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The Transness of Bastardy and the Transformative Power of Love: Recognition of Edmund in *King Lear*

Few works are circulated, interpreted, read, and re-read more often than the works of Shakespeare. *King Lear* is one of Shakespeare's most complex and well-known tragedies, and readers have peeled back its layers of power dynamics, gender roles, and relationships for hundreds of years. Though there have been many interpretations, productions, and readings of *King Lear* over the centuries, there are still layers worth digging into from new lenses. Transgender lives and narratives have long been excluded from representation in media, but the past few years have seen significant progress in representation of trans people, especially onstage. Shakespeare's works are known for depicting a wide breadth of the human experience, regardless of the type of humanity he wrote for. The trans experience is just as deserving of representation as any other because it is a facet of the human experience. While works such as *King Lear* are performed and so often seen as historically white, heterosexual, cisgender, largely masculine stories, their resonance and ability to speak to human nature transcend historical intention. The dimension that performance adds to the work allows adapters to take the piece in a multitude of directions, different from what the playwright may have intended.

Gender and performance are deeply intertwined, and that relationship adds integral layers to how we might analyze, perform, and interpret gender onstage and in drama. With that in mind, I will examine the gender of Edmund in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, considering both the text and

potential performance. While Edmund may not fit the image of transness or gender non-conformity that has been presented in recent history, he still represents meaningful parts of the trans experience. His desire for recognition, disconnect from his family, complicated performance of masculinity, and near inability to experience love are resonant of the transmasculine experience. He is emasculated, fetishized, and ignored, often purely because of the way he was born. In this essay, I will advocate for a trans reading of Edmund from *King Lear,* not because of historical textual evidence hinting that Edmund was assigned female at birth, but because reading him that way adds to our understanding of and empathy for both Edmund and trans people.

Trans studies is a relatively new field of literary criticism, but significant strides are being made in the field of trans Shakespeare studies. The field is expanding, and there have been multiple scholastic events regarding Shakespeare and trans studies held in the past few years. The Early Modern Trans Studies Conference will hold its fourth conference in 2026. The conference was founded and organized by Colby Gordon and Simone Chess, and has invited scholars to speak on early modern and premodern transgender history from around the world. The topics included in conferences since have included Ottoman eunuchs, crucified hermaphrodites, Renaissance boy actors, archaeological sexing practices, and a wide variety of other topics, proving the scope of pre- and early modern trans studies to be expansive and ever-growing. In a roundtable held in 2021, several Shakespeare scholars came together to establish a "state of the fields" regarding Shakespeare studies and trans theory, as well as queer, race, and performance studies (Rubright et al. 270). One of the key concepts explored, described by Alexa Alice Joubin, is the idea that performance adds an additional layer to a text in order to enhance or reveal something about a character; it "dislodges the idea that text alone can encompass

everything the words connote" (Rubright et al. 273). While Edmund may not be textually trans in the way that he's textually a bastard, through performance we can read beyond the text and what the "words connote" in terms of his desires and behavior. Joubin goes on to stress the importance of being seen through performance, claiming that "trans studies are...born out of the necessity for everyone to live a livable life. What one sees correlates to how one sees" (Rubright et al. 273). By reading Edmund as trans, we increase trans visibility and acknowledge the reality of trans living, affecting both "what" and "how" we see.

In the field of trans historicism, we see some of these ideas echoed, and we can expand them into an adaptive methodology that encompasses performance as well as textual analysis. In the introduction to *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality Before the Modern,* a collection of essays examining the plurality of gender in historical accounts and fictions from antiquity, the medieval period, and the early modern period, the editors describe how despite the preconception that "transgender" is a new, modern word and concept, gender plurality manifests across history, including in the pre-modern (LaFleur et al. 3). The editors advocate for an adaptive approach to examining historical texts from hundreds of years ago. Joubin's adaptive method examines both performativity in the text and performance studies. Joubin describes the theory of assemblage, defining it as the act of disparate aspects of social performance coming together to form a complete whole. She claims that "assemblage is relevant to the notion of trans aesthetics particularly in the context of performance studies. Just as gender is a social action, assemblage involves a stage set (social setting), costumes (sartorial choices to suit the occasion), and speeches that solidify or deny personhood, all of which constitute a dramatic assemblage that constitutes gender" ("Are There" 751). Joubin's theory of assemblage both provides a basis from

which we can develop a method of reading gender from a modern perspective and mirrors historical notions of how gender was constructed in the early modern era.

In their article "Transgender Reassessments of the Cross-Dressed Page in Shakespeare, Philaster, and The Honest Man's Fortune," Ezra Horbury uses queer historicism, shadow histories, transhistories, and queer temporality to provide "a transgender rereading of the cross-dressed [pageboy]" (102). Similarly to Joubin's assemblage, Horbury claims that gender is constructed in early modern England through ostensible, outward-facing "prostheses," such as codpieces, beards, and hair length. Horbury goes on to assert that when considering the costumed actor onstage, "the absence of the naked body leads viewers to put far more weight on these prosthetic traits in constructing sex" (103). Thus, any interpretation of an actor's or a character's gender is constructed based on those other presentational qualities. The actor's and character's bodies are inaccessible to the audience who can only see costumes and prostheses. In the case of *Twelfth Night,* this makes the gender of Viola/Cesario constructed and fluid and their sex arbitrary. Horbury claims that "for Viola, performing gender in 'everyday life' comes to constitute gender itself," which indicates the fundamental aspect of trans theory that gender is a social construct that is performed (106). Horbury's argument hinges on an understanding of gender that is constructed through external presentation and the inadmissible bodies underneath, and does not account for the internal experience of transness. Ultimately, Horbury claims that "A cis male, transmasculine, and crossdressed Veramour [another cross-dressed page] are identical" (119). Through analysis of external features and ostensible characteristics, we can only reach this ambivalence towards transgender identity.

