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“The Darke and Vicious Place”:
The Dread of the Vagina in *King Lear*

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May not this be one of the principal roots of the whole masculine impulse to creative work—the never-ending conflict between the man’s longing for the woman and his dread of her? (KAREN HORNEY, “The Dread of Woman” [1932])

As a belated fellow traveler of what my revered *Doktorvater* Harold Bloom has sardonically termed the School of Resentment, I have been impressed by the collective achievements of both feminist and new historicist scholarship in transforming the received understanding of canonical Western literature. Although my grounding in object relations theory and developmental psychology causes me to be skeptical of the social constructivism fashionable in postmodernist academic circles, I endorse wholeheartedly the premise that gender constitutes a fundamental category for the analysis of human experience.¹

Thus, although I confess to harboring a smack of Bloom’s humanist nostalgia, including his reverence for the genius of Shakespeare, I cannot agree with his contention that “nothing crucial in this largeness is culture-bound or gender-confined.”² Indeed, in order to challenge this assertion, I shall consider *King Lear*, arguably the summit of the Western canon, about which Bloom has asserted that “the flames of invention burn away all context and grant us the possibility of primal aesthetic value, free of history and ideology.”³ Despite having elsewhere defended the autonomy of aesthetic experience against those

1. Indeed, I would go so far as to argue that gender is a more fundamental category than either race or class, as can be seen from the fact that the binary opposition between maleness and femaleness exists in every human culture, whereas the classifications of race and class are infinitely more multifarious and variegated.

2. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York, 1994), p. 52.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

who would deny it completely, I feel constrained here to counter Bloom's excessively idealist aesthetics by insisting on the ideological components of even the most sublime work of art.⁴ Bloom's reading gives us a *King Lear* not for our own time but one essentially unchanged from that purveyed thirty years ago by Maynard Mack, for whom gender issues did not exist and who saw the play unproblematically from Lear's own perspective.⁵

In viewing *King Lear* through a feminist psychoanalytic lens, I am aligning myself with what is already a formidable critical tradition whose landmarks extend from Coppélia Kahn's 1986 essay, "The Absent Mother in *King Lear*," to Janet Adelman's monumental *Suffocating Mothers*.⁶ The guiding assumption of this tradition, first systematically espoused by Kahn in her earlier *Man's Estate* (and in direct contrast to Bloom's denials), is that Shakespeare's plays are written from a male perspective and depict predominantly conflicts of masculine identity.⁷

My point of entry into *King Lear* is furnished by Edgar's lines in the final scene in which he recounts to Albany how, while in disguise as Poor Tom, he became the guide of his eyeless father: "And in this habit / Met I my Father with his bleeding Rings, / Their precious Stones new lost" (TLN, 3151–53; 5.3.188–90).⁸ This passage serves as a nodal point for both a feminist and a psychoanalytic interpretation of the play. The phrase "precious Stones," referring literally to Gloucester's

4. See my introduction to *Transitional Objects and Potential Spaces: Literary Uses of D. W. Winnicott* (New York, 1993), pp. xiv–xv.

5. Both Mack and Bloom accept Lear's demonization of Goneril and Regan. See Maynard Mack, "*King Lear* in *Our Time*" (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1965), p. 32; Bloom, p. 68. As I shall argue below, this splitting of the image of women into diametrically opposed good and evil aspects, which is endemic not only to Lear's individual psyche but to the structure of the play as a whole, is a crucial symptom of the misogyny of *King Lear* that calls for feminist analysis. Mack's opusculum, moreover, is laced with denunciations of approaches to Shakespeare's "medieval and homiletic" art in terms of "twentieth-century psychological principles" (p. 78) with which I cannot agree.

6. See Coppélia Kahn, "The Absent Mother in *King Lear*," in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago, 1986), pp. 33–49; and Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, "Hamlet" to "The Tempest"* (New York, 1992). For a synopsis of feminist criticism of the play, see Ann Thompson, "Are There Any Women in *King Lear*?" in *The Matter of Difference: Materialist Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, ed. Valerie Wayne (New York, 1991), pp. 117–28.

7. See Coppélia Kahn, *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1991).

8. As is by now well established, *King Lear* exists in distinct Quarto and Folio versions, the latter of which almost certainly reflects Shakespeare's revision of the play. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from *King Lear* will be from the facsimile of the *First Folio*, ed. Charlton Hinman (New York, 1968), with Through Line Numbers (TLN) given parenthetically in the text. I have normalized *i*, *j*, *v*, and *u* in accordance with modern

missing eyeballs, also carries the metaphorical connotation of "testicles," while "Rings," completing the comparison of eyes to jewels and signifying the gaping sockets, likewise refers to the vagina.⁹ Gloucester's blinding is thus a symbolic castration, which leaves him with a bleeding vagina—or rather two bleeding vaginas—on his face in place of his excised testicular eyeballs.¹⁰ That blindness is a symbolic representation of castration is a psychoanalytic truism frequently invoked with reference to the Oedipus myth, but this parallel is established with remarkable explicitness in Shakespeare's language.

Shakespeare's conflation of blindness with castration allows us to discern the connection between the fates of Lear and Gloucester. It is commonplace that *King Lear* is structured by a double plot that juxtaposes its two protagonists, but what has not been sufficiently recognized is that Lear and Gloucester are two sides of a single masculine psyche whose histories must be interpreted with continuous reference to one another.

This contention is supported not only by the obvious facts that both Lear and Gloucester are fathers whose wives are absent from the play and whose offspring are polarized into "good" and "evil" figures, but also by their attitudes toward sexuality. The fleeting prelude to the tragic symphony, as Stanley Cavell has reminded us, is a scene involving Gloucester, Edmund, and Kent, in which Gloucester's bawdy humor deflects his shame at having sired an illegitimate son.¹¹ Not by chance, his question to Kent, "Do you smell a fault?" (TLN, 19; 1.1.16), combines an allusion to the vagina as "an unsound or damaged place; a flaw, crack" (*OED*, s.v. "fault") with the sense of "fault" as a moral defect. Both meanings of "fault," moreover, are associated with the olfactory apparatus in a way that prefigures Gloucester's blindness ("let him smell / His way to Dover" [TLN, 2170–71; 3.7.92–93]) and Lear's revulsion against female sexuality later in the play.

usage. Any adjustments in quotations will be placed in square brackets. I shall also provide act, scene, and line numbers keyed to the Arden *King Lear*, ed. Kenneth Muir (1952; reprint, Cambridge, Mass., 1959). Other references to Shakespeare's works will be to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Cambridge, Mass., 1974).

