Fleeing Goneril’s “sharp-tooth’d unkindness,” Lear arrives at Gloucester’s house in search of Regan, still hoping that she will be “kind and comfortable,” although she was inexplicably not at home when he called before. He finds his messenger in the stocks, a humiliation that he rightly takes as directed at him personally. At first he simply denies what Kent tells him, that Regan and her husband did indeed commit this outrage. Then he seeks to understand how, or why. Kent recounts the studied rudeness, the successive insults, the final shaming, that he has endured.

For a moment, Lear can no longer deny or rationalize; he can only feel—a tumult of wounded pride, shame, anger, and loss, which he expresses in a striking image:

O! how this mother swells upward toward my heart!
Hysterica passio! down, thou climbing sorrow!
Thy element’s below.

By calling his sorrow hysterical, Lear decisively characterizes it as feminine, in accordance with a tradition stretching back to 1900 B.C. when an Egyptian papyrus first described the malady. Fifteen hundred years later in the writings of Hippocrates, it was named, and its name succinctly conveyed its etiology. It was the disease of the hyster, the womb. From ancient times through the nineteenth century, women suffering variously from choking, feelings of suffocation, partial paralysis, convulsions similar to those of epilepsy, aphasia, numbness, and lethargy were said to be ill of hysteria, caused by a wandering womb. What sent the womb on its errant path through the female body, people thought, was either lack of sexual intercourse or retention of menstrual blood. In both cases, the same prescription obtained: the patient should
get married. A husband would keep that wandering womb where it belonged. If the afflicted already had a husband, concoctions either noxious or pleasant were applied to force or entice the recalcitrant womb to its proper location.²

In Shakespeare’s time, hysteria was also called, appropriately, “the mother.” Although Shakespeare may well have consulted a treatise by Edward Jordan called *A Brief Discourse of a Disease Called the Suffocation of the Mother*, published in 1603, like anyone in his culture he would have understood “the mother” in the context of notions about women. For hysteria is a vivid metaphor of woman in general, as she was regarded then and later, a creature destined for the strenuous bodily labors of childbearing and childrearing but nonetheless physically weaker than man. Moreover, she was, like Eve, temperamentally and morally infirm—skittish, prone to err in all senses. Woman’s womb, her justification and her glory, was also the sign and source of her weakness as a creature of the flesh rather than the mind or spirit. The very diversity of symptoms clustering under the name of hysteria bespeaks the capricious nature of woman. And the remedy—a husband and regular sexual intercourse—declares the necessity for male control of this volatile female element.³

* * *

Psychoanalysis was born, one might say, from the wandering womb of hysteria. Anna O., the star of *Studies in Hysteria*, published by Freud and Joseph Breuer in 1895, was its midwife. It was she who named psychoanalysis “the talking cure” and in a sense even discovered it. Afflicted with a veritable museum of hysterical symptoms, when Breuer visited her she spontaneously sank into a rapt, semiconscious state in which she insisted on talking about what bothered her, thus showing the way to free association as the distinctly psychoanalytic technique of treating mental disorders. For psychoanalysis and hysteria both, the discovery that its strangely disparate physical symp-
toms were in fact symbolic representations of unconscious mental conflict constituted a crucial breakthrough. Relocating the cause of hysteria in the head instead of in the womb, Breuer and Freud were able to make sense of it, treat it, and, to an extent, cure it. Yet, in the Viennese women they treated, we can see that hysteria does indeed come from the womb—if we understand the womb as a metaphor for feelings and needs associated with women. As Dianne Hunter suggests, what Anna O. talked out was her specifically female subjectivity. She expressed through the body language of her paralyzed arm, her squint, and her speech disorders the effects on her as a woman of life in a father-dominated family and a male-dominated world that suppressed the female voice. The matrix of her disease was both sexual and social: the patriarchal family.

Because the family is both the first scene of individual development and the primary agent of socialization, it functions as a link between psychic and social structures and as the crucible in which gender identity is formed. From being mothered and fathered, we learn to be ourselves as men and women. The anthropologist Gayle Rubin describes psychoanalysis as “a theory of sexuality in human society...a description of the mechanisms by which the sexes are divided and deformed, or how bisexual androgynous infants are transformed into boys and girls...a feminist theory manqué.” A great Shakespearean critic, C. L. Barber, calls psychoanalysis “a sociology of love and worship within the family.” Freud, of course, viewed this family drama from the standpoint of a son; he conceived the development of gender as governed primarily by relationship with the father. Because Freud grounds sexual differentiation in the cultural primacy of the phallus, within the context of a family structure that mirrors the psychological organization of patriarchal society, he enables us to deconstruct the modes of feeling, the institutions, and the social codes in which much if not most of English literature is embedded.

