Interpersonal Complications and Intertextual Relations: *A Thousand Acres* and *King Lear*

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The last decades of the 20th century saw plenty of postmodern self-reflective rewritings of canonical works. Writers have always derived inspiration from previous narratives; but in his study *Rewriting: Postmodern Narrative and Cultural Critique in the Age of Cloning* (2001), Christian Moraru argues that contemporary rewritings express a more potent need to revise, undermine, and radically criticize the representation of foundational stories of western culture. Moraru distinguishes between two rewriting practices: rewriting as support, i.e. 'underwriting' and rewriting as disruption, i.e. 'counterwriting':

> According to [the neoclassical philosophy] *rewriting is underwriting*, support and reduplication of the already-written. [By contrast, the postmodern rewriting practices] set up a *counterwriting* distance, a "rupture" between themselves and what they redo – the literary past – as well as between themselves and various hegemonic forces active at the moment and in the milieu of "redoing". (Moraru 2001: 9)

Women writers' 'counterwriting' of Shakespeare has increased considerably in recent years. Allowing scope for investigations into race and ethnicity, *The Tempest* has been a particular target for post-colonial rewritings, whereas *King Lear* has come in for a good deal of attention from feminist writers.

Jane Smiley's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *A Thousand Acres* (1991), is an open response to *King Lear.* According to the writer herself, '[t]he obvious internal system of *A Thousand Acres* is *King Lear*' (Smiley 2001: 160). In David Cowart's terminology, *King Lear* figures as a 'host-text' for *A Thousand Acres,* providing the 'guest-text' with plot, characters, and form (Cowart 1993: 4). Cowart describes such an intertextual relation as symbiotic. By attaching itself to *King Lear, A Thousand Acres* contributes

to the survival of *King Lear. King Lear*, on its part, figures as 'host' for *A Thousand Acres*, providing the 'guest' with plot, characters, and structure.

The *King Lear*-plot is, however, transposed to the American Midwest in the late 1970s, and the narrative 'perspective' is changed to a woman's. The appropriation and re-positioning of plot, characters, and themes into a 20th century setting incorporates a (counterwriting) distance between past and present which invites a critique of both. Smiley thus engages in what Cowart calls 'an epistemic dialogue with the past', one which 'forces readers into a recognition of the historical or diachronic difference between the voice of one literary age and that of another' (Cowart 1993: 1).

Importantly, Smiley's critique is aimed against the conventional reading of *King Lear:* 'I had an intention in *A Thousand Acres* that grew out of something less rational, a response to the play. I wanted to communicate the ways in which I found the conventional reading of *King Lear* frustrating and wrong' (Smiley 1999: 160). Up until recently, the predominant critical reading of Goneril and Regan could be summarized in Harold Bloom's acceptance of the two as 'unnatural hags' and 'monsters of the deep' (Bloom 1994: 64). It is true that previous critical attempts have been made to challenge these images, notably by Stephen Reid in 1970,[1] but it is only in recent years that a change seems to have occurred, possibly in the wake of *A Thousand Acres.*[2]

Jane Smiley approaches *King Lear* from a feminist perspective creating a space from which Ginny/Goneril speaks, counteracting the patriarchal images of Shakespeare's women and granting silenced female character a voice. In contexts concerning opposition or resistance to male normativity, voice has come to denote 'power of expression' (Gilligan

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[1] See Stephen Reid. 'In Defence of Goneril and Regan'. *The American Imago* 27, no. 3 (1970): 226-244.

[2] See, for example, Cristina León Alfar. 'King Lear's "Immoral" Daughters and the Politics of Kingship'. *Exemplaria* 8, no. 2 (1996): 375-400. In this article she rejects the notion of Goneril and Regan as innately evil arguing that their actions are 'symptomatic of the patrilineal structure of power relations in which they live and to which they must accommodate themselves', 375. See also Cristina León Alfar. 'Looking for Goneril and Regan' in *Privacy, Domesticity, and Women in Early Modern England* ed. Corinne S. Abate. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003, and Cristina León Alfar. *Fantasies of Female Evil The Dynamics of Gender and Power in Shakespearean Tragedy.* Newark and London: University of Delaware Press, 2003. In *Making Trifles of Terrors: Redistributing Complicities in Shakespeare.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997, Harry Berger Jr. suggests that Lear might be seen as provoking Goneril's behaviour.

1993: xvi). For Nancy A. Walker, *A Thousand Acres* counts as a 'disobedient' narrative in that it 'expose[s] and question[s] patriarchal patterns that Shakespeare and his contemporaries took for granted' by giving 'narrative authority to the female characters' (Walker 1995: 7-8). But, as I will try to illustrate below, female voice or 'narrative authority' cannot alone effect changes to narrow images of Goneril and Regan.

This essay attempts to show how these images can be altered by the positioning of Ginny and Rose in a complicated pattern of interpersonal relations, one which is disturbed by the disruptions that come with the transfer of power and property from one generation to another. Intrigued by this pattern in *King Lear*, *A Thousand Acres* thus examines how this disturbance affects social and interpersonal relationships.

The interaction between the two texts renders possible an oscillation between different worlds, between past and present, between different conditions of and possible means of existence, which has important consequences for the reader's understanding of both texts. Importantly, the meeting of and the oscillation between the two texts rule out any simple 'takeover' on the part of the contemporary novel. For a different picture of Goneril to emerge, *A Thousand Acres* would require the continuous presence of *King Lear* and is therefore not an attempt to preferential truth. One text is not relinquished at the expense of the other, quite the reverse; the reader is able to contain two texts within his/her vision or mental picture.