9. For a conspicuous use of these words with the same sexual connotations elsewhere in Shakespeare, see Shylock's protest in *The Merchant of Venice* at the loss of "two rich and precious stones, / Stol'n by my daughter" (2.8.20–21), and Gratiano's bawdy references to "keeping safe Nerissa's ring" (5.1.307) at the close of the same play.

10. See Adelman, pp. 106–7.

11. See Stanley Cavell, "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*," in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (1969; reprint, Cambridge, 1976), pp. 267–353. Cavell anticipates my observation concerning the psychic twinship of Lear and Gloucester (p. 280). Despite its profundity, however, Cavell's essay eschews any consideration of gender issues in his dissection of the dynamics of love and shame in the play.

The counterpart to Gloucester's actual adultery is Lear's fantasy, when confronted by his elder daughters' treachery, that he has been cuckolded by his wife. "If thou should'st not be glad," he admonishes Regan, "I would divorce me from thy Mother['s] Tombe, / Sepulchring an Adultress" (TLN, 1408–10; 2.4.131–33).¹² By branding Goneril a "Degenerate Bastard" (TLN, 763; 1.4.262), Lear establishes a parallel between his own lawfully begotten progeny and Edmund, Gloucester's literal bastard. What is more, although only Gloucester's adultery is real, both protagonists blame the conception of their repudiated children on the women in question—namely, Lear's wife and the anonymous whore with whom Gloucester enjoyed "good sport" (TLN, 26; 1.1.23) when he fathered Edmund.

A fear of women's power to cuckold their husbands haunts all of Shakespeare's works, and this obsessive motif comes to the fore yet again in the Lear plot. Shakespeare gives much shorter shrift to men's betrayal of women, and when he does so—as in the characters of Proteus in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Bertram in *All's Well That Ends Well*, and Angelo in *Measure for Measure*—he invariably redeems his straying protagonist either by a bed trick in which he sleeps with a woman who turns out to have been his wife after all, or else by the expedient of having him fail in his suit to the other woman and then be forgiven by his faithful betrothed. The character of Gloucester is unique in Shakespeare's canon in portraying male adultery as having tragic consequences, although the focus is not on the husband's wronging of his (unmentioned) wife, but instead on the way that the illegitimate offspring returns to exact retribution from his prodigal father.

Lear and Gloucester's psychic twinship is borne out by the inscription of the female genitals on Gloucester's face as a result of his blinding. For an identical process occurs in Lear's case, when his attempt to combat the threat of female sexuality is subverted by the welling up within himself of the femininity he has repudiated.¹³ When he finds Kent placed in the stocks by Regan and Cornwall, Lear exclaims: "Oh

12. The same fantasy underlies Lear's repudiation of Cordelia in the opening scene: "Heere I disclaime all my Paternall care, / Propinquity and property of blood" (TLN, 120–21; 1.1.113–14). In the speech to Regan, the odd metaphor of "divorce" from a "tomb," where "womb" might seem more appropriate, suggests a chiasmic crossing of death and sexuality with incestuous overtones.

13. An elucidation of this dynamic of repressed femininity with respect to Lear was Kahn's signal contribution in "The Absent Mother in *King Lear*," though it was left to Adelman to pursue the parallel with Gloucester. See Adelman, pp. 114, 300 n. 27. In his discussion of Samuel Harsnett's *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Imposters* (1603) as an intertext for *King Lear*, Stephen Greenblatt highlights a passage that must have caught Shakespeare's attention: "It would (I fear me) pose all the cunning Exorcists, that are this day to be found, to teach an old corky woman to writhe, tumble, curvet, and fetch

how this Mother swels up toward my heart! / *Hist[er]ica passio*, downe thou climing sorrow, / Thy element's below" (TLN, 1328–30; 2.4.56–58). The word "Mother" here refers technically to the uterus, and Lear diagnoses his malady as a suffocation caused by its wandering. Thus just as Gloucester's "bleeding rings" corroborate Edgar's pitiless judgment on the dying Edmund, "The darke and vicious place where thee he got, / Cost him his eyes" (TLN, 3333–34; 5.3.172–73), so Lear, a male hysteric, fears that he harbors within himself the internal organs of the despised female body.

Although only Gloucester is literally blinded, much of the ocular imagery of the play actually centers on King Lear himself. This pattern extends from Kent's reproof in the opening scene, "See better *Lear*, and let me still remaine / The true blanke of thine eie" (TLN, 169–70; 1.1.158–59), through Lear's bewildered questions, "Do's any heere know me? / This is not *Lear*: / . . . Where are his eies?" (TLN 738–40; 1.4.234–35), to his final halting query concerning the identity of the trusted retainer disguised as Caius: "Who are you? / Mine eyes are not o'th'best" (TLN, 3243–44; 5.3.278–79). Shakespeare's insistence that Lear metaphorically shares Gloucester's blindness reinforces the psychological identification of his two protagonists.¹⁴

The eye imagery in the play is closely bound up with issues of gender. As Lear succumbs to madness in response to his daughters' cruelties, he experiences a conflict between his desires to grow angry and to weep, which are coded respectively as masculine and feminine forms of protest. When Goneril demands that he halve his train of 100 knights, Lear responds:

Life and death, I am asham'd
That thou hast power to shake my manhood thus,
That these hot tears, which breake from me perforce
Should make thee worth them.

(TLN, 814–17; 1.4.305–8)

her morris gambols." In *King Lear*, Cornwall commands his servants to pinion Gloucester by saying: "Binde faste his corky armes" (TLN, 2091; 3.7.29). See Stephen Greenblatt, "Shakespeare and the Exorcists," in *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1988), pp. 120–21. Strikingly, Gloucester's "corky armes" belong in the source to an "old woman," thus reinforcing the feminine identification inherent in his blinding.

14. On "the sight pattern" in *King Lear*, see Robert B. Heilman, "I Stumbled When I Saw," in *This Great Stage: Image and Structure in "King Lear"* (1948; reprint, Seattle, 1963), pp. 41–64. A rejoinder was offered by Paul J. Alpers, "King Lear and the Theory of the 'Sight Pattern,'" in *In Defense of Reading: A Reader's Approach to Literary Criticism*, ed. Reuben A. Brower and Richard Poirier (New York, 1962), pp. 133–52. But in his justified protests against moralistic readings of *King Lear*, Alpers eviscerates the ocular imagery in the play of any metaphorical significance.

He continues:

Old fond eyes,
Beweepe this cause againe, Ile plucke ye out,
And cast you with the waters that you loose
To temper Clay.

(TLN, 820–23; 1.4.310–13)

Later, when Regan seeks to deprive him of every last knight, he implores the gods:

touche me with Noble anger,
And let not womens weapons, water drops,
Staine my mans cheekes.

