and paintings. In particular, *King Lear* has fascinated many artists. Despite a hefty collection of art based on this play’s characters, very few artists have felt that Lear’s middle daughter is worthy of such iconographic immortalization. When I began researching the art surrounding Regan, I was hoping to discover that (as feminist interpretations began to infiltrate the work of the Bard and, therefore, the art surrounding his plays) the more recent images depicting Lear’s daughters would allow her to have more focus and agency in her visual representations. With the stigmas still attached to Goneril and Regan in popular readings of the play, I was sure that the artists originally painting the still-lives of these women would be part of the problem underlining their characters as halves of the same evil whole. I was expecting to uncover more visually interesting and nuanced interpretations of Regan the closer I came to the present day, and that is where I was sorely mistaken.

As technology has become more and more prevalent in the world of art, traditional paintings and illustrations of Shakespearean characters, once a common occurrence in the 16th and 17th centuries, have gone out of style. Artistically, Regan seems to have almost
completely fallen out of fashion since the 1900s as far as conventional art forms are concerned. While there are still current artists who use Shakespeare for inspiration (see the work of Yang, Hadley, and Bruvel to the right), when *King Lear* is shown in modern art, rarely, if ever, is Regan remembered. How can we expect to remember her in our scholarship when she is rarely in our sight?

Considering the lack of traditional artistic representations of Regan after the mid-1800s, I decided to look a little deeper at the early paintings of her that do exist to see what they had to say about her as a character. Rather than jumping into their many differences, I began by analyzing what these various visualizations of Regan in art had in common. The
answer: Regan is always presented in some variation of red. Similarly, Cordelia is almost always in blue and Goneril dons dark greens for most of her depictions. While the other sisters occasionally are given a slightly different interpretation, Regan stays in her color family exclusively. No matter how we think of her (if we are reminded of her presence at all), she is always presented as red-headed or wearing a shade of that same color. And what does this mean about her visual reception culturally? Red is an appetite stimulant, creating the feeling of hunger for more, even when what she is craving is unattainable. Red, the color of passion and desire, also lends to the popular performance interpretations of Regan as a lusty lush with flushed cheeks from her recent flirtations and libations. Whether these personality choices are supported by the text
is up to the audience, but there is no doubt that the iconic imagery of Regan in red supports this common directorial choice based solely on her dominant coloring.

The consistency of her color palette is intriguing simply because, despite whether she is the focus or not, red naturally draws the attention of the eye. Henry Fuseli’s 1790 painting, King Lear Admonishing Cordelia, creates an easy visual path for the viewer— the eye moves from Lear’s disapproving gaze to his accusatory hand to Cordelia’s virginal white gown to the dark red curtains framing Lear’s throne and his burnt umber robes to the gold bustier of Goneril and, finally, to the red hair of Regan in her somewhat subordinate but very defensive stance. While the intended point of the painting seems to be the pain in Cordelia’s face as a result of her father’s visceral anger, the eye, following Fuseli’s line, ends on the face of Regan. Not the body, not the bosom, not even the profile, but the full face. Even the lighting in the image seems to make Regan glow in comparison to her siblings. In this painting, her image is the one your eye rests upon last; her defiant face is
the first to have any extended amount of attention paid to it. This image is full of signs that must be decoded by the viewer. I see a young woman cautiously reacting to her father’s violent outburst, standing as a bold shield to the husband cowering behind her.

The 1814 painting *King Lear and His Three Daughters*, attributed to William Hilton the Younger, is similar in style. While the red clothing worn by both Lear and Goneril is highlighted, it is Regan’s wavy red hair that holds the most focus among the three sisters. Her stance is also worth noting. As she backs away from her father and Cordelia in horror, she still manages to protect her older sister, despite Lear’s hand reaching menacingly out toward her. Regan’s expression, while alarmed, is not nearly as terrified as the look upon Goneril’s face. It is almost as if Regan is more accustomed to the tyrannical wrath of her father. In Hilton and Fuseli’s paintings, we are confronted with the image of a woman attempting to outwardly bend to the patriarchy but, if you look at her face, she is much more aware of her strength and control in these situations than anyone else in the images.

Fig. 6: *King Lear and His Three Daughters* (Hilton the Younger)
Shortly after these works, we see the red move from just Regan’s hair to also becoming the dominant color of her elaborate dressings. Famed 19th century painters Ford Madox Brown, James Archer, and Edwin Austin Abbey depict Regan with both red hair and red garments. We also start to see a shift from her standing off to the side to commanding more attention in the framing of the painting. “Ford Madox Brown’s lifelong interest in King Lear was sparked in his youth by a romantic attraction to its emotional intensity” says art historian Lucy Oakley (26). “He initially made a series of drawings based on scenes from the play in 1844 and continued to find inspiration in it throughout his career” (Oakley 26). Brown’s painting, Cordelia’s Portion, circa 1865, keeps Regan closer to the background, but her effervescent crimson mantle begs for attention. Her position in the frame implies that she is still considered to be subordinate to Goneril and her father, but her arms rest protectively upon her husband’s shoulders. Regan’s gaze, fixed upon the face of her older sister, seems to be in the middle of some kind of non-verbal
communication. The focus of the painting may be aimed toward the dejection of Lear and the pain and disbelief of Cordelia, but the eye is, yet again, drawn to the bright red of Regan in a field of comparatively pastel coloring.

In *The Daughters of King Lear*, attributed to painter James Archer circa 18-1900, Regan is still pushed into the background laterally, but her face and red dress are the initial focus of the painting. The raven-haired Goneril draws momentary focus, as does the pitiful and chastising look on Cordelia’s lighter shaded face and hair, but Regan is almost directly in the center of the frame. Her ivory skin picks up the light in the painting in a way that suggests that, unlike many previous depictions, she may not be quite as evil as her darker-toned sister. This is the first time we see a possible glimmer in the façade of the Manichean binary she is often placed under. Regan may still be tangibly connected to Goneril in this particular image, and her physical body may be technically in the background, but her voice is the one most fully heard.
Edwin Austin Abbey was the first artist to give Regan complete command of the paintings she is captured within (whether this is intentional or not is up to art historians).

