

KING LEAR (TAYLOR'S VERSION):
IN SPECULATIVE JUKEBOX DRAMATURGY

by

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Introduction: Shakespeare / Swift — Jukebox as method

In his profile of American singer-songwriter Taylor Swift, Sam Lansky chronicles the genres of narrative that Swift has navigated in her musical career and public image, from ‘a coming-of-age story’ to ‘romances’ to his conclusion: ‘There have been dramas with stakes so high and turns so twisty they feel Shakespearean in their scope, betrayals both personal and professional that have shaped her life.’¹ In particular, I identify what Carolin Isabel Steiner calls Swift’s ‘post-hiatus discography’ — from her album *reputation* (2017) to the present — as resonant with Shakespeare’s *King Lear* for its exploration of the chasm between public performances of reputation and private expressions of love and the generic experimentation between romance and tragedy. In this dissertation, I propose *King Lear (Taylor’s Version)*, a jukebox musical supplementing the Shakespearean text with a musical score from Swift’s post-hiatus discography.

Approaching the intersection of Shakespeare and Taylor Swift, I follow Stephanie Burt’s suggestion that we might understand Swift’s songs in the context of her life story the way we understand Shakespeare’s songs in the context of their dramas — as voiced by character(s).² Treating celebrity as the site of intertextuality, I employ Robert Dyer’s definition of ‘star text’ to understand ‘Taylor Swift’ as *persona* — the combination of her artistic output, promotional/marketing material, media coverage, criticism, and audience reception.³ Swift’s songwriting — a largely confessional, diaristic, autobiographical lyrical output, with some fictional character sketches — has been understood as ‘autofiction’ that narratively blends autobiography with invented storytelling.⁴ Her lyrics encode ‘the story of [her] success’ in a tale comparable to her own popular definition of ‘folklore’ — blending fact and fiction, fantasy and reality, speculation, fable, gossip and legend.⁵ It is this ‘Taylor Swift’, a figure of both contemporary cultural ‘mythology’ and her own self-mythology, whose meaning I inscribe on *King Lear*.

¹ Sam Lansky, ‘Taylor Swift: 2023 TIME Person of the Year’, *Time Magazine*, 6 December 2023 <<https://time.com/6342806/person-of-the-year-2023-taylor-swift/>> [accessed 24 September 2025].

² Stephanie Burt, ‘Taylor Swift and Shakespeare’, *Folger Shakespeare Library*, 23 July 2024 <<https://www.folger.edu/blogs/shakespeare-and-beyond/taylor-swift-and-shakespeare/>> [accessed 24 September 2025].

³ Robert Dyer, *Stars*, 1998 edn (British Film Institute, 1979), pp. 60-2.

⁴ Maria Junko, “‘This is me trying’”: Autofiction and Taylor Swift’, in *The Literary Taylor Swift: Songwriting and Intertextuality*, ed. by Betsy Winakur Tontiplaphol and Anastasia Klimchynskaya (Bloomsbury, 2024), pp. 237-48.

⁵ Taylor Swift, ‘Prologue’, from *folklore* (Republic Records, 2020).

I borrow Claire M. L. Bourne's use of the discursive slash (/) in her edited collection for the Arden Shakespeare Intersections series, *Shakespeare / Text: Contemporary Readings of Textual Studies, Editing, and Performance* — a glyph that alternately means 'and', 'or', or 'and/or' — to mediate 'a dynamic linkage rather than a fixed one.'⁶ Bourne uses the slash to propose a binary relationship between 'two seemingly opposed, irreconcilable or intransigent concepts' and then interrogate their relationship, revealing how they are 'mutually informing or constitutive or otherwise implicated.'⁷ As this introduction is titled, I propose the binary of 'Shakespeare / Swift', which may register as an incongruence between the high culture of canonical literature and the popular culture of contemporary music and celebrity. However, I employ Bourne's historical invocation of the productive slash as the 'pause, the breath, that held two utterances apart from each other' to invite my reading of 'the sameness, relatedness, difference and/or mutual implication' of the two.⁸

In this research, I employ 'jukebox' not just as form but method. In *Shakespeare as Jukebox Musical*, John R. Severn notes the productive meaning-making of jukebox musical dramaturgy, in which the 'unexpectedly appropriate fit between a well-known song and a dramatic situation' prompts the audience's unpacking of its palimpsestic 'semiotic density' for the limited duration of the song, creating a sense of pleasure in their 'spectatorial mastery.'⁹ Malcolm Womack identifies the jukebox-musical form's meaning-making tool of 'revoicing' as inscribing the meaning of a song's original author and recording artist into the adaptation's invocation of the same song in a new, dramatic context.¹⁰ Beyond comparative studies' comparison of two texts side-by-side, and beyond intertextual studies' proposition of the interconnectedness of two texts' meaning, 'jukebox as method' imagines the invocation of a text (song) in a specific dramatic moment and by a specific character's perspective and then unpacks the 'semiotic density' of the theatrical-musical palimpsest.

My proposed *King Lear (Taylor's Version)* re-voices the characters of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, pairing Swift's song with Shakespeare's characters, inscribing the cultural and literary context

⁶ Claire M. L. Bourne, 'Introduction', in *Shakespeare / Text: Contemporary Readings in Textual Studies, Editing and Performance* (Arden Shakespeare, 2021), p. 5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3; *ibid.*, p. 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁹ John R. Severn, *Shakespeare as Jukebox Musical* (Routledge, 2019), p. 7; *ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁰ Malcolm Womack, "'Thank You For the Music': Catherine Johnson's feminist revoicings in *Mamma Mia!*", *Studies in Musical Theatre* 3.2 (2009), pp. 201-11.

of Swift (her biography, identity, and reputation) on Shakespeare. As such, this research is driven by character, effectively exploring Swift's persona in archetype: Swift as deposed regent (Lear), Swift as Machiavellian schemer (Edmund), Swift as one whose trust was betrayed with false evidence (Gloucester), Swift as idealized victim-heroine (Cordelia), and Swift as power-hungry villainess (Goneril and Regan).

My interdisciplinary methodology develops out of Shakespeare studies. Feminist criticism of *King Lear* has variously argued that Shakespeare's text is itself patriarchal, that the drama critiques 'misogynistic masculinity,'¹¹ and that the discipline itself has been historically patriarchal in past *Lear* critics avoiding the implications of gender in its socio-political structure.¹² In this dissertation, I employ the sense of 'play' in speculative criticism¹³, the subjective-empathetic reading of character studies¹⁴ in my reader-response to gender and genre, and 'creative misappropriation' as feminist critical intervention,¹⁵ following Lesley Kordecki and Karla Koskinen's model in *Re-Visioning Lear's Daughters* (2010) of using literary theory to test theatrical possibility and dramaturgical interpretation.

In chapter 0 — a dramaturgical plotting of *King Lear (Taylor's Version)* — I present my scene-by-scene plot breakdown. In the sense that this written product is the result of practice-led research, my practice consists of designing this speculative jukebox musical theatre dramaturgy that composes the Shakespearean material and the Swiftian material together.

The body of this dissertation is divided into three sections by which characters I am 're-voicing' and the specific adaptational approach/intervention — thematic, generic, and scenic — I propose. Though using creative work as a point-of-departure for this written dissertation, each chapter presents argumentative criticism as a means of 'testing' my adaptation dramaturgy. This dissertation serves as a proof-of-concept for *King Lear (Taylor's Version)*.

In chapter 1 — centered on voicing Lear, Gloucester, and Edmund through understanding 'fame as power' — I close-read Swift's discography for its literary intertextuality to prove an

¹¹ Kiernan Ryan, 'King Lear: A Retrospect, 1980–2000', *Shakespeare Survey* 55 (2007), p. 7.

¹² Ann Thompson, 'Are There any Women in *King Lear*?', in *The Matter of Difference: Materialist Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, ed. by Valerie Wayne (Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 117-28

¹³ Louise Geddes, 'Unlearning Shakespeare Studies: Speculative Criticism and the Place of Fan Activism', *Shakespeare Survey* 71 (2018), pp. 209-20

¹⁴ On defenses of Shakespearean character studies, see Stanley Cavell, Michael Bristol, and Sarah Beckwith.

¹⁵ Lynne Bradley, "'Re-vision' of the Kingdom: Feminist Adaptations of *King Lear*", in Bradley, *Adapting King Lear for the Stage* (Routledge, 2010), p. 189.

enduring thread of ‘the Shakespearean’, present a piece of speculative performative creative-criticism imagining interpolation of two of Swift’s songs into *King Lear*, and propose re-voicing Lear and Gloucester as anxiously aging regents through a reading of Swift’s persona of celebrity-lover-artist through Stanley Cavell’s ‘The avoidance of love’ and interpolation her post-hiatus discography.

In chapter 2 — centered on imagining ‘Cordelia’s interludes’, revoicing the character’s silence and absence — I fill the gap in Cordelia’s story through my feminist reader-response, investigate gender in Shakespearean genre studies to excavate the proto-romance in *King Lear* by comparison to *The Winter’s Tale*, employ jukebox speculative dramaturgy to illustrate Cordelia’s physical and emotional journey between banishment and return using Swift’s discography, and contend with how Shakespeare’s patriarchal dramaturgy necessitates Cordelia’s demise.

In chapter 3 — centered on representing Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia — I establish a comparison between the reputations of the daughters and of Swift as dualistically ‘good’ or ‘bad’ through feminist criticism of *King Lear* and criticism of Swift rooted in celebrity studies, close-read *King Lear* and Swift’s paratexts to identify their appraisals of morality through sexuality, explicate a Shakespearean-Swiftian theory of the sexual/textual politics of ‘sheets’, and conceptually propose the bed(room) as the site of the daughters’ potential empowerment in the musical through finding their respective authorial voices in bodily experience.




This research functions, as a form of social-political activism, to legitimize the literary study of Taylor Swift by invoking her name in the same breath as Shakespeare’s. In the emerging field of Taylor Swift studies, this dissertation aims to unite its bifurcated interest in both literary studies and celebrity studies through this offering in speculative performance studies and adaptation dramaturgy that understands Swift’s joint role as songwriter-celebrity through the language of theatre and theatricality.¹⁶ In the field of Shakespearean creativity, this research advocates for the validity of the Shakespearean jukebox musical as an original — not merely derivative — creative endeavor in the craft of piecing together two bodies of work. Finally, as Shakespearean criticism, I aim to prove ‘jukebox’ as a creative-critical method of intertextual studies.

¹⁶ See Betsy Winakur Tontiplaphol and Anastasia Klimchynskaya’s edited collection, *The Literary Taylor Swift: Songwriting and Intertextuality* for various literary readings of Swift’s works; scholarship on Swift in the field of celebrity studies has often appeared in the journals *Celebrity Studies* and *Contemporary Music Review*.