But to use one of Freud’s favorite metaphors, to excavate patriarchal sensibility in literature, we must sift through more than one layer. In
the history of psychoanalysis, the discovery of the Oedipus complex precedes the discovery of pre-oedipal experience, reversing the sequence of development in the individual. Similarly, patriarchal structures loom obviously on the surface of many texts, structures of authority, control, force, logic, linearity, misogyny, male superiority. But beneath them, as in a palimpsest, we can find what I call “the maternal subtext,” the imprint of mothering on the male psyche, the psychological presence of the mother whether or not mothers are literally represented as characters. In this reading of King Lear, I try, like an archaeologist, to uncover the hidden mother in the hero’s inner world.

Now, it is interesting that there is no literal mother in King Lear. The earlier anonymous play that is one of Shakespeare’s main sources opens with a speech by the hero lamenting the death of his “dearest Queen.” But Shakespeare, who follows the play closely in many respects, refers only once in passing to this queen. In the crucial cataclysmic first scene of his play, from which all its later action evolves, we are shown only fathers and their godlike capacity to make or mar their children. Through this conspicuous omission the play articulates a patriarchal conception of the family in which children owe their existence to their fathers alone; the mother’s role in procreation is eclipsed by the father’s, which is used to affirm male prerogative and male power. The aristocratic patriarchal families headed by Gloucester and Lear have, actually and effectively, no mothers. The only source of love, power, and authority is the father—an awesome, demanding presence.

But what the play depicts, of course, is the failure of that presence: the failure of a father’s power to command love in a patriarchal world and the emotional penalty he pays for wielding power. Lear’s very insistence on paternal power, in fact, belies its shakiness; similarly, the absence of the mother points to her hidden presence, as the lines with which I began might indicate. When Lear begins to feel the loss of Cordelia, to be wounded by her sisters, and to recognize his own vulnerability, he calls his state of mind hysteria, “the mother,” which I inter-
pret as his repressed identification with the mother. Women and the needs and traits associated with them are supposed to stay in their element, as Lear says, “below”—denigrated, silenced, denied. In this patriarchal world, masculine identity depends on repressing the vulnerability, dependency, and capacity for feeling which are called “feminine.”

Recent historical studies of the Elizabethan family, its social structure and emotional dynamics, when considered in the light of psychoanalytic theory, provide a backdrop against which Lear’s family drama takes on new meaning as a tragedy of masculinity. Recently, several authors have analyzed mothering—the traditional division of roles within the family that makes the woman primarily responsible for rearing as well as bearing the children—as a social institution sustained by patriarchy, which in turn reinforces it. Notably, Nancy Chodorow offers an incisive critique of the psychoanalytic conception of how the early mother-child relationship shapes the child’s sense of maleness or femaleness. She argues that the basic masculine sense of self is formed through a denial of the male’s initial connection with femininity, a denial that taints the male’s attitudes toward women and impairs his capacity for affiliation in general. My interpretation of Lear comes out of the feminist re-examination of the mothering role now being carried on in many fields, but it is particularly indebted to Nancy Chodorow’s analysis.

According to her account, women as mothers produce daughters with mothering capacities and the desire to mother, which itself grows out of the mother-daughter relationship. They also produce sons whose nurturant capacities and needs are curtailed in order to prepare them to be fathers. A focus on the primacy of the mother’s role in ego-formation is not in itself new. It follows upon the attempts of theorists such as Melanie Klein, Michael and Alice Balint, John Bowlby, and Margaret Mahler to cast light on that dim psychic region which Freud likened to the Minoan civilization preceding the Greek, “grey with age, and shadowy and almost impossible to revivify.” Chodorow’s
account of the mother-child relationship, however, challenges the mainstream of psychoanalytic assumptions concerning the role of gender and family in the formation of the child’s ego and sexual identity.

Because I find family relationships and gender identity central to Shakespeare’s imagination, the most valuable aspect of Chodorow’s work for me is its comparative perspective on the development of gender in the sexes. For both, the mother’s rather than the father’s role is the important one, as crucial to the child’s individuation (development of a sense of self) as to the child’s sense of gender. It is only for the purpose of analysis, however, that the two facets of identity can be separated. Both sexes begin to develop a sense of self in relation to a mother-woman. But a girl’s sense of femaleness arises through her infantile union with the mother and later identification with her, while a boy’s sense of maleness arises in opposition to those primitive forms of oneness. According to Robert Stoller, whose work supports Chodorow’s argument, “Developing indissoluble links with mother’s femaleness and femininity in the normal mother-infant symbiosis can only augment a girl’s identity,” while for a boy, “the whole process of becoming masculine . . . is endangered by the primary, profound, primal oneness with mother.”14 A girl’s gender identity is reinforced but a boy’s is threatened by union and identification with the same powerful female being. Thus, as Chodorow argues, the masculine personality tends to be formed through denial of connection with femininity; certain activities must be defined as masculine and superior to the maternal world of childhood, and women’s activities must, correspondingly, be denigrated. The process of differentiation is inscribed in patriarchal ideology, which polarizes male and female social roles and behavior.15