“Abbey was attracted to the Pre-Raphaelite’s art and theories,” including the work of his friends and mentors Ford Madox Brown and John Everett Millais (Oakley 27). Abbey’s panoramic 1898 oil painting *King Lear* shows the opening scene of the play, with Regan demanding all focus. Cordelia is center and is bathed in pale blue robes matching those of her exiting father, but her auburn hair gives leave for the eye to move to the next source of that same color in the image—Regan’s ginger hair and captivating bright red dress. Fanning out her robes in a mock curtsey to put herself on full display, Regan is presented as a confident and almost frivolous woman with little to no remorse toward the disinheritance she just witnessed. According to art historian Lucy Oakley, “The color of [Regan’s] dress, the low, central knotting of her hip-slung belt, and the long riverine fall of its cords through the valley created by the raising of her skirt all focus attention on her
female sex, with its connotations of mystery, blood, and darkness” (46-47). She may not be the intended focus of the painting, but Regan certainly manages to keep the viewer’s eyes on her. “Henry Irving’s production of King Lear, mounted in 1892 with sets and costumes based on [Ford Madox] Brown’s images (Cordelia’s Portion, etc.), may have encouraged Abbey’s interest in the older artist’s version of the play” says Oakley (45). With this in mind, it is easy to draw connections between Brown and Abbey’s choices in their representations of Regan. Still dressed in an arresting red, Regan’s intent in this painting, if we are to think like an amalgamation of W.J.T. Mitchell and Lucy Oakley and allow her to be a moving character within a static frame, is to try a new tactic in gaining the attention of the viewer. By alluding to her dangerous and thriving sexuality with the placement and color of her garments, she has discovered that highlighting her womanhood may be the key to remaining visible among her more popular sisters.
Abbey’s 1902 painting, *Goneril and Regan* from *King Lear*, finally brings Regan to the foreground—but it almost seems like she doesn’t know what to do with this new and unsolicited attention. Her crimson gown still tugs at the eye, but her now darker auburn hair tries to hide her face. According to Oakley, “Extracted from the narrative flow of the earlier painting, the figures are a study in contrasts (underscored in the divided background) between two personifications of evil” (72). This harsh assumption defining both Goneril and Regan as evil creatures captured within a critical frame creates a distancing between the viewer and the image. As image analyst W.J.T. Mitchell claims, “What pictures want... is simply to be asked what they want, with the understanding that the answer may well be, nothing at all” (48). It appears as though this is the first visual representation of Regan we have where she is the focal point, yet she seems to have nothing at all to say.

Furthermore, this is the first painting out of everything we’ve looked at thus far in which Regan is fully feminized without a hint of masculinity in her stance. In everything prior to this, she is either defiantly or defensively positioned. In Abbey’s *King Lear*, she is curtseying—a feminine action—but in a mocking fashion, subverting the womanly quality
of her posture. Abbey’s *Goneril and Regan* catches her with her guard down. Her body is vulnerable and her face shows her discomfort towards this unsought consideration. Regan is used to crying out for attention—she doesn’t know how to feel when such attention comes naturally.

Interestingly enough, the only time she is given full agency in a painting up until this point is when she is portrayed in these more feminizing terms. I believe that her naturally masculine characteristics, considered abnormal and undesirable in women in the centuries these art pieces were created, are part of the reason she has remained hidden for so long. It seems counterintuitive to paint her in the most eye-catching color on the canvas unless you want her to be focused on. Yet, she is still put in the background and left to be considered less interesting than Lear, Cordelia, or even, at times, Goneril. Perhaps the masculinity of Regan was seen as an unattractive and somewhat ostracizing trait. As a stereotypical middle child, Regan was probably the black sheep of the family. Goneril, being the eldest, would have been more like a second in command, while Cordelia, the baby, was Lear’s favorite. Regan, the middle daughter forced to make her own way in the world beneath the shadows of her more interesting siblings, may have realized that negative attention for her masculine behaviors was better than no attention at all.

That said, it seems as though the visual representations of Regan in early art have created an interesting conversational challenge between the artist’s depiction of the royal family dynamic and Regan’s desire to be seen as the emboldened woman she has become as a result of that dynamic. Outside of the later paintings of Abbey, Regan may not have
been given much conscious emphasis in the many paintings of Lear and his daughters, but her image certainly manages to capture the eyes of her viewers and keep them focused on her to her heart’s content.
CHAPTER 4: REGAN ON FILM

The paintings of Archer and Abbey from the late 1800s may have allowed Regan some agency, but, with the advent of film technology in the 1900s, she was suddenly silenced, put in the corners of the frame, or replaced entirely. While I do not have the time or the ability to outline every filmed version of the play that exists out in the world today (it is a popular subject matter that has been adapted in a multitude of ways and there are few roles for older male actors that equal Lear), I have chosen a selection of filmed accounts of King Lear that I feel best exemplifies the different styles of filming that occurred in the 1900s and early 2000s.

When film first began, audio tracks, specifically the speech of the actors being filmed, were not fully incorporated. This was the era of silent films; hyperbolic movements and expressions coupled with intertitles explaining the words the audience could not hear were overlaid with music (often piano based) that helped to set the tone of the film. Furthermore, film technology, when it first began, was only able to capture a certain amount of time on film to be played back. For example, the 1910 silent film King Lear, by Italian director Gerolamo Lo Savio, is only 16 minutes in its entirety. With this shortening of the usually 3 hour long play, anything outside of Lear’s main plot points is removed from the story being told. In fact, Regan’s relevancy to the story is virtually imagined as she is consistently visually blocked by her older sister and rarely has a moment of her own
worth any notice. She exists within the film for two scenes—and in both her only job is to continue to motivate Lear’s descent into madness. The entire Gloucester subplot is removed and, once Lear is sent away from Regan’s home by Goneril, neither of the older sisters are seen again.

Filmed originally in black and white, directors of this era would sometimes attempt to push the envelope by administering the pain-staking treatment of “colorization” to their final product—meaning that they would hand paint each individual cell to add color to the film when played back. Savio, not wanting to be behind the times, chose to do the same with his *King Lear*.