Reading Shakespeare's characters as trans goes beyond external presentation; we must look to their internal experience to truly represent trans lives onstage. Shakespeare scholar

Sawyer K. Kemp pulls out a blog post from Will Tosh where Tosh claims that Shakespeare's comedies containing cross-dressing characters like Viola are examples of gender fluidity; Kemp describes this as "optimistic but distancing" ("Shakespeare in Transition" 37). Kemp pushes back against the trans readings of characters like Rosalind/Ganymede in *As You Like It* and Imogen/Fidele in *Cymbeline*. These characters have more outward traits that conform to what some perceive transness to be about, as in the changing of gender presentation, but these characters often fail to speak to aspects of the trans experience that go below surface level. In their article, "'In That Dimension Grossly Clad': Transgender Rhetoric, Representation, and Shakespeare," Kemp advocates for a reading of trans Shakespeare characters that speaks to the internal trans experience. Kemp claims that the experience of the cross-dressing women involves "little more than a pair of pants to turn Rosalind into Ganymede" ("'In That Dimension'" 122). The women don boys' clothing, change their dialogue patterns a bit, and are immediately perceived as male. This is not the experience of most trans people. Kemp describes the ways the trans community talks about passing, referencing the many guidelines and resources trans people lay out for each other for passing. They cite online forums where trans people advise each other on how to transition and pass better. Kemp clarifies that what the extensive effort put into transitioning "should suggest is not that passing is mandatory, but rather that it is *hard"* ("'In that Dimension'" 123). The cross-dressing women of Shakespeare do not experience the amount of effort and stress that comes with trying to pass. Kemp also notes that while Sebastian struggles to see Cesario as anything but a man, many young trans people find the most difficult people to convince they are trans are their own family members. Kemp goes on to claim that, while Sebastian's fixed perspective of Cesario as a man may be taken as a "utopian vision of transition," they also note that "taking such instances as uncritical parallels for transness

obscures much of the anxiety, ambivalence, and danger that this familiar scenario presents for many," acknowledging that passing, or being perceived as the gender you choose to present as, can be extremely tense, difficult, and for many, a matter of life and death ("'In That Dimension'" 123).

Kemp urges scholars to identify transness in something other than clothing. They push for a nuanced, expansive way to read trans characters, and stress the importance of the effect of doing so:

> Not only will this contribute to the inclusive model of Shakespeare that Tosh and others seek, but it can also help us as scholars develop more nuanced work on gender, passing, and the question of trans-historical gender identity. We must reckon not just with the rhetoric of genderqueer bodies and performance, but also with trans people's history with a socially marked body and the community that has developed around self-fashioning. At a critical moment when the boundaries of acceptable gender expression are the subject of political debate, this move signals to our students that there is meaningful continuity between our work and their lives. ("Shakespeare in Transition" 37)

Kemp stresses the importance of reckoning with trans identities for both scholastic and transgender communities. In applying this method, Kemp provides the example of Hamlet, drawing on Hamlet's depression, suicidality, and struggle with "the task that generations of scholars have insisted is the Ur-quest of masculinity and patrilineage" as reasons as to why Hamlet could be read as trans ("'In That Dimension'" 124-5). Here, Kemp focuses on internal factors that affect Hamlet's life and relationship with masculinity. Choosing internal factors, rather than external ones, to draw upon in reading or in performance reveals a fuller, more resonant picture of a trans man. The text of *Hamlet* does not contain the explicit, textual gender

play that occurs in *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It,* but Hamlet's lived experience still mirrors those of many trans people.

Kemp also discusses the impact that performance has on transgendered readings of Shakespeare's plays, pulling out *Othello* in addition to *Hamlet*. They interview an actor whose gendered experience colored their portrayal of Othello at different points in their transition. Skylar Cooper played Othello once as a butch lesbian, and then again, post-transition, as a trans man. Kemp claims that the portrayal of Othello as transmasculine emphasizes "Othello's outsider status," and re-contextualizes the other characters' vitriol for him ("Two Othellos" 658). Cooper highlights the fact that the ostracization and discrimination that Othello faces as a black man and an outsider has huge relevance to the trans community. While the production did not begin with the intention of portraying a transmasculine Othello, the actor's identity still shaped the text in a new way that is unique to the trans experience. Kemp states that they "aim to ask not if the trans themes attending these performances affirm or reform Shakespeare's racist text, but rather how these performances highlight the mutually reinforcing pressures of racism and gender normativity" ("Two Othellos" 653). Kemp disregards completely the idea of "affirming" Shakespeare's text, instead favoring the prospect of using the play to speak to a contemporary audience about gender and race. In *Othello,* the additional layer of gender adds to the broad conversation about race that Shakespeare scholars have long had, and this production brings that conversation directly to a modern audience. Kemp also points out that "a trans man being cast in a professional regional theater production marks real progress in the realm of transgender representation in theater and performance" ("Two Othellos" 651). Representation of trans people onstage can mark the progress of acceptance of transness, as well as affect trans people's own lives.

