

**Renaissance Shakespeare:
Shakespeare Renaissances**

The Politics of Rape in Nahum Tate's *The History of King Lear*, 1681

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John Crowne's alteration of 2 and 3 *Henry VI* into *The Misery of Civil War* (1680) features a scene in which soldiers ransack a village and rape the daughters of peasants before demanding "how do you like Rebellion?"¹ The horrors depicted are said to be "all a Nation gets by Civil War," and the scene is used to emphasize the need to retain legitimate, patriarchal rule.² I would argue that the threat of rape is central to this message. Crowne's play was produced in response to a succession dispute known as the Exclusion Crisis. The Crisis divided the nation and left many fearing renewed civil war. It also led to a Shakespeare Renaissance of sorts, with ten alterations of his plays produced in only four years. Of the Shakespeare plays rewritten between 1678 and 1682, one (*Titus Andronicus*) had its existing rape plot refigured as an "Invasion on a Prince's Right," while three others (*King Lear*, *Coriolanus*, and *Cymbeline*) received entirely new rape plots.³ Like Crowne's scene, the new rape plots use sexual violation to demonize rebellion and illegitimacy, and voice support for the man at the center of the Crisis, James, Duke of York, and his legitimate claim to the throne.

This chapter offers a reading of the politics of attempted rape found in Nahum Tate's *The History of King Lear*. The changes Tate made to Shakespeare's *King Lear*(s)⁴ include the removal of the Fool, the addition of a love plot between Edgar and Cordelia, and a modified ending in which Lear survives and rule is handed to Cordelia and Edgar. A less noted alteration is Tate's new rape plot in which illegitimate Edmund of Shakespeare's subplot plans to kidnap and rape his brother's love interest, Cordelia. The rape plot is one of the most significant of Tate's changes, and I believe it offers the clearest indication of *The History of King Lear*'s politics. I wish to argue that the (renewed) threat the Exclusion Crisis posed to royal authority led to the expression of a problematic set of ideals and values in which illegitimacy and illegal claims to power are equated not only with the *desire* to rape, but also with

the *inability* to do so. Tate's play can thus be seen to demonize sexual violence while simultaneously suggesting that men *ought* to be able to sexually dominate women.

The Exclusion Crisis takes its name from a bill introduced in parliament by opponents of the Duke of York (later James II). With Charles II failing to produce any legitimate children, the crown was due to pass to his brother, James. James's opponents sought to bar him from the legal line of succession on the grounds of his conversion to Catholicism in the early 1670s. Rival successors, such as Charles II's illegitimate (but Protestant) son, the Duke of Monmouth, were also proposed by some of York's opponents. The bill was rejected on three occasions, and Charles II prorogued Parliament for the last time in March 1681, completing his rule without it. As Jonathan Scott has argued, "the parallel with the crisis of Charles I's reign—the first crisis of popery and arbitrary government—was [. . .] universally remarked upon by contemporaries."⁵ The impact of the Exclusion Crisis was considerable: the late 1670s and early 1680s saw renewed division in the nation between those supporting James and the tradition on which his birthright depended (loosely labeled "Tories"), and those who opposed his succession and Charles's arbitrary dealings with Parliament (loosely labeled "Whigs").⁶

Before turning to the rape plot in Tate's *The History of King Lear*, I would like to situate his play in the context of the sexual politics of a group of contemporary comedies. J. Douglas Canfield has noted that, during the Crisis, "comic playwrights turned cit-cuckolding [short for citizen-cuckolding] into a particularly virulent example of the erotics of power."⁷ He states that the plays "portray cits as silly, cowardly, impotent Whigs who meddle in politics; Cavaliers as handsome, witty, libertine, potent Tories who are worthy to dominate; and women as [. . .] naturally attracted to the dominant males. The Cavaliers tup their rivals' women, often in their faces, and force them to accept it."⁸