Interestingly enough, Savio chooses to bathe Regan in golden tones, rather than her signature red coloring. Despite this change, she is still presented antithetically to the rest of her family—Lear, Goneril, and Cordelia are clothed in pastel blues, greens, and purples, all cool colors, while Regan is dressed in the only warm color. While there is much to be said regarding this chromatic warmth in comparison with the

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Fig. 11: A still taken from Gerolamo lo Savio’s silent film, *King Lear*. I have taken the liberty to circle Regan for ease in locating her. You can watch the entire film (sans original music) here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oXLghGeMA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oXLghGeMA).

Fig. 12: Another still from Lo Savio’s *King Lear*—note the color blending of Cornwall and Regan (lo Savio)
cooler tinting of her family members, her difference from them is undermined by her husband. Regan may belong to a different color family than her biological household, but she wears an identical color to Cornwall, making her visually indistinguishable from him. She has visually traded in one family for another.

Moving further into the 1900s, Peter Brook’s 1971 King Lear highlighted the familial dysfunction between Lear and his three daughters while also alluding to the entirety of the royal family’s plummet into madness. Much of the text is removed and shifted by Brook in exchange for expansive location shots of Denmark in the winter. Shooting the film in high contrast black and white emphasized the nature around them and reinforced the binary codes placed on the characters within the film. Harsh and defined, the eyes of Lear and his family are sunken and shadowed, metaphorically showcasing the darkness within them.

Brook’s take on Regan is particularly worth noting. Starting off cold, calculating, and properly put together, Regan of Act One Scene One is starkly different from Regan of Act Five Scene Three. She begins the film collected, manipulative, and harsh, but as the film progresses and she suffers the betrayal of Gloucester and the death of Cornwall, she becomes more and more unkempt and wild. Her...
hair falls from its original bun and lays loose around her shoulders. Her makeup smears and her physical stance morphs from confident and intimidating to confused, introverted, and alone.

Brook’s bleak look at Lear, clearly influenced by the absurdist, the Berliner Ensemble, and Artaud, left very little room for Regan. She is utilized mainly as a plot point, another mouthpiece of madness in the royal family. The gruesome blinding of Gloucester is the one scene in the film where her power, frazzled as it may be, is stressed. She initiates the interrogation, but her emotions begin to swell and Cornwall, played in the film as a sadistic man without mercy, stops Regan from revealing too much emotion and, consequently, too much of their plan against Lear. The actual blinding of Gloucester occurs out of sync with the text- Brook has Gloucester completely blinded before the servant steps in and attacks Cornwall. Also disjointed from the original text, Regan does not kill the servant with a sword. Instead, she strays from such a masculinized killing and

Fig. 14: Left: Regan is disheveled and distraught by the news of Gloucester’s betrayal. Right: Regan’s emotions get the better of her after the brutal blinding of Gloucester (Brook).
grabs what looks like a dull stone bread knife from the table behind her and beats her husband’s killer with it. Taking away Regan’s moment of power, Brook turns it into a moment of manic rage.

Regan does not gain more focus and power as the play progresses, as she seems to in many other interpretations. Instead, she slowly spirals out of control, creating a 1970s Regan who seems to rely on the strength and constancy of the men in her life to keep her, in turn, just as stable. Without that stability, she is left to her own devices and, much like her mad king father, she is prone to madness when there is nothing external for her to cling to.

A decade after Brook’s filmed interpretation of *King Lear*, television had become such a powerful and common means of communication that it only seemed right to bring the Bard to the masses through the use of this new form. As a result, the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) decided to take the idea of filmed Shakespeare and adapt it for broader consumption. In 1982, as part of their Shakespeare Collection, the BBC aired their “made for television” version of *King Lear*, directed by Jonathan Miller. Disparate of the films prior to this, the BBC’s interpretation of the tragedy allows Regan to not only have agency in the frame, but also to embrace that agency.

The setting and period costumes of the piece are dark and create an unsettling atmosphere. Moments of high action are often shot in close-up, blurring the violence for the television audience. The fatal blows of each fight scene are nearly impossible to see. The theme of unseen violence is a constant through-line in the film—metaphorically
attempting to keep the intensity of the actions and characters shrouded in the physical darkness that surrounds them. Considering Regan’s most subversive acts in the play occur under cover of darkness, this interpretation, not to mention Penelope Wilton’s sadistic portrayal of the character, gives Regan the opportunity to command and keep focus. This foregrounding is not only in moments of vulnerability—thus showcasing a Regan who is always aware of the attention, negative as it may be, and is embracing every second.

In this account, Regan is also presented as rash and manipulative, no longer a tactful strategist in the wings. Her sickening smile is saved for the moments she lies to Gloucester and Lear. Beneath that exterior, though, a seething hatred for these men boils. She is out for her best interests—and she is unafraid of the consequences. Her manipulation of Gloucester in the first acts of the made-for-television film make her reaction to his blinding in act three even more nauseating. Unlike many of the versions of the play we’ve seen before this, Regan is placed firmly within the binary of good and evil—and there are little to no
redeeming moments in the entire 180 minutes that could ever prove her to be anything but the face of immorality.

In keeping with this theme of unseen violence, perhaps the most intense scene in the play, the blinding of Gloucester, is performed facing away from the camera. Gloucester is forcibly tied to a chair with his back to the viewer. While this leaves the gruesome act up to the viewer’s imagination, it also allows the audience to witness Cornwall and Regan’s pleasure in their dastardly entertainments.

Regan begins the interrogation of Gloucester, plucking his beard with a smile. Once Cornwall is by her side, the violence escalates and Regan’s sexually excited reactions to the gore inflicted by her husband are downright disturbing. She nibbles excitedly at her fingertips as Cornwall takes up the questioning of the traitor and this eroticization of violence is fully realized after Cornwall plucks the first of Gloucester’s eyes from his skull. Regan’s carnal pleasure in the violence leads her to
fervently kiss her husband in response to the fresh blood on his hands. Wilton’s portrayal, while powerful and sharply contrasting to the filmed portrayals before her, creates an image of Regan as nothing short of the devil in female form.