King Lear is a play that deals with patriarchal rule and the relationship between father and daughters, and these factors are often considered to be the main reasons why this play holds special fascination for women authors (Sanders 2001: 5). Even so, *King Lear* harbours something that attracts and intrigues many female writers apart from the father-daughter relation. More than any other Shakespeare play, it offers a broad range of interpersonal relationships between parent and child but also between king and subject, between husband and wife, and between siblings of both sexes. The distribution and wielding of power generates tragic consequences for the family; it leads to clashes between generations, discord between fathers and daughters and fathers and sons, rivalry between siblings friction between husband and wife, and enmity between king and subject. Presumed values of loyalty, obedience, and duty are upset, questioned, and brought under careful scrutiny, not only in the kingdom but in the family as well. *King Lear* is a play about 'power, property and inheritance', as Jonathan Dollimore points out (Dollimore

2004: 197) – or, perhaps even more, a play about the *dislocation* of power, property, and inheritance, and the ensuing effects and disturbances.

Set in Iowa in the Midwest in the late 1970s, *A Thousand Acres* tells the story of a father, Larry (Lear), and the effects of his sharing his farm with his three daughters, Ginny (Goneril), Rose (Regan), and Caroline (Cordelia), and their respective husbands, Ty (Albany), Pete (Cornwall), and Frank (France), as seen through the eyes of Ginny (Goneril). The youngest daughter, Caroline, hesitates as to the advantages of transferring the farm, which results in her father's excluding her from the project. The transfer of property and Caroline's reluctance to accept Larry's decision trigger and fuel enmity between daughters and fathers, between spouses, as well as between siblings; but they also have an effect on the Gloucester-subplot that finds its way into *A Thousand Acres* through Harold Clark and his two sons, Jess (Edmund) and Loren (Edgar), who live on a neighbouring farm. The dispute over the Cook farm awakens repressed memories, and the unremitting phrase 'there's more to that than meets the eye' acquires poignancy as we find out that Ginny and Rose were incestuously assaulted by their father (Smiley 1991: 134).

A Thousand Acres alerts the reader to how the transfer of property and power penetrates and encroaches upon the firmest family relationships and the most solid loyalties. The transfer of property upsets marriages, as well as exposing the tacit and already existing rivalry between siblings. The growth of sibling rivalry and the complex relation between spouses in *A Thousand Acres* heighten the reader's awareness of Goneril's position in a complicated structure of relations, one in which she is not only a daughter, but also a sister, and a wife. Accordingly, this essay will begin by taking a closer look at the reader's role as a significant factor in the dynamics between the texts.

When James Schiff points out that Goneril's and Regan's voices are heard and that the rewriting provides 'a motivation for and an understanding of the two older daughters' (Schiff: 1998: 370), he fails, like so many other critics apart notably from Marina Leslie[3], to raise questions about the reader's part in the understanding of the two elder daughters. Peter Conrad points out that Jane Smiley takes Goneril's and Regan's 'side' by making Ginny 'her narrator' (Conrad 1995: 133). More

[3] See Marina Leslie. 'Incest, Incorporation and *King Lear* in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*'. *College English* 60, no. 1 (1998): 31-50.

importantly, does Smiley's position also result in the reader's sympathetic response to Goneril?

Sympathy for Goneril (and Regan) is difficult to establish without presuming that the reader of *A Thousand Acres* revisits *King Lear* in some way, however brief, after finishing Smiley's novel. As long as the he/she stays within the fictional world of *A Thousand Acres*, the reader, as James A. Schiff points out, 'understand[s] why Ginny/Goneril has just cause for speaking of her father in such a manner, and we are likely to cheer her on' (Schiff 1998: 375). It is the movement from *A Thousand Acres* to *King Lear* that is instrumental in the production of sympathy for Goneril. Reformulating *King Lear*, so as to give what Walker terms 'narrative authority' to the female characters, calls for some further clarification (Walker 1995: 7).

The change from a traditionally masculine perspective to a feminine one in *A Thousand Acres* makes it possible for women to acquire more prominent positions. The reader receives Goneril's version; her inner life and feelings are put on display as Smiley provides her with a voice and a history. This alteration cannot suddenly make Goneril 'more sinned against than sinning' or Lear a 'monster of the deep'. Granting narrative authority to the female characters does not mean that we suddenly just side with Goneril and Regan, or that Goneril becomes the epitome of goodness. Smiley makes it quite difficult for the reader to identify Ginny as the counterpart to Goneril as they are very different characters: one is the daughter of a king, married to a duke, about to inherit a third of the kingdom, and as such in a very powerful position; the other is a farmer's daughter.

Smiley also renders it difficult for the reader to sympathize with Ginny for several reasons. *A Thousand Acres* is written from a first-person perspective, which makes the speaking voice much more subject to critique and suspicion than a third-person mode of narration would be. It is true that as a first-person narrator, Ginny inhabits a very powerful position; the story and the other characters are filtered through her perspective. At the same time, however, the first-person voice only claims 'the validity of one person's right to interpret her experiences', as Susan Sniader Lanser points out (Lanser 1992: 19). A first-person narrator runs a greater risk of being questioned about his/her intentions. It might be difficult to establish authority, as the novel actually avoids the masculine position of authority which is, as Lanser points out, traditionally associated with an omniscient narrator (Lanser 1992: 19).

