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**“The Curiosity of Nations”:
King Lear and the Incest Prohibition**

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**A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the degree of Master’s in English Literature.**

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Abstract

The incest prohibition, though ostensibly “universal,” has inspired a wide range of explanations and definitions both within and between cultures. Intense debate sprung up around the incest taboo during the matrimonially tumultuous reign of Henry VIII, leading to the great interest in this theme, which flourished on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stages. Although Shakespeare contributed a number of works to the incest canon, *King Lear* does not treat the incest motif overtly such that many critics have ignored its crucial role in that play. A synthetic theoretical approach is useful in exploring the wide-reaching implications of father-daughter love in *Lear*, which challenges the parameters of the incest prohibition.

King Lear’s effort to obstruct the marriage of Cordelia in the first scene constitutes a violation of the incest prohibition according to Levi-Strauss’s notion of exogamy. To this violation, Cordelia contributes her belief that marriage requires only partial withdrawal of love from her father. Lear’s unfulfilled love for his daughter Cordelia, whom he figures into wife and mother roles, exhibits oedipal traits and seeks gratification in Goneril and Regan. Lear experiences their “unnatural” refusal of his desires as emasculating sexual rejection, which manifests as the disease and guilt of transgression. He understands virtuous love as fatally tainted by sexual desire; the theme of love-as-death gains momentum. The tempest emerges as an agent of justice and punishment. Lear and Cordelia’s reunion reasserts the themes of adulterous love and love-as-death, foreshadowing their shared death. Their subsequent capture introduces an expanded notion of the father-daughter relationship, including the possibility of conjugal love, which is consummated in their marriage in death.

Résumé

L'interdiction de l'inceste a inspiré une variété de moyens d'explications et de définitions aussi bien entre qu'au sein des cultures. Sous le règne d'Henri VIII, les débats vifs se sont instaurés autour du taboo, suscitant un grand intérêt pour ce motif qui a inspiré le théâtre des élisabéthains et les jacobites. Bien que Shakespeare ait contribué à bon nombre d'oeuvres sur l'inceste, *le roi Lear* ne traite pas de ce sujet explicitement; ainsi, un grand nombre de critiques ont considéré que ce n'était pas un sujet de la pièce. Une méthode de critique synthétique se rendra utile pour sonder les implications de l'amour entre le père et la fille de *Lear*, un amour qui défie les paramètres de l'interdiction de l'inceste.

Suivant les notions de Lévi-Strauss en ce qui concerne la prohibition de l'inceste, autant que le roi Lear essaie d'obstruer le mariage de sa fille, Cordelia, il passe outre l'interdiction de l'inceste. En plus de cette violation, Cordelia contribue sa croyance au mariage comme occasion de retirer seulement une moitié de son amour pour son père. L'amour non-satisfait de Lear pour sa fille, qu'il voit comme femme et mère autant que fille, révèle les traits du complexe d'Oedipe et cherche de se satisfaire en Goneril et Regan. Lear perçoit leur rejet comme rejet sexuel émasculant qui prend la forme de la maladie et du remords de transgression. Il voit l'amour vertueux comme corrompu fatalement par le désir sexuel; le motif de l'amour-comme-la mort accélère. La tempête se manifeste comme agent de justice et de punition. La réunion de Lear et Cordelia réaffirme les thèmes de l'amour adultère et de l'amour morbide présagant leur mort partagée. Leur capture subséquente introduit une notion du rapport entre père et fille plus élargie, y compris la possibilité d'un amour conjugal; cet amour se consomme en leur mariage dans la mort.

Introduction

Thou, Nature art my goddess; to thy law
My services are bound. Wherefore should I
Stand in the plague of custom, and permit
The curiosity of nations to deprive me . . .

....
As to th'legitimate. Fine word, 'legitimate'!

(1.2.1-18)

What would have been the fate of Lear and Cordelia's relationship had the king joined Edmund in flagrantly scorning customary notions of legitimacy? Although it signals his emergence as a peerless villain, Edmund's speech has an effect at once humorous and endearing. Above all, he has a point with which we can sympathize: "Why brand they us / With base? With baseness? bastardy? base, base" (1.2.9-10)? At the start, we appreciate Edmund's hailing disobedience of custom in favor of expanded legitimization. Only the actions Edmund takes to defy the plague of custom and the curiosity of nations render him a villain. Lear, too, confronts this curious plague. Although he wishes to retain the company of Cordelia, who appears uninterested in leaving him, he must relinquish his beloved daughter in marriage. While the cruel actions-- the disinheritance and casting out of Cordelia-- that stem from his unsuccessful efforts to undermine social custom bear no immediate resemblance to incest, observers of the playworld (and within it) have insinuated just such a transgression. If these impressions do not reflect disapproval of Lear's actions, are they judgments on the feelings that inspire his doomed quest for the legitimization of his relationship to Cordelia? Although we deplore the cruelty of Edmund's violent quest for legitimacy, as modern readers of *Lear*, we can accept his bastardy and even the validity of his claim to a portion of his

father's lands. Can we as easily accept Lear's claim on his daughter's heart and her readiness to leave a portion of it with him?

Strategically located immediately after the crucial Act 1, Scene 1, and highlighted in a soliloquy, Edmund's speech foregrounds the question of legitimacy in broad terms. The phrasing, "As to th'legitimate," which begins a line, introduces legitimacy as an upcoming topic, an essential motif of the ensuing tragedy. Spitting out "legitimate" five times within seven lines, as if, through the sheer injustice of its import, it were itself a dirty word, Edmund addresses the audience directly, beseeching them to consider legitimacy as much more than a legal issue pertaining to inheritance. Comparing illegitimate fornication favorably to the "dull, stale, tired bed" of legitimate procreation, Edmund glorifies the adulterous act that, "in the lusty stealth of nature," produced him (1.2.11). Adultery, Edmund effectively concludes, is more legitimate-- in the expanded sense of spirited, healthy, and even natural-- than matrimonially sanctioned intercourse. In the same terms, Shakespeare constructs Lear's love for Cordelia and hers for him such that its legitimacy-- its moral decency and psychological wholesomeness-- is also called into question. To discuss the relationship between Lear and Cordelia, I broaden my notion of legitimacy to include what is vital and natural, taking up the spirit of Edmund's dismissal of custom in favor of nature.