The imprint of mothering on the male psyche, the psychological presence of the mother in men whether or not mothers are represented in the texts they write or in which they appear as characters, can be found throughout the literary canon. But it is Shakespeare who renders the dilemmas of manhood most compellingly and with the greatest insight, partly because he wrote at a certain historical moment. As part of
a wide-ranging argument for the role of the nuclear family in shaping what he calls “affective individualism,” Lawrence Stone holds that the family of Shakespeare’s day saw a striking increase in the father’s power over his wife and children. Stone’s ambitious thesis has been strenuously criticized, but his description of the Elizabethan family itself, if not his notion of its place in the development of affective individualism, holds true.¹⁶

Stone sums up the mode of the father’s dominance thus:

This sixteenth-century aristocratic family was patrilinear, primogeniture, and patriarchal: patrilinear in that it was the male line whose ancestry was traced so diligently by the genealogists and heralds, and in almost all cases via the male line that titles were inherited; primogeniture in that most of the property went to the eldest son, the younger brothers being dispatched into the world with little more than a modest annuity or life interest in a small estate to keep them afloat; and patriarchal in that the husband and father lorded it over his wife and children with the quasi-absolute authority of a despot.¹⁷

Patriarchy, articulated through the family, was considered the natural order of things.¹⁸ But like other kinds of “natural order,” it was subject to historical change. According to Stone, between 1580 and 1640 two forces, one political and one religious, converged to heighten paternal power in the family. As the Tudor-Stuart state consolidated, it tried to undercut ancient baronial loyalty to the family line in order to replace it with loyalty to the crown. As part of the same campaign, the state also encouraged obedience to the paterfamilias in the home, according to the traditional analogy between state and family, king and father. James I stated, “Kings are compared to fathers in families: for a king is truly pares patriae, the politic father of his people.”¹⁹ The state thus had a direct interest in reinforcing patriarchy in the home.

Concurrently, Puritan fundamentalism—the literal interpretation of Mosaic law in its original patriarchal context—reinforced patriarchal
elements in Christian doctrine and practice as well. As the head of the household, the father took over many of the priest’s functions, leading his extended family of dependents in daily prayers, questioning them as to the state of their souls, giving or withholding his blessing on their undertakings. Although Protestant divines argued for the spiritual equality of women, deplored the double standard, and exalted the married state for both sexes, at the same time they zealously advocated the subjection of wives to their husbands on the scriptural grounds that the husband “beareth the image of God.” Heaven and home were both patriarchal. The Homily on the State of Matrimony, one of the sermons issued by the crown to be read in church weekly, quotes and explicates the Pauline admonition, “Let women be subject to their husbands, as to the Lord; for the husband is the head of the woman, as Christ is the head of the church.”20 In effect, a woman’s subjection to her husband’s will was the measure of his patriarchal authority and thus of his manliness.

The division of parental roles in childrearing made children similarly subject to the father’s will. In his study of Puritan attitudes toward authority and feeling, David Leverenz finds an emphasis on the mother’s role as tender nurturer of young children, as against the father’s role as disciplinarian and spiritual guide for older children. Mothers are encouraged to love their children openly in their early years but enjoined to withdraw their affections “at just about the time the father’s instructional role becomes primary.” Thus the breaking of the will is accomplished by the father, rather than by both parents equally. This division of duties, Leverenz holds, fostered a pervasive polarity, involving “associations of feared aspects of oneself with weakness and women, emphasis on male restraint and the male mind’s governance of female emotions, the separation of ‘head’ from ‘body,’ . . . a language of male anxiety, rather than of female deficiency.”21

A close look at the first scene in King Lear reveals much about lordliness and the male anxiety accompanying it. The court is gathered to watch Lear divide his kingdom and divest himself of its rule, but those
purposes are actually only accessory to another that touches him more nearly: giving away his youngest daughter in marriage. While France and Burgundy wait in the wings, Cordelia, for whose hand they compete, also competes for the dowry without which she cannot marry. As Lynda Booze shows, this opening scene is a variant of the wedding ceremony, which dramatizes the bond between father and daughter even as it marks the severance of that bond. There is no part in the ritual for the bride’s mother; rather, the bride’s father hands her directly to her husband. Thus the ritual articulates the father’s dominance both as procreator and as authority figure, to the eclipse of the mother in either capacity. At the same time, the father symbolically certifies the daughter’s virginity. Thus the ceremony alludes to the incest taboo and raises a question about Lear’s “darker purpose” in giving Cordelia away.22

In view of the ways that Lear tries to manipulate this ritual so as to keep his hold on Cordelia at the same time that he is ostensibly giving her away, we might suppose that the emotional crisis precipitating the tragic action is Lear’s frustrated incestuous desire for his daughter. For in the course of winning her dowry, Cordelia is supposed to show that she loves her father not only more than her sisters do but, as she rightly sees, more than she loves her future husband; similarly, when Lear disowns and disinherits Cordelia, he thinks he has rendered her, dowered only with his curse, unfit to marry—and thus unable to leave paternal protection. In contrast, however, I want to argue that the socially-ordained, developmentally appropriate surrender of Cordelia as daughter-wife—the renunciation of her as incestuous object—awakens a deeper emotional need in Lear: the need for Cordelia as daughter-mother.