Seeing trans lives reflected in Shakespeare is more than just representation. In “Trans as Method: The Sociality Of Gender And Shakespeare,” Alexa Alice Joubin describes “pleasure activism” as the practice of creating joy and “emotional satisfaction” as a way to allow community members to lead liberated lives and push societal change (8). Joubin describes audience experiences in which viewers of plays that depict queer lives witness possibilities they had not considered before, and go on to “[develop] new ideas to try out ‘in relation to gender, pleasure, and community’” (“Trans as” 8). As the authors of *Trans Historical* claim, “we [should not] underestimate the impact of theatrical enactment and embodiment on society, existing cultures and individuals, whether performers or audience” (Rubright et al. 279). Theatrical engagement with the trans community, especially when recontextualizing canonical texts, allows trans experiences to be recognized as human experiences.

As with trans communities, recognition is integral to Edmund’s character. In his article in *Shakespeare Quarterly,* Richard Matthews claims that Edmund’s repentance is genuine, and he compares Edmund to Lear in their inability to quantify love. Matthews also offers the idea that one of the key aspects of Edmund’s redemption is his ability to recognize that he is loved. Matthews says of Edmund, "he finds that he is lovable. It is a pathetic recognition of a perverse thing, but it is apparently just enough to tip the scale in the direction of goodness" (28). Though Matthews identifies it as “perverse” and “pathetic,” Edmund’s need for recognition is analogous to the desire for recognition trans people also experience. Transness is so heavily influenced by the way one is perceived, since gender is so strongly tied to the ostensible. Being recognized for who they are shapes a trans person’s quality of life and mental state. Regardless of a trans person’s internal conception of self, being gendered incorrectly by other people can affect their self-esteem, alter their mental health, and cause a mounting sense of frustration that is difficult to

ignore. Edmund's lack of recognition is similar, shaping his life so much he is willing to fight and kill in order to alter it. The article is from 1975, but Matthew's identification of recognition as the crux of Edmund's reversal resonates with modern readers as well.

In "'edmund is trans he told me himself': Recognition in Transgender Shakespeare Fan Fiction," Yves Herak examines fan fiction and trans interpretations of Shakespeare characters in fandom spaces as a means to study how contemporary trans audiences view Shakespeare characters. Herak describes how readers recognize Edmund as trans through the reference in the title: he told us ourselves. The title references the fact that the interpretation of Edmund as trans stems from his dialogue. Herak echoes Kemp in asserting that scholars should locate transness in factors beyond crossdressing, and pulls out examples of how fan interpretations of him can "add to the nuance and complexity this [reading] begets for Edmund as a character" (Herak). Herak describes use of fan fiction, wherein readers of a text write their own stories featuring their interpretations and desires for the text, to exemplify what modern trans readers are thinking and feeling about Shakespeare's texts. Many trans readings of Shakespeare characters emerge this way. One of the most accessible forums for discussing transgender Shakespeare characters is not conferences or symposiums or even papers, but the social media/blogging site Tumblr. As a platform, Tumblr allows users to share ideas and add on to others' posts to fuel a collaborative discussion. Tumblr user transfemmbeatrice writes a multi-paragraph post that interprets, as their username may foreshadow, Beatrice from *Much Ado About Nothing* as a trans woman. They describe *Much Ado* as a "play about the social vulnerability of women," and comment that "having a character be a trans woman just makes sense as a way to provide depth to that idea" (transfemmbeatrice). They also voice what they want to see from a trans adaptation on a personal level, saying "i [sic] wanted an out and accepted trans character to play with rather than a

closeted one who cannot transition, just as a matter of personal preference" (transfemmbeatrice). Their voicing their desire for a more positive representation of transness in Shakespeare reflects both Kemp's desire for more in-depth and thematic transgender readings and Joubin's pleasure activism. Having an "out and accepted" trans Beatrice has textual implications that affect significant themes of the play, but it's also just what transfemmbeatrice would prefer to see as a trans person themselves. It brings joy, as does the hearty discussion taking place in the comments and reblogs of the post.

Transfemmbeatrice is one of many who use Tumblr and fan culture as an avenue through which to read transness into Shakespeare characters. Within their original post, other users have added and commented, contributing to a discussion of what it means for a Shakespeare character to be trans. Herak explores the question of why fan culture is such a prominent avenue through which people express trans readings of Shakespeare characters. They cite the nature of fandom as being more centered around one's personal emotional response to a text rather than a critical one, allowing for more subjectivity, personal connections, and "interpretive leeway" (Herak). Fandom becomes an appealing avenue through which to discuss connections between a text and a reader's experience as a trans person because they can engage with that sense of recognition with "no necessity to strictly argue that this reading is textually accurate" (Herak). While the lack of necessity for textual accuracy is freeing and allows for more fluid interpretation, it does provide space for less precise work with less scholarly or textual support, creating flimsy and "vibes-based" readings of the text. Still, exploring fan responses encapsulates the desires of the trans community on a more personal level than scholarship may suggest. Because fan sites are so accessible, readers can express what they thought and felt about a text through their own stories much more easily than through scholarship or academia. Through fan culture, modern readers

are able to pull out and engage with elements of Edmund's dialogue and actions that reflect the modern trans experience.