Shakespeare invites his audience to explore the role played by the "plague of custom" and the "curiosity of nations" in arresting the potential of Lear and Cordelia's relationship. In my reading of *King Lear*, I discuss the complexities of the incest taboo as it informs their relationship, ultimately to indulge the temptation of imagining their arrested possibilities. The incest prohibition, after all, is just such a curiosity, riddled with intricacies of custom. In the Act 1, and therefore up until their reunion in Act 4, Cordelia and Lear lack a language outside the customary limits of flattery and gendered obedience in which to form a legitimate bond

appropriate to their particular relationship. Lear's desperate efforts to circumvent the sanctioned rituals and customs governing "legitimate" father-daughter relationships in order to reserve for himself Cordelia's exclusive love calls the legitimacy of his intentions into question. Would a renunciation of these limitations on legitimacy have led Lear to commit "unthinkable" crimes against his daughter(s) or, assuming he could have royally mandated Edmund's attitude throughout his domains, would it have freed him to legitimize what was no more legitimate than Edmund, a richly shared relationship with his favorite daughter?

Understood by directors, critics, and readers as alternately the defiant child and the embodiment of love, Cordelia has proven endless cause for fascination in her relationship to King Lear, despite that, after lines have been counted, her role in the play is a small one and her stage time limited. Critical attention attests that the Lear/Cordelia pair constitutes an important point of reference and identification informing modern paradigms for father-daughter relationships specifically and parent-child relationships in general. As the impossibility of a comprehensive analysis of *King Lear* necessitates a strict prioritization of issues, I limit my exploration of the tragedy as much as possible to that particular father-daughter relationship. However, I do not choose this current as merely one among innumerable choices. I read this relationship as the dramatic crux of the play, one that both frames and constitutes its driving problem: defining the legitimacy of relationships in the face of nations' curiosity.

Shakespeare, like many Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights, directly and indirectly treated the topic of incest in a significant number of his works. Although only *Pericles* deals overtly with the specific issue of father-daughter incest, modern critics seem particularly anxious to posit father-daughter relationships throughout Shakespeare's canon as incestuous.

And while the relationship between Lear and Cordelia does not prove entirely exempt from such readings, somewhat less critical attention to this extensively analyzed father-daughter relationship has broached the suggestion that Lear's feelings for his daughter emerge (or fail to emerge) in the forbidden zone of the romantic.

To complicate matters, there are as many theories seeking to explain the prohibition of incest and its attendant taboo as there are critical approaches to the relationship between Cordelia and Lear. A taboo that our society is only beginning to confront, notions of the prohibition continue to evolve today. Thus, all the more titillating for its persistent taboo status, incest emerges as a hot topic in current social trends including generally increased consciousness of familial sexual abuse, the associated "discovery" of phenomena such as false memory syndrome, and cultural productions like America's most-produced play in 1998, Paula Vogel's controversial and Pulitzer Prize-winning *How I Learned to Drive*, in which the heroine's romantic relationship with her uncle is portrayed as mutually pleasing. A discussion of the incest taboo in *King Lear* is topical in that it reveals many of the same restrictions and contradictions with which we are still wrestling today. In many ways, such a reading demonstrates the lack of progress that has been made in defining and confronting the incest prohibition.

The objective of this study is not to determine whether Shakespeare built into Lear sexual desire for his daughter. The assumption is that yes he did and no he did not. The brilliance of Shakespeare lies in the fact that he builds possibility without eliminating specificity. Practically speaking, if a given director wants to design a production in which Lear harbors secret lust for one or another of his daughters, such a reading can be supported by the text. Although the vast majority of productions intimate nothing of the sort, the 1997 *King Lear* of the celebrated Peter Hall Company featured just such an overtly sexualized

relation between Lear and his daughters. Clad in black leather and bearing a whip, the Lear character greeted each of his daughters with a prolonged and distinctly unfatherly kiss before allowing them to proceed with their love speeches. While Hall's choices seemed perfectly compatible with the script, it is difficult to feel sympathy for the sadist Lear when his obvious transgressions bring the world down around him. My goal, then, is to offer one possible reading of *Lear* that acknowledges the relevance of the incest prohibition without defusing the tragedy. The king's ability to build a relationship with Cordelia is crippled by culturally imposed limitations, I propose, and the social injunctions in place drive Lear through phobia to experience pathology and punishment imagined as ideologically fitted to incest.

The first chapter of my thesis offers an overview of the ambiguity surrounding the incest prohibition with an emphasis on Henry VIII's reign, Shakespeare and his contemporaries, and modern critics. As a number of critics have focused on Shakespeare's father-daughter relationships as an appropriate point of entry into the discussion of incest, I briefly discuss the conflicts that arise for these pairs around the patriarchal rules governing and restricting interaction between fathers and daughters. In the second chapter, I survey past critical attention to the theme of incest in *King Lear*, and foreground my own reading, which emphasizes the role of social custom in deeming illicit Lear's love for Cordelia. In particular, I note the importance of distinguishing between quantitative and qualitative aspects of love for a fuller understanding of the taboo's import. Chapter III demonstrates the role of this distinction in establishing the incest theme in Act 1, Scene 1. Understood as a function of the rule of exogamy, as articulated by Claude Levi-Strauss, love may be regarded as unnatural or "incestuous" because of its quantity rather than quality-- in other words, "incestuous" love need not be sexual. Building on the work of Lynda E. Boose, I explore Lear's violation of the rule of exogamy, which spurs insinuations of a qualitative transgression both within the

playworld and on the part of the critics. In Chapter IV, I explain Lear's violation of exogamy as an act of adultery. Introducing Coppelia Kahn's idea of Lear's profound need for a mother, I argue that this need and confusion of mother and daughter roles indicate incestuous desire of another kind, analogous to a son's desire for his mother's whole love and thus compatible with Freud's notion of the oedipal complex. Noting Lear's successful displacement of France, I further discuss incest's proximity to adultery, relating it to Lear's expanding notions of legitimacy and Edmund's initial diatribe. In the final chapter, I explore the arrested potential of Lear and Cordelia's relationship as suggested by Lear's birds-in-the-cage speech. To conclude, I argue that the paradoxical joy and grief of Lear's death constitutes "judicious punishment" for his particular violations of the incest prohibition (3.4.73).

The interactions and relationships between Lear and Cordelia can readily be said to fit a number of incest paradigms. Nonetheless, their relationship, with its "incestuous" nature, need not be the root of the play's nihilism. Shakespeare's play does not draw the same distinctions that we do. For him, the intensity of love between Lear and Cordelia need not be appreciably different from that of Romeo and Juliet. In a sense, we have no choice but to see Lear's feelings for his daughter as incestuous, but his experience of incestuous desire is socially generated. The subsequent casting of judgment, both society- and self-generated, born of fear and repulsion at the hint of such feelings, restricts healthy outlets for their love. *Lear* invokes the incest prohibition, yes, but largely to dismantle it. Shakespeare effectively allows the audience to conceive of an expanded notion of what an appropriate/reciprocal father-daughter relationship might be. Dramatizing the impossibility of legitimate father-daughter intimacy, *Lear* puts into sharp focus the deadly limitations placed on father-daughter relationships.

Incest [is] a wicked and abominable sinne, and forbidden both by the law of God and man, in so much that the very heathen held it in detestation.