The play’s beginning, as I have said, is marked by the omnipotent presence of the father and the absence of the mother. Yet in Lear’s scheme for parcelling out his kingdom, we can discern a child’s image of being mothered. He wants two mutually exclusive things at once: to have absolute control over those closest to him and to be absolutely de-
pendent on them. We can recognize in this stance the outlines of a child’s pre-oedipal experience of himself and his mother as an undifferentiated dual unity, in which the child perceives his mother not as a separate person but as an agency of himself, who provides for his needs. She and her breast are a part of him, at his command. In Freud’s unforgettable phrase, he is “his majesty, the baby.”

As man, father, and ruler, Lear has habitually suppressed any needs for love, which in his patriarchal world would normally be satisfied by a mother or mothering woman. With age and loss of vigor, and as Freud suggests in “The Theme of the Three Caskets,” with the prospect of return to mother earth, Lear feels those needs again and hints at them in his desire to “crawl” like a baby “toward death.” Significantly, he confesses them in these phrases the moment after he curses Cordelia for her silence, the moment in which he denies them most strongly. He says, “I lov’d her most, and thought to set my rest/ On her kind nursery” (1.1.123-24).

When his other two daughters prove to be bad mothers and don’t satisfy his needs for “nursery,” Lear is seized by “the mother”—a searing sense of loss at the deprivation of the mother’s presence. It assaults him in various ways—in the desire to weep, to mourn the enormous loss, and the equally strong desire to hold back the tears and, instead, accuse, arraign, convict, punish, and humiliate those who have made him realize his vulnerability and dependency. Thus the mother, revealed in Lear’s response to his daughters’ brutality toward him, makes her re-entry into the patriarchal world from which she had seemingly been excluded. The repressed mother returns specifically in Lear’s wrathful projections onto the world about him of a symbiotic relationship with his daughters that recapitulates his pre-oedipal relationship with the mother. In a striking series of images in which parent-child, father-daughter, and husband-wife relationships are reversed and confounded, Lear re-enacts a childlike rage against the absent or rejecting mother as figured in his daughters.

Here I want to interject a speculation inspired by Stone’s discussion...
of the custom of farming children out to wet nurses from birth until they were twelve to eighteen months old; at that time they were restored to the arms of their natural mother, who was by then a stranger to them. Many if not most people in the gentry or aristocracy of Shakespeare’s day must have suffered the severe trauma of maternal deprivation brought on by the departure of the wet nurse. We know the effects of such a trauma from the writings of John Bowlby; a tendency to make excessive demands on others, anxiety and anger when these demands are not met, and a blocked capacity for intimacy. Lear responds to the loss of Cordelia, the “nurse” he rejects after she seems to reject him, by demanding hospitality for his hundred knights, by raging at Goneril and Regan when they refuse him courtesy and sympathy, and by rejecting human society when he stalks off to the heath. After the division of the kingdom, he re-enters the play in the fourth scene with this revealing peremptory demand: “Let me not stay a jot for dinner; go, get it ready” (1.4.9-10); he wants food, from a maternal woman. I believe that Lear’s madness is essentially his rage at being deprived of the maternal presence. It is tantalizing, although I can imagine no way of proving it, to view this rage as part of the social pathology of wet-nursing in the ruling classes.

The play is full of oral rage: it abounds in fantasies of biting and devouring, and more specifically, fantasies of parents eating children and children eating parents. The idea is first brought up by Lear when he denies his “propinquity and property of blood” with Cordelia; that is, he denies that he begot her, that he is her father, as he also denies paternity of Regan and Goneril later. He assures her,

The barbarous Scythian,
Or he that makes his generation messes
To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom
Be as well neighbour’d, pitied, and reliev’d,
As thou my sometime daughter.

(1.1.116-20)
The savagery of the image is shocking; it indicates Lear’s first step toward the primitive, infantile modes of thinking to which he surrenders in his madness. When Cordelia doesn’t feed him with love, he thinks angrily of eating her. Lear again voices this complex conjunction of ideas about maternal nurture, maternal aggression, and aggression against the mother when he looks at Edgar’s mutilated body, bleeding from its many wounds, and remarks,

Is it the fashion, that discarded fathers
Should have thus little mercy on their flesh?
Judicious punishment! ’twas this flesh begot
Those pelican daughters.

(3.4.72-75)

Lear seems to think that Edgar first transgressed against his father by “discarding” him as Regan and Goneril discarded Lear, and that Edgar’s father then got back at his child, his “flesh,” in the flesh, as Lear would like to do. But this fantasy of revenge calls forth an answering fantasy of punishment against his own flesh—a punishment he deserves for begetting children in the first place. The image of the pelican may have been suggested to Shakespeare by this passage in a contemporary text, which I will quote because it elucidates both the reciprocating spiral of aggression and revenge and the close identification between parent and child, which possesses Lear’s mind:

The Pelican loueth too much her children. For when the children be haught, and begin to waxe hoare, they smite the father and mother in the face, wherefore the mother smiteth them againe and slaieth them. And the thirde daye the mother smiteth her selfe in her side that the bloud runneth out, and sheddeth that hot bloud upon the bodies of her children. And by virtue of the bloud the birdes that were before dead, quicken againe.28
The children strike their parents, the mother retaliates, then wounds herself that the children may nurse on her blood. “Is’t not,” Lear asks, “as this mouth should tear this hand/ For lifting food to ’t?” (3.4.15-16) referring to “filial ingratitude.” His daughters are the mouths he fed, which now tear their father’s generous hand; but at the same time, he is the needy mouth that would turn against those daughters for refusing to feed him on demand. Lear’s rage at not being fed by the daughters whom, pelican-like, he has nurtured, fills the play. It is mirrored in Albany’s vision of all humanity preying upon itself, like monsters of the deep (4.2.46-49), a vision inspired by the reality of Goneril turning her father out in the storm and shortly confirmed by the more gruesome reality of Regan and Cornwall tearing out another father’s eyes.

Bound up with this mixture of love and hate, nurture and aggression, is Lear’s deep sense of identification with his daughters as born of his flesh. When Goneril bids him return to Regan’s house rather than disrupt her own, his first thought is absolute separation from her, like his banishment of Cordelia; “We’ll no more meet, no more see one another.” But immediately he remembers the filial bond, for him a carnal as much as a moral bond:

But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter;  
Or rather a disease that’s in my flesh,  
Which I must needs call mine: thou art a boil,  
A plague-sore, or embossed carbuncle,  
In my corrupted blood.

(2.4.223-27)

Gloucester echoes the same thought when he says wryly to Lear on the heath, “Our flesh and blood, my lord, is grown so vile,/ That it doth hate what gets it” (3.4.149-50).

Children are products of an act that, in Elizabethan lore, was regarded as the mingling of bloods. In the metaphor of Genesis, repeated in the Anglican wedding service, man and wife become “one flesh.”
With regard to mother and child, however, the fleshly bond is not metaphorical but literal. Lear (like Gloucester) ignores the mother-child fleshly bond and insists that his children are, simply, *his* "flesh and blood." In the pelican image, he assimilates maternal functions to himself, as though Goneril and Regan hadn’t been born of woman. Like Prospero, he alludes only once to his wife, and then in the context of adultery. When Regan says she is glad to see her father, he replies

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if thou shouldst not be glad
I would divorce me from thy mother’s tomb,
Sepulchring an adultress.
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(2.4.131-33)

These lines imply, first, that Lear alone as progenitor endowed Regan with her moral nature, and second, that if that nature isn’t good, she had some other father. In either case, her mother’s only contribution was in the choice of a sexual partner. Thus Lear makes use of patriarchal ideology to serve his defensive needs: he denies his debt to a mother by denying that his daughters have any debt to her, either.

Lear’s agonizing consciousness that he did indeed produce such monstrous children, however, persists despite this denial and leads him to project his loathing toward the procreative act onto his daughters, in a searing indictment of women’s sexuality:

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The fitchew nor the soiled horse goes to ’t
With a more riotous appetite.
Down from the waist they are centaurs,
Though women all above:
But to the girdle do the Gods inherit
Beneath is all the fiend’s: there’s hell, there’s darkness,
There is the sulphurous pit—burning, scalding,
Stench, consumption; fie, fie, fie! pah, pah!
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(4.6.124-31)
Even if he did beget these daughters, Lear implies, he’s not answerable for their unkindness, because they are, after all, women—and women are tainted, rather than empowered as men are, by their sexual capacities. Thus he presses into service another aspect of patriarchal ideology, its misogyny, to separate himself from any feminine presence.

To return for a moment to the social dimensions of Lear’s inner turmoil, it is important here that generational conflicts entwine with and intensify gender conflicts. Lear and his daughters, Gloucester and his sons are pitted against one another because the younger generation perceives the authority of the elder as “the oppression of aged tyranny” (1.2.47-52). Stephen Greenblatt remarks that this period has “a deep gerontological bias,” revealed in numerous claims that “by the will of God and the natural order of things, authority belonged to the old.” At the same time, however, sermons, moral writings, and folk tales of the kind on which King Lear is based voice the fear that if parents hand over their wealth or their authority to their children, those children will turn against them. The common legal practice of drawing up maintenance agreements testifies that this fear had some basis in actual experience. In such contracts, children to whom parents deeded farm or workshop were legally bound to supply food, clothing, and shelter to their parents, even to the precise number of bushels of grain or yards of cloth. Thus the law put teeth into what was supposed to be natural kindness. Lear’s contest of love in the first scene functions as a maintenance agreement in that he tries to bind his daughters, by giving them their inheritance while he is still alive, into caring for him. This generational bargain is then complicated by the demands proper to gender as well—the father’s emotional demand that his daughters be his mothers and perform the tasks of nurture proper to females.