Chapter 0: Dramaturgical Plotting of *King Lear* (Taylor's Version)

The following table briefly outlines the dramaturgical plotting of *King Lear* (Taylor's Version) and my plan for interpolating Swift's songs in the jukebox-musical form, as voiced by the characters of *King Lear*. This work presents Shakespeare's play as the arc of Lear and Cordelia's separation and reunion, beginning with 1.1 and cutting the text after Cordelia's return in 4.7.¹⁷ My adaptation includes 'Cordelia's interludes', new scenes imagining her unseen storyline, interspersed in Shakespeare's plot; these interludes take place in the domesticity of France's castle, their shared living quarters and bedroom. This plan reshapes Shakespeare's dramatic material, moving some of Shakespeare's language around the main plot and, in the case of Cordelia's interludes, writing modern dialogue to replace sentiments coded in Shakespeare's language. Musical theatre distinguishes between diegetic songs (those performed within the world of the play) and non-diegetic songs (heard by the audience but not by the other characters); most of the songs in this production — all but the Fool's quips in 1.4 — are non-diegetic, imagining the character 'breaking out into song' as akin to soliloquy, divulging their emotional state. In this conception, Edmund's role is genderbent to be a woman.

	Shakespeare's play (original text)	Cordelia's interludes (new scenes)	Taylor Swift's songs
KEY	→ indicates one scene carrying into another seamlessly. / indicates scenes happening simultaneously. Act-scene numbers in parentheses indicate the origin of the referenced dialogue and plot points, some being transplanted from the original location to another scene that is an invented composite of multiple scenes from Shakespeare's play. Scenes designated in 'parts' are continuous, with 'interludes' occurring on the split-stage simultaneously in stage-time and narrative-time. Lyrics are <i>italicized</i> .		

SCENE	PLOT	SONG
Prologue	The company assembles centre-stage as a band, with Lear and Gloucester singing the duet, Cordelia on piano, and the Fool on guitar.	 'Nothing New' (Lear, Gloucester, company) ▾ Lear and Gloucester preface the show with a ballad lamenting losing relevancy and lacking wisdom as they age.
Transition		 '...Ready For It' (Cordelia) ▾
1.1	Lear holds a love test to decide how to split up his kingdom among his daughters after abdicating the throne. Goneril and Regan	 'exile' (Lear, Cordelia) ▾ As Cordelia is leaving with France, Lear and Cordelia each lament their parting, ' <i>You were me [town/crown] / Now I'm in</i>

¹⁷ References to act-scene designations follow R.A. Foake's *Arden* edition of *King Lear*.

	comply. Cordelia refuses public flattery. Lear banishes her. France chooses to marry Cordelia, despite lack of dowry.	<i>exile seeing you out</i> , ambiguously depicting both as the person leaving and the person left. They both express frustrations over who is at fault for their relational miscommunication: <i>'You never gave a warning sign—' 'I gave so many signs.'</i>
1.1	Edmund laments society's discrimination against illegitimate children, championing bastards. She tricks Gloucester into thinking Edgar is plotting against his father's life.	<p>♪ 'the last great american dynasty' (Edmund) ▾</p> <p>Edmund tells the story of 'Rebekah', a middle-class divorcée-socialite marrying into money who was socially vilified for her scandalous lifestyle, before revealing that Edmund is her daughter. Resonating with Rebekah's defiance in the face of social stigma, Edmund joyfully vows to carry on her mother's legacy.</p>
Interlude 1	Cordelia and France settle into domesticity in their new relationship, the bedroom being their site of intimacy and vulnerability that solidifies their mutual devotion.	<p>♪ 'King of My Heart' (Cordelia) ▾</p> <p>Replacing the <i>'king'</i> of her life, Cordelia expresses her eternal romantic commitment — heart, body, and soul — to France and embraces her new identity as foreign <i>'queen'</i>.</p>
1.4 (part 1)	At Goneril's, Lear settles in with his knights for dinner. The Fool mocks Lear for favoring his two false daughters over his one true one.	<p>♪ 'tolerate it' (Goneril) ▾</p> <p>As Goneril <i>'lay[s]'</i> the dinner <i>'table with the fancy shit'</i>, she laments that father doesn't <i>'celebrat[e]'</i> her love but <i>'tolerate[s] it'</i>.</p> <p>♪ 'mirrorball' (Fool) ▾ The Fool professes to reflect Lear back to himself.</p> <p>♪ 'Foolish One' (Fool) ▾</p> <p>The Fool taunts Lear as the <i>'[f]oolish one'</i>, telling him to stop expecting declarations of devotion. As the lights crossfade onto Cordelia's scene, the Fool's song begins to narrate her internal assurance, <i>'Foolish one, the day is gonna come for your confessions of love'</i>, affirmed by the presence of her new husband.</p>
Interlude 2 (part 1)	Cordelia rejoices in her newfound sense of home.	<p>♪ 'Lover' (Cordelia) ▾</p> <p>Cordelia expresses the intimacy of her new domesticity with France, <i>'We could leave the Christmas lights up till January / This is our place, we make the rules.'</i></p>
1.4 (part 2)	Goneril objects to Lear's rowdy knights, demanding he dismiss half his retinue.	
Interlude 2 (part 2)	Cordelia and France marry, alongside a coronation, and Cordelia is now queen.	<p>♪ 'Lover' (Cordelia) ▾</p> <p>In the second half of the song, Cordelia addresses the bride as her wedding vows, <i>'Ladies and gentleman, will you please stand / [...] I take this magnetic force of man to be my lover.'</i> Finishing her vows, she narrates, <i>'And at every table, I'll save you a seat'</i>, taking her seat at the throne next to France.</p>
1.4 (part 3) →	Lear verbally attacks Goneril for her	<p>♪ 'Anti-Hero' (Fool) ▾</p>

1.5	ingratitude, then prepares to leave for Regan's house.	The Fool remarks on Lear's maturity without wisdom before they begin their journey.
2.1	Edmund hears of civil war brewing between Albany and Cornwall. Edmund convinces Edgar to flee for fear of Cornwall. Edmund shows her self-inflicted wound as evidence of her defense of her father. Cornwall and Regan take Edmund to their service.	<p>♪ 'Vigilante Shit' (Edmund) ▾</p> <p>Edmund confirms her villainous but righteous actions (<i>'I'm on my vigilante shit again / I don't start shit but I can tell you how it ends'</i>), vowing her vengeance and encouraging other women to do the same.</p>
2.3	Fleeing his death sentence, Edgar disguises himself as a mad beggar.	
2.4	Lear arrives, asking Regan and Cornwall to take in him and his knights. At Goneril's arrival, Lear argues over his retinue, and once Regan and Goneril both conclude that Lear does not need any of his knights, Cornwall locks Lear out of the gates.	<p>♪ 'I Did Something Bad' (Goneril, Regan) ▾</p> <p>Goneril and Regan express their lack of remorse for turning their father out of their houses. Cordelia sings backup vocals in solidarity.</p>
Interlude 3	Cordelia hears about Lear's mistreatment (2.2 and 3.1).	<p>♪ 'Better Man' (Cordelia) ▾</p> <p>Cordelia reflects on her past relationship with her father, acknowledging his mistreatment and her conflicting feelings, before affirming her decision to run away. Goneril and Regan sing backup vocals in solidarity.</p>
3.3 → 3.5 / 3.2	Lear is set out into the storming heath with the Fool (end of 2.4). Gloucester leaves to rescue Lear (3.3). Edmund betrays her father to Cornwall (3.5). Lear rages against the elements (3.2).	<p>♪ 'Look What You Made Me Do' (Lear, Edmund) ▾</p> <p>Edmund and Lear express their contempt for those who betrayed them and vow vengeance.</p>
Interval		
3.4 → 3.6 (part 1)	Moving with his companions from the heath to a hovel's shelter, Lear conducts a mock-trial of his daughters. Lear falls asleep.	<p>♪ 'Anti-Hero' (Lear, company) ▾</p> <p>Lear approaches self-reflection, expressing self-loathing, and anxieties about ambitious inheritors.</p>
Interlude 4	Cordelia sits at the piano in the middle of the night, working through her feelings. (Hearing her haunting ballad across the ocean's divide, Lear momentarily stirs in the nightmarish vision.)	<p>♪ 'my tears ricochet' (Cordelia) ▾</p> <p>In a funeral lament, Cordelia expresses her own grief in her loss of homeland and belonging.</p>
3.6 (part 2)	The Fool, Edgar, and Gloucester carry the sleeping Lear away. The Fool gives a prophecy before dying (3.2).	<p>♪ 'The Prophecy' (Fool, Lear) ▾</p> <p>The Fool voices Lear's plea for love and his fear of his destined loneliness: <i>'Please I've been on my knees / Change the prophecy / Don't want money / Just someone who wants my company.'</i></p>
Interlude 5	Cordelia enjoys France's gentle companionship and home. Cordelia and France contemplate sending forces into	<p>♪ 'Sweet Nothing' (Cordelia) ▾</p> <p>Cordelia appreciates the peace of France's unconditional love of her against the backdrop of a chaotic world: <i>'I find myself</i></p>

	England to defend Lear.	<i>a-running home to your sweet nothings / Outside they're push and shoving / You're in the kitchen hummin' / All that you ever wanted from me was sweet nothing.'</i>
3.7 → 4.1	Cornwall and Regan blind Gloucester for his supposed disloyalty. Thrust out the gates, Gloucester asks Edgar (as Poor Tom) to lead him to Dover.	<p>🎵 'The Archer' (Gloucester) ▾</p> <p>In the moment of his blinding, time slows and Gloucester realizes his folly in trusting the wrong child, reflecting on his own opaque self-image and identity.</p>
4.2 / 4.5	Goneril pens her devotional letter to Edmund (4.6). Goneril favors Edmund, becoming romantically entangled, and Albany rebukes her for her treatment of Lear. Simultaneously, the widowed Regan expresses she would rather take Edmund's hand.	<p>🎵 'So It Goes...' (Goneril, Regan) ▾</p> <p>In their separate bedrooms, Goneril and Regan express their sexual desire for Edmund: <i>'You know I'm not a bad girl / But I do bad things with you.'</i></p>
Interlude 5	Cordelia and France send French forces to England (4.3); the three sisters and their partners (Goneril and Albany, Regan and Cornwall, Cordelia and France) prepare for war.	<p>🎵 'Miss Americana & The Heartbreak Prince' ▾</p> <p>Cordelia assesses the national demise and her disreputation with an air of political disillusionment, before affirming that she should return home from exile, in belief of their eventual victory.</p>
4.6	Edgar (as Poor Tom) pretends to lead Gloucester to the edge of the Dover cliff, where Gloucester attempts suicide. Lear and Gloucester meet on the plain face-to-face, babbling incoherently but recognizing each other. French attendants try to rescue the mad Lear, who runs off.	<p>🎵 'hoax' (Gloucester, Lear) ▾</p> <p>Gloucester and Lear each lament the seeming falsity or irrationality of their true child's devotion, but embrace the relationship's melancholy.</p>
Interlude 6	Cordelia resolves to return to Dover herself and rescue Lear, ordering out a search party for him (4.4).	<p>🎵 'Daylight' (Cordelia) ▾</p> <p>Cordelia maturely moves past her bitterness and anger towards forgiveness and moving on.</p>
4.7	Cordelia kisses Lear awake from his madness and the two are reunited.	<p>🎵 'Call It What You Want' (Lear, Gloucester) ▾</p> <p>In a split-scene, the weakened Gloucester propped up in the shade of a tree (5.2, 5.3), and the mad Lear in a mad haze between daydream and sleep, the two realize the love and loyalty of their true children, Edgar and Cordelia.</p>
Epilogue	The company performs a choreographed movement-and-dance piece.	<p>🎵 'cardigan' (Cordelia, company) ▾</p>
Curtain Call	The company bows.	<p>🎵 '...Ready For It' (company) ▾</p>
Encore	The company resumes its position as a 'band'.	<p>🎵 'Mastermind' (company) ▾</p>

Chapter 1: Lear, Gloucester, Edmund and the Fool — Fame as love and power

In this chapter, I argue for the presence of ‘the Shakespearean’ in Taylor Swift’s discography; then, I explicate a proposal for collaging *King Lear* and Swift through her 2017 album, *reputation*; finally, I detail re-voicing Lear and Gloucester with Swift’s post-hiatus discography by reading Swift’s lyrics through Stanley Cavell’s ‘The avoidance of love.’