Edward Ravenscroft's play, *The London Cuckolds* (1683), shows this link between political warfare and sex. Ramble calls Dashwell "a Blockhead City Attorney; a Trudging, Drudging, Cormuging, Petitioning Citizen."⁹ The word "petitioner"—denoting a supporter of Parliament and the Exclusion Bill—is a key insult in this exchange. Ramble's companion responds, "a Petitioner! Cuckold the Rogue for that very reason."¹⁰ This establishes a direct link between political allegiance and sexual usurpation. *The London Cuckolds* also features an epilogue in which we are told that "every Cuckold is a Cit. [. . .] And be it spoke to their eternal Glory's, / There's not one Cuckold amongst all the Tory's."¹¹ The ability to retain and satisfy a woman is thus presented as a key feature of Tory masculine identity.

The link between cuckolding and Exclusion is based on the Whig view that "the King, Lords and Commons [ought to] have [the] power to dispose of the succession as they shall judge most conducive to the Safety, Interest, and Happiness of the Kingdom."¹² This link is made clear in John Crowne's *City Politiques* (1683). When Camillo asks Florio if he is to blame for his wife's infidelity, he is informed that she is "a true Whig" and has "revolted" because he failed to satisfy her sexually.¹³ After all, as Florio reminds him, the "principles" of faction dictate that "[h]e is not to be

regarded who has a right to Govern, but he who can best serve the ends of Government. I can better serve the ends of your Lady than you can, so I lay claim to your Lady."¹⁴ The passage uses the microcosm of the family to emphasize the implication Whig arguments would have for husbands across the country. Both Whigs and Tories advocated allegiance to a husband, father, or ruler, but the conditions in which one might resist rule were debated. For Tories, passive resistance was called for, as nothing could justify the rejection of a lawful monarch or patriarch. For Whigs, by contrast, a monarch could be resisted in certain circumstances. Thus, while Tory writers used the domestic sphere to justify state patriarchy, Whigs were not keen to see their views of the right to resist an unsuitable monarch's rule translated into the domestic sphere as they have been in the satirical exchange above.¹⁵

It is important to recognize, of course, that cuckolding and rape are not the same. As Canfield states, the women are shown to be "naturally attracted to the dominant males."¹⁶ However, *The London Cuckolds* and *City Politiques* do show how women's bodies were transformed into battlegrounds for male political disputes—the dispute over succession in particular—and this was continued in more disturbing ways in the rape plots of Exclusion Crisis plays. As Susan J. Owen has noted, the use of "rape rhetoric" became a key way of indicating one's political allegiance during the Exclusion Crisis.¹⁷ Whig rape rhetoric tends to portray tyrant rapists in order to voice support for elected or limited rule. Corrupt rulers are frequently depicted as rapists, as the violation of female consent involved in rape becomes equated with the rule of a monarch without the consent of his subjects. The acts are presented as assaults on the rights of the people, and as a failure to respect the private property embodied in the female victim.

Tory responses to Whig rape rhetoric tend to either reverse the charge and equate illegitimate claims for power with illegal sexual urges, or deny that any rape has taken place. Sir Robert Filmer took the latter approach when discussing the rape of Lucretia in Rome. Whigs often cited Lucretia's rape and the subsequent expulsion of the Tarquins as justification for political resistance. Nathaniel Lee's play, *Lucius Junius Brutus* (1681), is a key example. In his *Observations on Aristotles Politiques* (1679), Filmer, whose work was reissued as part of the Tory propagandist campaign, denies Lucretia's rape in order to explain the expulsion of the Tarquins as the result of "the wantonness and licentiousness of the people of Rome."¹⁸ As a rule, Tory plays depict attempted rape. Plots in which rape actually takes place are not as common. When they do occur, it is predominantly in plays with Republican settings—the idea being that, once legitimate, patriarchal rule has been abandoned and, as a result, patriarchal protection is lost, all hell breaks loose.