In addition, in contrast to Marina Leslie's opinion, we do not receive a very 'likeable' or agreeable picture of Ginny throughout (Leslie 1998: 35). Her adulterous affair with Jess and the meticulous preparations to poison Rose come across as rather disturbing. Neither of these two events happens in the spur of the moment: 'I believed that I was going to sleep with Jess Clark with as full a certainty' (Smiley 1991: 155). Moreover, without considerations for her sisters' children – they would not only be fatherless but also motherless – and with particular crude exactitude, Ginny executes her plan: 'The perfection of my plan was the way Rose's own appetite would select her death' (Smiley 1991: 339). These are factors that probably make it harder for the reader to develop a benevolent attitude to her. Furthermore, her self-contempt - reminiscent of Goneril's words about her 'hateful life' - and her general contempt for her present life contribute to making the picture of Ginny at least in part unfavourable.

I would submit that if the reader develops a more benign attitude to Goneril after reading *A Thousand Acres*, this is because we witness Ginny in dynamic interaction with other characters. We are allowed to see Ginny in contexts involving other characters, perceive her in different situations, and envisage her in a variety of roles - not only as a daughter, but also as a sister, and a wife. We witness what occurs when different roles converge and clash, as happens, for instance to Cordelia in *King Lear*, in act one scene one in which her role as a daughter is set off against her new role as a future wife. Shakespeare creates sympathy for Lear by placing him in a context made up of other characters in order for us to form another perspective of him, untainted by his treatment of Cordelia and Kent, within the framework of the play. As returning readers of *King Lear*, we import our heightened awareness of interpersonal relationships into Shakespeare's context.

Returning to *King Lear*, then, is not so much a matter of taking Goneril's side; rather, it is a matter of understanding how the relocation of power in the form of a property transfer disturbs relations between people, creates suspicion between siblings and misunderstandings in marriages, and uncovers the flaws within families. On returning to *King Lear*, the reader will thus locate Goneril in a larger structure of interpersonal and social relations, having been invited to understand how characters might behave when they are unloved and unseen by their fathers, or disappointed, misunderstood, and let down by their siblings and husbands. Many critics, feminists included, have postulated that Goneril and Regan are uncomplicated with no depth to their character; but

relations between people are nearly always complex in Shakespeare. V.G. Kiernan has rightly pointed out that: '[Shakespeare] was concerned with men in combination, interacting, entering into one another's lives, becoming part of one another' (Kiernan 1964: 48). To understand Goneril and to sympathize with her, we have to place her in a framework of interpersonal and social relations, and a previous reading of *A Thousand Acres* helps us do that. Returning to *King Lear*, does not mean that we perceive Lear as evil and Goneril as good. It is precisely the movement between the texts that reduces the reader's need or desire to perceive acts and behaviour as morally reprehensible.

The transfer of power and property is central in both *King Lear* and *A Thousand Acres.* As any reader of *King Lear* knows, the division of the kingdom will come to dominate the original purpose of the ceremony: to select a future husband for Cordelia. In *A Thousand Acres,* the transfer of the farm comes to overshadow the welcome-home party for Harold Clark's son Jess. Without previous notice and without any intention, it seems, of diminishing his power, Larry announces his plan to form a corporation between his three daughters and their respective husbands. Both taken by surprise, Ginny and Rose express their admission. Ginny thinks '[i]t's a good idea', whereas Rose thinks 'It's a great idea' (Smiley 1991:19). Similarly to Cordelia, Caroline refuses to play the role of the complying daughter. In full career as a lawyer, Larry's youngest daughter has established a life for herself and her fiancé outside the perimeters of the farm. Her answer 'I don't know' when confronted with Larry's plan does not have the same turbulent effect on Larry as the equally enigmatic 'Nothing' has on Lear, however. Larry's response is terser but none the less powerful. With the assertion, 'you don't want it my girl, you're out', Larry leaves the party (Smiley 1991: 21). The transfer of the kingdom/farm in *King Lear* and *A Thousand Acres* triggers a struggle between the generations and stages the inherent differences between them.

A Thousand Acres' reiteration of the division of the kingdom focuses on the tension between people and on how the characters react to the transfer. It turns the reader's attention to what happens in-between the silences, in-between characters. In *King Lear* it is very obvious which of his daughters Lear prefers. Cordelia is her father's joy and the one who will be granted 'a third more opulent than [her] sisters' if she speaks her love for her father (1.1.86). In *A Thousand Acres,* only Larry's gaze indicates whom he favours: 'He glanced at me, then at Caroline, and looking at her all the while, he said: "We're going to form this corporation"' (Smiley 1991: 18-19).

The transfer-scene demonstrates the different loyalties of the characters and their reactions to the transfer via the way they gaze at one another. Caroline, for example, 'swept the darkening horizon with her gaze' (Smiley 1991: 21). Not only does she not approve of the transfer; being away from the farm for a long period of time has led to a different conception of family loyalty. She does not harbour a divided duty between herself and her father. There is thus no dynamic tension between her and the other characters. Ginny desperately tries to make contact with her by fixing her eyes at Caroline: 'In the sudden light of the porch, there was no way to signal her to shut up, just shut up' (Smiley 1991: 21).

When Larry announces his decision to transfer his farm, Harold is spotted by Ginny at a distance standing in the 'dark doorway, grinning' (Smiley 1991:19). Harold seems to think that the transfer of Larry's property is a bad idea for Larry, but a good idea for himself. Harold and Larry are old rivals for land and property to increase their wealth and power: 'Harold Clark and my father used to argue at our kitchen table about who should get the Ericson land when they finally lost their mortgage' (Smiley 1991: 4). The transfer-scene thus also demonstrates how the tension between the small world and the large world is generated. Larry asserts that the reason for the transfer is age and a wish to prevent high inheritance taxes: 'if I died tomorrow, you'd have to pay [...] inheritance taxes' (Smiley 1991: 19).