‘Love Story’ from Swift’s second studio album, *Fearless* (2008), marks her most overt invocation of ‘the Shakespearean.’¹⁸ Swift adopts the character of Juliet, lamenting a thwarted young romance with her ‘Romeo’ that she intertwines with the language of fairytales, ‘You’ll be the prince / And I’ll be the princess.’ Swift’s adaptive intervention is writing Shakespeare’s characters a happy ending; the speaker of the final chorus changes to Romeo who asks her, ‘Marry me Juliet [...] I talked to your dad, go pick out a white dress / It’s a love story, baby just say “yes”.’ This youthful songwriting shows Swift’s identification with one of Shakespeare’s tragic romantic heroines as revised in the genre of fairytales promising the princess a ‘happily-ever-after’. I take ‘Love Story’, and Swift’s iterative use of its language in her lyrics since, as an invitation to position Shakespeare as an intertext with Swift’s discography.

Following major career success with *Fearless*, Swift’s third studio album, *Speak Now* (2010), elaborates on the ‘princess’ imagery, evolving her image from a teenage country-pop princess to an emerging ‘queen’ of the music industry. In the anthemic ‘Long Live’ (2010), Swift immortalizes the success of her breakout era in lyrics illustrating the successes of her music career as her ‘kingdom’. She identifies and appreciates her touring bandmates as reigning royalty (‘We were the kings and the queens’), as they achieve critical acclaim at prestigious awards ceremonies for the recording industry (‘And they read off our names’). Celebrating the collective, victorious jubilation of her audience, she describes the arena lights of her first headlining concert tour, ‘Long live [...] How the kingdom lights shined just for me and you’, equating her commercial popularity among fans with the support of royal subjects. As Swift’s songwriting matures, her fourth and fifth studio albums,

¹⁸ Going forward, I present my initial in-text references to the names of Swift’s songs and albums in single-quotes and italics, respectively, followed in parenthetical by the year of their release — i.e., the song, ‘Love Story’ (2008), is from the album, *Fearless* (2008). See the Appendix which lists which album each song on the set list is from, and the bibliography which lists the albums in alphabetical order under Swift’s name. Where I quote a song’s lyrics in-text but do not name its title in-text — that is, where the origin of the song lyrics referenced is not clear by the prose alone — I cite the song in the footnotes. Through this system of distinguishing Swift’s songs and albums, I aim to make clear references to her discography and the legibility of this dissertation to readers previously unfamiliar with her body of work.

Red (2012) and *1989* (2014), eschew her adolescent ‘princess’ imagery, and, with a genre shift from country music to pop, she found massive critical and commercial success in an era of her career she calls her ‘imperial phase.’¹⁹

However, a high-profile celebrity feud in 2016 marked a major change in her public image and, later, oeuvre. To explain the cultural context and to summarize in brief the relevant tabloid gossip: American rapper Kanye West released a song, ‘Famous’ (2016), in which he referred to Swift as ‘that bitch.’²⁰ When Swift publicly protested the lyric as pejorative, West’s wife, American media personality and socialite Kim Kardashian, released an edited video of Swift and West’s phone call that appeared to prove that Swift had given her express permission for West to use it. (At the time, Swift also protested West taking credit for her fame in the song’s lyrics as misogynistic and for his depiction of her naked wax sculpture in the music video as ‘revenge porn.’) As a result, Swift was ‘cancelled’ on social media, deemed manipulative, a liar, and a ‘snake.’

After a one-year hiatus from public appearances, Swift returned with the release of her sixth studio album, *reputation* (2017). The album’s incendiary and vengeful lead single and music video, ‘Look What You Made Me Do’ (2016), portrays Swift shedding her image of authenticity as ‘America’s Sweetheart’ and embracing the persona of ‘villain’; the promotional campaign implied that the album would be rooted in the artificial realm of celebrity drama, promising ‘diss’ tracks directed at Swift’s enemies. However, the tracklist proved to comprise mostly love songs. The album presents a narrative in which Swift at first vows vengeance for her disreputation in celebrity disputes but ultimately finds redemption and solace in blossoming romantic love.

With its return to ‘kingdom’ imagery, I argue that *reputation* marks the reappearance of ‘the Shakespearean’ in Swift’s discography; transforming the language previously coded in the idealistic genre of fairytales into the darker genre of Shakespearean tragedy, the album evolves the characterization of her music career from a ‘shining’ kingdom to a fallen one. Swift’s lyrical engagement on the album with the language of royalty, kingdoms, castles, weapons, and theatricality evokes the Shakespearean. Additionally, I understand Swift’s *reputation* as ‘Shakespearean’ through its use of character archetypes (king/queen, villain, fool) and its narrative

¹⁹ Lansky, ‘Taylor Swift: TIME 2023 Person of the Year.’

²⁰ Kanye West, ‘Famous’, from *The Life of Pablo* (GOOD Music and Def Jam Recordings, 2016). West’s song revived an ongoing feud with Swift that began during the 2009 MTV Music Video Awards. See Shaun Cullen for a chronicle of the inciting incident, its fallout, and a reading of its racial politics.

arc that mirrors *King Lear*. I map the narrative of *King Lear* onto the model of *reputation* — the story of a loss of power and a fall from grace following a betrayal of trust, ending with the redemptive power of true love. I compare Lear (and, at times, Gloucester) with Swift as figures seeking love both publicly and privately. As a king, Lear seeks the support of his courtiers and his retinue of knights, while, as a father, he seeks the filial devotion of his three daughters; similarly, as a celebrity, Swift seeks the favor of a general public (whether that be American culture, the internet, and/or news media), while, as a lover, she seeks the private understanding and love of a romantic beloved. In remodeling *King Lear* on *reputation*, my proposed *King Lear (Taylor's Version)* cuts Shakespeare's text after 4.7, Cordelia's return, reframing Shakespeare's tragedy as the story of Lear and Cordelia's separation and reunion in line with a Shakespearean romance; this adaptation abridges the play, refraining from depicting the multiple tragic deaths in 5.3.

By voicing Lear, Gloucester, and Edmund with Swift's *reputation* songs, *King Lear (Taylor's Version)* reframes Shakespeare's tragedy in the arc from disreputation to (the precipice of) redemption. To prove this jukebox concept, I next illustrate the interpolation of two such songs through speculative creative-critical performance criticism imagining two moments in *Lear*.

First, Edmund and Lear voice the climax leading into the interval, the vengeful 'Look What You Made Me Do' (2017). Leading into the musical number Edmund betrays her father to Cornwall (3.3 and 3.5). Setting in motion her dastardly plan, she begins singing, confessing to the audience her contempt for her father's unfair primogenitary privileging of legitimate son over bastard daughter, using theatrical language ('I don't like your little games / Don't like your tilted stage / The role you made me play / Of the fool.') In a split-stage Lear sings the second verse as he is cast out by his daughters and approaches the castle gates; he addresses their lack of hospitality, inherited estates, and celebratory abandonment of him (in Goneril's 1.4 dinner scene and Regan and Goneril's 2.4 mutual rejection), using sovereign language ('I don't like your kingdom keys / They once belonged to me / You asked me for a place to sleep / Locked me out / Then threw a feast.') But, Lear vows vengeance, singing, 'Maybe I got [my karma] but you'll all get yours'.

In the confrontational chorus that voices the song title eight times, Edmund and Lear's mimicry of Swift's shifting metrical stresses with each repetition first directs attention to each's villainous actions ('*Oob* / Look what you made me *do*'), then emphasizes their execution ('Look what you made me *do*'), deictically emphasizes first their own positionality ('Look *what* you just

made *me* do’), then their adversary’s (*Look* what *you* just made me do’), and finally entirely denies responsibility and disclaims blame for the ensuing narrative. As Edmund leads the bridge’s refrain from centre-stage, embracing the role of villain (‘I don’t trust nobody and nobody trusts me / I’ll be the actress starring in your bad dreams’), Regan and Goneril appear on either side of her joining in, then Lear and Gloucester flank them: the unsympathetic heroes and their evil foes united in their communal vow. As the song crescendos to its final rising bars, the raging storm cracks, the lightning flashes, and the youth shut Lear out of the kingdom gates — cue interval.

Approaching the musical’s end, I position the redemptive ‘Call It What You Want’ (2017), revising *reputation*’s earlier ‘kingdom’ imagery, as a duet after 4.6 between Gloucester and Lear. In their respective settings, the weakened Gloucester, under the tree where Edgar leaves him (5.2), and the mad Lear caught, between reality and a daydream as he slowly awakens in the French camp near Dover (4.7), address the song to their loyal and true children, Edgar and Cordelia, in a moment of realization. Lear expositis his fall from grace, ‘My castle crumbled overnight’, and Gloucester his ignorance of violence, ‘I brought a knife to a gunfight’, then jointly affirming, ‘They took the crown, but it’s alright.’ Gloucester continues with the first verse, alluding to Regan and Cornwall’s false suspicion (‘All the liars are calling me one’) before revealing his wellbeing despite all (‘I’m doing better than I ever was’). Gloucester sings the chorus — the romantic endearment ‘baby’ reinscribed to his literal child, Edgar — ‘My baby’s [sweet] like a daydream / Walking with his head down / I’m the one he’s walking to / So [...] call it what you want to.’