(TLN, 1576–78; 2.4.278–80)

Each of these passages deprecates crying as effeminate, and collectively they underscore the threat to Lear's manhood posed by the tears that, like the "Mother," involuntarily rise up within him when humiliated by his daughters. Of special interest is Lear's vow that he would sooner "plucke out" his "old fond eyes" rather than permit them to give way to weeping. For if weeping means becoming feminized, the remedy—to blind himself—also entails self-castration and thus leads to the same dreaded result. Lear is caught in a double bind and like Oedipus collides with his fate in striving to escape it.¹⁵ When, in the climactic encounter with Gloucester in act 4, scene 6, Lear breaks through to genuine compassion, his empathy is expressed by accepting the tears formerly disdained as unmanly: "If thou wilt weepe my Fortunes, take my eyes" (TLN, 2618; 4.6.178).

This antithesis between anger and weeping confirms that the play's relentless dichotomizing of "good" and "evil" characters is based on a gender polarity. The character of Kent furnishes an apt example. When after his banishment in the opening scene he returns as Caius to proffer his service to Lear, the king poses a series of questions. Concerning his age, the disguised Kent responds: "Not so young Sir to love a woman for singing, nor so olde to dote on her for any thing. I have yeares on my backe forty eight" (TLN, 568–70; 1.4.40–42). Kent thus presents himself as immune to feminine seductions, and only after he has done so does Lear break off his interrogation and pronounce Kent worthy to be his follower.

15. The same irony recurs on an existential plane in Lear's initial resolution to divide his kingdom "that future strife / May be prevented now" (TLN, 49–50; 1.1.44–45), since "prevented," besides meaning "forestalled," can also mean "anticipated," and thus suggests that by his abdication Lear has precipitated the very "strife" that he allegedly seeks to avoid. See Thompson Clayton, "'Is this the promis'd end?' Revision in the Role of the King," in *The Division of the Kingdoms: Shakespeare's Two Versions of "King Lear,"* ed. Gary Taylor and Michael Warren (1983; reprint, Oxford, 1986), p. 125.

Whereas Lear is torn between anger and tears, Kent's utter masculinity, expressed philosophically by his stoicism, obviates any such psychic fissure. "Anger hath a priviledge" (TLN, 1142; 2.2.71), he tells Cornwall to justify his beating of Oswald. Kent's ideology of gender fuels his contempt for Oswald, his antipode in terms of attitudes to service. The barrage of epithets with which Kent reviles Oswald culminates with calling him "the Sonne and Heire of a Mungrill Bitch" (TLN, 1095; 2.2.21)—an apt insult given Oswald's function as Coneril's lackey, but one that nonetheless reflects Kent's misogyny. When Kent threatens to "daube the wall of a Jakes" with Oswald (TLN, 1139–40; 2.2.66–67), his regression to anality is reinforced by the fact that for him phallic heterosexuality is not even an option.

A similar imperviousness to female charms characterizes Edgar, whom many commentators have felt to function, in Bloom's words, as "Shakespeare's personal representative in the play."¹⁶ This trait is crucial to Shakespeare's refusal to hint at a love interest between Edgar and Cordelia, who never so much as speak to each other in the work. (That Nahum Tate concludes his Restoration adaptation with their marriage points up the calculated oddity of Shakespeare's design.) Indeed, Edgar is positively hostile to women. His verdict that Edmund's malevolence is due to "the darke and vicious place" where he was conceived is unequivocally endorsed by the play. Nowhere is the possibility contemplated that Edmund's wickedness could be due to his repudiation by his father, though Edmund himself adduces his outcast status as a specious justification for his actions. As Kent alleges of Oswald, Edmund is "the Sonne and Heire of a Mungrill Bitch," irrevocably doomed by the whore at his origin.

The motherless Edgar's function as the voice of patriarchy in the play is highlighted when, disguised as Poor Tom, he constructs an imaginary history of his past life as a courtier who "served the Lust of my Mistris heart, and did the acte of darkenesse with her" (TLN, 1869–70; 3.4.85–87). He warns his companions in the hovel to "Let not the creaking of shooes, Nor the rustling of Silkes betray thy poore heart to woman" (TLN, 1874–75; 3.4.95–97). Lear deludedly believes that Poor Tom, like himself, has been betrayed by his daughters; but it is no less significant that the disguised Edgar's contempt for women, like the disguised Kent's, feeds into Lear's obsessions. On another level, Edgar's feigned sexual history can be seen as an unpacking of his father's "old Letcher's heart" (TLN, 1893; 3.4.115), with which he has unconsciously identified himself despite his disavowals.

16. Bloom (n. 2 above), p. 67.

In addition to Edgar and Kent, the only other character left standing at the end of the play is Albany; and Albany, too, earns his survival by purging himself of any feminine taint.¹⁷ In the first act, Goneril reviles his "milky gentleness" (TLN, 865; 1.4.351)—that is, his effeminacy—when he queries her actions. Once Albany learns of Gloucester's blinding and the casting of Lear out into the storm, however, he vehemently denounces her demonic nature: "Proper deformitie seemes not in the Fiend / So horrid as in woman" (TLN, 2309–10; 4.2.60–61). This view of Goneril and Regan is also Lear's; and again it is ratified by the play. Whatever their limitations, Albany, Edgar, and Kent are portrayed as eminently virtuous characters, and this virtue is in each case predicated on an immunity or escape from the threat posed by female sexuality.

In taking a census of the virtuous characters one must not overlook the Fool, and his role too comes into focus when mapped onto the grid of gender. If Cordelia's relationship to Lear is defined by his identity as father, and Kent's by his identity as king, the Fool (who, with Kent, is the only character devoid of family ties in the play) mirrors Lear in his existential capacity as a man. I see the Fool as Lear's psychotherapist, whose task it is to confront him with the painful truths he would otherwise prefer to ignore.¹⁸

Despite—or because of—his devotion to Lear, however, the Fool preys on Lear's misogyny and sexual anxiety. Even before Lear voices his suspicion that Goneril is a "Degenerate Bastard," the Fool insinuates: "The Hedge-Sparrow fed the Cuckoo so long, that it's had it head bit off by it young" (TLN, 727–28; 1.4.224–25). The motif of cuckoldry recurs in the Fool's explanation for why a snail has a house: "Why, to put's head in, not to give it away to his daughters, and leave his hornes without a case" (TLN, 904–5; 1.5.30–32). Having surrendered his crown, Lear becomes an impotent, hence feminized, male. In a passage that conflates gender and generational reversals, the Fool tells Lear that he has grown full of songs "Ere since thou mad'st thy Daughters thy Mothers" and "gav'st them the rod, and put'st downe thine owne breeches" (TLN, 686–88; 1.4.179–81).¹⁹

17. For a detailed comparison between Albany's roles in the Quarto and Folio texts, which stresses the heightened ambiguities of his portrayal in the Folio, see Steven Urkowitz, *Shakespeare's Revision of "King Lear"* (Princeton, N.J., 1980), pp. 80–128.