-- Thomas Beard, *The Theatre of Gods Judgements* (London, 1597)¹

I. The Incest Prohibition in Context

Prohibited sexuality continues to fascinate us. Although today we aggressively chip away at the quantity and range of manifestations of sexuality widely considered forbidden, incest remains untouched, a “formidable mystery” securely positioned at the top of our list of taboos (Levi-Strauss 10). As we dispel the others one by one, incest has not gone the way of pre-marital sex, homosexuality, masturbation, and a host of other sexual “deviations,” even in the most progressive circles. Often maintaining that incest is “unnatural,” we conflate and confuse marriage and sex, incest and rape, and emotional and physical intimacy in our efforts to get to the bottom of it. Today, many people continue to understand incest as a prohibition born of the dangers of inbreeding. We have a “natural” aversion to sexual interaction with people within certain degrees of consanguinity, the popular belief goes, because mating with them would produce birth defects. Claims of the adverse effects of inbreeding, which in reality would take generations of liaisons between very close relatives, liaisons that might just as well produce progeny with exceptional strengths, fail at any rate to explain variations in the prohibition across cultures. And, of course, as several incest scholars have pointed out, if there were truly a natural aversion, then we wouldn’t need a taboo (Twitchell 246). We cannot unravel the “interpenetrating explanations” of “incest as an act, as a taboo, as a double standard, as a sublimated desire, as an inefficient reproduction strategy, as a buttress of marriage, as an assumption of family in a wider society,” or as a crime (Twitchell 243).

¹ Beard is cited in Boehrer’s “Nice Philosophy” (361).

Despite the proliferation of theories, we continue to misunderstand the incest prohibition and what it means to abide by it, so we cling to the taboo with exceptional anxiety.

More or less without known exception, communities of people around the globe and throughout history have restricted sexual activity between persons within given degrees of consanguinity and/or affinity. Freud speaks of this avoidance of certain relationships as “Insestcheu,” meaning literally “incest avoidance” or “shy of incest” (Twitchell 41).

However, as James Twitchell points out, this term was translated by A. A. Brill as “dread of incest” and then even more dramatically by James Strachey as “horror of incest,” revealing a predilection for heightening the force of the taboo (41). Robin Fox devotes a book, *The Red Lamp of Incest*, to unfurling the tortuous path of incest theory and explaining the widely varying manifestations of the incest prohibition. He rejects what he calls, perhaps in reference to “The Horror of Incest,” a chapter title in Strachey’s translation of Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*, a “universal grisly horror of incest.” Rather, Fox explains, cultural approaches to incest vary significantly:

In some cultures there may indeed be horror, but in others there is mere embarrassment, in still others indifference, and in a certain few there may be positive encouragement . . . At the last count, there were at least ninety-six societies with some evidence of permitted sexual relations among family members, including full marriage (6).

In confirmation of Fox’s work, Twitchell explores inconsistencies in modern renderings of the incest prohibition in *Forbidden Partners: the Incest Taboo in Modern Culture*. Noting the development of such terms as “consensual incest” and even “positive incest,” he questions the discrepancy between the marked statistical prevalence of familial sexual abuse and the relative scarcity of psychologically disabled people, asking why, “if incest is so bad,” there

are “not more observable signs of troubled behavior” (14). While far from a proponent of incest or abuse, he concludes that the “horror” is rather a means of “deflecting the anxiety of sexual ambivalence” (252). Somewhat paradoxically, then, this most “universal” of the world’s taboos encompasses no single set of parameters across cultures or periods.

Relationships forbidden in some cultures may meet with mixed approval or be encouraged in others. Thus, no more than any one set of rules can delineate the parameters of the incest prohibition can any single theory account for its origins. To an understanding of this nevertheless elusive taboo, sociologists, anthropologists, biologists, geneticists, and psychoanalysts (among others) have contributed their theories, the names of which read like Polonius’s list of elaborately classified dramatic genres.

In *King Lear* alone, such a wide variety of incest paradigms are played out that capturing the richness of the theme requires exploration of more than any one conception or aspect of the taboo. Considering Lear’s interest in Cordelia in purely sexual terms, for example, would be reductive and necessarily speculative. Multiple theoretical points of entry more fully accommodate an understanding of the incest taboo’s polyvalent resonance. Levi-Strauss’s understanding of the relationship between incest and the rule of exogamy as well as Freud’s notion of the oedipal conflict effectively expand the question of incest to encompass non-sexual desire inappropriate primarily in terms of its quantity. In these conceptions, the failure, such as Lear’s, to heed the social imperatives to separate from one’s daughter or mother imply violations of the incest prohibition. Evoking yet another applicable incest model, Lear’s death in the arms of his beloved, who embodies qualities of the archetypal feminine, invokes the mythic phenomenon of love-as-death with its allusion to the mother goddess who incestuously consumes her son to perpetuate the cycle of life and death. The applicability of the range of incest paradigms attests to the validity of a reading of incest in

Lear, reveals Shakespeare's multi-faceted notion of incest (consistent with the fluidity of his contemporaries' delineations of the taboo), and underscores the ongoing complexity and contradiction inherent in any rendering of the taboo for modern audiences. "Unspeakable" above all in the difficulty of delimiting it precisely, incest remains enigmatic.

English Renaissance society was also fascinated by sexual taboos, especially those governing illicit family love. However, ambiguity and ambivalence characterized the incest prohibition in Shakespeare's England. Despite Renaissance England's strict regard for religion and social propriety, incest was not regarded as categorically evil; it could even be considered advantageous in certain situations. Definitions of and attitudes towards incest fluctuated, especially to accommodate the desires of the ruling class. And while the benefit of the family and the social group have generally entailed marrying children into other families to expand power and alliance bases, the potential benefits of consolidating power within a family through marriage to another member of the family-- relationships which could be incestuous by kinship or affinity-- did not go unheeded. Given the taboo's ongoing potential for manipulation, Bruce Thomas Boehrer stakes the following guidepost on the tortuous path of incest theory: "*whatever else it is or does, it is a means of self-promotion and self-defense*" (sic *Monarchy* 3). The pliability of the incest prohibition, then as now, reveals its socially constructed nature.

During Henry's reign, the question of incest became relevant to the issues of kingship and succession, sparking an ongoing debate of royal magnitude. The multiplicity of exceptions and contradictions that emerged uncovered the taboo's malleability within the social context of early Renaissance England. Henry and his supporters mastered the plasticity of the prohibition, initiating a seemingly endless series of manipulations for the advancement

of royal aims. A wholesale purchase of psychoanalytical historian J.C. Flugel's detailed analysis of Henry's Oedipal complex is unnecessary for agreement that "a simultaneous fear of, and attraction to, incestuous situations, whether symbolic or actual, tended to dominate Henry's sexual and marital life from start to finish" (Forker 28). Implicated in a lengthy chain of relationships and marriages touched by incestuous degrees of kinship and affinity, Henry instigated fiery theological and political debates, which raged throughout Europe during his lifetime, regarding marriage and a wide variety of incestuous circumstances.