In 2008, filming Shakespeare for television was taken to a new level. The Royal Shakespeare Company’s staged performance of King Lear, directed by Trevor Nunn and featuring Sir Ian McKellen in the titular role, was filmed for television broadcast by Channel 4 in the UK and for the Public Broadcasting System’s Great Performances series in the US. The televised production was shot mostly on a sound stage that mimicked the stage used in their original performance. While some alterations were made to allow the production to be filmed for television audiences (McKellen’s complete nudity in the stage production was replaced with only partial nudity for the sake of the television censor), the proscenium staging kept up the awareness at all times that the viewer was watching a filmed reproduction of a play. This filmed production, scoring many awards and an Emmy nomination for McKellen, showcased a different side of Lear than all others presented thus far: Lear as a foolish and impulsive man.

Fig. 17: Above: Cornwall whispers to Regan to keep on flattering her father during the opening scene, despite her obvious discomfort in his unexpected game (Nunn). Below: Cornwall gives Regan strength as she stands up to Lear in Act Two, Scene Four (Nunn).
who has fallen from the rank of a divinely appointed king to a servant of his manipulative daughters.

Regan, portrayed by Monica Dolan, is almost as rash as her father. Indulging in wine in almost every scene, she does not seem to think through her actions. Yet, her relationship with Cornwall, played by Guy Williams, is solidly codependent. Cornwall pushes Regan in the opening scene of the filmed production, urging her on to speak better than Goneril for the chance at more land (they are blissfully unaware that Lear has already partitioned out the land and this impromptu game is just for show). Throughout the entirety of the film, Regan may gain strength and confidence in her ownership of the country, but her sole weakness is always in standing up to her father.

As the play progresses, Regan begins to take bolder risks and push Cornwall into doing more than originally anticipated-for example, when Kent is put in the stocks for Cornwall’s sport, Regan ups the ante to a true punishment of her father’s messenger: ordering him to stay in the stocks all night. Cornwall, pleased and impressed by his wife’s cunning, motions for his servants to do just as she says. Furthering Kent’s discomfort, she
throws the remainder of her wine in his face before laughing and skipping from the yard, calling for Cornwall to follow after her, which he obeys with a smile. Regan may have started the play as the dependent wife of Cornwall, but, with her newfound power, she transforms into a frivolous woman whose greatest pleasure is in inflicting pain in others.

Regan, as presented in this filmed production, may not have been quite as evil to begin with, but the wickedness of her actions escalate quickly, perhaps in correlation with her accelerated drinking habits, to the eventual breaking point in Act Three Scene 7. Dolan, despite Wilton’s unnerving sexually charged performance in 1982, chooses to create a different image of Regan during the blinding of Gloucester—one of a Regan who deserves to be feared. She initiates the questioning and the torture in the scene and Gloucester almost entirely directs his answers to her rather than Cornwall. In multiple moments, Cornwall even seems to defer to Regan as to the next step in their mutual persecution of the Earl. In Cornwall’s anger, he takes out the first eye of Gloucester, while Regan squeals in horrified delight, watching her husband perform the task. As Gloucester cries out in pain, Regan inspects Cornwall’s dirty work and orders her husband to take out the other eye, too. After
the brutal attacks on Gloucester are complete, Regan takes his head in her hands and tells him of Edmund’s betrayal. She holds his head, in an almost motherly fashion, as he cries out in anguish over this betrayal and his mistaken attacks on his innocent son, Edgar. When Gloucester asks for forgiveness, Regan throws his head aside roughly, impulsively switching emotional gears, and calmly tells the remaining servants to untie him. The iconic line, “let him smell his way to Dover,” is, unfortunately, almost thrown away by Dolan (3.vii.114-115). She chooses to play Regan in this moment almost as if she regrets her rash torture of the Earl. While this regret does not last long, she stutters her way through her remaining lines to Gloucester until she realizes the wound inflicted on Cornwall is fatal.

Also interesting in this production, unlike the 1982 version, most of the violence mentioned in the text is visually emphasized. While the more gruesome effects are still left up to imagination, the bloodlust of the characters is not
eliminated. The fight between the servant and Cornwall, while a bit lengthy, is shot in a way that we can see the fatal blows. Even more intriguing, this is the first time on film that the audience is allowed to not only see Regan fully stab the servant, but they get the opportunity to see it twice. She rushes at him from behind as he fights Cornwall then, after he is falling to the ground, Regan stabs him a second time—much more fully and deeply.

While, in many ways, this filmed production seems to allow Regan a bit more power in her scenes, Dolan chooses to undermine that power with an inconsistent stutter and a strong preference to perform Regan as an alcoholic. In most of her scenes, Regan has a chalice of wine in her hands or a bottle at her side. In the opening scene of the film, she drinks while examining the map of her newly prescribed lands and Goneril forcibly takes the libation away from her as she explains their need for a plan in dealing with Lear’s wild eccentricities. Even prior to this moment, as Cordelia says her goodbyes to her sisters, Regan removes herself from the conversation to sit at the table and drink instead. In many scenes, including the one previously mentioned where she slings her wine at Kent in the stocks, Dolan uses the
“lush” persona to create a Regan who often lightheartedly, and sometimes drunkenly, abuses her power. Additionally, in this filmed production of *King Lear*, Goneril is so aware of her sister’s disposition toward alcohol that she doesn’t just poison her chalice of wine in the final scene of the play. Instead, she poisons the whole bottle—pouring Regan a small glass and leaving the bottle by the end of the table. True to fashion, Regan quickly swallows the contents of her cup, pours herself another glass and, despite feeling a sickness overcome her, continues to drink from the poisoned bottle she carries with her. Although the portrayal of Regan as an alcoholic is far from a new performance choice for the character, this is the first time in film that we see it presented to such a full extent.

The filmed adaptations of *King Lear*, from Brook’s stylized and bleak epic to the made-for-television version of an RSC performance originally meant for the stage, Regan on film has made one step forward and a few steps back. While she is now more exposed to her audience and able to be more fully analyzed than before, her portrayals have been
less than justified. She has been most often reduced to just a lusty, sadistic lush with Daddy issues- no real depth necessary. While films have helped to make her character more lasting, Regan deserves a bit more justification in her actions to be remembered by.
CHAPTER 5: REGAN IN GRAPHIC NOVELS

While filmed and televised versions of Shakespeare are still on the rise, perhaps one of the most interesting new mediums for the Bard to transcend has been the realm of comics and graphic novels. With companies like Classical Comics making their mark repackaging the works of Austen, Doyle, and Shelley into full color graphic interpretations, it was only a matter of time until Shakespeare joined the mix. Graphic novels, a medium originally intended for young adults, tend to be filled with gore, mayhem, mystery, and betrayal. Psychological warfare and fight scenes are, in many cases, a must. Luckily, King Lear has all of these necessities in spades.