Edmund's first soliloquy, the first moment he is alone onstage, lays out the reasons why he resents his subjugation, which mirrors the oppression many trans people face today. He cites the "curiosity of nations" as the reasons for his marginalization, in contrast with "nature," which he treats as the utmost force determining his fate (Shakespeare 1.2.4 and 1.2.1). The phrase "curiosity of nations," or the "elaborate legal or social distinctions," as it is glossed in the Folger edition, indicates the constructed nature of society (Mowat and Werstine 28 n4). In the same way that Edmund is subject to a society to which he doesn't conform, today's society enforces a rigid gender binary on trans people, punishing those who break from their assigned roles. The emphasis on "distinctions" in the gloss maps onto the distinctions created by the gendered hierarchies and societal expectations to which trans people are beholden. The argument Edmund makes for his own self-promotion is also a familiar one. He asks why he should be denied his father's lands and inheritance "when my dimensions are as well compact, / my mind as generous and my shape as true / as honest madam's issue?" (Shakespeare 1.2.7-9). Here, Edmund claims he is as able-bodied and strong-minded as anyone born legitimately, and goes on to question why the way he was born should limit what he is allowed to do or have.

Trans people today are also restricted based on the way they were born. Trans people face disproportionate degrees of violence: "Transgender people are over four times more likely than cisgender people to experience violent victimization, including rape, sexual assault, and aggravated or simple assault" ("Transgender People"). According to another survey, 30% of trans adults have experienced homelessness in their lives (O'Neill et al.). Transphobia has dire consequences on the lived experiences of trans people, often based on their defiance of gender

norms. Edmund is similarly punished for a constructed categorization that he defies, despite that defiance having nothing to do with his actual body or mind.

In *King Lear,* love, like gender, is portrayed as a societal construct which one may or may not perform correctly. The language of love in *King Lear* is often built around duty, obligation, or law. When Cordelia refuses to describe her love in detailed and flowery language, as her sisters do, she says to her father, "You have begot me, bred me, loved me. / I return those duties back as are right fit: / obey you, love you, and most honor you" (Shakespeare 1.1.106-8). The OED defines "duties" as "the action and conduct due to a superior; homage, submission; due respect, reverence; an expression of submission, deference, or respect" ("Duty"). Her use of "duties" indicates that the performance of love is "due" to Lear as her "superior." She sets up a transactional exchange in which fathers beget their children, and in return, children are obligated to love them "as are right fit," as an established and right process. Lear does not recognize that Cordelia gives him this answer because she is not performing her love as Goneril and Regan did. He exiles her, but he realizes the errors of his ways, and learns that she is right. Edmund directly breaks the precedent Cordelia establishes. Though his father did beget him, Edmund does not "obey" or "honor" him, and instead schemes and overthrows him. Edmund rejects the societal expectation of what filial love looks like by not following Cordelia's example. While Cordelia believes that love is due from a child simply because their parent conceived them, Edmund believes that love is owed both ways, and does not feel recognized by his father.

Edmund's use of the phrase "honest madam's issue" in opposition to himself identifies chastity as another societal value that he rejects. Edmund was conceived out of wedlock, and his issue is not with the behavior of his parents but with the societal convention that condemns that behavior. In fact, he insults those conceived *within* the bounds of marriage, referring to the act of

their production as “creating a whole tribe of fops / got ‘tween asleep and wake” (Shakespeare 1.2.15-16). Bastards, by contrast, “in the lusty stealth of nature, take / more composition and fierce quality” (Shakespeare 1.2.11-12). Edmund not only has no issue with adultery, but he believes those born out of wedlock are better because they were conceived with lust, and thus have “more composition and fierce quality,” or “a stronger constitution and more energy” (Mowat and Werstine 30 n13). Additionally, he goes on to initiate affairs with Goneril and Regan, proving further his lack of objections to adultery and again rejecting societal constructs.

Edmund’s refusal to perform love in a societally-accepted manner and rejection of conventional relationships connect to the modern perception of queerness. A study from the Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication claims that “in general, queer perspectives question the legitimacy of hegemonic assumptions about bodies and sexualities, opting instead for more fluid and porous discourses and norms” (West). Edmund sums up the complicated relationship between Goneril, Regan, and himself after seeing them dead: “I was contracted to them both. All three, now, marry in an instant” (Shakespeare 5.3.270). The notion that three of them might marry together breaks social norms; the idea of a three-way marriage is non-monogamous and incestuous, as well as bigamous, since Regan and Goneril are already married. When considering who of the sisters he might marry, he asks, “Which of them shall I take? / Both? One? Or neither? Neither can be enjoyed / If both remain alive” (Shakespeare 5.1.65-7). “Both” appears as an option alongside “one” and “neither,” though the bounds of contemporary marriage practices would not allow him to marry both, and if he were to marry one and take the other as a mistress, he’d be committing adultery. In rejecting standards of typical relationships, Edmund “[questions] the legitimacy of hegemonic assumptions,” and his attitude towards relationships can be viewed as queer.

His relationships with Goneril and Regan ultimately mean enough to him to transform him. It is through these affairs that he realizes, as he dies, that "Edmund was beloved," which is the key to his redemption and recognition (Shakespeare 5.3.287). His final recognition of love, which enables him to grant mercy to Lear and Cordelia, comes from outside the bounds of societal constructs. His ability to find love mirrors Lear's revelation: love cannot be quantified. Matthews claims that this recognition is "perverse" and "pathetic." Ultimately, the love he recognizes is outside the bounds of what is considered societally acceptable, which people may pass judgement on by calling it "pathetic." The "love" he experiences is out of wedlock, like his conception, and he does not discount either. Edmund still values his bastard status and still takes Goneril and Regan's desire for him as love, even as his doing so falls outside of the bounds of established societal norms and may be considered "perverse." This charge of perversion can be seen as well in the contemporary trans experience.