The most famous of Henry's feats of incest was his very public desire to annul his marriage to Catherine of Aragon on the basis of incest by affinity-- he, like Claudius, married his brother's widow-- claiming that this transgression had cursed his efforts to produce a male heir (Fuzier 24). Henry's suit called into question parameters of incest that had long been taken for granted. Both friends and foes of the King turned first to the Bible to support their moral and political causes. However, the ensuing theological debates proved "thorny" because, as Charles Forker explains "open contradictions and discrepancies in the Bible" (29) abound, and, as Twitchell concurs, while the Bible frequently orders us "not to 'lie with' or 'uncover the nakedness'" of certain relatives, it also provides a "catalog of exceptions" (128). To begin with, Adam and Eve obviously "had no choice but to commit incest in order to propagate the human race" (Forker 30). An "exception" is also made for father-daughter incest in the case of Lot: his daughters commit incest with him to preserve his "seed" after his wife turns into a pillar of salt in the family's flight from Sodom. The Henrician scandals and attendant debates had as part of their eventual legacy a new Table of Kindred and Affinity, established in 1563 by Elizabeth's Archbishop of Canterbury, Mathew Parker, which

laid out the letter of the law, while the spirit remained somewhat nebulous (Fuzier 23).² As theological arguments met with ambiguity and contradiction, the incest taboo was rapidly propelled to its status as “the epitome of a powerful social sanction with no immediately apparent justification,” a status that, to some extent, continues right up to the present (Wilson 251). Thus, in Elizabethan England, began a transition from chiefly theological arguments to a wider range of justifications on the basis of cultural and natural law which would continue through the eighteenth century and which have yet to meet with a consensus (Wilson 251). These debates left as their legacy a list of unanswered questions and unresolved issues, fodder for controversy thereafter entertained by many a Renaissance playwright.

In Tudor-Stuart England, the theme of incest-- an issue at the core of both the macro- and microcosmic realms of politics and family-- offered dramatists reliable sensation in the ever-popular form of forbidden sexuality. Forker paints their interest in this particular prohibition as something of an obsession (13). A highly charged and controversial theme in Elizabethan drama, incest became all the rage on the Jacobean stage. Lois Bueler catalogs thirty-three plays-- including Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Pericles*, and *The Comedy of Errors*-- written between 1559 and 1632, in the full range of genres, which feature incest as a central theme. Corroborating and expanding on her work, Forker enumerates in his review of Renaissance plays at least thirty-eight playwrights who incorporated the incest motif mainly in plots but also in imagery “in some sixty comedies, tragedies, tragicomedies, moralities, histories, romances, and pastorals.” Of these sixty, Shakespeare authored six in which incest plays a role “directly or by implication”: Forker adds *Richard III*, *Measure for Measure*, and

² Although Henry's “levirate union”—marriage with a deceased and childless sibling's spouse was not forbidden by the table (and, in fact, is part of Moses's Law) it was annulled on the claim that, though, childless, it had been consummated. Fuzier and Maguin offer detailed information about Henry's scandals in their essay, “Archetypal Patterns of Horror and Cruelty in Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy.”

King Lear to Bueler's three above, additionally making a case for *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Henry VIII* (14). The very difference in their numbers and assignations of "incest" speaks to the seeming impossibility of pinpointing just what the word denotes. Some see it where others do not because, even within the confines of our society, we cannot agree on what constitutes "incest."

In addition to a certain amount of shock value, incest served playwrights as a theatrical device. In her comprehensive evaluation of "The Structural Uses of Incest in English Renaissance Drama," Bueler identifies several mix-and-match axes upon which an incest-driven play could turn: Is the incestuous feeling or action actual or wrongly assumed, witting or unwitting, reciprocated, and/or consummated (118)? Bueler's enumeration of dramatic hinges reveals the extent to which incest violations are measured in shades and degrees rather than by clear-cut standards. Though Bueler's rubrics focus on the incest motif as a theatrical device, they are useful in identifying moral sub-issues of concern to Renaissance playgoers, issues that continue to intrigue modern critics and audiences.

For Shakespeare's audiences, especially in the world of drama, incest by kinship and affinity was hardly rare, the attraction itself *not* necessarily condemned or thought unnatural. As Forker points out, though the marriage of Hamlet's mother and uncle "disgusts the young Prince of Denmark, shaking his faith in human nature to the core . . . what Hamlet and his father's ghost regard as the blackest of sexual transgressions seems to occasion no great objection in Denmark generally" (26). Most striking, then, is the extent to which incest was not wholly sensational-- it was grounded in topical issues and met with a certain degree of acceptance. It seems that the Elizabethans might have agreed with Mandeville's statement on incestuous relationships in *The Fable of the Bees* (1723): "Such alliances are abominable; but it is certain that, whatever Horror we conceive at the Thoughts of them, there is nothing in

Nature repugnant against them, but what is built upon Mode and Custom” (Wilson 253).

Although they may not have been able to admit it so candidly, the people of Shakespeare’s England were making a transition to a line of thinking-- and a distinction between *nature* and *custom*-- often overlooked today.

Central to Levi-Strauss’s discussion of the incest prohibition, which I explore more thoroughly in the third chapter, is the notion that, as far as mating goes, “nothing in the sister, mother, or daughter . . . disqualifies them as such” (485). This crucial feature of his theory echoes a sentiment put forth humorously in Ford’s *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore*. In reaction to Annabella’s joy on the occasion of her first sexual intimacy with her brother, her nurse exclaims, “What though he be your brother? Your brother’s a man, I hope, and I say still, if a young wench feel the fit upon her, let her take anybody, father or brother, all is one” (2.1.47-9 qtd in Bueler 127). Forker mitigates Bueler’s assertion that, for Renaissance playwrights, incest “is not nor cannot come to good” (127), with the observation that, “Ford treats the incestuous relationship with considerable sympathy-- not as a bestial abomination but as a tragic but humanly comprehensible error, in comparison with which arranged and affectionless marriages are crude, destructive, and even barbaric” (24). Here, we see the sparks of an alternative to “universal horror.” And it is particularly noteworthy that, in Forker’s analysis, incest compares favorably to marriage as it was often brought about-- that is, artificially-- in the Tudor-Stuart world of distant patriarchal authority, primogeniture and forced wedlock for enhanced social position. Of these environmental factors, a brief exploration of the nature of male-female relationships in Elizabethan England generally, and those between fathers and daughters specifically, will prove most relevant to my discussion of the role and ramifications of the incest prohibition in *King Lear*.