Tate's *King Lear* also links the threat of rape to the absence of patriarchal protection. The attempted rape scene occurs once Cordelia has been banished by her father and civil war has engulfed the nation.¹⁹ Tate's play deploys a rape rescue narrative, with a heroic, rightful heir defeating an illegitimate villain in order to save an innocent female. This scenario sees the female character, Cordelia, take on symbolic significance, with her body transformed into the battleground on which the Gloucester succession debate is contested.

Tate utilizes the ready-made parallels he found in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and, I would argue, refines them to offer a pro-James reading of the Exclusion Crisis. In terms of existing parallels, the central focus of *King Lear* is, of course, a crisis in the succession, with the play carrying clear warnings about the consequences of basing royal succession on merit. Tate also found in Shakespeare a subplot in which an illegitimate heir, Gloucester's bastard son, Edmund, conspires to disinherit Gloucester's legitimate son, Edgar, by spreading false rumors about him. Edmund hopes to usurp Edgar's birth right: Gloucester's lands and title. In Tate's *The History of King Lear*, this subplot becomes part of the main plot. Edgar and Edmund would have encouraged audiences to draw parallels to two of the figures at the heart of the succession debate, Charles's legal heir, the Duke of York, and his illegitimate son, the Duke of Monmouth. Edgar is forced into exile as a result of the lies his half brother spreads about him, which resembles York's fate during the Crisis: he faced voluntary and not-so-voluntary exile in March 1679 and October 1680.²⁰ Edmund, who now appears in the list of characters with the simplified name "Bastard," is an ambitious illegitimate son with designs on rule and, as such, is likely to have invited comparison with the Duke of Monmouth.

As C. B. Hardman and Nancy Klein Maguire have observed, Tate appears to have recognized these character parallels and stressed their topicality.²¹ For example, Tate's play opens with Edmund's "Thou Nature" soliloquy. The soliloquy immediately introduces the character's villainy and the theme of legitimate versus illegitimate inheritance, as he demands, "Why am I [. . .] / Depriv'd of a Son's Right because I came not / In the dull Road that custom has prescrib'd? / Why Bastard, wherefore Base [. . .]?"²² Edmund's plot against his brother is also introduced, thereby alerting audiences to the centrality of the Edmund-Edgar antagonism:

legitimate Edgar, to thy right
 Of Law I will oppose a Bastard's Cunning [. . .]
 Here comes the old Man chaf't with th'information
 Which last I forg'd against my Brother Edgar:
 A Tale so plausible, so boldly utter'd [. . .]
 That now the slightest circumstance confirms him,
 And Base-born Edmund spite of Law inherits.²³

Links between Edmund's illegitimacy and his villainy are stressed in this soliloquy, and the audience is immediately made aware of Edmund's plot to turn the other characters against legitimate Edgar so that he can seize his inheritance.

The opening soliloquy is not the only way in which Tate prefaces *King Lear*'s love test. Tate also frames the love test with discreet exchanges between Edgar and Cordelia, here addressed as "Cordelia, royal fair," thereby emphasizing his play's love plot. In love with Edgar and aware of her father's plan to marry her to the Duke of Burgundy, Cordelia's infamous "nothing, my Lord" now comes with an ulterior motive. Banished by her father and abandoned by Burgundy once she has lost her inheritance, Cordelia worries that Edgar may be as inconsistent as Burgundy and so issues a love test of her own. She intends to test Edgar's constancy, and Tate thereby

establishes a means for Edgar to prove himself an attentive lover and successor. This paves the way for their marriage and rule at the end of the play.

Tate highlights Edgar and Cordelia's compatibility and their suitability for rule via repeated reference to their filial piety, a political valence linked to Filmer's *Patriarcha* and the Virgilian tradition. In line with the Tory policy of passive resistance,²⁴ both characters remain loyal to their fathers, despite the fact that they have wronged them. At one point "pious Edgar" enters "leading his eyeless father," while Cordelia begs for "succour for a Father and a King, / An injur'd Father and an injur'd King."²⁵ When urged by Tate's Gloucester to consider for whom she begs (the "King that wronged" her), she responds that her father-King "did not, could not wrong" her.²⁶ Edgar's disguise as poor Tom is designed to allow him to watch over Cordelia and ensure her safety. He does so in spectacular fashion when she is threatened with rape. They are therefore presented as a virtuous, well-matched couple.