Lear picks up the second verse, referring to his elder daughters (‘All the drama queens taking swings), then his mocking Fool (‘All the jokers dressing up as kings’), and then Cordelia (‘They fade to nothing when I look at [her]’). Finally self-reflecting, admitting fault, acknowledging a lack of maturity (‘And I know I make the same mistakes every time / Bridges burn, I never learn’), Lear realizes his one saving grace (‘At least I did one thing right [...] Starry eyes sparking up my darkest night.’) In the second chorus, as Lear and Gloucester voice their revelations of the redemptive power of their nurturing, protective beloved who pierces through the external chaos (‘My baby’s [...] / High above the whole scene / Loves me like I’m brand new’), they see Cordelia and Edgar wondrously materialize in their vision through the haze of fog. Just as Lear approaches Swift’s bridge yearning for escape (‘You don’t need to save me / But would you run away with me?’), the musical arrangement fades into underscoring for the beginning of 4.7; Cordelia kisses

Lear awake from his madness with the language of remedy, ‘O my dear father, restoration hang / Thy medicine on my lips, and let this kiss / Repair those violent harms that my two sisters / Have in thy reverence made,’ and the two are reunited.²¹

So ends the Shakespearean text of *King Lear* (*Taylor’s Version*). The musical ends on a romantic note, lingering in Shakespeare’s moment of hope. I posit an echo in the stage images of 1.1 and 4.7 — Lear centre, with Cordelia downstage, Goneril to the left, and Regan to the right — revising the image of the ‘love test’ with each of the three daughters approaching Lear with their respective armies — Regan and Goneril’s with the promise of a brewing civil war, and Cordelia’s doubly to rescue Lear and to foreshadow the imminent international war. This adaptation targets what I call ‘the knowing audience’, audiences of adaptation dramaturgy (or, ‘adapturgy’, per Linda Barnette), that, in recognizing the source material, experience a ‘palimpsestuous pleasure’ in discovering the layers of meaning reinscribed.²² My audience shares in one moment of hope and restoration, before anticipating the unseen tragedy of the last act — the eruption into war, Gloucester’s bursting heart at recognizing Edgar, Lear’s broken one in holding Cordelia’s corpse — with dread.

I take *reputation’s* equation of celebrity with Shakespearean royalty as the stimulus for this research and creative inquiry. To piece out the rest of Lear and Gloucester’s arcs in *King Lear*, I propose voicing them through songs from Swift’s post-hiatus discography that I term ‘the insecurity cycle.’ I probe Swift’s self-presentation as a lover in her discography to suggest that, as a private individual, her lyrics evidence her seeking the devotion of a romantic beloved, but as a celebrity-artist, as a performer and as confessional singer-songwriter detailing her personal experience, she seeks the devotion of the audience of her artistic work: the combination of fans, listeners of her records, and attendees of live performances. I acknowledge that Swift, a young, beautiful woman ‘in her glittering prime’²³, may seem like an odd comparison to Lear (and to a secondary extent, to Gloucester, as well), an elderly man in infirmity. However, I argue that in reading Swift’s post-hiatus discography by following Stanley Cavell’s reading of *King Lear*, Swift,

²¹ William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. by R. A. Foakes (Arden Shakespeare, 1997), IV. vii. 26-29.

²² Jane Barnette, *Adapturgy: The Dramaturg’s Art and Theatrical Adaptation* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2018), pp. 53-70.

²³ Taylor Swift, ‘I Can Do It With a Broken Heart’, from *The Tortured Poets Department* (Republic Records, 2024).

Lear, and Gloucester are comparable for their similar fears of aging, losing power, self-reflection, and vulnerability, and their crises of identity.

Cavell reads the tragedy of *King Lear* as being Lear and Gloucester's 'avoidance of love.'²⁴ Cavell reads Shakespeare's use of the language of sight as Lear and Gloucester's avoidance of the acknowledgement of others (of 'being seen', recognition) and their avoidance of acknowledgement of themselves ('insight', self-reflection). In his abdication as love test, Lear demands his daughters' performances of false love to affirm his public image as authoritative; however, Cordelia's refusal to comply, in not being able to perform devotion like her sisters when hers is true, reveals Lear's own shame in asking for such devotion and prompts his self-recognition in identifying his declining authority among the court. Lear's avoidance of (Cordelia's) love is rooted in his fear of dependency (on his children for their care), his fear of aging (in losing his authority and power as king), and his fear of vulnerability (in wanting, needing, desiring love). He wants knowledge of love (that is, proof, evidence, surety), but Cordelia can only offer acknowledgement of her love; Lear must have faith and trust in being loved, recognizing that the other is human, and open himself up to the vulnerability of both being seen and, in the wanting love, to the possibility of not being loved. Gloucester's avoidance of Edgar's love and sight is rooted in his avoidance of self-acknowledgement, of self-reflection, of his own fault in misplacing his trust in the wrong son, of his own shame.

Comparably, in her documentary, *Miss Americana* (2020), Swift divulges similar crises of identity and insecurity in her life experience as a performer: she professes her belief that her latest album release at age twenty-nine might be her last chance at commercial success as an aging woman in the entertainment industry; she confesses her motive as an entertainer, to be liked, is driven by an intrinsic self-doubt in feeling unworthy; and she dolefully grieves the unyielding affections of a public once they have 'fall[en] out of love with you.'²⁵ Lyrically, she acknowledges the music industry's fetishization of women's youth — first at age 22 ('Someone else lights up the room / People love an ingénue'), and then at age 32 ('Sometimes I feel like everybody is a sexy baby / And

²⁴ Stanley Cavell, 'The avoidance of love: A reading of *King Lear*' in Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 246-325.

²⁵ *Miss Americana*, dir. Lana Wilson (US, 2020).

I'm a monster on the hill') — imagining her present as the never-ending eve of the demise of her career and desirability: what I identify as an early-onset Lear syndrome.

The lyrics of her post-hiatus discography, which can be understood as interchangeably referring to a romantic other or the consumers of her artistic body, verbalize her fear at losing her audience's love. As such, my *King Lear (Taylor's Version)* employs these songs from (what I dub) 'the insecurity cycle' — 'Nothing New' (2022, voiced by Lear and Gloucester in the prologue), 'mirrorball' (2020, the Fool in 1.4), 'Anti-Hero' (2022, Lear in 3.6), 'hoax' (2020, Gloucester and Lear in 4.6), and 'Mastermind' (2022, the company in the encore) — that re-voice Lear and Gloucester's own 'avoidance of love' with Swift's words. Crucially, Cavell's criticism unites readings of the language and characters of *King Lear* through: the image of mirrors; the language of blinding and sight; the word 'Nothing'; and variations on 'knowing.' Below, I detail how *King Lear (Taylor's Version)* uses Swift's lyrics to voice Lear and Gloucester through Cavell's language.

Cavell uses the image of 'mirrors' in reading Lear and Gloucester's avoidance of self-reflection, their avoidance of their own identity, and in seeing their acknowledgement of others as reflecting back their own sense of self; for example, Cavell identifies Lear and Gloucester's meeting in 4.6 as the 'great' 'double or mirror image [...] of every man who has gone to every length to avoid himself, caught at the moment of coming upon himself face to face', and he describes the Fool's response ('Lear's shadow') to Lear's question ('Who is it that can tell me what I am?') as a doubling that reflects the obscurity of Lear's self-identity.²⁶ Swift uses the language of mirrors to express her comparable experience. In 'mirrorball' (2020), Swift illustrates her identity as being composed of reflections of others but not itself constitutive ('I'm a mirrorball / I'll show you every version of yourself tonight'), her fractured sense of self causing identity crises ('And when I break it's in a million pieces'), and her dependency on others' reaction for a sense of self ('I can change everything about me to fit in'). In 'The Archer' (2019), she defaces herself in vindictive self-destructiveness and regrets her irrationality and ensuing self-image ('I cut off my nose just to spite my face / And I had my reflection for years and years'). And in 'Anti-Hero' (2022), she avoids self-reflection and self-acknowledgement ('I'll stare directly at the sun but never in the mirror').

Cavell uses the language of blinding and sight to identify that Lear and Gloucester cannot achieve recognition of their true children (Edgar and Cordelia) without first allowing themselves to

²⁶ Cavell, 'The avoidance of love', p. 258; *ibid.*, p. 282-3.

be recognized and recognizing themselves; Gloucester can recognize Edgar only once he's recognized his fault in trusting the false son. Similarly, in 'The Archer' (2019), Swift builds from fear of others' acknowledgement ('They see right through me'), to consideration of allowing others' acknowledgement ('Can you see right through me?'), to finally self-recognition or insight about the incongruence of her self-presentation and identity ('I see right through me') because of her faulty trust ('Cause all of my enemies started out friends').

Chiefly, Cavell discusses 'knowing', in the difference between knowledge and acknowledgement of another, which Shakespeare communicates through repetition of the word, 'nothing': Cordelia's utterance of the word forces Lear to have faith in her love (acknowledgement) and not demand her public performance of it (knowledge),²⁷ Edmund uses the word in tracking Gloucester with false evidence,²⁸ and the Fool uses it to identify Lear as lacking wisdom and worth.²⁹ Similarly, in 'Nothing New' (2022), Swift uses the word to indicate her absence of maturity ('How can a person know everything at 18 but nothing at 22?') and a lack of worth in age ('Will you still want me when I'm nothing new?'). Further, in 'hoax' (2020), Swift is figuratively driven to suicidality over lack of knowledge of another's love ('Stood at the cliffside screamin' "Give me a reason"), before melancholically accepting acknowledgement of their love in trust over reason ('Your faithless love's the only hoax I believe in.')

However, in many ways, Swift does *not* fulfill Cavell's illustration of a figure avoiding love, because she is not just a lyricist expressing her vulnerabilities in song(writing), but a celebrity-artist *performing* vulnerabilities for listeners and live concert attendees. Lear and Gloucester cannot acknowledge their own love or their will to be loved, but Swift can and does — after all, fame is the experience of 'being known.' I employ the jubilatory 'Mastermind' (2022), Swift's song embracing the vulnerability of wanting to be loved, as the encore to *King Lear (Taylor's Version)*. In 'Mastermind', Swift confesses to her addressee her calculations from their first meeting to manifest their relationship ('It was all my design'), embracing her public persona as 'scheming' ('Cause I'm the mastermind.') Shifting from her playfully cunning tone in the verse, Swift's bridge confesses

²⁷ Shakespeare, *King Lear*, I. i. 27-29.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, I. ii. 32.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, I. iv. 78; *ibid.*, I. iv. 85.

her insecurities and the lengths to which she has gone to architect her music career and global stardom:

No one wanted to play with me as a little kid
 So I'm been scheming like a criminal ever since
 To make them love me and make it seem effortless
 This the first time I felt the need to confess
 And I swear I'm only cryptic and Machiavellian 'cause I care

In the song, Swift eschews a performance of nonchalance to admit her desperate want to be loved — both recognizing her own desire to be loved and openly admitting it. In Swift's live performances of 'Mastermind' as the final song of her *Eras Tour*, Swift narrates in the final chorus that her addressee 'knew [her plan] the entire time', slowly revolving in place and pointing to who her addressee: the crowd.³⁰ Swift's song as recorded functions as confession, as vulnerable acknowledgement of her own want to be loved, but delivered live, 'Mastermind' dramatizes Cavell's risk of acknowledgment, intimating the interconnectedness of the needs of the lover and the loved as the codependence of performer and audience. In performance, Swift accents the final line with a bow, in appreciation for her audience's devotion but also revelling for a moment in the affirmation of being appreciated.