Elizabethan England inherited a spirit of paternal authoritarianism, which governed all power structures from the top down and the bottom up. In the Renaissance family paradigm, a father was exactly like a king, albeit within the scope of his family-- the institutions of kingship and fathership depended on each other for power and legitimacy (Aughterson 163). In the Bible, too, men found authorization-- even commandment-- to assume a position as head of the family, of which women were merely the “body,” as put forth in St. Paul’s statement and justified by the story of Adam and Eve. The sixteenth and seventeenth century Englishwoman was legally her husband’s “chattel”: “Her person and her property were under the control of her husband. He had the right to rule over her, to dispose of her property, to teach and to chastise her, even to beat her” (Hull 31).³ Before becoming a wife, before being passed from father to husband, a woman was similarly under the control of her father.

Marriages organized by family patriarchs for the purpose of advancing the family unit were consistent with a principle to which Levi-Strauss much later found that the subjects of his study on the incest prohibition adhered, “the group’s assertion that where relationships between the sexes are concerned, *a person cannot just do what he pleases*” (43). It follows that marriage rarely entailed the sanctification of a union born of love between two mutually adoring young people. Diane Elizabeth Dreher concretizes the import of this tradition with an apt comparison: “Children in the Renaissance were routinely matched for life with less of a say than modern children have when their parents buy them clothing or other commodities” (27). As such, marriages in Elizabethan England resembled the so-called “primitive” matrimonial notions Levi-Strauss identifies as forming the foundation for modern incarnations of the incest prohibition. The group was privileged over the family and the family privileged over the individual.

³ This and subsequent citations of Hull come from *Women According to Men*.

Before children's marriage, it was the task of fathers, especially those of the upper class, to educate and interact with their children as suited boys and girls separately. In her analysis of a "massive two-volume how-to-live guide," written by Thomas Becon during the reign of Elizabeth, Suzanne W. Hull explains that, while both genders learned to obey their parents and the tenets of Christianity, all dialogues employing the catechismal method-- or "any conversation"-- occur between father and son. In *The Court of Good Counsell*, which came out at about the same time as *Lear*, a father is instructed to "use himself otherwise toward them [daughters] than toward his sons" (Hull 135). The ideal attitude towards a father reflected "fear mixed with love, a reverential awe" (Dreher 22). While it is easy to see the restrictions that this situation placed on wives and daughters-- which should be neither underestimated nor under-appreciated-- it also left fathers with very limited leeway where decisions regarding daughters were concerned. Most importantly, they could not choose to interact with their daughters as befit their particular interpersonal connection, especially after their daughters reached puberty.

Consensus among instructional manuals had it that the father's main responsibility with regard to his daughter was to "settle [her] in an appropriate marriage and to see that she was brought up as a chaste and worthy candidate for that goal" (Hull 135). A father had to keep an eye on his daughter's virginity and marry her off, the sooner the better. For her part, a daughter showed love and obedience by silently accepting the spouse selected by her father and neatly "transferring her allegiance from one father figure to another" (Dreher 16).

While sticking obstinately to the rules, Shakespeare's fathers have a notoriously difficult time with this main responsibility of Renaissance paternal responsibility. At first glance, their difficulties stem from their daughters' insubordination in refusing to accept the

spouses chosen for them. More balanced perusal reveals a suspicious predilection on the part of the fathers for choosing mates abhorrent to the daughters, even when the daughters have found seemingly suitable spouses for themselves. Capulet is willing to relinquish his control of Juliet, but only to the spouse of his choosing, one hateful to his daughter. Egeus proves similarly content to give his daughter up in marriage, provided Hermia marry a man she detests rather than the one she loves. Cymbeline incarcerates Imogen because she rejects the prince he has selected in favor of a "Poor but worthy gentleman" (Morrison 35). The Duke of Milan violently banishes Valentine when he learns that, against his paternal will, his daughter Sylvia loves him rather than her father's choice, Thurio, who would keep her closer to home. The Duke banishes Sylvia for her failure to comply with his wishes in much the same way that Lear casts out Cordelia (Jaarsma 201). Brabantio is horrified by Desdemona's departure and chosen mate; his warning to Othello-- "She has deceived her father, and may thee" (1.3.288)-- refers to potential cuckolding as if, even as father, he has been the victim of adultery. In his efforts to prevent a successful courtship between Hamlet and his daughter, Polonius tells Ophelia that the Prince's tenders of affection "are not sterling" (1.3.107) and, despite her protest that he "hath importuned me with love / In honorable fashion," (1.3.110-11) commands Ophelia to "lock herself from his resort, / Admit no messengers, receive no tokens" (2.2.143-44). The example of *Pericles* suggests a darker conflict of interests underlying these failures of smoothly transferred allegiance. Antiochus, who has explicitly violated his own daughter, sets up a riddle contest for the hand of his daughter, one that aims to ensure the death of the contestant. In Shakespeare, tragedy often befalls daughters as a result father-daughter disagreements about spouses, ultimately calling into question the patriarchal rules rather than filial disobedience.

While it is impossible to include an exhaustive account of such conflicts here, this problem has not gone unnoticed by critics, especially Dreher. Her book, *Domination and Defiance*, presents a comprehensive look at father-daughter relationships in Shakespeare and identifies four parenting styles and attendant anxieties/neuroses particular to the Bard's fathers. Calling Lear Shakespeare's "most conflict-ridden and possessive father," Dreher reserves for him alone the assignation of all four "categories of paternal imbalance":

He is reactionary in his desire to retain his daughters as obedient children to forestall his own aging and death. He is mercenary in his view of love, measuring it in quantitative terms. He is so jealous of his youngest daughter that he cannot release her in marriage without a ritual that requires her to promise the impossible. Finally, he is egocentric in his identification with his daughters, especially Cordelia, and his identity problems are severe (64).

Dreher also associates Shakespearean fathers' reluctance to part with daughters to what could clearly be called an incestuous tendency: "Fathers in Shakespeare often sound like jealous lovers, their feelings for their daughters intimately tied up with their own sexuality" (9). In *Shakespeare's Darker Purpose: A Question of Incest*, Mark Taylor similarly focuses on Shakespearean fathers' marked inability to relinquish their daughters to rival males, explicitly attributing their violent reluctance to "incestuous feelings":

Consciously or unconsciously, sometimes both, Shakespearean fathers dread no circumstance more than the loss, to other men and to maturity, of the daughters whom they desire for themselves; and this desire, both impermissible and inadmissible, expresses itself in very strange behavior-- in acts that are arbitrary, selfish, irrational, violent, cruel. The combination of dread and desire that occasions these acts I designate incestuous feelings;

hardly ever overt, these incestuous feelings manifest themselves through sublimations, compensations, and displacements (x).