Despite the fact that Regan, the harbinger of death in Lear, is consistently at the center of the gore, mayhem, mystery, and betrayal prescribed by graphic novels, she is regularly kept on the outskirts of the page. When she is center stage, each artist employs a different technique in masking her power in each situation. The 20th and 21st century artists of the recent graphic novel interpretations of King Lear (Ian Pollock, Gareth Hinds, and Ilya), almost seem to take pains in keeping Regan in her traditional attention-grabbing color palette while still managing to hide her in the background whenever possible.

Ian Pollock’s 1984 graphic novel King Lear is a quite disturbing take on the story. His illustrations of Regan emphasize nothing but the voluptuous mouth of Lear’s middle daughter- creating some interesting, albeit frightening, images in which Regan is reduced
to only her luscious, blood-red lips. When her lips are not the focal point, her face is often distorted and the only distinguishing features that remain are her trim waistline connected to her larger-than-average hips. Whether intentional or not, Pollock has managed to visually revert Regan back to the stone age of womanhood—her lips and hips fetishize her body as her focus. The power she has in the world of the play is lost as we are forced to see her as merely a soft, female body with nothing more to offer than the fairer parts of her sex.

Pollock’s illustrations, avant garde and abstract as they are, impose certain social constructions on the reader. Image analyst William A. Gamson et al. comments that these kinds of image constructions “rarely appear as such to the reader and may be largely unconscious on the part of the image producer,” and, as such, they “appear as transparent descriptions of reality” (382). Keeping this in mind, Pollock’s illustrations seem to propose
the notion that Regan has nothing more to offer the story than her physical attributes. In fact, she is almost entirely kept out of the action of the play, sans the stabbing of the servant who murders her husband—which is still belittled to almost look as if she has poked the insubordinate servant with a rather large toothpick instead of landing a fatal blow. Her stance in this depiction is not one of violence; it is illustrated to look more like she is engaging the servant in a fencing match with non-lethal foils, bending at any hint of pressure. Prior to this moment, she is consigned to the edges of each panel while Cornwall takes the lead on the questioning and resulting torture of Gloucester, despite textual evidence of Regan’s vocal and physical power in the space during Gloucester’s blinding. Even in the mid-1980s, it seems as though the masculinity inherent in Regan’s character must be masked- it is too dangerous for their young adult audience to see Regan as a woman capable of such violence. Instead, her female shape is emphasized, her face distorted, and her powerful physical presence erased.

Gareth Hinds’ aesthetically beautiful 2007 watercolor King Lear lightens Regan’s clothing from the blood red crimson seen in most previous illustrations to a pastel, rosy red. Often placing her on backgrounds of a similar color, Hinds subjects her to almost complete invisibility throughout much of the graphic novel. Even when her sisters are
blurred to the point of making recognition difficult, their clothing colors help to keep them in the sight of the reader. Regan is nearly lost in the shuffle of color behind her. I have added a circle to the picture to help point out just where she is in the illustration.

Color choices aside, the illustrations of Regan within this graphic novel sometimes look to be left entirely unfinished— with no outlines or individual features to remind the reader who they are looking at. As seen in Figure 25, while the rest of the characters in the frame are carefully detailed (even the nameless soldiers), Regan is left without an outline and seems to be more like a haunting ghost on Cornwall’s shoulder than a character of her own (Hinds 32). Even the line “Put in his legs,” originally spoken by Regan to the disguised Kent, are struck from her mouth and given to Cornwall to declare (2.ii.164).

Hinds’ interpretation presents a textually and visually softer side of Regan, but her shifts are still noticeable. When she is calm and forgiving, she is drawn with softer features and larger, more expressive eyes.

Fig. 26: Above: Regan’s rosy coloring matches the background so well she almost disappears from the scene entirely (2-3). Below: Regan ghosts behind Cornwall (32).

Fig. 27: Regan has a moment of vulnerability with her father before the arrival of Goneril in Act 2 Scene 4 (40).
Yet, when her anger and power rise, she is given angular lines to her face and her eyes turn cold and beady. She is a conundrum with no serious through-line in his representation of her character. Regan is, in this case, nothing more than another character to draw and another mouthpiece for the lines of the Bard—despite the fact that many of her lines are divvied out to other personages in the play.

Furthermore, Regan is almost entirely kept away from as much of the action as possible, except in Act 3 Scene 7, the blinding of Gloucester and wounding of Cornwall. While she is pushed aside during the torture, she is the principal interrogator of Gloucester. In the same scene, her stabbing of the servant is calculated and her face is left out of frame for the final moment of the servant’s death. Hinds’ *King Lear*, perhaps the truest to the original Shakespearean text out of the three graphic novels discussed in this chapter, allows Regan to speak within its pages, but only when she is first spoken to.

![Fig. 28: Above: Moments after the previous image, Regan is verbally slapped by her father’s language against her- her physical features illustrate the change in her attitude (41). Below: Regan’s tactical approach to the murder of the servant- her maneuvers are almost mechanical (69).](image-url)
Ilya’s intriguing 2009 Native American *King Lear*, showcases Regan in an entirely different light. Drawn like a child of Medusa, she is depicted as a venomous snake coiled and ready to strike at anyone who steps into her path. There is no gentility in Ilya’s Regan. She is a hunter rather than the hunted. While there is much to say about the choice to set the story in colonial America, I will only allude to that briefly when the choice influences the visualization of Regan.