Trans people are often treated as deviants or as overly sexual, and experience fetishization in varying contexts. In a qualitative study from 2024 surveying transmasculine individuals, researchers identified "a dominant theme [centering] on the perception of trans people as deviant from cis-hetero normativity and the norm of vanilla sexuality and sexual morality" ("From Abstinence"). Additionally, a 2021 survey from the *Archives of Sexual Behavior* claimed that "64.2%...of [transgender] participants answered 'yes'...or 'maybe'...to the question: 'In your experience, have you ever felt fetishized?'" ("'Being'"). While the authors of the study purposefully do not define fetishization to participants to avoid shaping responses, we can consult the OED definition for fetish: "An unusual or unconventional object or activity to which a person's sexual desire or gratification is strongly linked" ("Fetish"). The intensity of Goneril and Regan's desire for Edmund is evident, though it is not clear why they both find him

so attractive. Regan describes Goneril's desire for Edmund, saying "I know your lady does not love her husband; / I am sure of that; and at her late being here, / She gave [Edmund] strange eliads and most speaking looks" (Shakespeare 4.5.27-9). "Eliad," or "oeillade," is defined in the OED as "an amorous look, an ogle," suggesting Regan perceives Goneril's attraction to Edmund as amorous, or even lecherous ("Oeillade"). Both sisters appear heated as they bicker over Regan's potential marriage to Edmund in Act 5 Scene 3, with Regan describing her anger as "a full-flowing stomach" (Shakespeare 5.3.87). "Stomach" is described in the Folger's notes as "often [meaning] anger"—Regan's literal stomach, too, is suffering, as she has been poisoned by Goneril in their fight over Edmund (Mowat and Werstine 240 n87). Both women have charged, amorous feelings for Edmund, but don't have an appreciation for him as a complete person. A common theme identified in the *Archives of Sexual Behavior* study was the feeling among trans participants that they were not seen for who they truly were, but rather were treated as a commodity ("Being").

Edmund's experience of Regan and Goneril's desire for him is not clear—he is a quiet character and generally speaks only when spoken to. When Regan and Goneril bicker over Regan's potential marriage to Edmund in Act 5 Scene 3, Edmund is present but does not acknowledge or respond. The only form of affection we see him show to them is his calculation that, while Goneril is married, "Neither can be enjoyed / If both remain alive" (Shakespeare 5.1.66-7). His use of "enjoyed" suggests a degree of pleasure he might glean from them aside from how a relationship with either of them would advance his station. The *Archives* study does not treat fetishization as a uniquely negative thing, and describes situations in which participants felt positively about being fetishized in addition to describing negative experiences. One trans male participant states, "When having practically no option for feeling desired, being fetishized

seems better than having no attention at all" ("Being"). Edmund's "enjoyment" of Goneril and Regan and eventual interpretation of their affection for him as love can be quizzical, as their desire for him does not represent what we think of as a wholesome love of a full person. However, like with the trans man surveyed, Edmund doesn't feel wanted in any other capacity in his life.

Regardless of whether or not Edmund's father loves him, Edmund's conflation of love with quantifiable value prevents him from experiencing familial love. Edmund addresses the love his father shares for him and his brother Edgar by announcing, "Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land. / Our father's love is to the bastard Edmund / As to th' legitimate" (Shakespeare 1.2.17-9). The direct positioning of "love" with his assertion, "I must have your land" places the value of love and the value of land in direct comparison**,** manipulating love into something measurable. Critic Arthur A. Brown analyzes Edmund's manipulation of language and claims that "what Edmund means by 'Nature'...is sensuality and self-assertion. What he means by 'nations' is convention and legal technicalities. What he understands by 'brother' is the accident of begetting" (43). Brown analyzes Edmund's language through his use of words deriving from the Indo-European prefix gen-, meaning to beget, which is the root through which we get the words gender, nature, kin, and kind. Edmund's fixation on and manipulation of these terms of begetting warps their meaning to shift focus from family to the individual. While Lear reaches out in search of kindness in his daughters, Brown claims, "Edmund, on the other hand, turns away from kinship, [and] uses language for self-assertion and calculation" (43). Additionally, he holds little sympathy for his father and mocks his belief in astrology. When Gloucester attributes recent turns of events on the movements of the sun and moon, Edmund complains that people blame their problems on astrology. Alone, he soliloquizes, "This is the excellent foppery of the

world, that when we are sick in fortune (often the surfeits of our own behavior) we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and stars" (Shakespeare 1.2.125-8). Not only does he fail to empathize with his father's distress, but he also comments specifically that people sublimate problems that they caused themselves onto forces outside of their control after his father has just lamented of "the bond cracked 'twixt son and father" (Shakespeare 1.2.115). Edmund believes in individualism and self-determination over his father's astrology, isolating him further from the family who he believes doesn't care for him.