Sung by the company as a musical ensemble, 'Mastermind' ends this adaptation of Shakespeare's 'avoidance of love', offering an alternate path around Lear and Gloucester's tragic fear of acknowledgment, proposing Swift as a model for vulnerability, and suggesting we might embrace the terror of recognition for the humanity it affords us and others, for the possibility of affirmation. In doing so, *King Lear (Taylor's Version)* ends in the hope that we might all allow ourselves to love and be loved, to risk knowing and being known.

³⁰ *Taylor Swift: The Eras Tour*, dir. Sam Wrench (US, 2023).

Chapter 2: Cordelia's interludes — Restoring female authorial voice in romance

What distinguishes my proposed *King Lear (Taylor's Version)* as not just a jukebox musical, in which songs are interspersed into an elided cut of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, but an adaptation is the invention of 'Cordelia's interludes'. The question driving my critical and creative inquiry into her character has been: why does Cordelia return? In this section, I argue that Swift's discography can support a feminist revision of *King Lear* through generic adaptation from punitive Shakespeare tragedy to restorative Shakespearean romance.

In his inquiry on the question of Cordelia's return, Richard Knowles collates previous criticisms that rely variously on close-reading, character motivation, dramaturgy, textual history, and authorial revision speculation to answer it. Knowles explains that, the 'mysterious, perhaps intentionally confusing and contradictory [...] hints of background movements give the audience a hopeful sense that some kind of countermovement is at work, [...] but they give no real information about why Cordelia and France have invaded.'³¹ Instead, Knowles concludes that, in the absence of definitive explanation, Shakespeare 'deliberate[ly] sacrifice[s] [...] the clarity of the invasion to gain the dramatic advantage of speed and momentum.' He explains the dramaturgical effect of Shakespeare's chronological inconsistency: the protracted background events of the French invasion occur in 'swift' time simultaneously with the foreground events of Lear's abandonment in 'strict' time to keep Lear's mad episode brief, preserving the pathos and emotional intensity of the play's motion towards Lear's crisis and tragic resolution.³²

While I do not dispute that opaqueness of Cordelia's return heightens the dramatic pathos of Lear's restoration from madness in 4.7, I take issue with Knowles's self-effacing preface that: 'generations of playgoers have had a satisfactory experience of the play without worrying about the question [of why Cordelia's returns].' I intervene to offer: I am not satisfied. I do not understand why she returns — and I want to. In some way, I see her flight to France as not just exile but escape. Knowing the ending, her defense of Lear, though noble, escalates the domestic strife of civil war into an international conflict with her leading the French army. Thus, I cannot unsee her return as the cause of her being taken prisoner and eventually being killed. And so, I wrestle with the text: why does she return? Why does she forgive Lear? Why does she return to save him when it puts her

³¹ Ibid., pp. 48-9.

³² Richard Knowles, 'Cordelia's Return', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 50.1 (1999), pp. 35.

back in harm's way? I am concerned not just with her motive — perhaps, the joint reasons of a personal will to save Lear and political aim to recover her homeland — but *how* she gets there.

My adaptive approach to foregrounding Cordelia's character is two-fold: first, I seek to restructure *King Lear*, shifting the play's focus from the downward, tragic trajectory of Lear to the separation and reunion of Lear and Cordelia, and second, I seek to fill in the gaps of Cordelia's storyline, her absence and her silence, by imagining her emotional journey from rejection to forgiveness. With both of these, I use Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* as a foil to *King Lear*, employing understandings of their generic and character parallels to attempt to alter *King Lear* in the model of *The Winter's Tale* and secure restoration.

Many critics have probed the similarities in theme, image, language, plot, genre, and characters between *King Lear* and *The Winter's Tale*.³³ In the introduction to the *Arden* edition of *The Winter's Tale*, John Pitcher explains that 'it is generally agreed' that 'the key influence' for *Tale*'s 'daring generic shape' of 'tragedy into romance' was 'developed out of *King Lear*.'³⁴ Susan Snyder and Deborah T. Curren-Aquino begin their Cambridge edition of *Tale* with an anecdote from Jane Smiley, author of *King Lear* novel adaptation *A Thousand Acres* (1991): 'I would love to see a rep company do *The Winter's Tale* and *King Lear* together, same actors, same costumes, because I think Shakespeare wrote *The Winter's Tale* to answer *King Lear*'s tragedy with hope.'³⁵ Indeed, David Farr's repertory casting of the two plays drew parallels between roles (Greg Hicks as Lear/Leontes, Samantha Young as Cordelia/Perdita, and interestingly, Kelly Hunter as

³³ See Sandra Budick for parallels between the thematic and linguistic presentation of the protagonists' obsession with a lack of evidence, with both Lear and Leonte repeating the word, 'nothing' (pp. 149-50). See John Pitcher for discussion of the mirror images of Leontes seeing breath on Hermione's lips and wanting to kiss her and Lear tragically and deliriously holding a feather to Cordelia's lips and hoping to see breath before he dies (p. 19).

³⁴ John Pitcher, 'Introduction', in William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, ed. by Pitcher (Arden Shakespeare, 2011), p. 1.

³⁵ Susan Snyder and Deborah T. Curren-Aquino, 'Introduction', in William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, New Cambridge Shakespeare, ed. by Snyder and Curren-Aquino (Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 1.

Goneril/Hermione),³⁶ and Germanic scholar Maria Tatar's programme note explicitly identified that the two shared 'fairy tale' elements.³⁷

King Lear and *The Winter's Tale* have, to an extent, similar arcs around betrayal and forgiveness, separation and reunion: they both follow a man (Lear/Leontes) who rejects the one person who truly loves them (Cordelia/Hermione) over their own misreading of their words, and, having hurt the woman they love, must work through their irrationality to make amends and restore what has been lost; understanding *Tale* as a 'gloss' of *Lear*, Eugene England summarizes that both dramas parallel arcs from guilt to atonement, sinning to salvation.³⁸ If John Pitcher considers *The Winter's Tale* 'a romance that flows out of *King Lear*, with the catastrophe reversed and part of the harm mysteriously undone'³⁹, I wish to pursue the reverse of Shakespeare's authorial journey from *Lear* to *Tale*; instead of revising *Lear* to end it differently in *Tale*, I wish to excavate the glimmers of *Tale* in the 'proto-romance' of *Lear*, pausing the narrative's tragic arc at the moment when the catastrophe *seems* like it can be reversed. Practically, *King Lear* (*Taylor's Version*) cuts Shakespeare's *King Lear* at 4.7, ending after Lear and Cordelia's reunion. In a sense, I do find *Lear* too 'bleak' and 'nihilistic' and have tried to revise it in the vein of romance. However, instead of ending it comically — like Nahum Tate's *The History of King Lear* (1681) for Restoration audiences, ending in the marriage of Cordelia and Edgar⁴⁰ — I wish to *insist* upon Shakespeare's tragedy, to prove the patriarchal dramaturgy of *Lear*'s tragedy by the foil of the comparably feminist, restorative *Tale*.

To illustrate, I will compare the function of parallel women characters in *Lear* and *Tale*: Cordelia with Perdita, Hermione, and Paulina. Many critics and theatre practitioners have seen *King Lear* as a predecessor to Shakespeare's romances (*Cymbeline*, *Pericles*, *The Winter's Tale*, *The*

³⁶ 'David Farr 2010 Production: *King Lear*', *Royal Shakespeare Company* <<https://www.rsc.org.uk/king-lear/past-productions/david-farr-2010-production>> [accessed 18 September 2025]; 'David Farr 2009 Production: *The Winter's Tale*', *Royal Shakespeare Company* <<https://www.rsc.org.uk/the-winters-tale/past-productions/david-farr-2009-production>> [accessed 18 September 2025].

³⁷ Maria Tatar, 'Haunting stories: Maria Tatar explores what gives fairy tales their power to move us', theatre programme for the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2009 *The Winter's Tale* (Stratford-upon-Avon, Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Reading Room).

³⁸ Eugene England, 'Cordelia and Paulina: Shakespeare's Healing Dramatists', *Literature and Belief* 2 (1982), p. 69.

³⁹ Pitcher, 'Introduction', in Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, p. 22; *ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴⁰ See Katherine Romack and see Lynne Bradley's "'Why, this is not Lear": Adaptations before the Twentieth Century' for discussion of Nahum Tate's adaptation of *King Lear* as romance for the Restoration stage.

Tempest) in depicting a lost daughter (Imogen, Marina, Perdita, Miranda, respectively) that is ‘restored’⁴¹ to the father and/or kingdom and ‘redeems’⁴² the father ‘from a state of loss and depression brought on by his own misjudgement.’⁴³ Gordon McMullan summarizes the genre of ‘romance’ that Edward Dowden first identified: ‘plays in which time goes by, voyages are undertaken, storms and human sinfulness separate friends, lovers and families, yet eventually, at the last, usually over a period of a decade-and-a-half (time, that is, for daughters to grow to marriageable age), reconciliations are effected, families reconstructed and the generational future assured.’⁴⁴ Seeing Cordelia’s story as alike — she experiences ‘swift’ background time, undertakes voyages to France and back to Dover, has a storm separate and reunite her with family, and is not only marriageable but marries — I excavate the ‘proto-romance’ by modeling her unseen experience after the heroines of Shakespeare’s romances, as a ‘lost princess’ who is restored to her kingdom.

Taylor Swift’s two-album arc from *reputation* (2017) to *Lover* (2019) narrates the same generic story of Shakespearean tragedy into romance — aesthetically from nighttime to sunrise, thematically from betrayal to forgiveness; she ends *Lover* with a statement of purpose, ‘I wanna be defined by the things that I love / Not the things I hate / Not the things I’m afraid of.’⁴⁵ As such, in *King Lear (Taylor’s Version)*, I speculatively imagine Cordelia’s arc as a romantic heroine in the model of Swift’s over the course of six interludes. In ‘King of My Heart’ (2017), Cordelia settles into a new relationship she believes could be the one forever (‘Is this the end of all my endings?’), making herself at home intimately in the new kingdom and new bedroom of France (‘We rule the kingdom inside my room’), identifying herself as the foreign (‘American’) ‘queen’ to her lover (‘king of my heart’), who values her person over the monetary worth of her dowry (‘Say you fancy me not fancy stuff’). In ‘Lover’ (2019), Cordelia celebrates the sweet intimacy of sharing a home and domain with her beloved in a committed relationship, ending in marriage vows that simultaneously serve as her official coronation as French queen. In ‘Better Man’ (2021), Cordelia misses her father, first lamenting but eventually affirming her exile from Lear’s harsh love as escape, ‘I just miss you

⁴¹ Oliver Ford Davies, *Shakespeare’s Fathers and Daughters* (Arden Shakespeare, 2017), p. 124.

⁴² Ibid.; Tina Packer, *Women of Will: The Remarkable Evolution of Shakespeare’s Female Characters* (Vintage Books, 2015), p. 242.