Edmund's lack of piety, by contrast, is linked to his illegitimacy, and his sexual urges are associated with his thirst for power. As James Black has noted, like a number of Restoration villains, Tate's Edmund is based on the late seventeenth-century conception of Hobbesian man, one who is "lustful and cruel, and who judges the rightness of a cause by its success."²⁷ This is demonstrated in the very first scene when Edmund demands, "What Saint so Divine, / That will successful Villany decline?" a line which Black rightly sees as echoing Hobbes's observation that "good success is power."²⁸ Edmund repeatedly equates sexual possession with the acquisition of political power, for example, when he declares his intention to "Usurp at once" Albany's "Bed and Throne."²⁹ Significantly, he does not manage to usurp either.

For the characters of the play, Edmund's villainy is not exposed until Edgar defeats him in a duel in act 5, but for the audience it is established much earlier. Having introduced Edmund's plotting in the opening speech, Tate establishes a link between Edmund's desire to usurp the throne and his desire to rape Cordelia. Edmund fantasizes about rule, declaring,

The Storm is in our louder Rev'lings drown'd.
Thus wou'd I Reign could I but mount a Throne.
The Riots of these proud imperial Sisters
Already have impos'd the galling Yoke
Of Taxes and hard Impositions on
The drudging Peasants Neck, who bellow out
Their loud Complaints in Vain.³⁰

These lines suggest that, like Goneril and Regan, he would rule tyrannically, reveling in festivities at the expense of his people, and ignoring their complaints. Repeated use of storm imagery helps to achieve an echo between Edmund's fantasy of "mounting a throne" and his fantasy of raping Cordelia, which he voices only 120 lines later. Here he imagines how "[l]ike the vigorous Jove [he] will enjoy / This Semele in a Storm, 'twill deaf her Cries / Like Drums in Battle, lest her Groans shou'd pierce / [His] pitting Eat, and make the amorous Fight less fierce."³¹ That Cordelia's cries will be deafened matches his plan of drowning out the bellowing complaints of peasants. In identifying

with Jove, Edmund further points to the potential destruction of Cordelia and the nation. Jove's relationship with Semele is far more caring than Edmund's sadistic fantasy, but the consequences for her are still devastating once Jove is tricked into revealing his true nature. Fortunately for both the nation and Cordelia, Edmund is not able to achieve either fantasy; he does not manage to mount a throne, nor does he manage to rape Cordelia. His legitimate brother prevents him from doing either.

Earlier in the play, Edmund had resolved to "bribe two Ruffians" to "po[a]ch" Cordelia for him, and the verb "to poach" is highly significant, pointing as it does to the crimes of invasion, theft, and rape.³² To "poach" meant "To go in illegal pursuit of game, fish, etc., esp. by trespassing (*on* the lands or rights of another) or in contravention of official protection; to hunt *for*." (*OED*). The verb therefore stresses the illegality of Edmund's actions, while also portraying Cordelia as another's possession, her body as contested land. "Poach" also indicates the penetration involved in rape, the *OED* defining it as "to thrust oneself, push, intrude" and "to stab, or pierce." Again, the idea of invasion is suggested, thus further inviting an analogy between Cordelia's body and both the throne Edmund would like to "mount" and the land he wishes to seize from his brother.