18. Lear himself assumes this function vis-à-vis Gloucester in his mocking riddles of act 4, scene 6: "Your eies are in a heavy case, your purse in a light, yet you see how this world goes" (TLN, 2590–92; 4.6.147–49). Like the Fool's interrogation of Lear, the motive for this apparent cruelty is ultimately love.

19. Roberto Speziale-Bagliacca notes the Fool's implication that Lear has given his daughters his "phallus-scepter" with which they can penetrate as well as beat his proffered buttocks. See *The King and the Adulteress: A Psychoanalytic and Literary Reinterpretation of "Madame Bovary" and "King Lear,"* ed. Colin Rice (Durham, N.C., 1998), p. 111.

If Edgar is the voice of patriarchy, the Fool is the voice of Lear's unconscious. As such, he articulates the castration anxiety that is at once cause and effect of Lear's loss of royal power. This function helps to explain such otherwise obscure jests as the Fool's parting address to the audience at the close of act 1: "She that's a Maid now, & laughs at my departure, / Shall not be a Maid long, unless things be cut shorter" (TLN, 923–24; 1.5.52–53), where "things" has a phallic meaning and the allusion to castration is likewise explicit.

Concomitant to the Fool's obsession with castration is his view of the female genitals as a place of absence and foul odor. Again, there are sexual undertones to the Fool's answer to the riddle about why the nose is placed in the middle of the face: "Why, to keepe ones eyes of either side's nose, that what a man cannot smell out, he may spy into" (TLN, 895–96; 1.5.22–23). Echoing the reference to "smelling a fault" in the Gloucester plot and thus reinforcing the psychic indivisibility of Lear and Gloucester, the Fool's lines contrast the senses of sight and smell, which are coded respectively as masculine and feminine. It is perhaps not a cultural accident that in *King Lear* Shakespeare anticipates the bizarre thesis of Freud's friend Wilhelm Fliess concerning the connection between the nose and the female sexual organs.²⁰ The Fool's riddle emphasizes the nose's location in the middle of the face, a displaced allusion to the vagina. As he earlier tells Lear, "Thou hast pared thy wit o'both sides, and left nothing i'th'middle" (TLN, 699–700; 1.4.194–95), where "nothing i'th'middle" equates the nose with the vagina, now defined not in terms of its odor but its lack.

As so often, the strands of Shakespeare's sexual imagery are mutually reinforcing. Only when "nothing" is accorded its vaginal significance, as it has been by David Willbern in a classic essay, can the phallic resonance of "thing" be properly heard, and vice versa.²¹ The most important lesson I would draw from this opposition between "thing" and "nothing" is that Shakespeare, like Freud, presupposes a phallocentric model of sexual difference based on an opposition between male

20. See Wilhelm Fliess, *Die Beziehung zwischen Nase und weiblichen Geschlechtsorganen* (Vienna, 1897). Freud's later colleague Georg Groddeck viewed the nose as a phallic symbol, urging that Germans should emulate the French "le nez" by giving the noun a masculine form: "mein Naser," instead of "die Nase." See *Der Seelensucher: Ein psychoanalytischer Roman*, 2d ed. (Vienna, 1922), p. 195. That the Fool should side with Fliess rather than Groddeck by defining the nose as vaginal conforms to the pattern whereby male characters tainted by sexuality become feminized throughout *King Lear*.

21. See David Willbern, "Shakespeare's Nothing," in *Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays*, ed. Murray M. Schwartz and Coppélia Kahn (1980; reprint, Baltimore, 1982), pp. 244–63. On the religious and philosophical contexts of Shakespeare's nullophobia, see Edward W. Taylor, "King Lear and Negation," *English Literary Renaissance* 20 (1990): 17–39.

presence and female absence, the consequences of which have only recently begun to be exposed by feminist analysis.

It thus becomes possible to propose a new meaning for Lear's description of Edgar, in the latter's disguise as Poor Tom, as "unaccommodated man." For when Lear characterizes Tom as "the thing it selfe" (TLN, 1886; 3.4.109), the genital significance of "thing" makes Tom into an emblem of the naked phallus. The phrase "unaccommodated man" undergoes a mutation in which "man" comes to designate not human beings in general but males in particular, confirming Coppélia Kahn's thesis in *Man's Estate* that Shakespeare is writing from the standpoint of a masculine subject. Not only does Edgar invent a history of his past life as a courtier that resonates with Lear's denigration of women, but his counterfeited ravings, "Pillicock sat on Pillicock hill" (TLN, 1858; 3.4.76)—triggered by Lear's reference to his "Pelican Daughters"—employ a term of endearment for the penis.²² What we may call, in Melanie Klein's terminology, Lear's projective identification with Poor Tom is thus grounded in the way that the Bedlam beggar constitutes an objective correlative not only for suffering humanity as a whole but specifically for his own wounded genital organ.²³

Character and language are inseparable, and nowhere can their interdependence be seen more clearly than in the concluding lines of Lear's tirade against female sexuality in act 4, scene 6 (spoken, not coincidentally, when he is brought face-to-face with the eyeless Gloucester): "Downe from the waste they are Centaures, though Women all above: but to the Girdle do the Gods inherit, beneath is all the Fiends. There's hell, there's darkenes, there is the sulphurous pit; burning, scalding, stench, consumption: Fye, fie; pah, pah: Give me an Ounce of Civet, good Apothecary sweeten my imagination: There's money for thee" (TLN, 2567–73; 4.6.126–34). In branding the female genitalia a "sulphurous pit," Lear's speech brings to a climax the olfactory imagery in the play. The anatomical references here retroactively warrant a sexual reading of Lear's apostrophe to the storm as "You Sulph'rous and Thought-executing Fires" (TLN, 1659; 3.2.4).²⁴ Indeed, if the storm represents nature as an unleashed female body

22. See Muir's note to this passage in the Arden edition (n. 8 above).

23. For a detailed conspectus of projective identification in the psychoanalytic literature, see R. D. Hinshelwood, *A Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*, 2d ed. (London, 1991), pp. 179–208. The term was introduced by Klein in a 1952 addition to "Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms" (1946), in *The Writings of Melanie Klein*, ed. Roger Money-Kyrle et al., 4 vols. (New York, 1975), 3:1–24.