Much of Edmund's belief that he is not loved derives from his own attitude; still, Edmund is treated with a lack of respect when compared to his legitimate brother. Though Gloucester claims to love Edmund, the tone with which Gloucester talks of Edmund differs greatly from the tone he uses when speaking of his legitimate brother Edgar. When Gloucester discusses Edmund with Kent, he describes Edmund fondly while still managing to insult him. When Kent asks if Edmund is Gloucester's son, he responds, "His breeding, sir, hath been at my charge. I have so often blushed to acknowledge him that now I am brazed to 't" (Shakespeare 1.1.9-11). His response does not address Edmund as a person, but rather describes the circumstances of his breeding, namely its illicit nature and Gloucester's embarrassed response. Gloucester's description of Edmund's breeding being "at [his] charge" refers to the expense Edmund's raising accrued, as well as to the fact that Edmund's "parentage has been imputed" to him (Mowat and Werstine 6 n9). Though Gloucester claims that Edgar is "no dearer in my account," the language couching the way he refers to Edmund lacks respect, especially compared to how he refers to Edgar (Shakespeare 1.1.20-1). When Gloucester describes his love of Edgar to Kent in Act 3, he says simply, "I loved him, friend, / No father his son dearer" (Shakespeare

3.4.178). Gloucester believes that Edgar is the one who betrayed him and still he maintains love and respect in the way he describes Edgar. This respect is not afforded to Edmund.

Throughout the play, Edmund is emasculated and condescended to. When Edmund has convinced Gloucester that Edgar is plotting against him, Gloucester praises him by calling him "Loyal and natural boy" (Shakespeare 2.1.98). Even when praising him, Gloucester uses the term "boy," invalidating his masculinity and seniority. Horbury, when describing the gender plurality of the cross-dressed pageboy figure, cites critics Will Fisher and Bruce Smith on the nature of the "boy" gender in the early modern period. Horbury claims that "'boys were considered to be a different gender from men in the Renaissance.' Understood as a separate and transitional gender to manhood...the label boy 'elaborates a distinction in power vis-à-vis a social or moral superior'" (qtd. in Horbury 111-2). Using this framework to understand the concept of "boyhood" as Gloucester labels Edmund, we can see both a suggestion of gender nonconformity as well as the emasculation that Gloucester assigns Edmund. The only other character who is consistently called "boy" in *King Lear* is the Fool, a literal clown. The label of "boy" that Gloucester places on Edmund and Lear places on the Fool carries a degree of familial affection, but also implies that Lear and Gloucester perceive failed masculinity in the Fool and Edmund. Edmund's masculinity is called into question, too, by Kent and Cornwall. Kent calls on Edmund, saying, "With you, goodman boy, if you please. Come, I'll flesh you. Come on, young master" (Shakespeare 2.2.46-7), invalidating Edmund's masculinity both through the word "boy" and by insulting his rank. "Goodman" is glossed as "a form of address to a man below the rank of gentleman," and is specified as being "insulting to Edmund" (Mowat and Werstine 84 n46). The social landscape of *King Lear* is part of the "social setting" that Joubin names when describing assemblage, and thus social relationships are a part of how Edmund constructs his masculinity.

Because titles were how a man measured his power in early modern society, a man's social rank was part of how he constructed his hegemonic identity as a man. When investigating Edmund's emasculation and perceptions of gender, his fixation on the power he is denied correlates with his masculinity, painting Kent's slander as not just broadly insulting, but emasculating.

Edmund's masculinity and seniority are both questioned by Cornwall, too. When Cornwall and Regan plan to torture Gloucester, Cornwall first sends Goneril away to deliver a letter to Albany. Cornwall does not reference Goneril's sensibilities or fitness to observe what they are about to do, and merely sends her away to complete an errand. However, when he sends Edmund away, he says, "Edmund, keep you our sister company. The revenges we are bound to take upon your traitorous father are not fit for your beholding...Farewell my lord of Gloucester" and later, encourages him off with "Edmund, Farewell" (Shakespeare 3.7.7-14 and 3.7.24). Cornwall says "farewell" twice, indicating an embedded stage direction that Edmund does not leave when he is first bade farewell, perhaps suggesting that he did not want to leave. Even if he wanted to stay, Cornwall does not permit him to. Cornwall justifies Edmund's expulsion by deciding the event is "not fit for [Edmund's] beholding." Regardless of whether or not Edmund wanted to watch his father be brutally tortured, the fact that Cornwall prevents him from making a choice reads like Cornwall is protecting Edmund's sensibilities as if he were a lady or a child rather than an adult man. Cornwall also makes no effort to stop Regan from attending and participating in the torture while Edmund is barred. He implies that Edmund's sensibilities are more delicate than those of Regan, a woman, who would have been perceived as more fragile.

It follows, then, that Edmund recognizes Goneril and Regan's affection for him as love, as they respect his masculinity. They fight over him, each attempting to trump the other in praising Edmund and his virtues. In their fight, Regan describes Edmund's greatness in relation

to her own stature, referencing the promises of marriage he has made to her, which Goneril responds to with, “In his own grace he doth exalt himself / more than in your addition” (Shakespeare 5.3.78-9). Goneril claims that Edmund has worth and nobility in his own right, not in relation to someone he might marry or that he is related to. With nobility and titles tied up in Edmund’s perception of his masculinity, Goneril’s validation of his nobility also provides him with a validation of gender that he does not get from the other male characters. We know from the very first scene, in which they flatter their father in order to grow their power, that Goneril and Regan are sycophants. It would then be possible to assume that the praise they give Edmund to his face is not genuine, and they are instead acting in their own interests by flattering him to get what they want. However, we know how they behave when Edmund is not present.

