

Interpreting Invisibility: The Iconography of Regan Lear

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Iconography, as defined by art historian Erwin Panofsky, is a “description and classification of images [which] furnishes the basis for further interpretation” (Weschler, 201). Theatrical scenes and characters have long been the studies of such iconographic portraits and paintings. In particular, Shakespeare’s tragedy, *King Lear*, has fascinated many artists. Despite a hefty collection of art based on this play’s characters, very few artists have felt that Lear’s middle daughter was worthy of such iconographic immortalization, especially compared to the many paintings of her sisters and other Shakespearean females. When I began to formulate the idea for this paper, I was hoping to discover that (as feminist interpretations began to infiltrate the work of the bard and, therefore, the art surrounding his plays) the more recent images depicting Lear’s daughters would allow them to take more focus and agency in their visual representations. With the stigmas still attached to Goneril and Regan in popular readings of the play, I was sure that the artists originally painting the still-lives of these women would be part of the problem underlining their characters as halves of the same evil whole. I was expecting to uncover more visually interesting and nuanced interpretations of Regan the closer we got to the 21st century, and that is where I was sorely mistaken.

Oddly enough, the paintings that allow Regan some agency in her own representation tend to be from the early artists of the 1800s while the graphic novel interpretations of the 2000s limit her visibility to the point of often being lost in the background or sometimes even to the literal shadows of her sisters, father, or husband. With this startling realization, I decided to attempt to trace how the societal view of the second of Lear’s daughters had changed over time,

keeping in mind the popular schemas surrounding her as well as her various representations in visual art.

I began by analyzing what these visualizations of Regan Lear had in common from the 1790 paintings of Henry Fuseli through the 2007 graphic novel illustrations of Gareth Hinds. The answer: Regan is always presented wearing some variation of red. Similarly, Cordelia is almost always in blue and Goneril dons dark greens for most of her depictions. While the other sisters sometimes are given a slightly different interpretation (Ilya's "Corndelia" and multiple images of Goneril in black, slightly darker red than Regan, or the purple of Ian Pollock's interpretation), Regan stays in her color family exclusively. No matter how we think of her (if we are reminded of her presence at all) she is always either red-headed or wearing a shade of that same color. And what does this mean about her visual reception culturally? Red is an appetite stimulant, creating the feeling of hunger for more, even when what she is craving is unattainable. Red, as the color of passion and desire lends to the popular performance interpretations of Regan as a lusty lush with flushed cheeks from her recent flirtations and libations. Whether this is supported by the text is up to the audience, but there is no doubt that the iconic imagery of Regan in red supports this common directorial choice based solely on her dominant coloring.

The consistency of her color palette is intriguing simply because, despite whether she is the focus or not, red naturally draws the attention of the eye. Henry Fuseli's 1790 painting, *King Lear Admonishing Cordelia*, creates an easy visual path for the viewer- Cordelia's virginal white gown to the dark red curtains framing Lear's throne and his burnt ombre robes to the gold bustier of Goneril and, finally, to the red hair of Regan in her somewhat subordinate and defensive stance. While the obvious point of the painting is the pain in Cordelia's face as a result of her father's visceral anger, the eye, following Fuseli's line, ends on the face of Regan. Not the body,

not the bosom, but the face. In this painting, upon first glance, her image is the one your eye rests upon last, and yet, her face is the first to have any extended amount of attention paid to it. This image, a la Roland Barthes, is full of signs that must be decoded by the viewer. Personally, I see a young woman frightened by her father's violent outburst, but, surprisingly, she still stands as a defiant shield to the husband cowering behind her. The Hilton painting is similar in style. While the red clothing worn by both Lear and Goneril is highlighted, it is Regan's wavy red hair that holds the most focus among the three sisters. Her stance is also worth noting. As she backs away from her father and Cordelia in horror, she still manages to protect her older sister, despite Lear's hand reaching menacingly out toward her. Regan's expression, while alarmed, is not nearly as terrified as the look upon Goneril's face. It is almost as if Regan is more accustomed to the tyrannical wrath of her father. In Hilton and Fuseli's paintings, we are confronted with the image of a woman attempting to outwardly bend to the patriarchy but, if you look at her face, she is much more aware of her strength and control in these situations than anyone else in the images.

Shortly after these works, we see the red shift from just Regan's hair to also becoming the dominant color of her elaborate dressings. Ford Madox Brown, James Archer, and Edwin Austin Abbey depict Regan with both red hair and red garments. We also start to see a shift from her standing off to the side to commanding more attention in the framing of the painting. Brown's painting, *Cordelia's Portion*, circa 1865, keeps Regan closer to the background, but her vibrant red mantle begs for attention. She is still depicted as subordinate to Goneril and her father, but her arms rest upon her husband protectively. The focus of the painting may be aimed toward the dejection of Lear and the pain of Cordelia, but the eye is, yet again, drawn to the bright red of Regan in a field of comparatively bland coloring. Moving into the Archer piece, Regan is still pushed into the background laterally, but her face and red dress are the initial focus of the

painting. The raven-haired Goneril draws momentary focus, as does the pitiful and chastising look on Cordelia's lighter shaded face and hair, but Regan is almost directly in the center of the frame. Her physical stance may be in the background, but her voice is the one most fully heard.