Indeed, father-daughter incest is a popular point of entry into discussions of incest in Shakespeare, perhaps too popular. Critics like Taylor and Dreher are often quick to assume that fathers' dread at daughters' nuptial departures stems from their own specifically sexual desire for their offspring. It is important to keep in mind that fathers were obligated to choose mates for their daughters and that daughters were supposed to accept them without dissension.

Notwithstanding allegations of "incestuous feelings" in fathers reluctant to part with their daughters, as we have already seen, Shakespeare was by no means left out of the incest craze of Tudor-Stuart drama. In *Hamlet*, the relationship between Claudius and Gertrude evokes the same type of incest by affinity that eventually enabled Henry VIII to annul his marriage to Catherine of Aragon. Additionally, many critics and modern directors have taken up Freud's work, implicating Hamlet's own desire for his mother in the terms of a classical oedipal complex. Four out of five instances of the word "incestuous" in Shakespeare's canon occur in *Hamlet*, and the fifth in *King Lear* (3.2.55) (Fuzier 12). In stark contrast with *Lear*, *Pericles*, produced the same year, features an explicitly incestuous father-daughter relationship, the only one in the canon. The sources for both *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale* include the incest motif (Forker 14). In *Pandosto*, the source for *The Winter's Tale*, a father incestuously, but unwittingly, desires his daughter. Taylor understands the reunion between Polixenes and Perdita as arousing desire or fear of desire in Polixenes, and he compares this reunion to Lear and Cordelia's. Twitchell notes a "reflexively condemnatory" treatment of incest in such works as *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *King Lear* in which "the recurrent theme of displaced intrafamilial sexual tension . . . partially causes the ultimate tragedies" (80).

Of course, the above examples are intended to give a sense of the range of critical attention to incest in Shakespeare rather than a comprehensive overview. Most significantly, critics differ in their identification of incest's relevance to a given text, unless it is explicitly identified as such, as in *Pericles* and *Hamlet*. Shakespeare to some extent validates the discrepancy in the critics' findings in *Measure for Measure*, which contains one of two uses of the word "incest" outside the five of *Pericles* (Fuzier 15). Isabella uses this word to characterize her brother's plea that she use her virginity as ransom for his freedom: "Is't not a kind of incest, to take life / From thine own sister's shame?" (3.1.138). Marc Shell describes Isabella's refusal of Claudio request as "the dramatic crux" of the play. This occurrence of "incest," both as classified by Isabella and as an instance of pandering, so significant within the piece despite its brevity, will prove particularly relevant to an understanding of *King Lear*. In the example of Isabella, Shakespeare validates the notion of "a kind of incest," implying that there are a varieties of incests and introducing the possibility that some "incests" are more or less evil than others.

Oh, what a combat feeles my panting heart,
'Twixt childrens loue, and care of Common weale!
How deare my daughters are vnto my soule,
None knows, but he, that knows my thoughts and secret deeds.

....

While they like wantons sport in youthfull toyes,
This throbbing heart is pearst with dire annoyes.

-- *The True Chronicle history of King Leir*⁴

II. Reading Incest in *King Lear*

King Lear does not dramatize an overtly incestuous or sexual relationship between Lear and Cordelia or the other daughters, so it is rarely included in the extensive, well-recognized set of Renaissance incest plays. Although critics exploring the theme of incest in Shakespeare's canon tend to be particularly sensitive to the subtlest manifestations of the taboo, they, too, sometimes exclude *Lear* from their comprehensive studies. While traditional criticism omits this consideration, a significant number of critics have come to read incestuous desire and/or activity as a crucial feature of Lear and Cordelia's relationship. When they do engage in such a reading, critics often use psychoanalytic theory in their approach to the theme of incest in *Lear*.

Any exploration of past critical attention to the incest prohibition in *Lear* must begin with reference to Freud's 1913 essay, "The Theme of the Three Caskets," even though he makes no explicit reference to incest in the essay, or at all until a letter to J. H. S Bransom, twenty years later. In the essay, Freud examines the trope of the hero who must choose between three women-- or three caskets-- focusing on Bassanio's effort to win Portia by choosing the right casket in *The Merchant of Venice*. Equating women and caskets, he also

analyzes Lear's division of his kingdom, explaining that the "third sister" of any triad represents the Goddess of Death, disguised as the Goddess of Love. "[T]he theme is a human one," he concludes, "*a man's choice between three women*" (81). In a bizarre bow to the reality that not all male humans get to choose between three women, Freud explains, rather weakly:

We must not be led astray by the fact that Lear's choice is between three daughters; this may mean nothing more than that he has to be represented as an old man. An old man cannot very well choose between three women in any other way. Thus they become his daughters (82).

Freud's cursory explanation of the inconsistency inherent in including Lear in a study of men choosing romantic partners ends up highlighting the suggestion of incest implicit in it. Only much later, in a response to a comment in Bransom's *The Tragedy of King Lear* (Oxford 1934), (in Harold Bloom's words, "an unfortunate book" presenting "an insane view with which Freud happily concurred" [385]), Freud agrees that "the repressed incestuous claims on the daughter's love" is "the secret meaning of the tragedy" (Lesser 163).⁵ Freud's agreement with Bransom's 1934 suggestion, that Lear is repressing sexual desire for Cordelia, seems to correct the incongruity of Freud's earlier work.

Many critics-- indeed, the vast majority-- exploring incest in *Lear* make reference to Freud's essay and/or other aspects of his theory, especially the oedipal complex and the ideas of "repressed incestuous claims" and "unconscious motivations." In addition to Boose and Kahn, Winifred F. Frazer, R. E. Gajdusek, Simon O. Lesser, William H. Chaplin, Paul Jorgenson, Alan Dundes, Mark J. Blechner, Kurt Schlesinger, Arpad Pauncz, John Donnelly,

4 *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* is cited in Muir's edition of *Lear* (207-8).

5 My citation of Freud's letter comes from Lesser, who cites Ernest Jones's *The Life and Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 3 (New York, 1957), pp. 457-58) in which the letter is quoted in full.

Richard J. Jaarsma, S.C.V. Stetner and Oscar B. Goodman refer to Freud's ideas in relation to the theme of incest in *Lear*. Pauncz uses the term "Lear Complex" to identify "a kind of a reverse Oedipus complex, referring to a father's being sexually attracted to his own daughter" (Dundes 358-9). Citing Pauncz's "Psychopathology of Shakespeare's King Lear" and Donnelly's "Incest, Ingratitude and Insanity: Aspects of the Psychopathology of King Lear," Jaarsma notes their focus on "unconscious sexual motives" (199). He abridges the "psychological" reading in sexualized terms: "Lear loves Cordelia, not as a father, but as a lover. He rejects her totally, like an anguished lover, when she denies him the lover-mistress relationship" (201). In support of his own reading, which, based on a folkloric analysis of the plot as that of a daughter-centered fairytale, sees incest in *Lear* as "daughter-father" rather than "father-daughter," Dundes summarizes the similarly sexual assumptions of the psychoanalytic model: "all of the psychoanalytic readings of the play treating the incest theme and that includes Freud's later one agree that it is a matter of father-daughter incest" (sic 359). Such readings have spurred reactions such as Claudette Hoover's: "One need not resort to Freudian cries of 'incest' to explain Lear's disillusionment" (88).