To begin with, Ilya’s version of the play-made-graphic novel also contains Regan wearing her trademark red. Yet somehow, despite her strong Native American parentage, she is paler than her English Colonialist husband, causing her to quite literally blend in with the white of the page. Even in the black and white sections of this manga-style Shakespeare, Regan is depicted through the first half of the book as an almost faceless subordinate to her husband and sister. As the manga continues, she gains more color in her face only as she begins to assume control over Edmund (which can also be read through a postcolonial lens since, in this version, Edmund is portrayed as the mixed-race,
illegitimate son of his white colonialist father and his implied African slave mother). My original reaction to this change in her physical depiction was that Regan was given more color and, therefore, more agency on the page as she gained more power in the world of the play. While this almost empowers Regan in a way that could be seen as beneficial to her, a second look at the idea shows holes my original theory. She is still reliant on the men in her life, despite gaining obvious power and dominance in each panel as the play progresses. With this reliance in mind, her change in coloring could also be seen as a chameleon-like defense mechanism—her face and body physically change to blend in with her surroundings and the specific male figure she is most allied with. Even in the images to the right, she is either turning to Cornwall for support in her words or standing behind Edmund, almost like the Lieutenant to his General. Regan, still dealing
with her own agency within the frame, is still being defined by the men in her life and not by her own standards.

Despite the power given to Regan throughout the entirety of Ilya’s post-colonial interpretation (superficial as that power may be), in the final moments of the play Ilya illustrates Regan’s poisoned, lifeless body in a way that the Lear of Act 3, Scene 6 would approve of: her corpse is dragged into the frame and left to be anatomized and objectified by all those left standing. While Pollock and Hinds’ depictions of the same scene involve some layer of decency in the presentation of Goneril and Regan’s dead bodies, Lear’s lines “Then let them anatomize Regan. See what breeds about her heart” are taken to their furthest by Ilya—the dead sisters are fully put on display for all to see (III.vi.80-81/199). Emphasizing her gaping mouth and her barely covered chest and torso, we see Regan presented as nothing more than a female body, powerless and vulnerable. Even in death, she is drawn in a way that encourages the male gaze—barely covered above the waist, hands contorted in pain, and her face moist with her own blood, she is sexualized for the reader even as a corpse. Regan is, again, most visible when she has nothing left to say.

Fig 32: Regan and Goneril’s bodies are put on display (199).
The paintings, filmic representations, and graphic novel illustrations of Regan discussed thus far inform the reader as to what she wants from them, her captive audience. According to Mitchell, “Pictures are things that have been marked with all stigmata of personhood and animation: they exhibit both physical and virtual bodies; they speak to us... or they look back at us silently across a ‘gulf unbridged by language’” (30). The iconography of Regan is no different— but there is a shift somewhere in the 1900s when she moves from speaking to her audience on a stage to an almost complete invisibility within static frames, to then silently lurking in the wings of these graphic novel representations, waiting for her chance to communicate once more. Is this the fault of the medium? If we accept McLuhan’s thought that “the content of any medium is always another medium,” then we cannot blame the shifting focus of Regan on anything but society’s perception of her as a result of her cultural framing within each piece (107). Yet, moving from early paintings to filmed adaptations to the medium of the graphic novel, the iconography of Regan alters drastically between the centuries. And why is this?

Despite women’s rights movements and the resulting multiple waves of feminist thinking, I believe the livelihood and agency of women is still being undermined by the patriarchal boundaries of the society we exist within. From being put in binders to attempts toward new legislations regarding the control of our wombs, efforts to silence women are still occurring. The exact when and why this shift occurred (if it was a shift at all) is the topic for another much longer examination into sexism and the male gaze as represented in multiple forms of art and media, but I propose that the new art of graphic novels (typically
the realm of young boys and girls) is nurturing the idea of women as silent and subordinate characters to their male counterparts—even if this silencing is entirely unintentional. Such a woman as Regan should not be concealed. Yet, she has somehow moved from the attention-stealing depictions of Abbey and Brown to visually un-stimulating appearances on the silver screen and now near silence in the graphic novels of Pollock, Hinds, and Ilya.

This silence is striking and worrisome. As a character with much to offer, it is disturbing how little attention she is given by graphic novel illustrators and authors of the 20th and 21st centuries. It seems as though the only way to treat her, even by today’s standards, is to hide her strength and, more than anything, keep her silence. Although Regan is not the ultimate picture of feminine good, she still has a voice and a story to be told. Her story is not a happy one, nor is it one of love and feminine tenderness—it is a story of humanity, jealousy, and remembrance. And, for that, she deserves a voice.
Unlike many of the artistic representations of Regan, performances of the character have allowed a bit more freedom in her visual and emotional interpretation. While she is still more often than not either dressed in red or red-headed, this is not always the case.

The red coloring we’re used to seeing her bathed in is used as signifiers for her personality traits that might be more difficult to pick up on without the help of performance. Red, as mentioned before, can have many meanings—lust, passion, blood, wine, and appetite to name a few. In performance, colors are not necessary for character understanding—but they do reinforce the common representations of Regan. Even as we move into the 21st century, it is surprising how many portrayals of Regan rely on the ideas frequently expressed by that crimson coloring.

The earliest costume rendering I could locate of Regan comes from the mind of John Seymour Lucas in 1892. It is interesting to note that Lucas’s renderings bear a striking resemblance to Ford Madox Brown’s painting, *Cordelia’s Portion*, as

![Costume renderings for Goneril and Regan, respectively, by John Seymour Lucas for an 1892 production of King Lear (Lucas).](image-url)
mentioned in an earlier chapter. While there are no notations describing which sister is which in the original painting, Lucas’s reading of the sisters in the frame is influential. Drawing Goneril and Cordelia as almost identical to two of the women presented in Brown’s original, his representation of Regan looks nothing like the remaining sister. His depiction, a red-headed almost bashfully-stanced woman draped in a cloak with light-red undertones, is the polar opposite of the remaining sister in Brown’s painting. With this said, even if I interpret the identity of the sisters differently in Cordelia’s Portion, there is much to be said regarding the complete re-designing of a seemingly supporting character in the 1890s. Regan, a footnote in most play critiques of the time, was interesting enough to Lucas to merit a complete re-design while her sisters remained the same.