Larry's real reason, however, seems to be his desire to top Harold Clark. The competitive configurations of the outside world are seen to enter the private sphere of the family as Harold and Larry vie for the same space. The competition between the two thus reaches its peak at the party when Harold demonstrates his 'twin exhibits' (Smiley 1991: 18), as Ginny calls them, namely his son Jess and the new tractor: Daddy said, "Hell, I'm too old for this. You wouldn't catch me buying a new tractor at my age. [---] People always act like they're going to live forever when the price of land is up" – here he threw a glance at Harold' (Smiley 1991: 19). Larry's gaze or 'glance', this time at Harold, reveals his concerns. A quick look at Harold indicates that the ball is now in Harold's court, just as his momentary look at Caroline suggests that he needs her approval of the transfer. Motives are never unambiguous in either *A Thousand Acres* or *King Lear*. Nevertheless, Harold's investment encroaches upon Larry's mind and compels him to make the rash decision to surpass Harold by transferring his property to his three daughters, leading to tragic consequences for his family, as his conflict

with Harold is made to impinge on the domestic sphere, leading to marital breaches and sibling rivalry.

In *A Thousand Acres*, Larry Cook, the 'king' of his 'unmortgaged' thousand acres of well-cultivated land, is the epitome of power in the farming community. Larry is not just any farmer; he is also a public figure. As one of the most prosperous farmers, he is one of the most revered men in the community. After all, he is, as Ginny remarks, 'one of the biggest landowners' in Zebulon County (Smiley 1991: 141).

As king, Lear is also a public figure. In addition, as king, he is also the biggest landowner in the country. In Jacobean England, the political theory of kingship was defined 'as the possession of the kingdom and of the subjects who inhabit it' (Brayton 2003: 402). Lear's status as king is contingent on the land, 'the champaigns riched' and the 'wide-skirted meads' as his property, as well as on the obedience of those who inhabit this land, including his family (1.1.64-65). Despite his desperate attempts to retain 'the name' and 'all th'addition to a king'; losing possession of the kingdom means losing his identity as king (1.1.137). The experience of powerlessness - the loss of control over his subjects and his daughters - that comes with the loss of property is thus destructive to the family as well. Lear's role as a father is affected and directed by his kingship and the anxieties that come with this public role, or, perhaps even more, the anxieties that develop from the lack of this role. It is Lear's political decision to divide the kingdom that impinges upon the domestic sphere and leads to marital breaches between Goneril and Albany and the deadly antagonism between Goneril and Regan. It is in such a context that Goneril has to be regarded.

In *King Lear*, Goneril's mellifluous speech guides the reader's/audience's response to her, as well as Lear's. There is no doubt that she embraces Lear's decision. Critics of *King Lear* often perceive her attitude to the division and her flattering speech as signs of her hunger for power. In contrast, the reader of *A Thousand Acres* realizes that Ginny's attitude to the transfer is an ambivalent one: 'In spite of that inner clang, I tried to sound agreeable' (Smiley 1991: 19). Despite the inner caution, Ginny seems to support her father's proposal unconditionally. Cognizant of her inner thoughts, however, the reader understands that other factors are behind Ginny's affirmative reply to Larry's decision.

Larry has been assigned an almost God-like presence. In Ginny's childhood, her father is the provider of a centre, the protector against all

evil outside. Reflections of his God-like status in Ginny's eyes permeate her memories of Larry:

> When I went to first grade and the other children said that their fathers were farmers, I simply didn't believe them. I agreed in order to be polite, but in my heart I knew that those men were imposters, as farmers and as fathers, too. In my youthful estimation, Laurence Cook defined both categories. To really believe that others even existed in either category was to break the First Commandment. (Smiley 1991: 19)

The allusion to the First Commandment indicates Larry's standing, in the eyes of Ginny, as a divine authority. This image of the father keeps the daughters subdued, which in its turn invests him with additional privilege in the community. Awe of him is instilled in the daughters by his preservation as mysterious, omniscient, and majestic almost to the point of transcendence. Larry is used to being confirmed and revered by his daughters as well as by the other farmers, even by the minister in the Church: 'our minister, gave his yearly sermon about all worldly riches having their source in the tilling of the soil, which was guaranteed to appeal both to farmers' self-regard and to their sense of injury at the hands of the rest of society' (Smiley 1991: 35). Through Ginny's descriptions, the reader is made to understand that Larry's status in the community and in the family has always been marked by authority and power. Without influence and power over other people's minds and behaviour, Larry loses control.

During the transfer-scene, it becomes clear that Ginny does not act out of selfish reasons but out of dread for her father, a sense of daughterly duty, as well as according to different demands of loyalty. Ginny supports Larry's decision not only because she feels compelled to back up her father, but also because Ty, her husband, wants her to. She thinks Ty deserves to 'realize some of his wishes' (Smiley 1991: 25). Indeed, with him gazing at her, Ginny realizes what she has to do: 'Ty was looking at me, and I could see in his gaze a veiled tightly contained delight – he had been wanting to increase the hog operation for years' (Smiley 1991: 19). The gaze, associated with power, runs through *A Thousand Acres.* The reader is thus invited to attend to the way people look at each other and understand and read the silences, for example Albany's in *King Lear*, and as returning readers of *King Lear* we have become alerted to the fact that there could be more than one reason for Goneril's willingness to take over a third of the kingdom. *A Thousand Acres* helps us realize that Goneril is

acting in relation to other people besides her father; she is not only a daughter but also a wife.