Regan and Goneril betray and disappoint Lear by not being mothers to him, but in a deeper, broader sense, they shame him by bringing out the woman in him. In the following speech, Shakespeare takes us close to the nerve and bone of Lear’s shame at being reduced to an impotence he considers womanish:

The Absent Mother in King Lear
You see me here, you Gods, a poor old man,
As full of grief as age; wretched in both!
If it be you that stirs these daughters’ hearts
Against their father, fool me not so much
To bear it tamely; touch me with noble anger,
And let not women’s weapons, water-drops,
Stain my man’s cheeks! No, you unnatural hags,
I will have such revenges on you both
That all the world shall—I will do such things,
What they are, yet I know not, but they shall be
The terrors of the earth. You think I’ll weep;
No, I’ll not weep;
I have full cause of weeping, but this heart
Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws
Or ere I’ll weep.

(2.4.274-88)

He calls his tears “women’s weapons” not only as a way of deprecating
women for using emotion to manipulate men but also because he feels
deply threatened by his own feelings. Marianne Novy has argued that
Lawrence Stone, in calling attention to the “distance, manipulation,
and deference” that characterized the Elizabethan family, identified “a
cultural ideal of Elizabethan society . . . a personality type that on the
one hand kept feelings of attachment and grief under strict control, but
on the other was more ready to express feelings at anger.” “The
model,” she comments, “was primarily a masculine ideal.” In agree-
ing, I would suggest that this masculine ideal was produced by the ex-
treme sexual division of labor within the patriarchal family, which
made women at once the source and the focus of a child’s earliest and
most unmanageable feelings.

Despite a lifetime of strenuous defense against admitting feeling
and the power of feminine presence into his world, defense fostered at
every turn by prevailing social arrangements, Lear manages to let them
in. He learns to weep and, though his tears scald and burn like molten lead, they are no longer “women’s weapons” against which he must defend himself. I will conclude this reading of the play by tracing, briefly, Lear’s progress toward acceptance of the woman in himself, a progress punctuated by his hysterical projections of rage at being deprived of maternal nurture. In the passage that I just quoted, as he turns toward the heath, Lear prays that anger may keep him from crying, from becoming like a woman. He also, in effect, tells us one way to read the storm—as a metaphor for his internal emotional process: “I have full cause of weeping, but this heart/ Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws/ Or ere I’ll weep” (2.4.286-88). Shakespeare portrays the storm as the breaking open of something enclosed, a break that lets out a flood of rain; it thus resembles Lear’s heart cracking, letting out the hungry, mother-identified part of him in a flood of tears. Lear exhorts the winds to crack their cheeks and the thunder to crack Nature’s moulds and spill their seeds; he envisions “close pent-up guilts” riven from “their concealing continents” (3.2.1-9, 49-59). He wants the whole world struck flat and cleft open, so that the bowels of sympathy may flow. What spills out of Lear at first is a flood of persecutory fantasies. He sees everyone in his own image, as either subjects or agents of persecution. Only daughters like his, he thinks, could have reduced Poor Tom to naked misery; Poor Tom and the Fool are, like him, stern judges bringing his daughters to trial. Gloucester is “Goneril, with a white beard,” and then, someone who might weep along with Lear although he has only the case of eyes.

Before Shakespeare allows Lear to feel the weeping woman in himself or to face his need for Cordelia and his guilt for the wrong he did her, he evokes and excoriates a world full of viperish women. Interwoven with Lear’s indictments of women during acts 3 and 4 are the imaginary lustful mistresses of Poor Tom’s sophisticated past, the wearers of plackets and rustling silks, as well as the real Regan tearing out Gloucester’s eyes, and the real Goneril, stealthy and lustful, seducing Edmund and sloughing off Albany. It is as though Shakespeare as
well as his hero must dredge up everything horrible that might be imagined of women and denounce it before he can confront the good woman, the one and only good woman, Cordelia.

Cordelia’s goodness is as absolute and inexplicable as her sisters’ reprovable badness, as much an archetype of infantile fantasy as they are. When she re-enters the play, she is described as crying with pity for her father’s sufferings, yet in her tears she is still “queen over her passion.” Whereas Lear thought weeping an ignoble surrender of his masculine authority, Cordelia conceives her tears as a source of power:

All blest secrets,
All you unpublished virtues of the earth,
Spring with my tears; be aidant and remediate
In the good man’s distress!

(4.4.15-18)

In these scenes Cordelia becomes, now in a benign sense, that daughter-mother Lear wanted her to be. Like the Virgin Mary, she intercedes magically, her empathy and pity coaxing mercy from nature. Yet finally, as the Doctor’s words imply, she can only be “the foster-nurse” of Lear’s repose.

Lear runs from the attendants Cordelia sends to rescue him, who appear just after he poignantly evokes the crying infant as a common denominator of humanity:

Thou must be patient; we came crying hither.
Thou know’st, the first time that we smell the air
We wawl and cry . . .
When we are born, we cry that we are come
To this great stage of fools.

(4.6.178-80, 182-83)
Here he comes closest to admitting his vulnerability, but he must immediately defend against it and see the proffered help as a threat. Stanley Cavell has argued that the reluctance to be recognized by those whom they love most, which characterizes Lear, Kent, Edgar and Gloucester, lies at the heart of this play; he holds that they are reluctant because they feel that their love bespeaks a demeaning dependency. I agree—and I regard that embarrassed shrinking from recognition as part of a masculine identity crisis in a culture that dichotomized power as masculine and feeling as feminine.