While Gloucester and Cornwall infantilize Edmund, Regan refers to him as “Lord Edmund,” his proper, traditionally masculine title, and “noble Edmund” (Shakespeare 4.5.6 and 30). Goneril, too, treats him with a reverence and respect that others lack. Goneril places Edmund and her husband in direct comparison: “My most dear / Gloucester! / O, the difference of man and man!” (Shakespeare 4.2.31-3). She compares Edmund, now called Gloucester after displacing his brother and acquiring his father’s title, to her husband Albany. Because she places him in comparison with Albany and refers to both as “man,” we can conclude that she considers Edmund just as much of a man as Albany. Though her love for him is lecherous, she validates his gender. As in the case of the trans man quoted in the *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, Edmund is not bothered by the fact that the love he receives from Goneril and Regan is sexually deviant and reprehensible, because it is coupled with validation of his masculine gender.

Matthews claims that Edmund’s recognition of love is “a pathetic recognition of a perverse thing” (28). Still, he recognizes that he is loveable. In a world where he is belittled,

ignored, and emasculated by the men around him, including those closest to him, the unconventional affection Edmund is shown by the sisters is close enough to the love he is missing that it changes him. He reverses his command to have Cordelia and Lear put to death, saying, “I pant for life. Some good I mean to do / Despite of mine own nature” (Shakespeare 5.3.287 and 291-2). He describes his nature as “rough and lecherous,” referring to his own evilness as though it is uncontestable, simply a part of his being, independent of the movements of fate: “I should have been what I am, had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardizing” (Shakespeare 1.2.138-40). He rejects the normative forms of fate, love, and society, choosing to blaze his own path and determine his own identity, or, as Kemp puts it, “self-fashioning.” The places Edmund finds love and recognition may be “perverse” and his revelation may be “pathetic” in the eyes of society, but that judgement doesn’t acknowledge that that society failed him. Though he may be evil, by his own admission, he is still a person who changes when presented with love.

King Lear is a gory, gruesome play that is ultimately about love. Lear is punished for failing to recognize the value of love—namely that it has no quantifiable value. Like Edmund, love is what forces Lear to change. He reunites with Cordelia, and her forgiveness and unconditional love shake him from his madness. Both Lear and Edmund finally see clearly because of love, though Edmund’s reversal is given less time and attention onstage. Edmund doesn’t have a family member like Cordelia with Christ-like capacity for forgiveness. Gloucester’s fatal mistake is that he is blind to which of his children loves him most, but he also fails to recognize how his behavior affects Edmund. Like many parents of trans children, Gloucester means well in claiming his love for him, but he ultimately fails to perceive his son’s needs. Edmund describes himself as fundamentally evil, regardless of the movements of heaven,

accepting immediately that he is “rough and lecherous” without further investigation. However, reading Edmund as trans reveals just how much Edmund is emasculated, ignored, fetishized, and disrespected. As Edmund believes bastards should not have to have been born legitimately to deserve land, trans people should not have to have been born cis to deserve love, and neither should have to be saint-like to deserve respect. Even in Edmund’s final moments, he is pushed to the sidelines. After being fatally stabbed by Edgar, he is carried away to die offstage. When a messenger comes to announce the news, Albany dismisses him with, “that is but a trifle here” (Shakespeare 5.3.359). He doesn't get a final monologue or even a final word. In his final moments onstage, his self-determination has failed him. When he is wounded, he references the wheel of fate he once disdained, saying, “The wheel is come full circle; I am here” (Shakespeare 5.3.209).

Finding transness in Edmund helps us understand more about this character that’s relegated to the sidelines, even in death. It’s true that he’s manipulative, Machiavellian, and power-hungry, but he’s also quiet, charming, young, and frustrated with a system that has failed him. He’s caught in a precarious state, between high stature and low birth, feeling the tension between the way he was born and the way he is viewed. He is ignored by Gloucester, fetishized by Goneril and Regan, and reviled by the audience. Part of his evil for Shakespeare’s audience would have been his desire to aspire above his station and go against the enforced order of the societal hierarchy. It would have been preposterous to imply that he should not be relegated to a lesser role because of the way he was born. We, however, have a choice in how we view and interpret him and all others who have been forced to find solace in the perverse and pathetic.

Personal Reflection

Edmund's transness was not written intentionally on the part of Shakespeare, but seeing transness around us, especially in a canon of classical literature that many feel doesn't represent them, is important to the theatrical community as well as the trans community. When I was fifteen, I was enrolled in an acting conservatory program for young actors working towards a career in theatre. In my second semester, I was assigned Edmund's Act 1 scene 2 soliloquy. I was told to read the play, take notes on my character, and then memorize and perform the monologue. I started reading the play and marking up my script, and found myself relating to Edmund. He was quiet, ambitious, and clever, and I didn't finish the play for another 3 years, so I wasn't really thinking about all the people that died because of him. I didn't realize I was trans for another couple years, but there were signs. At my first semester wrap-up meeting, I was told I was suited to playing pretty-girl ingénue characters. I was surprised and confused; I never thought of myself that way, as an actor or as a person. I was assigned Edmund's monologue as a way to step out of my comfort zone and play someone unlike myself. Later, when they told me the voice I used to read his monologue was too high, I was hurt. I wasn't trying to do a character voice—it was just my voice.