While I certainly appreciate the validity of the work of the critics who recognize the relevance of incest and/or Freud's ideas to an illuminating treatment of *Lear*, I understand, to some extent, the trace of disdain in Hoover's comment, which reflects the note of incrimination that often accompanies readings of incest in *Lear*. Many such treatments use the taboo's vocabulary loosely, asserting or implying a level of sexual interest in Cordelia on the part of Lear that is too literal to be credibly substantiated by the text. As in Dundes's summary, *what* is a matter of father-daughter incest and what constitutes "incest" too frequently remains unclear. In the absence of a specific explanation, "incest" invokes Lear's interest in Cordelia as a lover, erasing the distinction between an incestuous amount of love

and criminally sexual love. The distinction is an important one because terms such as Dundes's "father-daughter incest" refer, strictly speaking, to an action or desired act related to power abuse and sexual violation as in *Pericles*, whereas Lear's confrontation with "incest" does not necessarily overflow the realms of thought and emotion; the cruel acts stemming from it are not sexual. The implication of incestuously *sexual* love obscures the danger of what arises in Lear as an illegitimate *amount* of love and has the effect of incriminating the character Lear for hypothetical acts outside the playworld.

The moral imperatives of preventing or punishing a sexual act perpetrated by a father against a daughter are far more straightforward than the necessity of restricting the quantity of emotion or enforcing cultural structures intended to discourage illicit behavior. A breach of such a structure, after all, does not necessarily indicate an actual violation of the behavior code underlying the taboo in place to protect it. In some renderings of the incest taboo, a perfectly wholesome feeling-- paternal love for a daughter, for example-- can become amplified in quantity such that it becomes "incestuous" though it may remain fundamentally non-sexual. Must an appropriate feeling exceptionally amplified signify love of an essentially different nature, the kind labeled "incestuous?" At what point? Even if too much love is itself intrinsically problematic, it is certainly a problem of a different kind. Too often, the question of incestuous love arises in *Lear* criticism because of an omission of the distinction between an appropriate feeling exceptional in volume and an inappropriate (i.e. sexual) inclination, illicit in any quantity. The absence of explicit sexual desire reveals a less comfortable, more ambiguous moral question.

As Bloom observes, "properly played, properly read, [*Lear*] will demand more than any single answering consciousness is able to provide" (65). I also agree with Boehrer's

corollary contention that, when it comes to analyses of the incest taboo, “consistency can easily become more of a liability than an advantage” (37).⁶ For these reasons, no more than any one theoretical framework can accommodate the incest taboo generally, can any unilateral reading of the prohibition in *Lear* account for its complexities in that play. *King Lear* is reflective of what Boehrer calls the “submerged, polymorphous attitudes” which emerge from the “standard explanations” of incest, but cannot be accounted for by any one stock theory (37). For this reason, I particularly appreciate the readings of Boose and Gajdusek, who take approaches significantly different from the psychoanalytic and psychological models, although they both incorporate Freud’s work in their treatments. In her essay, “The Father and the Bride in Shakespeare,” Boose notes fathers’ frequent “threats of disinheritance to coerce their children” to wed and explores the ritual of marriage from a sociological viewpoint, drawing on the work of Levi-Strauss. In “Death, Incest, and the Triple Bond in the Later Plays of Shakespeare,” Gajdusek draws on Freud’s work, specifically his observation about the interrelationship between the Goddesses of Death and Love. Evoking the ancient archetype of the Mother Goddess, he explores the link between incest and mythic contraries in a number of works, with relatively brief attention to *King Lear*. Boose and Gajdusek expand the notion of incest and incorporate more than one theoretical approach in their analyses.

Freud’s notion of the incestuously charged oedipal complex, coupled with Levi-Strauss’s anthropological approach to the incest prohibition, help circumscribe without unduly limiting the unwieldy connotations of “incestuous.” Precisely because, as Levi-Strauss explains, it is “possible to ignore the differences between the prohibition of incest and exogamy” as “their formal characteristics are identical,” it is important to define that adjective

⁶ This citation and subsequent references to Boehrer come from *Monarchy and Incest*.

topically (51). Incestuous feeling does not necessarily imply sexual desire; rather, it comprises a sort of emotional greed that effectively hordes love at the expense of others who may deserve that love.

Taking as my point of departure an understanding of the incest prohibition as an outgrowth of the rule of exogamy, I use “incestuous” to refer to desire for a family member inappropriate especially in terms of its *quantity* (the desire for exclusive rights to a love that should be given away) and not merely *quality* (sexual love). An emphasis on quantity over quality is consistent with the incestuous desire Freud associates with an awakening libido and the oedipus complex. In Scene 1, Lear is guilty of a breach of “social incest,” which Levi-Strauss describes as a form of narcissism consisting in “obtaining by oneself, and for oneself, instead of by another, and for another” (489). Freud similarly sees incestuous oedipal desire as a function of narcissism, and he understands the respect for the “barrier against incest” as “essentially a cultural demand made by society” (91). An effective reading of *Lear* necessitates a willingness to embrace ambiguity, the ambiguity of our own notions of incest and the ambiguity with which Shakespeare so brilliantly invests his characters’ relationships, giving them their verisimilitude, and thus urgent relevance, to our own. Rather than offering answers, *Lear* forces us to ask questions ever relevant to modern audiences: What, for example, constitutes an appropriate father-daughter relationship and how do we distinguish what is richly close from what is incestuously excessive?

Readers and critics of *King Lear* demonstrate an insatiable desire to get at the heart of the unique bond between Lear and Cordelia. Critics frequently recognize in the *Lear* duo bits and pieces from their own parent/child relationships; while they clearly hope to bring this experience to bear in their readings of *Lear*, especially in relation to his children, a related instinct-- to take insight *from* that tragedy-- speaks to *King Lear*’s ongoing relevance to

family relationships within our society. A significant quantity of criticism treating Lear's particular bond with Cordelia seems, more specifically, to indicate a corresponding uncertainty about father-daughter relationships in contemporary society. How do we, as a live and modern society of spectators, readers, directors and critics recognize and digest the moral issues Shakespeare dramatizes for us in all of their gradations?