Edmund's reliance on two ruffians to "poach" Cordelia rather than seizing her himself suggests a potential weakness. It also provides stark contrast with his brother, who is both loved by Cordelia, and able to defeat the two ruffians single-handedly. In having the ruffians "poach" for him, Edmund raises questions about his virility, as does his suggestion that Cordelia's cries may make his "amorous fight less fierce." Read in the context of Edmund's view that the rightness of a cause ought to be judged by its success, I would argue that audiences are encouraged to associate Edmund's failure to mount a throne or to sexually dominate Cordelia with his unsuitability for rule. This is in diametrical opposition to Edgar who arrives to rescue Cordelia, and whose actions in act 5 save the nation from Regan and Goneril's tyrannical rule, and end Edmund's dreams of rule.

Edgar's rescue of Cordelia sees him passing the love test she set him in act 1. Now that he has revealed himself constant and worthy, Cordelia feels free to accept him: "Come to my Arms, thou dearest, best of men."³³ The attempted rape thus has a positive outcome for Edgar. However, the fact that Cordelia submits to Edgar because he saved her from rape paradoxically robs her of the very virtue he was supposed to be defending. I do not wish to suggest that Edgar and Cordelia's relationship is presented as one of conflict. The consensual nature of their relationship is, after all, of great importance for the Tory message, with Tory propaganda suggesting that relations between women and rightful heirs, like their relations with Tories, are always successful, always consensual. What I do wish to stress, though, are the traditional gender roles that male-female rape plots always involve. Rape rescue narratives "demonstrate not only the power of the rescuer over the rapist, but the power of both males over the female."³⁴ Cordelia's response when faced with abduction and rape is passive; she implores the gods to send a thunderbolt to strike her dead. Unless protected by Edgar's power or divine intervention, she is effectively helpless.

That Tate uses rape to demonize a character seems to suggest that he condemns the crime, but any implied condemnation is surely complicated by his emphasis on the symbolic use of rape, and overshadowed by his desire to stress the heroism of his rightful heir, Edgar. The point, as Edmund declares in his dying speech, is that "the sword has penetrated too far, legitimacy at last has got it."³⁵ Edgar may be a brave, caring, and desired lover-monarch, but Edmund is not simply evil and unworthy because he wishes to rape; he is an unfit ruler because he fails to rape and sexually dominate Cordelia. Conversely, legal, legitimate rule is not based on achieved rape, but rather on a utopia in which sexual consummation is not only consensual but also irresistible. It is important to remember that not only the possibility of rape is erased in the Tory rhetoric, but also any possibility of female resistance. Disturbingly, Tate's *King Lear* thus suggests that the difference between legitimate and illegitimate rule is not only that the illegitimate ruler wants to rape whereas as the legitimate ruler does not, but also that the illegitimate ruler is ultimately incapable of sexual domination whereas the legitimate ruler is sexually irresistible. Within the Tory rhetoric of Tate's play, the contested female therefore ends up willingly undergoing domination by him who is both legitimized to exert, and capable of exerting, sexual rule.

NOTES

1. John Crowne, *The Misery of Civil War* (London, 1680), sig. F2v. I use the label "alterations" throughout in order to reflect contemporary usage. Late seventeenth-century title pages use "altered" where we would today use "adapted," and as distinct from "revived," which is predominantly used to denote an earlier play which has appeared on stage without the introduction of major changes. For more on historicizing play terminology, see Laura J. Rosenthal, "(Re)Writing Lear: Literary Property and Dramatic Authorship," in *Early Modern Conceptions of Property*, ed. by John Brewer and Susan Staves (London: Routledge, 1994), 323.

2. Crowne, *Misery*, sig. K4r.

3. Edward Ravenscroft, *Titus Andronicus, or the Rape of Lavinia* (London, 1687), sig. C4v. For a similar observation about Ravenscroft's rape plot, see Susan J. Owen, *Restoration Theatre and Crisis* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 176.

4. As Sonia Massai notes, Tate used a quarto and a folio edition of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. See "Nahum Tate's Revision of Shakespeare's *King Lear*," *Studies in English Literature* 40 (2000): 435–50.