24. See Adelman (n. 6 above), who observes that Lear's diatribe "in effect traces the elements of the storm back to their origin" (p. 112), though she does not pursue a phallic interpretation of the "Steeple" and "Cockes."

wreaking its destructive havoc, it seems plausible to interpret Lear's exhortation to blow "Till you have drench'd our Steeples, drown the Cockes" (TLN, 1658; 3.2.3) as a depiction of the endangered male organ. In other words, the storm can be viewed in psychoanalytic terms as a primal scene fantasy, which exists in the mind of Lear as a character but is given objective form in the universe of the play. The storm is a hallucination of sexual intercourse as an act of violence, in which the pregnant female body is at once menacingly powerful and equated with the "thicke Rotundity o'th'world" that the masculine thunder threatens to "strike flat" (TLN, 1662; 3.2.7).

In addition to evincing repugnance toward the "hell" of the vagina, Lear's diatribe conspicuously splits the female body into upper and lower portions, doing so not once but twice in parallel constructions ("Downe from the waste," "but to the girdle"). The line of demarcation is the loins, with the human or divine region above and the bestial or demonic below. This polarization of women into angels or demons, madonnas or whores, pervades patriarchal culture; Freud explains it as a consequence of the son's discovery of his mother's sexuality in the course of the Oedipus complex.²⁵ Lear's speech, in addition to expressing this insidious fantasy, also glosses the deployment of characters in the play, and specifically the pattern whereby the virtuous characters are hostile to women, while the wicked characters belong to the camp of Lear's elder daughters. The "vertical" split in Lear's image of the female body is replicated by the "horizontal" split in the design of the play between Goneril and Regan's allies on the one hand, and Cordelia's on the other.

The idealization of Cordelia is but the obverse of the demonization of Goneril and Regan and should thus be viewed with suspicion as the symptom of, rather than an antidote to, the play's underlying misogyny. This is one of my major disagreements with both Bloom and Mack, who because they occlude gender issues simply reinscribe Lear's own judgments about his daughters instead of treating their

25. See Sigmund Freud, "A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men" (1910), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey et al., 24 vols. (London, 1953–74), 11:165–75. According to William Kerrigan, "our current academic culture of political correctness can be understood in psychological terms as a narcissistic denial of splitting," and we will never "produce a generation of males from whom this split has been scrubbed away" ("A Woman's a Two-Face," in *Hamlet's Perfection* [Baltimore, 1994], p. 81). Narcissism, however, far from entailing a "denial" of splitting, relies on it as a primitive defense mechanism; and feminists do not deny the existence of pathological splits in the images of women, but rather seek to confront and analyze them. To the extent that dichotomous thinking about gender and sexuality is ineradicable from the human psyche, moreover, its application is not limited to men's views of women, though this may be historically its most flagrant manifestation.

bifurcation into incarnations of good and evil as a problem to be analyzed.²⁶ Thus, when a Gentleman affirms to the fleeing Lear, "Thou hast a daughter / Who redeems Nature from the generall curse / Which twaine have brought her to" (TLN, 2647–49; 4.6.206–8), he speaks on behalf of an ideology endorsed by the play, but one that ought to strike contemporary readers as sexist.²⁷ The oppressive implications of the veneration of Cordelia are evident in Lear's eulogy over her dead body, as he strains to hear the words that will never issue from her lips: "Her voice was ever soft, / Gentle, and low, an excellent thing in woman" (TLN, 3236–37; 5.3.272–73). That women should be chaste, silent, and obedient is a cornerstone of patriarchal doctrine; and Lear's praise of Cordelia ironically attests to the shackles he has sought to impose on her.

Like both Kent and Edgar, who first endure banishment and then disguise themselves in an attempt to operate covertly on behalf of the patriarchs who have wronged them, Cordelia is exiled from her father's presence and then returns (paradoxically, at the head of the French armies) to fight on his behalf. Unlike Kent and Edgar, however, who can be said to have succeeded in their missions and remain alive at the end of the play, Cordelia is hanged as a result of Edmund's belatedly revoked order. Thus, whereas the fates of these virtuous male characters vindicate a belief in poetic justice—exemplified by Albany's valediction that "All friends shall / Taste the wages of their virtue, and all Foes / The cup of their deservings" (TLN, 3273–75; 5.3.302–4)—Cordelia's death shatters this morality-play pattern and casts *King Lear* irrevocably into the abyss of tragedy.

As the distillation of the patriarchal ideal of femininity, Cordelia is the logical culmination of the misogyny that distinguishes all the virtuous male characters in the play—Edgar, Kent, Albany, and the Fool,

26. For a provocative defense of the actions of Goneril and Regan as determined by the patriarchal structure of power in *King Lear*, see Cristina León Alfár, "King Lear's 'Immoral' Daughters and the Politics of Kingship," *Exemplaria* 8 (1996): 375–400. Though I agree with Alfár that feminist critics should "interrogate the moral judgments which define Goneril and Regan as monstrous," I cannot share her conclusion that "Shakespeare was no misogynist" (pp. 376, 379). My view of the play accords with that of Kathleen McLuskie, "The Patriarchal Bard: Feminist Criticism and Shakespeare: *King Lear* and *Measure for Measure*," in *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, ed. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985), pp. 88–106.

27. Adelman cogently argues that the "condensation of Goneril and Regan with Adam and Eve" in the Gentleman's speech "offers a revised version of the fall, making our fallen nature entirely derivative from Eve and her daughters" (Adelman, p. 119). A critique of the idealization of Cordelia (and a reworking of Shakespeare's incest theme) is implicit in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* (1991), a novel set on an Iowa farm in the 1970s, where the story of *King Lear* is narrated from the point of view of Goneril, here renamed Virginia ("Ginny"), who, along with her middle sister, Rose, has been sexually abused during childhood by their father.

not to mention Lear and Gloucester. At the same time Cordelia's gratuitous death sets her apart as unique. The rivalry between good and evil siblings is found in both the Lear and the Gloucester plots, but the Lear plot provides the prototype, while the enmity between Edgar and Edmund refracts that between Cordelia and her sisters. The artistic priority of the Lear plot, with the icon of Cordelia at his heart, shows that the polarization of "good" and "evil" characters in *King Lear* cannot be explained by Shakespeare's concern with moral issues, but that this fairy-tale pattern is rather an epiphenomenon of gender arrangements.