And so Lear exits running in this scene, asserting his kingship (“Come, come, I am a king”) but behaving like a mischievous child who makes his mother run after him (“Come, and you get it, you shall get it by running,” 4.6.199, 201-202). When he reappears, he is as helpless as a child, sleeping and carried in by servants. He awakes in the belief that he has died and been reborn into an afterlife, and he talks about tears to Cordelia:

Thou art a soul in bliss, but I am bound
Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears
Do scald like molten lead.

(4.7.45-47)

These are the tears of ashamed self-knowledge, manly tears caused by a realization of what his original childish demands on his daughters had led to. In this scene, which I want to compare with the next scene with Cordelia, Lear comes closer than he ever does later to a mature acceptance of his human dependency. He asserts his manhood, and admits Cordelia’s separateness from him at the same time that he confesses his need for her; he can say “I am a very fond foolish old man” and yet also declare, “For (as I am a man) I think this lady/ To be my child Cordelia” (4.7.59, 69). I want to pause at those three words “man,” “lady,” and “child.” Lear acknowledges his manhood and his daughter’s womanhood in the same line and the same breath. He can
stop imagining her as the maternal woman that he yearned for and accept his separateness from her. Yet he also calls her his child, acknowledging the bond of paternity that he denied in the first act. He need not be threatened by her autonomy as a person nor obsessed by the fleshly tie between them as parent and child.

Lear’s struggle to discover or create a new mode of being based on his love for Cordelia continues to his last breath. Imagining their life together in prison, he transcends the rigid structure of command and obedience that once framed his world:

Come, let’s away to prison:
We two alone will sing like birds i’ th’ cage;
When thou dost ask me blessing, I’ll kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness. So we’ll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh at gilded butterflies . . .

(5.3.8-11)

Parent and child are equal, the gestures of deference that ordinarily denote patriarchal authority now transformed into signs of reciprocal love. Moreover, Lear now views all power from a quasi-divine perspective that charmingly deflates pretension or ambition as mere toys, while nevertheless carrying a certain grandeur of its own. On the other hand, Lear’s characteristically fierce defensiveness continues to shape his fantasy, which is provoked by Cordelia’s request that they confront their enemies: “Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?” The prospect of facing his bad mothers as well as his good mother impels Lear to conceive of Cordelia and himself as forming an impregnable dyad bound together by a complete harmony of thought and feeling more than by the circumstances of captivity. If he did agree to meet Regan and Goneril, he would have to abandon the fantasy that one good woman like Cordelia can triumph over or negate her evil counterparts, as well as the fantasy that a prison can be a nursery in which Cordelia has no independent being and exists solely for her father as part
of his defensive strategy against coming to terms with women who are as human, or as inhuman, as men.

Cordelia’s death prevents Lear from trying to live out his fantasy, and perhaps discover once again that a daughter cannot be a mother. When he enters bearing Cordelia in his arms, he is struggling to accept the total and irrevocable loss of the only loving woman in his world, the one person who could possibly fulfill needs that he has, in such anguish, finally come to admit. No wonder that he cannot contemplate such utter, devastating separateness, and in the final scene tries so hard to deny that she is dead. At the end of King Lear, only men are left. It remains for Shakespeare to re-imagine a world in his last plays in which masculine authority can find mothers in its daughters, in Marina, Perdita, and Miranda—the world of pastoral tragicomedy and romance, the genres of wish-fulfillment, rather than the tragic world of King Lear.

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Notes

I am grateful to David Leverenz and Louis Adrian Montrose for their sensitive comments on drafts of this essay.

1. This and all subsequent quotations are taken from the Arden edition of King Lear, ed. Kenneth Muir (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952).


3. As Veith (ibid.) shows, during the Middle Ages, hysteria had ceased to be known as a disease and was taken as a visible token of bewitchment. Jordan wrote his treatise to argue for a distinction between the two. Both his work and the pamphlet by Samuel Harsnett denouncing the persecution of witches (from which Shakespeare took much of Poor Tom’s language) have the effect of pointing up parallels between hysteria and witchcraft as deviant kinds of behavior associated with women, which are then used to justify denigrating women and subjecting them to strict control. In her es-

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say on the literary and social forms of sexual inversion in early modern Europe whereby women took dominant roles and ruled over men, Natalie Zemon Davis notes that such female unruliness was thought to emanate from a wandering womb and comments, “The lower ruled the higher within the woman, then, and if she were given her way, she would want to rule over those above her outside. Her disorderliness led her into the evil arts of witchcraft, so ecclesiastical authorities claimed. . . .” See “Women on Top,” in Society and Culture in Early Modern France (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1975), p. 125. Hilda Smith notes that a gynecological text published in 1652 calls the entire female sexual structure “The Matrix,” subordinating female sexuality to its reproductive function; see her “Gynecology and Ideology in Seventeenth Century England,” in Liberating Women’s History, ed. Berenice Carroll (Urbana: Illinois University Press, 1976), pp. 97-114. For a theory of hysteria as a disorder that “makes complex use of contemporaneous cultural and social forms,” see Alan Krohn, Hysteria: The Elusive Neurosis (New York: International Universities Press, 1978).