While it is increasingly difficult to find reviews of Regan in performance before the 1900s (all reviews of Lear I have been able to find prior to the 20th century focus on Lear, Cordelia, the Fool, and the Gloucester men, and I’m lucky if the name of the actor/actress playing Regan is mentioned at all, let alone critiqued), I posit that the advent of film has altered the way we see her on stage. Prior to the many filmed adaptations, critics would see one performance and write, often solely, about the portrayal of the titular king. The rest of the cast, especially the evil sisters Goneril and Regan, were footnotes of the performance. Film, giving us the chance to watch the same performance multiple times, has given critics the time to more fully witness each character— from Lear all the way to the First Servant who stabs Cornwall in Act Three Scene Seven— and pay more attention to their representations and necessities to the story.
With that said, most productions of the 20th and 21st centuries construct a Regan with rarely more than a single dimension. She is generally portrayed as the jealous, alcoholic, sexualized temptress but, in polar opposition to this idea, she is sometimes directed to be seen as a scared, out-of-control young woman, molded by the hands of the men in her life. While these two styles of performance are the norm, I feel that Regan, like all other characters in Shakespeare, merits more depth in her choices—the more interesting option would be for her to feel completely rational and justified in her courses of action. While these character validations are rarely utilized, I believe a performance of Regan with them in mind would lead to a whole new way of reading and understanding the truths hidden in Lear.

While the production history of King Lear in the 20th and 21st centuries is expansive (the story is timeless and easily relatable), I will look mainly at the performances of Regan presented on stage by companies best known for their interpretations of Shakespeare’s works, including, but not limited to, productions by the Royal National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC).

One of the most high-profile Regan’s in the RSC’s history was Dame Judi Dench in their 1976 production. Trevor Nunn’s second direction of King Lear for the RSC, this production presented a Regan different than ever...
before seen on their stage: a Regan with a stutter. Dench’s choice was based on her reading of Lear’s physical and emotional tyranny over his daughters—resulting in a nurtured wickedness rather than an innate evil. “She stuttered only in Lear’s presence, and he showed impatience at it,” remarks Stanley Wells (267). Although the choice lent some kind of psychological background to Regan, it showcased less strength and more timidity—almost as if she was a frightened mouse, fearing the snap of Lear’s trap. Despite Dench’s acclaim for the role, according to her biographer John Miller, “she pleaded to be let out of it when it transferred to the Aldwych. Regan remains one of the two Shakespearean characters, which, like Portia, she positively hated playing” (154). There was a lack of humanity in the character for Dench, who felt like the stutter was just a tool, pushing too hard to find some scrap of kindness within Regan.

The cast of the Royal National Theatre’s 1990-1991 travelling production was full of important and interesting names. Starring Brian Cox in the nominal role, Ian McKellen played the Earl of Kent, Susan Engel performed as Goneril (despite her filmed portrayal of Regan in Peter Brook’s 1972 film), and Clare Higgins was tasked with performing the role of Regan. According to the rehearsal diaries of Cox, he and Higgins, under the direction of Deborah Wagner, decided the relationship between their characters early on in the rehearsal process: “Regan is obviously Daddy’s...
girl; the tom-boy of the family is probably Cordelia who shows great independence; and Goneril, being the eldest, is in many ways the least loved” (30). While this adds a new level of motivation to the usually presented royal family dynamic, it complicates things for Regan as a character. “Regan, the sort of pretty girl with doe eyes, obviously flirted with her Daddy, a relationship based on teasing, conspiring together, Daddy succumbing to her wishes and having a macho appeal for her” (30). But is she truly flirting with her father? Or is she manipulated by him? According to Cox, it was Higgins’ goal to be “teasingly reciprocating” to Lear’s affection as a way to avoid all sense of confrontation (44). She craves the attention, but seems to be frightened of the intent- leaving her to be, in the grand scheme of things, manipulated. As the rehearsal process continued, Higgins “played Regan as a sort of hysterical banshee, Regan and Albany were like two avaricious ferrets and it worked very well” (54).

Frivolously sexualized, Regan is, according to Higgins’ own critique of the character, “wanting to be protected by her elder sister, and therefore pleasing and copying her, and, at the same time, wanting to be the baby and get the longed-for affection from her father” (Jennings 9). Interestingly enough, what many critics saw in her performance was somewhat different than what was originally intended. “Clare Higgins’s Regan... seemed weak, tearful, and dependent, both upon Lear, on whose knee she sat giggling in the beginning, and on her powerful and authoritative elder sister” (Ogden and Scouten 233). Reviews like this were common about the production- highlighting only the feminine
frailty and other negatively portrayed aspects of Regan— not the justification or the strength envisioned in her actions and reactions.

In stark contrast to these performances, Washington D.C’s Syntetic Theatre has carved a niche for itself by including in its annual season multiple pieces of “Silent Shakespeare.” In 2011, they decided to tackle King Lear. Under the direction of Paata Tsikurishvili, one of the co-founders of the company,

Syntetic Theater’s seventh Silent Shakespeare venture present[ed] Lear totally denuded of ornate verbal shock absorbers. We [got], unfiltered, the horrible father/child relationships, the horrible sibling relationships, the horrible politics and the horrible atrocities. Yes, we witness[ed] how Regan, the more savage of Lear’s two daughters, uses a dagger to pry out the eyes of Lear’s friend Gloucester.

(Adcock 1).

Visually stunning and heartbreakingly emotional, the production received mixed reviews— some loving this new, raw adaptation of the classic, others claiming its defilement of the truest beauty of the Bard: the words. Whether the style suited or not, the character choices made by Irina Tsikurishvili in her portrayal of Regan are worth noting. Irina, who co-founded the
company with husband/director Paata, served not only as cast member but also as choreographer for this highly physicalized interpretation.

The play, performed in a giant sandbox, highlighted the child-like turn in senility in Lear, with his daughters, Goneril and Regan, playing the parts of the conniving bullies on the playground. Colorful balloons carried by the ever-present character of Death create a feeling of playfulness that is striking in contrast with the violence presented, especially in the blinding of Gloucester (performed entirely by Regan with Cornwall as a supporting actor in the moment). Jayne Blanchard of DC Theatre Scene describes Regan’s “edgy street style” who “bristles with hip-thrusting attitude and a ruthless competitive nature” (1). She puts on a front of folly, but she is completely aware of her choices and actions. Her clownish smile hides her seething anger and twisted manipulation of her family. Regan, a usually insular and supporting character, has been brought to the forefront by the characterization and intensely stunning choreography of Tsikurishvili. While a completely evil Regan is neither a step forward nor a complete step back, Tsikurishvili portrays a much stronger and more

![Fig. 37: Tsikurishvili, as Regan, calculatedly gouges out the eye of Gloucester (Hector Reynoso) while the Duke of Cornwall (Ryan Tumulty) hisses in morbidly sexualized excitement](http://www.synetictheater.org/event_pages/king-lear-2011/).
self-assured Regan than we’ve seen before. No hints of remorse, she is a monster with a smile that makes it difficult to hate her, despite the blood on her hands.