The action of *King Lear* moves implacably toward a climax in which Edmund kills Cordelia—that is, the epitome of masculinity slays the quintessence of femininity, as these stereotypes are defined in patriarchal culture. As I have argued, however, Edmund's virility is tainted by his identity as a "whoreson" (TLN, 27; 1.1.30)—the same word is used in Kent's abuse of Oswald (TLN, 1091; 2.2.16)—and is thus haunted by a repressed femininity. Indeed, Edmund's hypersexuality, which culminates in his adulterous liaisons with both Goneril and Regan, is inherited from his licentious father, whose own adulterous propensities led to his blinding at Edmund's instigation. "But have you never found my Brothers way, / To the fore-fended place?" (TLN, 2858–59; 5.1.10–11), Regan demands of Edmund; and in *King Lear*, any man who has entered "the darke and vicious place" of the vagina has been irredeemably contaminated by his exposure to female sexuality.²⁸ The dilemma of the situation of Lear's elder daughters, conversely, is that they cannot achieve their political aims without allying themselves with the feckless Edmund. Emancipated women are by definition evil and dangerous, but even they are barred from genuine autonomy in Shakespeare's patriarchal universe. Thus, although Edmund slays Cordelia, he operates as Goneril and Regan's agent. The assertion that masculinity slays femininity should be modified accordingly to indicate that the demonic half of the horizontally and vertically bifurcated image of the female body destroys its angelic counterpart.

First the Lear plot and then the Gloucester plot are set in motion when Cordelia and Edmund, respectively, utter the word "nothing." This verbal echo signals the latent antagonism between these two characters.²⁹ And if an allusion to the vagina always hovers subliminally in "nothing," both plots of the play explore the dark continent of

28. In his notes on the Arden edition, Muir glosses "place" as "the adulterous bed, and so the act of adultery" (5.3.172) and "Goneril's bed" (5.1.11). Such euphemisms eviscerate the fascinated revulsion with female sexuality in *King Lear*.

29. In *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature* (1948; reprint, London, 1972), John F. Danby contrasts Edmund and Cordelia as embodiments of antithetical conceptions of Nature in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

female sexuality. Just as Edmund is tainted by “the darke and vicious place” from which he has sprung and to which he compulsively returns, so Lear contains within himself the “sulphurous pit” of which he seeks to purge his imagination. Not only is Lear symbolically castrated by his daughters, as Gloucester is by Edmund, but when the Fool calls him “an O without a figure” and flings the taunt, “I am a Fool, thou art nothing” (TLN, 706–8; 1.4.200–202), he highlights Lear’s identification with the femininity he despises.

In parsing the Fool’s phrase “nothing i’t’h middle,” which he uses to impugn Lear’s wit, I pointed to the connection between the nose and the vagina in the imagery of the play. But Shakespeare also draws another analogy between the face and the female genitalia and, specifically, between the vagina and the mouth. In his misogynistic diatribe, Lear rails at the “simpring Dame, whose face between her Forkes presages Snow” (TLN, 2563–64; 4.6.120–21). Although his intended meaning is clearly that a woman’s virtuous demeanor does not guarantee chaste behavior, a more radical reading of the phrase “face between her Forkes” suggests that the face and what lies between the legs are one and the same. Support for this speculative construction is found in George Wilkins’s *The Miserie of Enforced Marriage* (1607)—a play pervasively indebted to *King Lear* as well as to *Twelfth Night*—in the scene where the protagonist Scarborrow diffidently woos Clare, who becomes his betrothed but then commits suicide when Scarborrow is forced by his guardian to marry another woman. As Clare stands in silence, Scarborrow resolves to “walke by her, in hope shee can open her teeth,” and continues to himself in soliloquy: “I think if I should take up her Cloaths to, she would say nothing to me.”³⁰ About this passage, Frank Whigham observes that “if he lifts her skirts,” Scarborrow “thinks he’ll find the notorious . . . *vagina dentata*, the fiendish face between her forks, saying ‘nothing.’”³¹ The emphasis on teeth is Wilkins’s addition, but Whigham’s commentary otherwise catches precisely the equation between the mouth and the vagina found also in Shakespeare, and the way that “nothing” issues from both sets of Cordelia’s female lips.

The association between the mouth and the vagina, mediated by the references to “nothing,” in turn illuminates the excruciating ending of the play, in which Lear dies comforted by the delusion that Cordelia has come back to life: “Pray you undo this Button. Thank you

30. George Wilkins, *The Miserie of Enforced Marriage*, ed. Glenn H. Blayney (Oxford, 1964), 11.196, 199–200. Earlier, bantering with the libertine Ilford, the Clown declares: “Nothing comes of nothing” (1.46).

31. Frank Whigham, *Seizures of the Will in Early Modern English Drama* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 137.

Sir, / Do you see this? Looke on her? Looke her lips, / Looke there, looke there" (TLN, 3281–83; 5.3.308–10). In this, his final speech, Lear is confronted by a reprise of the "nothing" uttered by Cordelia at the outset, though it here takes the form not of a spoken word but of the eternal silence of death. Lear's intense focus on Cordelia's mouth displaces upward his interest in the nothingness between her legs. It is usually assumed that Lear's exhortation to "undo this Button" pertains to his own clothes—or by extension his body, seen as the garment of the soul—but the possibility cannot be excluded that the button belongs to Cordelia, whose breath Lear wishes to resuscitate.³² If the button were Cordelia's, it would follow that Lear in dying desires to expose her body, much as Oedipus uncovers the body of Jocasta when he seizes the brooches from her robe to put out his eyes. Be this as it may, the fact that the button could be either Lear's or Cordelia's shows once again their identification, adumbrated in the Fool's insinuations that Lear has "nothing i'th'middle" and is "an O without a figure."

In "The Theme of the Three Caskets" (1913), Freud expatiates on the association between Cordelia as the youngest of the three sisters or Fates and "the Silent Goddess of Death," and argues that the mythic pattern of three women represents "the three forms taken by the figure of the mother in the course of a man's life—the mother herself, the beloved one who is chosen after her pattern, and lastly the Mother Earth who receives him once more."³³ I would like to conclude by analyzing the incestuous dynamics in *King Lear*, as they are integral to any psychoanalytic understanding of the play.

Lear's "darker purpose" (TLN, 41; 1.1.36) is not the division of the kingdom announced with such fanfare in his opening speech, but rather his unconscious desire to maintain his incestuous hold over Cordelia, and this desire motivates his otherwise inexplicable decision to abdicate the throne.³⁴ As can be seen from the allusion to the vagina as a "darke and vicious place" and to sexual intercourse as an "acte of darkeness," the word "darker" carries a sinister undertone of female sexuality in the play. It is not by chance that Lear resolves to divide his kingdom just when he is obliged to give Cordelia away in

32. In his note to this passage, Muir admits the possibility that "Lear is referring to one of Cordelia's buttons," but deems this "unlikely."