The ways in which money, the transfer of property, and the uneven distribution of power can affect interpersonal relationships is illustrated symbolically in *A Thousand Acres* through the monopoly-game that Ginny, Ty, Rose, Pete, and Jess gather around in the evenings. The monopoly game – emblematic of capitalism and greed – foments not only rivalry between siblings and between spouses, but also between Pete (Cornwall) and Jess (Edmund). Pete and Jess are absolute opponents in the game, and the atmosphere it creates presses in upon their private relationship, prompting and stimulating rivalry between the two. Trying to surpass each other in the company of the others, they relate their respective adventurous experiences, one tale worse than the other. This is thus illustrative of the tension between the large world and the small one when power, property, and inheritance enter the domestic world. Playing monopoly, they all compete for the same thing: more property, more money, and more power.

The game also demonstrates symbolically what could happen between married couples when money and property eat into their relationship. When Rose wants Ginny to sell property to her, her husband Pete exclaims: 'Don't sell them to her' with 'the edge in his voice', as Ginny notices, 'not quite playful' (Smiley 1991: 88). Still, Rose and Pete are more supportive of each other than Ginny and Ty. Pete's and Rose's feelings about the farm and their attitude towards Larry's quirks are much the same. In response to Larry's spendthrift ways and irrational behaviour, Jess backs up his wife: 'Pete was angry too, and he encouraged [Rose] to dwell on it [...] Rose said, "A Thousand dollars! Right out the window"' (Smiley 1991: 87).

Ginny's and Ty's differing reactions to the transfer and towards Larry's increasing madness separate them from each other and alienate them. The property-transfer enters into the most steadfast relationships and the strongest loyalties, the loyalties that should exist between husband and wife. After the transfer, the relationship between Ginny and Ty enters a new phase, as their marriage has been transformed to incorporate a new sense of partnership. Through their share of the farm - which means a sharing of wealth and land - both of them acquire more power, and they have different ways of using that power. Ty's interest is only in fulfilling his dreams about the farm: to increase the hog-operation. As daughters, however, Ginny and Rose have never been included in the 'grand history'

of the farm (Smiley 1991: 371) The transfer thus entails a change of position and perspective from outsider to insider, from being an observer of history (men's history) to being part of that history (however critically). By Ginny's entrance into this previously closed space – a space formerly controlled by Larry - power relations inevitably change. Being brought up in a system that connects material wealth with power and authority, Ginny uses her new position to challenge Ty but also to question Larry's increasing unpredictable behaviour. After a car accident, when Larry is the most ashamed of himself, she avails herself of the opportunity to assume a position of power:

> It was exhilarating, talking to my father as if he were my child, more than exhilarating to see him as my child. This laying down the law was a marvellous way of talking. It created a whole orderly future within me, a vita of manageable days clicking past, myself in the foreground, large and purposeful. (Smiley 1991: 159)

Schiff points out that this scene 'marks a breakthrough' for Ginny and that she comes to resemble Goneril at this stage (Schiff 1998: 375). More importantly, we are made to understand the mechanism behind, and the allurement of, power. Ginny is a woman whose power over her life and even over her own body is severely impaired, by her father's sexual abuse, by Ty's reluctance to let her become pregnant, and by the farmers' poisoning of the well-water, which obstructs her reproductive capacities. It is the sudden change from a position of powerlessness to one of comparative power, and the effects this has on a person, that are important to bring to our reading of Goneril. *A Thousand Acres* does not ask whether certain actions or behaviour are morally reprehensible or not. The novel offers a context for understanding why and how a person can become blinded by power.

The bed and bed-chamber represent conjugal duties and loyalties, but it is precisely here that the 'small' battle between Ginny and Ty is played out. The home or the bed-room is no longer a retreat from the outer world or from external and public conflicts. As larger questions - about farm management, but also about how to handle Larry's peculiarities and growing madness – invade the domestic sphere, the tension between Ginny and Ty is seen to grow. The disagreement over how to handle Larry is significant: 'At bedtime, Ty said, "You women don't understand your father at all" [---] I said, "Then we have something in common with him, because he clearly doesn't understand himself". "He understands himself fine. He's just secretive, is all" "And what are his secrets?"' (Smiley

1991: 110, 111). Ginny has never openly disagreed with Ty before, but the changed situation creates new opportunities, and it becomes clear that the transfer of the farm puts loyalties and duties between husband and wife to the test.

The different goals and experiences of Ginny and Ty, and the misunderstandings between them, is something that the reader of *A Thousand Acres* brings to the marriage relation between Goneril and Albany in *King Lear*. Having been alerted to the ways in which breaches in a marital relation may arise, such a reader senses how fragile two spouses' relationship is when exposed to external influence and conflicts. In *King Lear*, Lear's love test becomes a test of loyalty and duty not only between father and daughters, but also, in extension, between husband and wife. The tension between Goneril and Albany is seen to be set in motion when Goneril has had enough of Lear's disorderly knights. When politics enter the domestic sphere, a rift opens between husband and wife. Private issues entering the public sphere cause a breakdown of the kingdom, as we see in act one scene one; public issues invading the domestic sphere seem to end in marital fissures. Goneril's reaction to Lear's rowdy entourage is not supported by Albany, who advocates patience. When Lear curses Goneril as his daughter, she begs Albany not to:

> afflict yourself to know more of it,
> But let his disposition have that scope
> As dotage gives it. (1.4.283-285)[4]

When Goneril asks Albany for support on a political level by turning to his authority in connection with Lear's threat to 'resume the shape' as king, Albany reveals his ambivalence to Goneril before she actually acts against Lear. It is clear that Goneril does not have her husband's support:

> I cannot be so partial, Goneril,
> To the great love I bear you. (1.4.304-305)

Does Albany let Goneril down by not proving his loyalty to her? As her husband, he owes her certain duties. Goneril's '[a] fool usurps my bed'

[4] The edition used is *The Arden Shakespeare*, edited by R.A. Foakes. Surrey: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1997.