⁴³ Davies, *Shakespeare’s Fathers and Daughters*, p. 124.

⁴⁴ Gordon McMullan, ‘What is a “late play”?’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare’s Late Plays*, ed. by Catherine M. S. Alexander (Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 7.

⁴⁵ Taylor Swift, ‘Daylight’, from *Lover* (2019).

and I just wish you were a better man.’ In ‘my tears ricochet’ (2020), Cordelia haunts Lear in a vision while he’s sleeping on the heath, confessing her sorrow (‘I can go anywhere I want [...] / Just not home’), while bitterly affirming its shuddering, rebounding power on the person who caused it (‘And if I’m dead to you, why are you at the wake? / Cursing my name, wishing I stayed / Look at how my tears ricochet’). In ‘Miss Americana & The Heartbreak Prince’ (2019), Cordelia hears of the impending domestic strife nearing civil war at home and debates whether she should return from escape and exile with her lover to win the fight against the ‘bad guys’. Finally, in ‘Daylight’ (2019), Cordelia forgoes the vindictiveness and betrayal of the past chapter (‘Threw out our cloaks and our daggers because it’s morning now’) and resolves to move on and forgive (‘You gotta step into the daylight and let it go’).

However, I probe why *Lear* cannot end like the romances, returning to the foil of *The Winter’s Tale*. Helen Hackett identifies the genre of romance as ‘feminine’ for foregrounding the maternal and the theme of regeneration.⁴⁶ However, she identifies *Tale* as unique from the others in that whereas the other romances have male custodians of narrative and storytelling — *Cymbeline*’s Belarius, *Pericles*’s Gower, *Tempest*’s Prospero, and even *Winter’s Tale*’s choric Time — *Tale* prominently features Paulina in the authorial role as orchestrator of the statue scene.⁴⁷ Hackett’s characterization of her efforts in staging the reunion as ‘midwifery’ create a parallel between her role as a conduit between mother and child (Hermione and Perdita) and between performer and audience; she is, effectively, the keeper of the regenerative tale of ‘the wide gap of time.’⁴⁸ Eugene England presses the theatrical function of Paulina, seeing both Cordelia and Paulina as ‘healing dramatists’ who facilitate the reunion and redemption of the male tyrant; England notes that Cordelia’s role as ‘victim and healer [is] divided between Hermione and Paulina.’⁴⁹ Thus, in Cordelia, *Lear* compounds the three discrete archetypes of women in *Tale*: Perdita, as lost daughter/princess; Hermione, as wronged victim who bestows forgiveness; and Paulina, authoress of the restorative reunion.

⁴⁶ Helen Hackett, ‘Shakespeare’s romance sources’, in Hackett, *Women and Romance Fiction in the English Renaissance* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 150-5.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

⁴⁸ William Shakespeare, *The Winter’s Tale*, ed. by John Pitcher (Arden Shakespeare, 2011), V. iii. 154.

⁴⁹ England, ‘Cordelia and Paulina, Shakespeare’s Healing Dramatists’, p. 69.

As ‘authoress’ in *King Lear*, Cordelia’s voice, in the evolving significance of her lips, is indeed pivotal to the plot and Lear’s character arc. Her speech — the escape of a single utterance, ‘Nothing’, from her lips — incites Lear’s rash reaction and madness.⁵⁰ Her kiss restores Lear to sanity.⁵¹ And the air between her parted lips — the possibility of breath that fuels Lear’s, either, ‘joyous delusion’ at signs of life or ‘despairing conviction’ that she is dead⁵² — impresses the pathos of Lear’s fatal broken heart. However, despite her voice’s pivotality, Cordelia’s character is defined mostly by her silence and absence — a mere 115 lines and four appearances (1.1, 4.4, 4.7, and 5.3) — which leave little opportunity to develop the character’s subjectivity in dialogue or performance.⁵³

Feminist interventions into Shakespearean discourse often offer readings in an attempt to recover what is lost: women’s voices and experience, whether that be of female critics or the female characters in Shakespeare’s plays. In aiming to explore Cordelia’s ‘lost’ perspective, I interpolate Taylor Swift’s voice, not just as model of female authorship (voicing her own experience), but for Swift’s work on her re-recording project, which Juliette Holder frames as ‘revision as feminist activism’ through ‘embodied rhetoric theory.’⁵⁴ Following a high-profile dispute over the ownership of the original recordings (the ‘masters’) of her first six studio albums, Swift embarked on a re-recording project (2021-2023) that aimed to release new versions of each album, with painfully recreated instrumentation and new mature vocals. The subtitle of each re-recorded album, ‘(*Taylor’s Version*)’ not only claims possession over her self-written and autobiographical discography, but over her life story and literary voice. In each rerecording, Swift practices further feminist recovery by piecing out each album’s original narrative with previously unreleased tracks that were penned during the album’s original production cycle, giving further insight into each ‘era.’ As such, I might understand this adaptation as *King Lear (Cordelia’s Version)*.

However, in having Cordelia author her own ‘wide gap of time’ like Paulina, I found her agency can only extend as far as her return. In *The Winter’s Tale*, Leontes’s redemption is only

⁵⁰ Shakespeare, *King Lear*, I. i. 87; *ibid.*, I. i. 89.

⁵¹ Shakespeare, *King Lear*, IV. vii. 28-29.

⁵² David Fuller, ‘Rescuing Shakespeare: King Lear in Its Textual Contexts’, in *The Life of Texts: Evidence in Textual Production, Transmission, and Reception*, ed. by Carlo Caruso (Bloomsbury, 2018), p. 172; *ibid.*, V. iii. 305-310.

⁵³ Sarah Werner, ‘Multiplying Cordelia: Teaching Feminist Editorial Practice’, in *Feminisms and Early Modern Texts: Essays for Phyllis Rackin*, ed. by Gwynne Kennedy and Rebecca Ann Bach (Susquehanna University Press, 2010), p. 174.

⁵⁴ Juliette Holder, private discussion with the author, 27 June 2025.

secured after he accepts the coupling of Perdita and Florizel, guaranteeing the joint futurity of the two nations through intergenerational support. Cordelia returns from the kingdom of France to Dover to rescue Lear, notably, alone. Werner notes that Q's stage directions characterize Cordelia as caretaker, a Doctor accompanying her entrance in 4.7, while F's stage directions cast her as a martial leader or a head of an army, 'drums and colours' and 'soldiers' accompanying her entrance; this is a marked contrast to the respective entrances of Regan and Goneril in 5.1, both with 'drums and colours' but accompanied by their 'respective male companions, Albany and Edmund.'⁵⁵

While Cordelia's entrance without her husband might imbue her with more authority as the agential queen of France coming either to save Lear (Q) or defend his territorial claim (F), I argue that her return without her husband paradoxically demonstrates the doublemind of heteropatriarchy; as Cordelia parallels both daughter Perdita and wife Hermione, Lear's confusion of her two incongruent roles — as a child saving an ailing parent and as true (romantic) love — are the bind of her tragic fate. Using 'Cordelia's interludes' to understand her unseen background story, I note that Cordelia evolved from being a princess under the patriarchal rule of her father to a queen ruling her kingdom alongside her husband, one who appreciates her for herself. However, with the plight of her father pulling her home, her empathy becomes her liability in instigating her return back to his orbit. Were Cordelia to meet Lear in Dover alongside her husband — like Leontes coming face to face with the mirror image of his wife and best friend in the youthful Perdita and Florizel — her independence might have appeared less strong, but Lear might be forced to forgo his possessive love for Cordelia that is 'incompatible' with 'the idea of her having any (other) lover.'⁵⁶ As my adaptation serves not to rewrite the events that lead to Cordelia's ending, but to understand her arc in Shakespeare's text, *King Lear (Taylor's Version)* proves through its intertextual exploration of *King Lear's* patriarchal dramaturgy that Cordelia's virtue in forgiveness is the cause of her destruction; her selflessness is self-sacrifice.

⁵⁵ Werner, 'Multiplying Cordelias: Teaching Feminist Editorial Practice', p. 177.

⁵⁶ Cavell, 'The avoidance of love', p. 275.

Chapter 3: Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia — ‘Good/bad’ womanhood and the body in bed

In this chapter, I engage in discourses around the sexuality of Lear’s daughters and Taylor Swift to propose the bed(room) as the site of their realization of female agency for facilitating authorial voice and phenomenological epistemology through their body. To do so, I rely on appraisals of the reputation of Lear’s daughters (among the characters in the world of the play and in the literary and theatrical imaginary) and the evolving public image of Taylor Swift (in the news media and in her lyrics) as dualistically ‘good’ or ‘bad’.

Cordelia archetypically has been understood as the ‘good’ daughter. In the Q-only 4.3, Kent and Gentleman describe her reaction to hearing of Lear’s mistreatment as ‘patience and sorrow’, epitomizing her virtue and ‘goodli[ness]’ as the picture of idealized, saintly femininity.⁵⁷ Victorian literature collating Cordelia’s speeches and representing her character valorized her as a model of ‘perfect womanliness’ for girls for her filial gratitude and devotion.⁵⁸ Similarly, in her early career, Swift embodied a normative white femininity and a lack of overt sexuality that Valerie Pollock characterizes as ‘eroticized innocence.’⁵⁹ Swift’s public image was consciously constructed alongside expectations of her as a role model for young girls, relying on ‘Victorian notions of innocence, virtuousness, fragility and victimhood.’⁶⁰

Meanwhile, Regan and Goneril have been archetypically villainized — by early Shakespeare critics and by contemporary audiences and theatre practitioners — as the ‘bad’ or ‘evil’ sisters. Lesley Kordecki and Karla Koskinen push back on such readings of *Lear* that accede to Lear’s own misogyny against his elder daughters, offering feminist reinterpretation of the two’s cruelty and ambition that, while not necessarily redeeming them outright, argues for a complexity of their character motivations and experience and their theatrical representation.⁶¹ Similarly, alongside Swift’s growing success, she has faced criticism for being ‘overcalculating’ and ‘manipulative’ in her control over her songwriting, career, and public image.⁶² Her disreputation in 2016, alongside the

⁵⁷ Shakespeare, *King Lear*, IV. iv. 16; *ibid.*, IV. iv. 17.

⁵⁸ Janet Bottoms, “‘Look on her, look’”: The Apotheosis of Cordelia’, *Shakespeare Survey* 55 (2007), p. 111.

⁵⁹ Valerie Pollock, ‘Forever Adolescence: Taylor Swift, Eroticized Innocence, and Performing Normativity’ (unpublished master’s thesis, Georgia State University, 2014), doi:10.57709/5615366.

⁶⁰ Annelot Prins, ‘From awkward teen girl to aryan goddess meme: Taylor Swift and the hijacking of star texts’, *Celebrity Studies* 11.1 (2020), p. 144.

⁶¹ Lesley Kordecki and Karla Koskinen, *Re-Visioning Lear’s Daughters: Testing Feminist Criticism and Theory* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2010).