I went back to Edmund as a college junior and re-read that monologue, and suddenly things jumped out at me I hadn't noticed before. He is ignored, overlooked, rejected, and punished for something he can't control. The real reason I related to him clicked then; in the meantime, I had come out as trans at the end of my senior year of high school, and went on to play male and female characters in college. Like Edmund, I also hated the way I was born, felt that I fell short when compared to cis men around me, and was frustrated that all people saw was my transness, not my talent or ambition. As with how Edmund doesn't hate his bastardy, I never hated my voice, just how people treated me because of it. I did what they wanted, and I tried to

speak with a lower intonation. It's very difficult to thread the needle of androgyny in a theatrical context; when you're inhabiting men and women from as far back as Ancient Greece, there's not a lot of room for existing outside of that binary. I've seen a miniscule handful of trans characters represented on stage, and even fewer represented as complete people with feelings and desires.

Theatre is an empathy-driven art form, and empathizing with trans people allows trans communities to see themselves and experience that "emotional satisfaction" while opening a window into one more part of a full, inclusive portrait of the varied human experience for other audience members. Pushing that empathy for trans people is critical, especially now, as anti-trans sentiment mounts in the US. I've seen ideas similar to Joubin's "pleasure activism" echoed in my experience making theatre. I met with a Philadelphia-based theatre professional who stressed the importance of what we do. It's easy to feel discouraged about the impact of theatre when there are larger political problems you might feel you're not contributing to. However, theatrical experiences can serve as important touchpoints for emotional connection. She reminded me that making people smile during difficult times is important enough, and making an underrepresented community feel seen and heard is even more critical. She reminded me, as many members of oppressed groups will tell you, that when the world wants to trod you down, joy itself is an act of resistance.

Resistance comes in many forms, some of them more acceptable than others. As trans people search for effective ways to resist, they sometimes manifest in the media as villains. Like Edmund, trans "villains" in real life attempt to strike back at a world that struck first. In January of 2025, a young Black trans woman named Jaia Cruz pled guilty to fatally stabbing a man to death following a physical fight. Her legal team claimed self-defense "due to prior interactions between Ms. Cruz and Mr. Hodge" ("The New"). She claimed he called her a slur, made

homophobic remarks, and physically struck her (Tracy). Months prior, videos showing her being brutally beaten on the streets were posted online, and following the case, she received droves of transphobic harassment online. She summed up the experience: “He tried to mess with me because I’m trans, and I poked him up” (Cruz qtd. in Tracy).

Cruz seemed fully unremorseful. She told the detectives, “I hope he’s maggot food...I killed him laughing. Oh, well. I’ll piss on his grave” (Cruz qtd. in Tracy). She defended herself against a long-time antagonist. Trans people are forced to read the news and watch videos circulating online where other trans people are beaten and killed for being trans. It’s not often that we hear about trans victims that fight back, and it’s even rarer for them to win. The trans panic defense, in which a person who assaults a trans person can claim self-defense or even insanity and seek a lighter sentence because of the victim’s identity, is still legal in 30 of the 50 states (“Gay/Trans”). Cruz was charged with second degree murder, and many online claimed she received too light a sentence, calling her “pure evil” and a “disgusting excuse for a human being” (Tracy). Under a legal system where people can get a lighter sentence for killing a trans person, there’s a bittersweet kind of satisfaction that comes with a trans woman receiving a lighter sentence.

I can’t excuse her actions, but I can’t help but admire her refusal to perform a repentance she didn’t feel. Both she and Edmund refuse to perform standards of behavior put forth by a social system that hurts them. With the growing rise of conservatism in media and politics, transphobic rhetoric is being pushed vehemently, and a hateful minority is growing in size and growing more comfortable being open with their hate. In legislative battles against transphobic political movements, trans activists are forced to be eloquent and civil towards people who want to criminalize their existence. In the first three months of 2026, state and national lawmakers

have introduced 747 bills that could harm trans people, including the categories of "healthcare, education, legal recognition, and the right to publicly exist" ("2026"). In the wake of the exhaustion and frustration of facing harassment, being attacked, and having to justify one's own being, trans people may find it's difficult not to find a little bit of satisfaction in a trans villain. Cruz played the villain perfectly, and, in a sense, she won—both the fight against a transphobe and the lesser sentence.

Edmund did not win, but unlike Cruz, he did change. Trans or not, people's experience of the transformative power of love cannot be denied. Being treated like a person, and beyond that, a person with worth and dignity has the power to keep a person from lashing out. The thing that transformed Edmund from a being of ostensibly pure evil to someone who could repent and do some good in his life was not tolerance or the baseline acceptance of his father claiming to love him while degrading him, it was the experience of dignity and love. I believe theatre has that power, and if theatre can represent the lived experiences of the diverse community of theatre artists and theatre-goers, it is meaningfully engaging with a community and its neighbors. If a villain as evil as Edmund could change when shown love, the Jaia Cruzes of the world might forgo their violence if the world were better for them. Like Cruz, Edmund is determined to provoke. To an early modern audience, Edmund is a perfect caricature of the villain: he aspires above his station, breaks conventions of marriage, believes in the young over the old and logic over tradition, and pursues self-determination rather than believing in providence. As transphobia becomes more rampant, we must remember that even our perfect, unrepentant villains are deserving of dignity and of receiving the transformative power of love.

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