(4.2.28) takes on more than sexual connotations, reminding us of other conjugal duties - but Albany refuses to choose between Lear and Goneril. Albany's loyalties are not, pace Paul W. Khan, 'divided between daughter and father' (Khan 2000: 42), but between wife and king.

Ty proves his disloyalty to his wife on several occasions. During the storm-scene in which Larry rages and curses Ginny, Ty stands literally 'behind [Larry]' 'unmoving, hands in pockets' (Smiley 1991: 194, 195). Ty's solidarity with Larry prevents him from coming to Ginny's aid at the height of the family crisis. Ty takes Ginny's new and more challenging approach to Larry as an attack on himself, as it also undermines his own status and power: 'Ginny, you and Rose are going about this all wrong' (Smiley 1991: 153). It is in Ty's interest to look up to and retain the reverence for authorities like Larry, to preserve *status quo* in order to preserve his own status and power in the eyes of the community.

Are Albany's motives for supporting Lear and being disloyal to his wife solely emotional or are they perhaps political? It seems contradictory to argue for the former since such bonds do not seem to exist between the two in *King Lear*. Is it possible for Albany to stand outside the social processes of society? *A Thousand Acres* hints at the impossibility of not being implicated in society's competitive configurations, and points to what happens when the family is compelled to operate in a new context and according to different notions of loyalty.

The relationship between Goneril and Regan is another dimension in the Shakespearean play that acquires fresh poignancy when the reader returns to *King Lear* after reading *A Thousand Acres*. In *A Thousand Acres*, it is not only Ginny's role as a wife that is foregrounded but perhaps even more her role as a sister. Psychoanalysts view sibling rivalry as beginning in infancy and becoming an integral part of siblings' interrelations as they grow up. Smiley alerts the reader to how sibling rivalry between the daughters is created from a very early age, how it is nourished and fuelled, and preserved through an inherent system of favouritism. The father in *A Thousand Acres* creates and then consolidates the differences between the daughters already in their childhood. The youngest daughter, Caroline, is singled out as Larry's favourite and this is a sore subject for Ginny. Her answer to Jess' question as to who is Larry's favourite child is revealing: '"It's always been Caroline, I'm sure"'. The penetrating question causes Ginny to wince and shy away from the subject: 'I smiled the way you do when you want someone to stop probing a subject, but you don't want him to know that. I spoke idly: "Who's Harold's favourite?"' (Smiley 1991: 134). Early

experiences of favouritism help establishing Caroline as different from Ginny and Rose. The father's favouring of the youngest daughter has given rise to (seemingly) relentless solidarity and loyalty between Ginny and Rose. Rose has been an integral part of Ginny's life for as long as she can remember: 'no day of my remembered life was without Rose' (Smiley 1991: 5). Ginny thus establishes herself and Rose in an economy of sameness and Caroline as different from them. Smiley lets the reader notice Rose's and Ginny's special relationship quite early, as one which is in marked contrast to all other relations: 'Compared to our sisterhood, every other relationship was marked by some sort of absence – before Caroline, after our mother, before our husbands, pregnancies, her children, before and after and apart from friends and neighbours' (Smiley 1991: 8).

In *A Thousand Acres*, Caroline has had more freedom than Ginny and Rose ever had. As substitute mothers for Caroline, Rose and Ginny support Caroline in her every endeavour and guarantee that she receives a good education. They pave the way for her successful and independent life. Rose points out that Caroline 'doesn't have to be careful. She's got an income. Being his daughter is all pretty abstract for her, and I'm sure she wants to keep it that way. [---] She always does what she has to do' (Smiley 1991: 63). According to Marina Leslie, the incest is 'offering a context for [Larry's] very different treatment of the elder daughters and the favourite youngest child' (Leslie 1998: 36). Caroline, presumably saved from Larry's sexual abuse thanks to Ginny's and Rose's protection, does not remind Larry of his crimes. Favouritism, on a microcosmic level, develops between the siblings; as a result, Ginny and Rose have to vie for attention and love in a way Caroline never had to do, and this forces the two elder sisters into a system of competition.

The incest finds no literal correspondence in *King Lear*.[5] *A Thousand Acres*, however, adds dimensions to the destructive consequences of favouritism for the family in *King Lear*. Favouritism is seen to be the very foundation for many familial relationships in *A Thousand Acres*. Larry has always preferred Ty to Pete who is 'never on the right side of Daddy' (Smiley 1991: 32). In *King Lear*, Albany has always been 'more affected' than the duke of Cornwall (1.1.1). Moreover, Loren, who stands out as a 'nice guy', meets the news of his brother Jess' home-coming with a touch of bitterness, evoking biblical resonances: 'I notice he waited till we busted our butts finishing up planting before staging his resurrection' (Smiley 1991: 6).

[5] Critics have, however, exposed Lear's figurative incestuous desire for Cordelia.

In the Gloucester subplot in *King Lear* favouritism, both on a socio-political (legitimacy) and on a personal level, sets the tragedy in motion. Gloucester favours Edgar, or at least the systems of primogeniture and legitimacy favour Edgar. Edmund thus regards his brother Edgar as a rival for power and property: 'Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land' (1.2.16).