33. Freud, "The Theme of the Three Caskets," in *The Standard Edition*, 12:301.

34. Although on the right track, Mark Taylor's *Shakespeare's Darker Purpose: A Question of Incest* (New York, 1982) is perfunctory in its treatment of *King Lear*. Some salient remarks on the incest theme in the play can be found in C. L. Barber and Richard Wheeler, *The Whole Journey: Shakespeare's Power of Development* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1986), pp. 284–91.

marriage. The former action is set in motion by the latter exigency, although this causal relation is inverted by the chronological sequence of events in the opening scene; and the division of the kingdom, with its attendant love-test, can be seen as an elaborate unconscious strategy on Lear's part to disinherit Cordelia so that she will be unacceptable to any suitor and thus obliged to remain his daughter forever.

Lear, in other words, knows Cordelia well enough to intuit that she is unlikely to join her two elder sisters in the bidding war for his affections. His anger at her recalcitrance, though genuine on one level, masks a deeper level of satisfaction at her failure, since this justifies him in depriving her of a dowry. Lear's true surprise in the opening scene comes when France (in words that echo Sonnet 116, "Love is not love / That alters when it alteration finds") accepts her as she is without qualifications: "Love's not love / When it is mingled with regards, that stands / Aloof from th'intire point" (TLN, 261-63; 1.1.238-40). That Cordelia has two suitors formally refracts the fact that she has not one but two married sisters; and the clash between Burgundy and France symbolizes the conflict taking place between the materialistic side of Lear's soul that confuses love and property, and the spiritual side that is capable of unconditional love.

As psychoanalytic theory would lead one to expect, in his conflicts with his daughters Lear reenacts the dynamics of a son's relationship to his mother. Lear's psychic regression is signaled by his immediately expressed desire to "unburthen'd crawl toward death" (TLN, 46; 1.1.41); after Cordelia's disobedience, he protests that he had wanted "to set my rest / On her kind nursery" (TLN, 131-32; 1.1.123-24). Kahn and Adelman, among other commentators, have eloquently expounded the infantile origins of Lear's rage at his abandonment. As Freud has argued, the polarized image of women as either virgins or whores is traceable to the son's conflicting attitudes toward the mother in the Oedipus complex; and Melanie Klein would extend this to the split between the fantasies of the "good breast" and the "bad breast" in the first year of life.³⁵ Lear assimilates the demonized figure of Gon-

35. Speziale-Bagliacca (n. 19 above) quotes Lear's panic-stricken disowning of Cordelia, "By all the operation of the Orbes, / From whom we do exist and cease to be" (TLN, 118-19; 1.1.111-12), and comments that "for the desperate infant howling inside Lear . . . the relationship with the breast is a matter of life and death" (p. 107). Lear's lines echo Othello's torment at the thought of Desdemona's infidelity: "But there, where I have garner'd up my heart, / Where either I must live or bear no life; / The fountain from the which my current runs / Or else dries up" (4.2.57-60). The breast imagery of Lear's "Orbes" extends the womb imagery of Othello's "fountain," and both depict the female body as the source of life or death for the infantilized male protagonist.

eril to a maternal prototype in his imprecation that Nature destroy her reproductive powers:

Into her Wombe convey stirrility,
Drie up in her the Organs of increase,
And from her derogate body, never spring
A Babe to honor her.

(TLN, 792–95; 1.4.287–90)

Once reconciled to Cordelia, conversely, Lear casts her in the role of an angel of redemption. The generational fluidity whereby Lear is both father and son, and his daughters revenants of his mother, finds emblematic representation in the reverse pietà of the final scene, where Lear's entrance with the dead Cordelia in his arms inverts the cultural icon of the Virgin Mary who bears in her arms the crucified Christ.

A skeptic might observe that since Cordelia has married France she is presumably no longer a virgin. Hence one might question the relevance of the Madonna/prostitute dichotomy. But the sexual dimension of the relationship between Cordelia and France—like that between Othello and Desdemona—is conspicuously elided; and the play brings Cordelia back to England at the head of the French armies, conveniently without her husband. Strikingly, the only scene in the 1608 Quarto version of *King Lear* to be entirely omitted from the Folio is what modern conflated editions call act 4, scene 3, in which a Gentleman explains to Kent why the King of France has returned to his country: "Something he left imperfect in the state, which since his comming forth is thought of, which imports to the Kingdome, So much feare and danger that his personall returne was most required and necessarie."³⁶ So feeble is this excuse that it is worse than none at all, and its excision (as I take it to be) from the Folio reflects Shakespeare's decision to allow Cordelia's unaccompanied return simply to follow from the inexorable logic of events of the play, without offering even the semblance of a narrative justification.³⁷

Considered psychoanalytically, however, to contrive a reunion between father and daughter is the "darker purpose" not only of Lear as

36. I quote this passage from *The Historie of King Lear*, in *Shakespeare's Plays in Quarto: A Facsimile Edition of Copies Primarily from the Henry E. Huntington Library*, ed. Michael J. B. Allen and Kenneth Muir (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1981), p. 692. The Quarto lacks act and scene divisions. The equivalent passage in the Arden edition of *King Lear* is 4.2.3–6.

37. See Gary Taylor, "The War in *King Lear*," *Shakespeare Survey* 33 (1980): 27–33. Taylor notes that "to 'motivate' the French King's absence raises an awkward question which would be better left unasked. In this case, as so often, no excuse at all is more plausible than a poor one" (p. 30). Taylor observes further that the specifically French identity of Cordelia's armies is muted in the Folio version.

a character but of the play as a whole. Just as the storm unleashes its destructive force at precisely the moment when Lear has been cast out by Goneril and Regan and is descending into madness, thus making external reality indistinguishable from his private fantasy, so too the return of Cordelia gratifies Lear's fantasy, thereby effectively rendering it omnipotent.³⁸ Lear's longing for reunion with Cordelia reaches its apotheosis in his "Birds i'th' Cage" speech in the final scene, where notwithstanding his political defeat Lear is exultant because he can at last leave the world behind and escape to a Cave of Lovers with his precious daughter. The exquisite reciprocity of Lear's imagined scene, "When thou dost ask me blessing, Ile kneele downe / And aske of thee forgiveness" (TLN, 2950–51; 5.3.10–11), captures the symbiosis he longs for with Cordelia, a timeless moment of stasis in which father and daughter forever exchange roles.³⁹

The incest theme that subtends the Lear plot inevitably finds its double in the Gloucester subplot. Although the sexual transgression by which Gloucester begets Edmund is manifestly one of adultery and not incest, its unconscious meaning is laid bare by Edmund's illicit relations with Goneril and Regan, which constitute an incestuous as well as an adulterous triangle. (That one sister is married and the other newly widowed makes the situation triangular on all sides.) Since the sisters' sexual rivalry over Edmund reenacts their genteelly masked contest for their father's affections, the incestuous dynamics in both plots converge on the figure of the Bastard. Analogously, Edgar's lack of contact with Cordelia—assiduously enforced throughout the play—reproduces the primal taboo against Lear's accomplishment of his "darker purpose" with his youngest daughter. As Poor Tom, Edgar embodies Lear's phallic anxieties, but he has also introjected Gloucester's repressed sexual guilt. Like Edmund's unbridled promiscuity, therefore, Edgar's oppressive morality shows the sins of the fathers to be visited on the sons. What is more, the pious Edgar

38. According to Winnicott's notion of the "use of an object," only when an object survives a subject's destructive attacks does it come to be experienced as objectively real and placed in the external world. From this perspective, the fact that *King Lear* endorses the fantasy of its protagonist can be understood as a reflection of a dynamic of failed object use. Just as Cordelia fails to survive Lear's destructive attacks, so the world of the play remains a projection of Lear's own fantasy and does not take on a genuinely external quality. See D. W. Winnicott, "The Use of an Object and Relating through Identifications," in *Playing and Reality* (London, 1971), pp. 86–94.

