The Sisters Unite: Kingship and Kinship
(Act 2, scenes 1 and 2)

Act 2, Scene 1

Regan

The scene opens with an intimation that rumors abound regarding “likely Wars toward, / ’Twixt the Dukes of Cornwall, and Albany” (TLN 938–39; 2.1.11–12). The military backdrop of the action, then, is certainly not gratuitous, and interpretative choices can fruitfully heighten this. Albany, in his strong desire to uphold the rule of Lear, has become estranged from Goneril, causing her men to assume an imminent civil war. They were, after all, privy to both Lear’s threat to Goneril in 1.4—“Thou shalt find, / That I’ll resume the shape which thou dost think / I have cast off forever” (TLN 827–29 1.4.300–01)—and Albany’s obvious lack of support. Goneril’s letter communicated this military hazard to her sister, motivating Regan and Cornwall’s trip to Gloucester’s castle. Given the current political unrest, they travel with a show of force. Regan, an intelligent leader, comes to Gloucester, an admired, high-ranking military man in Lear’s court, to build a solid coalition to assure a stable and secure Britain. Both husband and wife are now “commanders in chief” and are dressed accordingly. Regan’s military costume, replicating the masculine dress of her men, reinforces her comfort and confidence in commanding the armed forces. Regan
prominently dons the same baldric celebrating a new order that Goneril wears in 1.4 in this interpretation.

Upon arriving, a newly empowered Regan expects to be treated as equal to her husband, but initially Gloucester, very much a part of the patriarchal system, defers to Cornwall; he earlier described him as “The Noble Duke my Master, / My worthy Arch and Patron” (TLN 995–96; 2.1.58–59). This fact is not lost on Regan, who takes more and more control of the discourse as the scene continues. She apparently discovers on the journey that Gloucester, her trusted mentor, has had his life threatened by his son Edgar. The Gloucester subplot conveys the theme of inheritance and property, just like the Lear plot. And just like Lear, Gloucester reveals the blindness of the patriarchal ideal. Jonathan Dollimore notes that “Gloucester’s unconscious acceptance of this underlying ideology is conveyed at several points but nowhere more effectively than in Act II scene I.” Here is where Gloucester replaces Edgar with Edmund, granting him status and property (199).1

Upon entering, Cornwall asks about the “strange news,” but here Regan takes the more militaristic position when she declares, “If it be true, all vengeance comes too short / Which can pursue th’offender” (TLN 1027–28; 2.1.88–89). Regan directly associates Gloucester’s bad son with “the riotous Knights / That tended upon my Father” (TLN 1033–34; 2.1.94–95).2 Gloucester, they assume, has been attacked by one of these very knights. Gloucester says “I know not Madam, ‘tis too bad, too bad.” And the Folio adds the phrase “of that consort” to Edmund’s response: “Yes Madam, he was of that consort” (TLN 1033–36; 2.1.94–97). This small adjustment again enhances the fateful though erroneous association of the now-exiled Edgar with the dangerous retinue of Lear, bolstering both Edmund’s contrivances and Goneril’s decision to limit her father’s retinue.

Patently, Regan has taken her sister’s news as fact, sharing her trepidation explicitly with Gloucester and Edmund. The soldier in Regan supposes that Lear’s men, forming a rebellion, have convinced Edgar to kill his father so that they can secure his wealth. Regan is committed to shared power; she communicates her decision that none of Lear’s rebellious men will be allowed at her house, confirming Goneril’s expectation of support.

1 DOLLIMORE: [Both Gloucester and Cornwall offer] to reward Edmund’s “loyalty” in exactly the same way (199–200).

2 Paul Kahn likens the rulers’ gullibility about Edmund to Gloucester’s shortly before. “Like Gloucester, they are taken in by Edmund’s show” (48). He notes the crucial linkage between Edgar and Lear’s men (50). Cordelia “stands with Gloucester, against Edgar. In turn, she expects him to stand with her, against Lear” (51).