As many critics are well aware and *A Thousand Acres* reminds the reader, the rivalry between the sisters in Shakespeare's play is noticeable already from act one scene one. Lear sets the example for how inheritance is to be allocated by disregarding the rights of primogeniture. Goneril is the eldest of the sisters, and according to the rights of primogeniture she should be the one to inherit the kingdom.[6] Indeed, Kent and Gloucester are both puzzled by the fact that control of the kingdom is not put in the hands of the Duke of Albany, the eldest daughter's husband. Demanding that his three daughters measure their love for him and inviting comparison between their protestations, Lear underscores rivalry between the sisters and fosters jealousy between them. The love-test impairs the loyalty between Goneril and Regan, as is evident in Regan's endeavour to top her sister's speech and declaration of love. Regan first states that she is made of that same 'mettle' as her sister, but then goes on to say that Goneril comes 'too short' in her expression of love for Lear. Whereas Goneril stays within a paradigm characterized by 'due' distance between father and daughter, Regan disrupts this convention, and that has important ramifications on the relationship between the two sisters. Regan's protestation of a deeper and more thorough love than Goneril's comes across as an attempt to undermine Goneril's privileges as the first-born. Regan has hence overstepped her 'rights' both on a political and on a personal level. Regan's speech makes it more difficult for Goneril to assert her authority as the elder sibling. This upsets the established power balance between the two sisters. Hence, an already existent schism materializes between Goneril and Regan during their speeches of love at the beginning of act one scene one, which we are made aware of through Smiley's way of establishing vital differences between the sisters and explaining how and why rivalry emerges.

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[6] In *Shakespeare's Festive Tragedy: The Ritual Foundation of Genre*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995, Naomi Conn Liebler writes that 'Lear violates his royal obligation to protect the realm, and also the custom of primogeniture in promising the "third more opulent" portion of the land to his youngest, not his eldest, daughter' (199).

Mutual trust is already subverted as a result of Lear's favouritism, and mutual distrust will be reinforced by Lear's efforts to trigger a division between the two sisters. Lear's threat to leave Goneril's abode to go to live with Regan further undermines the loyalty between the sisters. Taking up the abode with Regan would be a threat to Goneril, not only political:

> *Lear*: Degenerate bastard, I'll not trouble thee:
> Yet have I left a daughter.
> *Goneril*: You strike my people, and your disordered rabble
> Make servants of their betters. (1.4. 245-48)[7]

It is perhaps worth mentioning that critics have argued that after the banishment of Cordelia and Kent, the sisters are seen to plot together against their father.[8] This is, however, Goneril's way of asserting her authority over Regan. Goneril is trying to recover her power over her sister and find out where Regan really stands. Discussing this scene in relation to sibling rivalry could also explain why the sisters never actually implement their plan 'i'the heat'. Critics have found it puzzling that nothing comes of their meeting. Clearly, then, the relationship between Goneril and Regan is one of the aspects of Shakespeare's tragedy that take on new meaning when the reader returns to *King Lear* after a reading of *A Thousand Acres*.

The competitive configurations of the outside world were seen to motivate Larry's decision to hand over his farm to his daughters, and this make-up of society influences the relationship between Ginny and Rose. The competition between farmers and the repeated comparisons between Larry's farm and other adjacent farms create a system of rivalry on a larger scale with selfishness, greed, rights of possession, and desire to own as the

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[7] In 'The Image of the Family in *King Lear*'. In *On King Lear*, edited by Lawrence Danson. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981, Thomas McFarland has pointed out that in this scene Lear 'manipula[tes] [...] the dynamics of family favoritism' (97).

[8] In James A. Schiff's 'Contemporary Retellings: *A Thousand Acres* as the Latest Lear'. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 39, no. 4 (1998): 367-81, we read the following: '[Goneril] responds to her father's gift of land not with delight or gratitude, but with malice and paranoia, remarking to Regan that they must conspire together to "do something" to Lear so as to disempower him in his increasing madness' (7). But Goneril and Regan are not trying to conspire. They are anxious about their father's banishment of Kent and Cordelia, understandably enough, and Goneril wants to find out which side Regan is on as well as assert her power.

outcome. As a child, Ginny was 'indoctrinated' with such a conception of the world as the 'right order of things':

> I recognized the justice of Harold Clark's opinion that the Ericson land was on his side of the road, but even so, I thought it should be us. For one thing, Dinah Ericson's bedroom had a window seat in the closet that I coveted. For another, I thought it appropriate and desirable that the great circle of the flat earth spreading out from the T intersection of County Road 686 and Cabot Street Road be ours. (Smiley 1991:4)

This system of rivalry is hence established in the minds of Ginny and Rose very early on, and it is stimulated throughout their adult life. From early childhood, they have been used to competing for the same object, influenced by the competitive constitution of society.

Any external element that comes into Ginny's and Rose's world hence feeds the fire and sustains the rivalry. Ginny sees Rose as a rival for Rose's own children. Owing to nitrates (used by the farmer to fertilize the land), that poisoned the well-water, Ginny cannot become pregnant, and the sight of Rose and her two daughters affects her 'like poison'. Again, rivalry is prompted and Ginny's desire to own the children takes over: 'they were nearly my own daughters' (Smiley 1991: 8). Ginny tries to convince the reader that the jealousy she once felt towards Rose is set aside: 'the sight of those two babies, whom I had loved and cared for with real interest and satisfaction, affected me like poison [...] I was so jealous, and so freshly jealous every time I saw them, that I could hardly speak' (Smiley 1991: 8). A rhetoric of rivalry permeates Ginny's way of speaking in her efforts to convince herself that she has got over her jealousy.