Along comes Edwin Austin Abbey, the only artist to give Regan complete command of the paintings she is captured within (whether this is intentional or not is up to art historians). His 1898 oil painting, *King Lear*, shows the opening scene of the play, with Regan demanding all focus. Cordelia is center and is bathed in pale blue robes matching those of her exiting father, but her auburn hair gives leave for the eye to move to the next source of that same color in the image- Regan's ginger hair and bright red dress. Fanning out her robes to put them on full display, Regan is presented as a confident and almost frivolous woman with little to no remorse toward the disinheritance she just witnessed. According to art historian Lucy Oakley, "The color of [Regan's] dress, the low, central knotting of her hip-slung belt, and the long riverine fall of its cords through the valley created by the raising of her skirt all focus attention on her female sex, with its connotations of mystery, blood, and darkness" (46-47). She may not be the focus of the painting, but Regan certainly manages to keep the viewer's eyes on her. Abbey's 1902 painting, *Goneril and Regan from King Lear*, finally brings Regan to the foreground—but it almost seems like she doesn't know what to do with this unasked for attention. Her crimson gown still tugs at the eye, but her dark auburn hair tries to hide her face. Regan had been begging for focus for so long throughout her history that, once that attention was supplied, she was no longer sure of why she wanted it in the first place. This is the first representation of Regan we have where she seems to have nothing to say. As image analyst W.J.T. Mitchell claims, "What pictures want... is simply to be asked what they want, with the understanding that the answer may well be, nothing at all" (48).

From the auburn-haired Regan of Fuseli and Hilton to Brown, Archer, and Abbey's Regan dressed in garbs of pulsating crimson, the artists of the recent graphic novel interpretations of *King Lear*, Ilya, Gareth Hinds, and Ian Pollock, almost seem to take pains in keeping Regan in her traditional color palette while still managing to hide her in the background when possible. Ilya's intriguing Native American *King Lear* has Regan wearing her trademark red but, somehow despite her parentage, she is paler than her English Colonialist husband, causing her to quite literally blend in with the page. Hind's watercolor *Lear* lightens her clothing to a softer, rosier red and often puts her in backgrounds of similar colors, creating an identical feeling of invisibility that she has in the Ilya piece. Pollock's quite disturbing take on the story emphasizes nothing but the cherry red lips of Lear's middle daughter- creating some interesting, albeit frightening, images in which Regan is reduced to only her luscious, blood-red lips (I'll let you fill in the ways this might be seen as a feminist reading of his illustrations).

The paintings and illustrations of Regan inform the reader as to what she wants from them, her captive audience. According to Mitchell, "Pictures are things that have been marked with all stigmata of personhood and animation: they exhibit both physical and virtual bodies; they speak to us... or they look back at us silently across a 'gulf unbridged by language'" (30). The iconography of Regan is no different- but there is a shift somewhere in the 1900s when she moves from speaking to her audience to an almost complete invisibility, to then silently lurking in the wings, waiting for her chance to communicate once more.

The paintings of Archer and Abbey from the late 1800s allow her agency, but, with the advent of film technology in the 1900s, she is suddenly silenced, put in the corner, or replaced entirely. In film clips from Gerolamo Lo Savio's 1910 silent film *King Lear*, Regan's relevancy to the story is virtually imagined as she is consistently visually blocked by her older sister and

rarely has a moment of her own worth any notice. Moving further into the 1900s, the films of Peter Brook and Grigori Kozintsev, while tending to highlight the familial dysfunction between Lear and all of his daughters, only give real screen time to Regan during Act 3, Scene 7, during the blinding of Gloucester. In the critically acclaimed Japanese film, *Ran*, the daughters in question are turned into sons- the middle son being nothing more than a copycat to his older brother. Regan, even in her male form, is relegated to the shadows once more. Moving from early paintings to filmed adaptations to the medium of the graphic novel, the iconography of Regan shifts drastically between the centuries. And why is this?

It should not come as a surprise that, despite women's rights movements and the resulting multiples waves of feminist thinking since, I believe the livelihood and agency of women is still being undermined by the patriarchal boundaries of the society we exist within. From being put in binders to attempts toward new legislations regarding the control of our wombs, the effort to silence women is still occurring. The exact when and why this shift occurred (if it was a shift at all) is the topic for another much longer examination, but I propose that the art of graphic novels (typically the realm of young boys and girls) is helping to nurture the idea of women as silent and subordinate characters to their male counterparts—even if this silencing is entirely unintentional. Such a woman as Regan should not be concealed- after all, as Marilyn French points out, “Regan performs an act unique in Shakespeare: she kills, in her own person, with a sword” (231). And yet she has somehow moved from the attention-stealing depictions of Abbey and Brown to the near silence of Ilya, Pollock, and Hinds.

Regan Lear, as depicted in her flowing cherry gowns (lending credence to Oakley's interpretations of her sexual nature), calls upon the attention of the viewer, requesting their shift from the other characters inhabiting the painting to focus solely on her. In her earlier

incarnations, she is endowed with power within the frame. When Abbey gave her full focus, she didn't know what to do with it—and it almost seems as if that was her only chance for complete agency as a character in her visual representations. From that moment on, she was judged as not being able to handle the power of the viewer's complete attention. As the medium of film became more popular, Regan declined further- leaving her to plot in the background in silence. With the current influx of Shakespeare in graphic novels for children and young adults, she is given more attention than in film, but she is still demoted to the shadows of other characters. The images of Regan Lear have certainly shifted over the centuries, and I believe that, in this still very patriarchal society we live in, it's about time she was seen once more.

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