*King Lear* is also currently being performed on the Royal National Theatre’s stage in London. The production, directed by Sam Mendes and starring Simon Russell Beale in the lead, is scheduled to run until May 28th of 2014. Regan, played by Anna Maxwell Martin, is portrayed as “feline and provocative;” she is the “more artful sister” of the trio, according to theatre critic Henry Hitchings of the London Evening Standard (1). Like many portrayals of Regan, Martin has chosen to play up the erotic nature of the middle daughter- especially as a manipulative tool wielded against the men that surround her at all times.

Kate Fleetwood is a vampish, calculating Goneril while Anna Maxwell Martin is shriller and coquettish as Regan. Her nervous giggle as she joins in the blinding of Gloucester (Stephen Boxer), high on the adrenaline of what she has done, is beautifully observed. Set in the duke’s own wine cellar, this scene of corkscrew barbarity could come straight from a Tarantino film. (Edge)
While there is strength in Martin’s portrayal of the character, the sadistic stereotype of Regan is perpetuated here once more. Oddly enough, Michael Billington of *The Guardian* uses a photo of Maxwell and Beale for the frontispiece of his article, but he only speaks of Maxwell’s performance once, and it is in comparison to her stage sister: “Kate Fleetwood’s quietly venomous Goneril is also perfectly contrasted with Anna Maxwell Martin’s extrovert and hysterically cruel Regan” (1). Despite some of her most disturbing moments on stage (the sexual excitement in the blinding of Gloucester, the erotic and exhibitionistic toying with Kent in her courtyard in the middle of the night), it almost seems as if the critics are beginning to grow tired of the sadistic sex kitten portrayal of Regan.

Although Regan’s stage time has been given a bit more focus in the past two hundred years, her portrayal has not shifted far from her original stereotypes. While more actresses are beginning to attempt to create a more diverse backstory with psychoanalytic and feminist theories to support their choices, the character presented on stage, whether intentional or not, is inclined to fall into one of the two categories of lusty lush or manipulated mouse. Despite Shakespeare’s nature to create well-rounded and thought-provoking characters, Regan is continually presented with barely more than a single dimension. Some revisions of the ancient legend, *Lear’s Daughters* by Elaine Feinstein and The Women’s Theatre Group (WTG) and *Lear* by Young Jean Lee to name a very
select few, allow Regan more agency and character development in the telling of her own story. But these interpretations are few and far between. For me, the story of *King Lear* is, at its core, about the concept of nature versus nurture. Like Lesley Kordecki and Karla Koskinen in their book *Re-Visioning Lear’s Daughters*, I feel that the behaviors of all three of Lear’s daughters are a result of their abnormal upbringing and, more specifically, to Lear’s erratic, eccentric, and unbridled actions in the very first scene of the play (2).

Unfortunately, many resist a reading that provides a full assessment of the daughters by identifying with Lear’s pervasive misogyny, perhaps in part because our world still allows for and incorporates into it both vicious attacks on or subtle debasements of women. The play does not “show” us these women as monsters; it demonstrates how the world forces women into roles that others perceive as monstrous. (Kordecki and Koskinen, 19)

Despite the many ways to read the sisters, and Regan especially, they are, time and time again, placed neatly into their binaries with no chance to break out.
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS

If Regan is remembered at all in art and scholarship, it is rarely in a less than damning light. While this is, by no means, an exhaustive survey of the entirety of King Lear knowledge, Regan’s actions, according to most current scholarship, are not portrayed as justified (even to herself) and she is often presented as nothing more than a wicked counterpart to Goneril or Cornwall. She has been firmly branded as “evil” by almost all scholars prior to the 21st century- and very rarely has anyone tried to stand up against that flawed labelling. So why is this?

When the original Celtic myth of King Leir was first established, a strong, masculine, powerful woman was seen as a threat to the patriarchal system in place at the time. Goneril was, therefore, seen as a danger to Leir’s throne. Regan, not to be completely left out of the equation, still only requests to be judged similarly to her sister: “I am made of that self mettle as my sister/ and prize me at her worth” (1.i.76-77). While she may begin with the connection to her sister, Regan (as seen in her first lines) soon realizes she is not be outdone by her sister either: “In my true heart/ I find she names my very deed of love; only she comes too short...” (1.i.77-79). Often consigned to the shadows of the stage and of art, Regan is not content with playing second fiddle. She is her own woman, perhaps even stronger than her sister, who is very aware of the limitations placed upon her.
Despite her strength, she is very rarely seen or mentioned in art and scholarship surrounding this popular tragedy. Is she kept hidden for the safety of the other characters in the frame? Are artists and scholars afraid that if she is justified in her actions we may have to rethink the way we judge the play in its entirety? Is Regan too far ahead of her time considering how strong women are still marginalized even in the 21st century? Or is it for her own good? The lens we look through, be it that of an artist, a theatre historian, Shakespeare, or the character of Regan herself, distorts the way we can interpret this lack of visibility. In a play so driven by sight and a lack thereof, Regan has helped to take the sense of sight from another character—her reward being that she is taken from the sight of the world in many cases.

There are two sides to every story, and only one side of Regan’s has been fully exposed thus far in scholarship—and it’s told from the perspective of a mad man. As time has moved forward, Regan has been brought in and out of focus. She has been silenced and she has been vilified. When given the agency she deserves, she has been conscripted to the depths of alcoholism and sadism. Very few scholars have attempted at this point to defend her actions in a way that could absolve her of some of the guilt that has been placed on her for centuries.

With each century of King Lear’s existence, the ideas of how to present Regan and her sisters has shifted according to the time and location of the performance. Sometimes front and center, more recently left in visual obscurity, Regan is one of Shakespeare’s most interesting and difficult female characters to portray. The visual culture and representations
of Regan have certainly shifted over the centuries, and I believe that, in this still very patriarchal society we live in, it is about time she was made visible once more.
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