The rivalry over Jess should thus be discussed with reference to competition in the larger world. Even if Jess *triggers* the 'outbreak of rivalry' between Ginny and Rose;[9] it is the transfer of property that exposes (and activates) the tacit and already existing rivalry between siblings in both *A Thousand Acres* and *King Lear*. When Jess in *A Thousand Acres* comes into the picture there is thus more at stake than merely sexual jealousy. They are unconsciously competing for the same object. Handsome, charismatic, and attractive, Ginny and Rose notice Jess at the same time, but importantly, Ginny also notices that Rose has

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[9] In 'Goneril's Version: *A Thousand Acres* and *King Lear*'. *South Dakota Review* 33, no. 2 (1995): 105-15, Tim Keppel suggests that 'Jess is the catalyst for Ginny's awakening, both physical and psychological' (113).

detected him. Ginny imitates Rose's desire in a typically Girardian fashion: 'Rose noticed him [Jess], too, right when I did' (Smiley 1991: 10). Rene Girard has presented a model based on triangular desire that is interesting in this context. He suggests that we base our desire on another person's desire, a person whom we admire. Ginny does not choose the object of her desire herself; it is a 'third person', i.e. Rose, that 'indicates to the narrator the object [she] will begin desiring passionately' (Girard 1965: 30). However, Jess does awaken Ginny to sexual awareness, and her subsequent knowledge that Rose has an affair with him seems not so much to lead to sexual jealousy as foster an awareness on Ginny's part that she is in fact a different person from Rose:

> My deepest-held habit was assuming that differences between Rose and me were just on the surface [...] that somehow we were each other's real selves [...] But after all, she wasn't me: Her body wasn't mine. (Smiley 1991: 332)

When Jess swaps Ginny for Rose, Ginny's sole purpose in life will from then onwards be to remove Rose by whatever means. Ultimately it becomes an end in itself, quite apart from any considerations about Jess. Ginny cannot control the story any more; the desire to poison Rose takes over. Being brought up in a system that feeds and sustains competition between people, they are forced into rivalry over something they think rightfully belongs to both of them, namely Jess (as property). They only recognize the justice of their own needs and their own rights. The deadly antagonism between the two sisters actually makes Ginny's attempted poisoning of Rose, to which some critics have objected, seem believable.

Thus Smiley rewrites and emphasizes the distinction between Ginny and Rose, which also has a bearing on our reading of *King Lear.* Many critics explain the rivalry between Goneril and Regan with reference to sexual jealousy over Edmund, although feminists have presented a more nuanced picture of the two sisters.[10] Goneril's and Regan's 'lust' for Edmund is not exclusively sexual; it is also based on a system of rivalry made palpable through Lear's love-test. It might be Edmund that triggers

[10] In 'Horns of Dilemma: Jealousy, Gender, and Spectatorship in English Renaissance Drama', Katharine Eisaman Maus points out that '[e]ven Goneril and Regan, whose competition over a man reaches a murderous pitch, seem driven more by sibling rivalry, noticeable even in the first scene, as they strive to outdo one another in praise of their father – than by specifically sexual jealousy as the heroes experience it' (Maus 1987:564). Goneril, however, does not try to outdo Regan.

the rivalry between Goneril and Regan, but rivalry has certainly been lurking beneath the surface all along. The two sisters have to compete for love, attention, land, and power, being forced to vie for the same space, politically as well as personally - something Cordelia never had to do on the personal level, and arguably refuses to do on a political level when she says 'nothing'.

Whereas Ginny does not succeed in poisoning her sister and actually survives herself, Goneril succeeds in exterminating both herself and her sister. What was once so important to Goneril in *King Lear*, the battle between the kingdoms of England and France, yields to her desire to avoid experiencing, at any cost, her sister's alliance - sexual as well as political - with Edmund:

> I had rather lose the battle than that sister
> Should loosen him and me. (5.1.18-19)

The deadly rivalry between Goneril and Regan is no longer over Edmund. The competitive configurations of the political world have so deeply infringed on the relation between the siblings that nothing stands in their way when they wish to destroy each other. Towards the end of *King Lear*, Edmund himself is no longer important to Goneril; it is more important to her that Regan does not get him – just as possessing Jess had ceased to matter to Ginny in *A Thousand Acres* once she decided to try to kill Rose.

When we read *King Lear* against *A Thousand Acres*, the play's as well as the novel's deeply problematical preoccupation with relations between women, particularly the dynamics between Goneril/Ginny and Regan/Rose, is foregrounded. So is the complexity of marriage seen in the relationships between Goneril/Ginny and Albany/Ty. *A Thousand Acres* alerts the reader to other characters' influence on Goneril's, but also Regan's, behaviour and actions, helping us see how that influence affects the relationship between the sisters. The reader comes to realize that Goneril and Regan are part of a larger network of interpersonal relationships. *A Thousand Acres* thus shows the reader how women's position in patriarchy is informed by constraints rooted in their roles as mothers, daughters, siblings, and wives. When we return to *King Lear*, it is with a sharpened awareness of the complexity of family relationships.

The picture of the family as a site of dynamic interaction in *King Lear* is consequently intensified and brought to the fore through the interaction

between the two texts. The novel also draws attention to the tension between the domestic and the public. The stress on family relationships and the ways in which those relationships are seen to be informed by the competitive configurations of the outside world emphasize the tension between the microcosmic and the macrocosmic in *King Lear.*

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