⁶² Nate Sloan, ‘Taylor Swift and the Work of Songwriting’, *Contemporary Music Review* 40.1 (2021), pp. 13.

aforementioned feud with Kanye West and Kim Kardashian, was fueled by increasing criticism of her for inappropriate wielding of (cultural) power.⁶³

I compare Swift and Lear's daughters to tease out an interpretation of how in each world, the respective patriarchal social order is threatened by women's maturation when evidence of their adult sexuality disproves the guileless appearance of girlhood — essentially, at their apparent rejection of their daughterhood. Goneril and Regan's emerging ambition, prompting the overthrow of their father's authority, are frequently equated in contemporary performance with a fetishized deviant sexuality, as unnatural, incestuous, and/or adulterous.⁶⁴ Cordelia's return as a head of an army alone illustrates her independence, but she does so to 'preserve her father's position as patriarch'⁶⁵; her return to Dover without her husband preserves the appearance of her maidenhood. In the absence of any other female character, the world of *King Lear* is one in which women are constructed, not in relation to each other, nor even in relation to men, but as daughters in relation to their patriarch.⁶⁶ Similarly, the evolving public image of Taylor Swift's sexuality from 'boy-crazy virgin'⁶⁷ (Cordelia) to 'serial-dater' (Regan and Goneril) was concurrent with her emergence as an adult artist and increased authority in the patriarchal music industry; Swift reflected that male music executives initially saw her as an 'overexcited young girl' who wrote 'cute' songs and 'reminded them more of their little niece or their daughter', and that she only started experiencing sexism in the industry when her success, playing out stadiums and achieving crossover hits, began to look 'formidable' — or when she 'started to look like a woman.'⁶⁸

⁶³ For discussion of various criticisms of Swift: see Annelot Prins ('From awkward teen') on Swift's political silence during the 2016 U.S. presidential election and her lack of disavowal of white nationalist support; see Judy L. Isaksen and Nahed Eltantawy, Melissa K. Avdeeff, Myles McNutt, and Annelot Prins ('On good girls') on Swift's lack of intersectionality in her feminist activism; see Katherine M. Bell on Swift's white-washing of colonial narrative; see Paul Théberge and Eric Smialek on Swift's capitalist ventures as a businesswoman; see Gina Arnold on Swift's social activism fulfilling individual neoliberal advancement at the expense of collective empowerment; and see *Taylor Swift: Culture, Capital, and Critique*, eds. by Hannah McCann, Eloise Faichney, Rebecca Trelease, and Emma Whatman (Routledge, 2025) for critique of 'Swift as phenomenon', her societal impact on industry, domestic and international economies, and global culture.

⁶⁴ Kevin A. Quarmby, 'Sexing up Goneril: Feminism and Fetishization in Contemporary *King Lear* Performance', in *Women Making Shakespeare: Text, Reception and Performance*, ed. by Gordon McMullan, Lena Cowen Orlin, and Virginia Mason Vaughan (Arden Shakespeare, 2013), pp. 323-33.

⁶⁵ Werner, 'Multiplying Cordelia: Teaching Feminist Editorial Practice', p. 178.

⁶⁶ Michael Bristol, 'Character studies', in *The Arden Research Handbook of Contemporary Shakespeare Criticism*, ed. by Evelyn Gajowski (Arden Shakespeare, 2020), pp. 51-64

⁶⁷ Pollack, 'Forever Adolescence: Taylor Swift, Eroticized Innocence, and Performing Normativity', p. 32.

⁶⁸ Abby Aguirre, 'Taylor Swift on Sexism, Scrutiny, and Standing Up for Herself', *Vogue*, 8 August 2019 <<https://www.vogue.com/article/taylor-swift-cover-september-2019>> [accessed 21 September 2025].

I offer that the three women of *King Lear*, through their reputations within the early modern text and in its afterlife, might be understood through popular music's duality of womanhood as 'good' and 'bad' *girls*, the diminutive supplanting them of adult (sexual) experience and agency. In the intersection of 'early modern culture with contemporary music culture', Louise Geddes notes that Erik Didriksen's rewrite of rapper-singer Drake's song 'Hotline Bling' (2016) as a sonnet, which deconstructs what constitutes a 'good girl' with its inscription of the sexuality of Shakespeare's 'Dark Lady' sonnets, highlights how 'the sonnet's form plays with male-authored constructions of femininity.' In her emerging pop discography, Taylor Swift's lyrics exhibit her lyrical experimentation with the persona of a 'good/bad' girl, from *1989* (2014: 'I got that good girl faith'⁶⁹) to *reputation* (2017: 'You know I'm not a bad girl, but I do bad things with you'⁷⁰), to *Lover* (2019: 'They whisper in the hallway, "She's a bad, bad girl."⁷¹) I advance that Swift's evolving lyrical identity offers female authorship of the 'good/bad girl' as dramatic, in women experimenting with 'playing the role', in comparison with male authorship, epitomized in the rhetorical sonnet, which declares women as such. As such, through Taylor Swift, I offer that Lear's daughters may author their own 'play-acting' as 'good/bad' girls, grounding the duality not in women's external reputation but in their identity and self-presentation.

To do so, I focus on the body in relation to the bed(room). The setting of the bed is evoked a number of times in *King Lear*. Gloucester speaks of the 'great sport' of Edmund's conception in his mother's bed and passes off his illegitimate birth ('had [...] a son for her cradle ere she had a husband for her bed') as a shameful 'fault' through such crude language.⁷² Twice, Lear evokes the fantasy of his disloyal daughters being bastards through their mother's infidelity. When he hears that Regan put Kent in the stock, he addresses her, 'I would divorce me from thy mother's tomb, / Sepulchring an adultress', and he revives the image when lamenting to the blinded Gloucester in Dover, 'Let copulation thrive, / For Gloucester's bastard son was kinder to his father / Than were my daughters got 'tween the lawful sheets.'⁷³ In each example, the bed is a site that evaluates

⁶⁹ Taylor Swift, 'Style', from *1989* (Big Machine Records, 2014).

⁷⁰ Taylor Swift, 'So It Goes...', from *reputation* (Big Machine Records, 2017).

⁷¹ Taylor Swift, 'Miss Americana & The Heartbreak Prince', from *Lover* (Republic Records, 2019).

⁷² Shakespeare, *King Lear*, I. i. 14-15; *ibid.*, I. i. 22; *ibid.*, I. i. 16.

⁷³ Shakespeare, *King Lear*, II. iv. 128-129; *ibid.*, IV. vi. 12-14.

women's virtue through sexual fidelity to male partners through a now absent maternity and reproductive evidence.

Meanwhile, the bed is also evoked as the site of a mad sleep from which Lear wakes. In 4.7, the sleeping Lear is 'carried' onstage by Servants 'in a chair' that echoes his 1.1 position on the throne; however, now, in the passivity of his posture, the chair carries the connotation of an infant's cradle, reversing the child-parent dynamic. Lear is awoken by Cordelia's kiss, an act of intimacy coded as remedy.⁷⁴ I argue that Lear's position as the one *being* awoken is a strong evocation of fairy tale motif; if the opening scene (1.1) recalls the story of Cinderella (though a different subtype: ATU type 510), the chosen closing scene of my adaptation (4.7) bookends the story in fairy tale logic, recalling the story of Sleeping Beauty: a princess who has been cursed and falls into a magic sleep to be later awakened by a prince with a kiss (ATU type 410).⁷⁵ Martin Mueller considers Cordelia to be one of 'Shakespeare's Sleeping Beauties', one 'whose death is surrounded by surprise and uncertainty', arguing that early modern audiences, like Lear in his dying moments, might have believed that Cordelia could be revived due to the imprecisely-fatal method of hanging.⁷⁶ Thus, the revived Lear effectively serves as Cordelia's Sleeping Beauty, awoken magically with a kiss (4.7), while Cordelia serves as the seeming image of Lear's Sleeping Beauty but is in reality dead (5.3).

Valerie Traub argues that the female corpse in Shakespeare contains a 'female erotic power', as both the object of desire for male necrophilic fantasies and the cause of concern for patriarchal anxiety about women's power.⁷⁷ Scholar and actress Paige Martin Reynolds affirms through her experience playing many of Shakespeare's women, that to play female in Shakespeare's canon is often to play dead, a form of disempowerment and objectification for both character and actress.⁷⁸ Reynolds discusses the final scene of *King Lear*, in which the evil daughters are literally effaced and defaced, the text calling to cover their faces, denying any distinction between the two women, and

⁷⁴ Shakespeare, *King Lear*, IV. viii. 26-28.

⁷⁵ Hans-Jörg Uther, *The Type of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography: Based on the System of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson: Part 1: Animal Tales, Tales of Magic, Religious Tales, and Realistic Tales, with an Introduction* (Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2004), pp. 293-96; *ibid.*, pp. 244-45.

⁷⁶ Martin Mueller, 'Shakespeare's Sleeping Beauties: The Sources of "Much Ado About Nothing" and the Play of Their Repetitions', *Modern Philology* 91.3 (1994), pp. 309-10.

⁷⁷ Valerie Traub, 'Jewels, Statues, and Corpses: Containment of Female Erotic Power in Shakespeare's Plays', *Shakespeare Studies* 20, pp. 215-38.

⁷⁸ Paige Martin Reynolds, 'Preface' and 'Introduction', in Reynolds, *Performing Shakespeare's Women: Playing Dead*, (Arden Shakespeare, 2019), pp. xiii-24.

in which Cordelia's body, though valorized in the arms of Lear, is appreciated as ideal femininity for its silence, the actress's body functioning as a prop to fulfill the pathos of the starring male actor.⁷⁹ As the living men — Albany, Kent, and Edgar — remain standing at the end of the play, the dramaturgy of the play, with Regan and Goneril dead due to their jealousy over Edmund and Cordelia dead due to her empathetic self-sacrifice for her father, neutralizes the three daughters' agency as lovers and registers their allegiance to men as a bodily liability.

My intervention into *King Lear*'s theatrical and adaptation history is to recast the bed as the setting of Swiftian empowerment, the setting where one woman develops and embodies her authorial voice. From her teenage breakout hit 'Love Story' (2008, the aforementioned origin of the Shakespearean Swift), 'wr[itten] on [her] bedroom floor in about 20 minutes'⁸⁰, to her adult classic love song, 'Lover' (2019), penned at age twenty-nine, for which she explains inspiration struck in the middle of the night when she was 'in bed' and prompted her to '[stumble] over to the piano [...] really late at night', the bedroom exists in Swiftian mythology as the site of her songwriting.⁸¹ Swift's post-2017 autobiographical discography posits an evolution of the bedroom in relation to each album's concept: *reputation* (2017) as the site of private sanctuary and refuge; *Lover* (2019) as the site of intimacy in long-term commitment; and *Midnights* (2022) as the setting of her sleepless nights, in which she has woken from nightmares, confessionally reevaluating her memories of past relationships.