39. Compare Hamlet's lines to Gertrude in the "closet scene" after he has slain Polonius: "Once more good night, / And when you are desirous to be blest, / I'll blessing beg of you" (3.4.170–72). As he does between father and daughter in *King Lear*, Shakespeare in *Hamlet* envisages a symbiotic reciprocity between mother and son in which the incestuous fantasy is readily apparent.

ironically fulfills Edmund's murderous wishes by causing Gloucester's death of a heart attack when he belatedly reveals his true identity. The two brothers together thus enact the patricidal as well as the incestuous components of the Oedipus complex, and in so doing they demonstrate the indivisibility of the fates of Lear and Gloucester.

The conjunction between incest and patricide in the subplot raises again the matter of Gloucester's blindness. As Jay Halio points out, "In medieval Europe and England blinding and castration were punishments for sexual crimes," not for the crime of treason for which Gloucester is arraigned by Cornwall; and Shakespeare's language reanimates a symbolic equation between blindness and castration.⁴⁰ Apparently without any direct influence, Shakespeare has uncannily duplicated the themes and imagery of Sophocles's Oedipus plays. Not only does the aged Lear hauntingly recall the Oedipus of *Oedipus at Colonus*, but when Gloucester declares, "I stumbled when I saw" (TLN, 2200; 4.1.19), and Edgar reports that he "became [the] guide" (TLN, 2153; 5.3.190) of his blind father, Shakespeare likewise makes Gloucester into an avatar of Sophocles's hero.⁴¹ If Lear and Gloucester are two halves of a single masculine psyche, it is perhaps inevitable that that psyche should have the lineaments of Sophocles and Freud.

Lear's relations to his daughters constitute a reenactment of a son's ambivalent attachment to his mother. But, like generational roles, gender roles are extraordinarily fluid in the play. Thus, if Cordelia and her sisters are both daughters and mothers to Lear, and Lear is himself identified with the feminine "nothing," then it becomes impossible to differentiate fathers from daughters, sons from mothers, and parents from children. Two passages exemplify this final twist on the pattern of role reversals. In the first, Lear disowns Cordelia after she has refused to cooperate with his demand to flatter him with words of love:

The barbarous *Scythian*,
Or he that makes his generation messes
To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosome
Be as well neighbour'd, pittied, and releev'd
As thou my sometime Daughter.

(TLN, 123–27; 1.1.116–19)

40. Jay Halio, "Gloucester's Blinding," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 43 (1992): 222. Although published in the same year as Adelman's *Suffocating Mothers*, Halio presents his interpretation of Gloucester's blinding as a symbolic castration as though it were still controversial. He adduces the slang meaning of "stones" as "testicles," but overlooks the vaginal significance of "rings."

41. On *King Lear* and *Oedipus the King*, see Heilman (n. 14 above), pp. 20–24. The parallels that Heilman ascribes to "the structural procedures necessary to the most concentrated poetic drama" (p. 23), I would instead explain along psychological lines.

Lear's accusation reverses the actual state of affairs; he is himself the "barbarous *Scythian*," consumed with oral-sadistic rage, who wishes to devour his progeny. The cannibalistic father has been transmogrified into the disobedient daughter.

In the second passage, spoken when Lear sees Poor Tom during the storm scene, the lacerated body of the Bedlam beggar is blamed on his "unkind Daughters":

Is it the fashion, that discarded Fathers,
Should have thus little mercy on their flesh:
Judicious punishment, 'twas this flesh begot
Those Pelican Daughters.

(TLN, 1852-56; 3.4.72-75)

Like husband and wife, parent and child are one flesh. The pivotal phrase is "Pelican Daughters." The pelican, which sheds its own blood to feed its young, is conventionally an emblem of sacrifice, but here it is used to connote ruthless destructiveness. Instead of designating the parent, moreover, the pelicans here are Tom's imaginary offspring, and by extension Lear's daughters. Finally, the breast-piercing pelican is ordinarily a symbol of maternal devotion, but here a father is consumed by his "Pelican Daughters." Shakespeare's metaphor simultaneously reverses gender, generation, and affect. But just as father and daughter are fused in the "barbarous *Scythian*," so the maternal significance of the pelican is not effaced by the paternal overlay of the comparison. If Lear can be both father and mother to his daughters, they can be not only his maternal but also his paternal surrogates.⁴²

The leaps and bounds of these permutations should not unsettle anyone who understands that the purview of psychoanalysis is a realm where metaphor and transference reign supreme. Like last night's dream, Shakespeare's art is a royal road to the unconscious. Despite its inexhaustible vicissitudes of meaning, however, the tragedy of *King Lear* is at bottom simplicity itself. It is that Lear's fantasy of merger with Cordelia, which goes back to a child's incestuous longing to return to the body of its mother, is ultimately a death sentence. As in Othello's ecstatic reunion with Desdemona in Cyprus, "If it were now to die, / 'Twere now to be most happy" (2.1.189-90), so in Lear's "Birds i'th'Cage" speech: if the present moment is perfect then time and change cannot be tolerated and the little death of orgasm is prolonged to eternity. Although the fantasies of Lear and Othello draw on what I have no hesitation in affirming to be universal human de-

42. For the pelican as a fungible image of familial violence, see Frances E. Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England, 1550-1700* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1994), p. 150.

sires, the forms that they take indubitably reveal the ideological imprint of the age in which they arose. They display a misogyny that is far from inevitable and ought to distress us at the close of the twentieth century. For if we have profited from the interrogations of feminism as well as psychoanalysis, it should be possible for us to begin to sort out the essential from the contingent, to acknowledge our nostalgia for the womb without stigmatizing its portal as a "darke and vicious place," and to emancipate ourselves from the gender arrangements of patriarchy, even as we continue to reread the literary masterpieces in which its fantasies are most powerfully inscribed.