4. Dianne Hunter, “Psychoanalytic Intervention in the History of Consciousness, Beginning with O,” The (M)Other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation, ed. Shirley Nelson Garner, Claire Kahane, Madelon Sprengnether (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985). Freud suggests that attachment to the mother may be “especially intimately related to the aetiology of hysteria, which is not surprising when we reflect that both the phase and the neurosis are characteristically feminine.” “Female Sexuality” (1931), Standard Edition 21:223-45.


7. See my article, “Excavating ‘Those Dim Minoan Regions’: Maternal Subtexts in Patriarchal Literature,” Diacritics (Summer 1982), 32-41, which contains a much condensed version of this essay. The idea of a maternal subtext was first suggested to me by Madelon Gohlke’s essay, “‘I wooed thee with my sword’: Shakespeare’s Tragic Paradigms,” in Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980). She writes of a “structure of relation” in which “it is women who are regarded as powerful and men who strive to avoid an awareness of their vulnerability in relation to women, a vulnerability in which they regard themselves as ‘feminine’” (p. 180).


9. In his brilliant and wide-ranging essay in this volume, “‘Shaping Fantasies’: Figurations of Gender and Power in Elizabethan Culture,” Louis Adrian Montrose explicates the patriarchal ideology threaded through A Midsummer Night’s Dream, whereby the mother’s part in procreation is occluded and men alone are held to “make women, and make themselves through the medium of women.” He interprets this be-
lief as “an overcompensation for the natural fact that men do indeed come from
women; an overcompensation for the cultural facts that consanguineal and affinal ties
between men are established through mothers, wives, and daughters.”

10. Murray Schwartz explored this idea in a series of talks given at the Center for the
Humanities, Wesleyan University, February-April 1978.

11. Lawrence Stone’s *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (New
York: Harper & Row, 1978) offers a picture of Elizabethan filial relationships which is
both highly suggestive for readings of Shakespeare and much at variance with him; see
especially pp. 151-218. For a convenient summary of Stone’s account of the Elizabe-
than patriarchal family, see his essay, “The Rise of the Nuclear Family in Early Modern
England,” in *The Family in History*, ed. Charles E. Rosenberg (Philadelphia: Uni-

12. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*
(New York: W. W. Norton, 1976; reprint, Bantam, 1977); Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The
Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise* (New York:
Harper & Row, 1976); Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psycho-
analysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University at Cali-
tioned above is in part a review of these books.


14. Robert Stoller, “Facts and Fancies: An Examination of Freud’s Concept of Bi-
sexuality,” in *Women and Analysis: Dialogues on Psychoanalytic Views of Femininity*,

15. For a reading of Shakespeare in light of this differentiation and the ideology
connected with it, see my *Man’s Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* (Berke-

16. See reviews by E. P. Thompson, *Radical History Review* 20 (Spring-Summer
1979): 42-50; Alan MacFarlane, *History and Theory* 18 (no. 1, 1979): 103-26;
Randolph Traumbach, *Journal of Social History* 13 (no. 1, 1979): 136-43; Richard T.

17. Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558-1641*, abridged ed. (New

18. This and the following paragraph appear in *Man’s Estate*, pp. 13-14.

19. Quoted from *Political Works of King James I*, ed. C. H. McIlwain (Cambridge:
Nuclear Family,” p. 54.


21. David Leverenz, *The Language of Puritan Feeling: An Exploration in Litera-
ture, Psychology, and Social History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press,
1980), p. 86. Leverenz gives a fuller and more psychologically astute interpretation of
childrearing than does Stone. Though he is specifically concerned with the Puritan
family, he relies on the same sources as Stone—Elizabethan and Jacobean manuals of
childrearing and domestic conduct, holding that “almost any point made in Puritan
tracts can be found in non-Puritan writings” (p. 91).


28. *Batman upon Bartholeme* (1582), cited in the Arden edition, p. 118. “The kind life-rend’ring pelican” was a familiar image of Christ in the Middle Ages, wounding herself with her beak to feed her children. Even today, the blood bank of the city of Dublin, administered by an organization called “Mother and Child,” is known as “the Pelican.” (I am indebted to Thomas Flanagan for this information.)


31. See C. L. Barber, “The Family in Shakespeare’s Development: Tragedy and Sacredness,” in *Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays*, for the idea that “the very central and problematical role of women in Shakespeare—and the Elizabethan drama generally—reflects the fact that Protestantism did away with the cult of the Virgin Mary. It meant the loss of ritual resource for dealing with the internal residues in all of us of the once all-powerful and all-inclusive mother” (p. 196).


33. This reading of the play suggests that Shakespeare departed from his sources and let Cordelia die because he wanted to confront as starkly as possible the pain of separation from the mother.