Finally, the paratext to her latest album, *The Tortured Poets Department* (2024), best illustrates her conception of her sleeping body in relation to her oeuvre. Visually, the standard edition's album cover shows Swift's body in black lingerie lying between white sheets. The album's visual identity, photographed and stylized entirely in black-and-white, very prominently featured cascades of white sheets scribbled on with black ink. The album was billed as Swift's confessional 'tortured poetry', characterized by a writerly lyrical excess, following media speculation on a series of Swift's high-profile relationships. Swift summarizes the album in a poem on the last page of the CD's liner notes, describing her 'entering into evidence' her 'veins of pitch black ink', equating the

⁷⁹ Paige Martin Reynolds, 'Playing Parts in *King Lear*', in Reynolds, *Performing Shakespeare's Women: Playing Dead*, (Arden Shakespeare, 2019), pp. 41-64.

⁸⁰ Taylor Swift, '10 Questions', *Time Magazine*, vol. 173, no. 17 (2009), p. 4
<research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=24cd2c49-0e92-30e7-af0e-f0028bed9b9f> [accessed 21 September 2025].

⁸¹ Joe Coscarelli, 'How Taylor Swift Writes a Love Song', *The New York Times*, 24 December 2019
<<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/24/arts/music/taylor-swift-lover.html>> [accessed 21 September 2025].

ink of her writer's pen with her lifeblood, and her 'muses acquired like bruises', equating the experience of her lovers as impressions left on her form.⁸² In this, Swift equates her body of artistic work with her corporeal body.

Swift and Shakespeare's language purports a 'sexual/textual' politics in their similar comparison of the body of a writer's oeuvre with the writer's sexual body through the uniting words of 'sheets', equating bedsheets with paper sheets (pages). In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Leonato remarks, 'O, when she had writ it, and was reading it over, she found "Benedick" and "Beatrice" *between the sheet?*' (my emphasis), equating the paper on which Beatrice confesses her love with the sexual innuendo of bedsheets.⁸³ Further, Miles P. Grier identifies the early modern period as picturing transgressive interracial reproduction in the racist, textual imaginary of 'inkface', black ink indelibly marking white paper, such as in Aaron and Tamora's illegitimate child which appears onstage through means of paper (epistolary communication and prop rags).⁸⁴ I compare Swift's white paper sheets marked with black lyrics with the sheets of her bed, figuratively marked with the evidence (ink) of sexuality. In her prologue to *reputation*, Swift accuses the gossipy public of scouring her lyrics for details of her ex-boyfriends, 'as if the inspiration for music is as simple and basic as a paternity test'⁸⁵, figuratively conceiving of her songs as her (re)productive output and comparing her artistry with an illicit parenthood. I argue that Shakespeare and Swift's unifying image of 'black-on-white' as authorship as illicit parenthood invites consideration of the bed(sheets) as both creatively and sexually generative.

As such, in my *King Lear (Taylor's Version)*, I aim to revise the final image of the three daughters' on their deathbeds, fatally silenced and humiliatingly objectified post-mortem, instead preserving their bodies in a moment of agency by 'avoiding' their deaths. Annamária Fábian analyses *Lear's Daughters* as a play that uses Stanley Cavell's 'avoidance' as a 'feminist writing technique.'⁸⁶ Whereas Cavell argues for one's acknowledgement of others to recognize the humanity of others, the playwrights of prequel *Lear's Daughters* deliberately 'avoid' the character

⁸² Taylor Swift, 'In Summation', from *The Tortured Poets Department* (Republic Records, 2024).

⁸³ William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, ed. by Claire McEachern (Arden Shakespeare, 2005), II. iii. 136-138.

⁸⁴ Miles P. Grier, 'Black / white', in *Shakespeare / Text: Contemporary Readings in Textual Studies, Editing, and Performance*, ed. by Claire M. L. Bourne (Arden Shakespeare, 2021), pp. 319-42.

⁸⁵ Taylor Swift, "'Here's something I've learned about people'", from *reputation* (Big Machine Records, 2017).

⁸⁶ Annamária Fábian, 'The art of avoidance: Avoidance as a means of (re)creation in a prequel adaptation to Shakespeare's *King Lear*', *Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance* 6.2 (2013), pp. 109-24.

of Lear, reducing the dignity, mystery, and likeability of Shakespeare's Lear to the skeletal shadow of a 'flat and simple type', in order to author the 'gaps' of Shakespeare's play, depicting the maturation of the three daughters and developing their subjectivities and their complexity through the 'marked difference' with their Lear.⁸⁷ I employ Fábian's conception of 'avoidance as a creative technique', avoiding not Lear himself, but the play's patriarchal ending.

I recover the lost authorial voices of Cordelia, Regan, and Goneril by not only giving them Swift's songs to sing, but figuring them as taking agency from their bedrooms. Goneril and Regan's last song marks them in the throes of their sexual attraction to Edmund in the voice of Swift embracing her *reputation* 'villain' persona alongside sexual agency ('So It Goes...', 2017). Meanwhile, I specify the setting of Cordelia's interludes as her bedroom in France, imagining her with Swift's musical identity as a songstress. Whereas in 1.1 she voices a denial of her love, Cordelia takes on Swift's identity as a chronicler of heartbreak and a writer of love songs, stumbling over to the piano in the middle of the night to write and voice her midnight ruminations. In this, Cordelia's actress acts out the concepts of Swift's four post-hiatus autobiographical albums: her finding a true private love, France, who appreciates her despite her public fall from grace (*reputation*, 2017); her growth from bitterness over betrayal to moving on and returning home (*Lover*, 2019); her reevaluation of her past relationship with her father (*Midnights*, 2022); and her authoring her tale as (temporarily) surviving tragic romantic heroine, highly-disputed figure, and narrator of her own life (*The Tortured Poets Department*, 2024). From their bedrooms, the daughters are imbued with the Swiftian notion of 'sheets' as the site in which female authorial voice is founded in lived, corporeal, embodied experience.

In the denial of Shakespeare's patriarchal ending and the still, dead bodies of Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia, I imagine the epilogue musical number for *King Lear (Taylor's Version)* as Swift's song, 'cardigan' (2020) — sung and accompanied on piano by Cordelia, and visually illustrated as a choreographed movement-and-dance piece by the company, including Goneril and Regan — preserving the daughters' (a)liveness in voice and bodily motion. The song, as epilogue, serves as a paean to embodied experience, a declaration of fidelity to both age and youth. Swift embraces the emotional truth experienced in youth and the emotional growth achieved in age:

⁸⁷ Fábian, 'The art of avoidance', pp. 112-13.

Every part of you that you've ever been, every phase you've ever gone through, was you working it out in that moment with the information you had available to you at the time. There's a lot that I look back at like, "Wow, a couple years ago I might have cringed at this." You should celebrate who you are now, where you're going, and where you've been.⁸⁸

The lyrics of 'cardigan' purport such maturity, voicing Lear's realization of devotion despite betrayal ('And when I felt like I was an old cardigan / Under someone's bed / You put me on and said I was your favorite') and his knowing trust ('And I knew you'd come back to me') and Cordelia's insistence on the wisdom of youth as embodied knowledge ('When you are young they assume you know nothing', 'Cause I knew everything when I was young.')

Thus, in my focus on the body and the bed, I extend the commonplace 'sexual/textual' politics that refers to the intersection of gender and sexuality studies with textual and author studies, to a third realm: disability and mad studies — coining, perhaps, 'sexual/textual/intellectual' or '-affectual' politics. I propose a uniting theory of the body in bed as the site of mediation between self-presentation and identity, or one's 'de-roling' from performing normativity. As a site of remedy for Lear's madness, the bed offers a bridge between madness in literary studies and the lived experience of 'madness' as an embodied way of knowing. The bed (and its sheets) hosts a state of vulnerability in opening oneself to others: in sexuality (undressed), in writing (in confessional), and in recovery (in bodymind weakness). The experience of the body in bed as understanding oneself and others illustrates embodiment as epistemology — or, the intimacy of 'being known' by another.

As a proof-of-concept for *King Lear (Taylor's Version)*, this dissertation prompts further research as a creative-practice-based inquiry into crafting a Shakespearean jukebox musical. Practical execution of this idea would involve editing *King Lear* as a script for performance, writing arrangements of Swift's songs for the bi-modal genre of music drama (Shakespearean dialogue with jukebox score), and testing out the material in workshops and readings to receive feedback from artistic collaborators. Though such research would have to remain educational due to copyright law, productions such as the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2025 *Hamlet Hail to the Thief*, a distillation of Shakespeare and Radiohead, evidence a contemporary commercial and artistic interest in the intersection of Shakespeare and popular music onstage.

⁸⁸ Lansky, 'Taylor Swift: 2023 TIME Person of the Year'.

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Appendix: Set List for *King Lear (Taylor's Version)*

The following table compiles a list of the songs drafted for the set list of *King Lear (Taylor's Version)*, along with the album from which they originate, their year of publication, and which character(s) sing them in the musical. All songs used have Taylor Swift as the primary artist; songs with featured artists are specified. Albums are color-coded based on the color assigned to each album 'era' in Swiftian mythology.

SONG	ALBUM	YEAR	CHARACTER
'Nothing New' (feat. Phoebe Bridgers)	<i>Red (Taylor's Version)</i>	2021	Lear, Gloucester, company
'...Ready For It'	<i>reputation</i>	2017	Cordelia
'exile' (feat. Bon Iver)	<i>folklore</i>	2020	Lear, Cordelia
'the last great american dynasty'	<i>folklore</i>	2020	Edmund
'King of My Heart'	<i>reputation</i>	2017	Cordelia
'tolerate it'	<i>evermore</i>	2020	Goneril
'mirrorball'	<i>folklore</i>	2020	Fool
'Foolish One'	<i>Speak Now (Taylor's Version)</i>	2023	Fool
'Lover'	<i>Lover</i>	2019	Cordelia
'Anti-Hero'	<i>Midnights</i>	2022	Fool
'Vigilante Shit'	<i>Midnights</i>	2022	Edmund
'I Did Something Bad'	<i>reputation</i>	2017	Goneril, Regan (+ Cordelia)
'Better Man'	<i>Red (Taylor's Version)</i>	2021	Cordelia (+ Goneril, Regan)
'Look What You Made Me Do'	<i>reputation</i>	2017	Lear, Edmund
'Anti-Hero'	<i>Midnights</i>	2022	Lear
'my tears ricochet'	<i>folklore</i>	2020	Cordelia
'The Prophecy'	<i>The Tortured Poets Department</i>	2024	Fool
'Sweet Nothing'	<i>Midnights</i>	2022	Cordelia
'The Archer'	<i>Lover</i>	2019	Gloucester
'So It Goes...'	<i>reputation</i>	2017	Goneril, Regan
'Miss Americana & The Heartbreak Prince'	<i>Lover</i>	2019	Cordelia
'hoax'	<i>folklore</i>	2020	Gloucester, Lear
'Daylight'	<i>Lover</i>	2019	Cordelia
'cardigan'	<i>folklore</i>	2020	Cordelia, company
'...Ready For It'	<i>reputation</i>	2017	company
'Mastermind'	<i>Midnights</i>	2022	company