5. Jonathan Scott, *Algernon Sidney and the Restoration Crisis, 1677–1683* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 9. See also Richard L. Greaves, *Secrets of the Kingdom: British Radicals from the Popish Plot to the Revolution of 1688–1689* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992); Kenneth H. D. Haley, *The First Earl of Shaftesbury* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968); Tim Harris, *London Crowds in the Reign of Charles II: Propaganda and Politics from the Restoration to the Exclusion Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); and John Miller, *Popery and Politics in England, 1660–1688* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

6. See Robert Willman, "The Origins of 'Whig' and 'Tory' in English Political Language," *Historical Journal* 17 (1974): 247–64, and James Rees Jones, *The First Whigs: The Politics of the Exclusion Crisis, 1678–1683* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961).

7. J. Douglas Canfield, "Tipping Your Rival's Women: Cit-Cuckolding as Class Warfare in Restoration Comedy," in *Broken Boundaries: Women and Feminism in Restoration Drama*, ed. by Katherine Quinsey (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 115.
8. Canfield, "Tipping Your Rival's Women," 115.
9. Edward Ravenscroft, *The London Cuckolds* (London, 1683), sig. B4v.
10. Ravenscroft, *The London Cuckolds*, sig. B4v.
11. Ravenscroft, *The London Cuckolds*, sig. I3v.
12. Anthony Ashley Cooper, *An Impartial Account of the Nature and Tendency of the Late Addressee* (London, 1681), sig. C3r.
13. John Crowne, *City Politiques* (London, 1683), sig. L1r.
14. Crowne, *City Politiques*, sigs. L1r-v.
15. The ideas in this paragraph are indebted to Susan Staves, *Players' Scepters: Fictions of Authority in the Restoration* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), 116.
16. Canfield, "Tipping your Rival's Women," 115.
17. Susan J. Owen, "'Suspect My Loyalty When I Lose My Virtue': Sexual Politics and Party in Aphra Behn's Plays of the Exclusion Crisis," *Restoration* 18 (1994): 37-47; "He That Should Guard My Virtue Has Betrayed It: The Dramatization of Rape in the Exclusion Crisis," *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Theatre Research* 9 (1994): 59-68.
18. Sir Robert Filmer, *Patriarcha and Other Writings*, ed. Johann P. Sommerville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 259.
19. Laura J. Rosenthal makes a similar observation in "Reading Masks: The Actress and the Spectatrix in Restoration Shakespeare," in *Broken Boundaries: Women and Feminism in Restoration Drama*, 212.
20. Mark Knights, *Politics and Opinion in Crisis, 1678-81* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 3, 43.
21. C. B. Hardman, "'Our Drooping Country Now Erects Her Head': Nahum Tate's History of King Lear," *Modern Language Review* 95 (2000): 913-23; "Nahum Tate's *King Lear*: 'The King's Blest Restoration,'" in *The Appropriation of Shakespeare: Post-Renaissance Reconstructions of the Works and the Myth*, ed. Jean I. Marsden (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991): 29-42.
22. Tate, *King Lear*, sig. B1r.
23. Tate, *King Lear*, sigs. B1r-v.
24. See Tim Harris, *Restoration: Charles II and His Kingdoms* (London: Penguin, 2006), 29-30.
25. Tate, *King Lear*, sigs. K1v, E2r.
26. Tate, *King Lear*, sig. E2r.
27. James Black, "The Influence of Hobbes on Nahum Tate's *The History of King Lear*," *Studies in English Literature* 7 (1967): 380.
28. Tate, *King Lear*, sig. C1r; Black, "The Influence of Hobbes," 381.
29. Tate, *King Lear*, sig. H3v.
30. Tate, *King Lear*, sig. E1r.
31. Tate, *King Lear*, sig. E2v.
32. Tate, *King Lear*, sig. E2v.
33. Tate, *King Lear*, sig. F2v.
34. Jocelyn Carty, *Writing Rape. Writing Women in Early Modern England: Unbridled Speech* (London: Palgrave, 1999), 26.
35. Tate, *King Lear*, sig. J3r.