Holding this pair up to every available model of the father-daughter relationship, critics try to pin it down within an accepted or at least recognizable paradigm. What motivates Lear's rage? What motivates Cordelia's goodness? How can Lear's actions be justified? What value system accommodates Cordelia's unshakeable sense of duty with regard to her father? What pushes them apart? What pulls them back together? Or, still more appealing, who is the responsible party? Who is the agent of the actions that cause the apocalyptic tragedy and what are the guilty actions? It could be considered Cordelia's fault-- "Cordelia, knowing both her father and her sisters well, could forestall the tragedy by a touch of initial diplomacy, but she will not" (Bloom 67) -- or Lear's-- "Lear is torturing her, claiming her devotion which she wants to give, but forcing her to help him betray (or not to betray) it, to falsify it publicly" (Cavell 291). Or, as Twitchell suggests, an underlying unnatural relationship between the two could be at the root of the tragedy (80).

For many critics treating the relationship between Lear and Cordelia, it goes without saying that the often-invoked "ultimate tragedy" of *Lear* consists in the ultimate failure of that relationship. *Au diable* the "poor naked wretches." The casualties of the tragic fallout-- the fallen of the bloody arbitrement, the torture and death of Gloucester, the disappearance of the Fool, the apparently imminent suicide of Kent, and the death (and thus sterility) of the entire nuclear royal family-- receive tribute in cursory itemizations (such as mine) or even more sweeping terms which, aspiring to account for totality in brevity-- "civil war and disasters

sufficient to rock the macrocosm” -- often signify dismissal (Stetner 82). Subsequent commentary inevitably betrays empathy for the ancillary disaster victims on the level of Albany’s upon hearing news of Edmund’s death: “That’s but a trifle here” (5.3.294).

Despite frequent targeting of Lear and Cordelia as scapegoats for the macrocosmic disasters, few readers bother to bemoan society’s suffering at the hands of Lear and/or Cordelia; rather, *sympathies* tend to lie with the pair whose conjugal duet is tragically prevented by what we are forced, for lack of a more specific culprit, to call circumstance. In this regard, the nearly simultaneous loss of Cordelia and Lear recalls no other Shakespearean father-daughter pair; rather, it evokes the original star-crossed couple, Romeo and Juliet, who perished for a famously genuine, innocent love rendered fatal by the absolute notions of family that forbid it.

Long familiar with the events of that tale, it is possible for us to watch from the sidelines, smugly enjoying our privilege of foreknowledge, as the older people of Verona learn their lesson from the young. Perpetrators and victims are clearly delineated. We are relatively comfortable in our ability to conceive, with a little help from the Friar, of a way out; a word or two from us, after all, could prevent the tragedy unfolding before our eyes. If only the messenger reached Romeo in time, if only Romeo knew that Juliet was really still alive, all would be well. Not so with *King Lear*. Not only is the root of the problem far more elusive, it’s almost impossible to imagine a cause, let alone a solution.

Lear and Romeo have in common a lethally passionate love for a young woman. They share tragically bad timing, which leaves each, after a heart-wrenching confusion of life and death, dead over the bodies of their loved ones. They are equally passionate, equally destroyed. And, Cordelia, for her part, dies in the service of Lear. She gives her life so as not

to forsake him, not unlike Juliet who, faced with the absence of Romeo, takes her own life. In quantity, at least, the loves of the two couples must compete. But the similarities end there, surely, because Lear's love is that of a father for his daughter, Cordelia's that of a daughter for her father, and thus inherently different from Romeo and Juliet's love, the love of lovers. Or is Lear's love for Cordelia, or the love they share, the love of lovers? Or can a father and daughter love each other passionately but not illicitly? What would that mean and to what extent does it matter? While it is tempting to frame the similarities of the two couples in the extreme, I intend simply to underscore the passion underlying both relationships.

Romeo and Juliet find each other because they share innocence and love in a world otherwise characterized by conflict and antagonism. The intensity of their love dramatically counter-balances the widespread hate that permeates Verona. Although Lear and Cordelia are similarly surrounded by conflict and transgression, they seem in many ways to counter-balance each other, to be themselves inherently opposite: old/young, vengeful/forgiving, proud/unassuming, wrathful/patient, impulsive/thoughtful. Somehow, though, the very differences that push them apart draw them back together in the familiar trope of opposite ends of a magnet; they fit Alan W. Watts's description of *polar* opposites-- "the terms, ends, or extremities of a single whole . . . inseparable opposites"-- such that we don't know what to make of their "implicit unity" when confronted by it (49). Lear and Cordelia force us to confront the difficulty of defining the parameters of appropriate filial/parental love and differentiating it from conjugal/romantic love. At what point does-- must-- one end and the other begin? Should we measure it emotionally or chronologically? In quantity or quality? At what point, if the two loves-- which we have done our best to define as wholly distinct-- linger too long in the shade of the indistinguishable, should we evoke the socially fatal word "incestuous"?

What say you to the lady? Love's not love
When it is mingled with regards that stand
Aloof from the entire point. Will you have her?
She is herself a dowry.

(1.1.236-239)

III. Act 1, Scene 1: Lear Violates the Rule of Exogamy

In Act 1, Scene 1, Lear effectively violates the rule of exogamy by obstructing his daughter's marriage out to a rival male though covertly, perhaps even unconsciously, pursuing this aim. I examine Lear's desires and actions in the first scene through the lens of the incest prohibition primarily as articulated by Levi-Strauss in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Levi-Strauss's theory of the incest prohibition, as an outgrowth of general exchange principles, facilitates an understanding of the central action of this scene in relation to incest and, specifically, exogamy, while accommodating Fox's crucial reminder, "*Incest refers to sex, exogamy refers to marriage*" (4). Easing into a reading of incest in *Lear* by way of the first scene necessitates an awareness of both the connections and distinctions between the incest prohibition and exogamy. The incest prohibition forbids sexual activity *within* a certain degree of affinity or kinship; exogamy consists in a positive command to marry *out* of a given group, usually as encompassed by the family. Although the diction of 1.1 alludes to incest, it is about the literal marriage of Cordelia, and, with an understanding of the relationship of the incest prohibition to the rule of exogamy in Levi-Strauss's terms, we need not prove that Lear's interest in his daughter is specifically sexual to demonstrate that he unequivocally violates the taboo.

In the opening dialogue of Act 1, Kent and Gloucester's conversation about King Lear's imminent division of the kingdom takes only his two sons-in-law into consideration. No mention is made of Cordelia or her suitors. And yet, as soon as Lear makes his entrance, his first attention is to enlist Gloucester to the attendance of France and Burgundy, who, after a lengthy "amorous sojourn" in the court, have apparently been asked to wait in the wings (1.1.46). Gloucester accepts his commission without ado and Lear announces, "Meantime, we shall express our darker purpose" (1.1.35). In execution of his living will, "To shake all cares and business from our age, / Conferring them on younger strengths, while we / Unburthen'd crawl toward death" (1.1.38-40). Lear divides his kingdom in three and calls upon his daughters to compete for the most valuable shares-- their dowries-- through public declarations of love for him.

Lear's first word, "meantime," implies that the division of the kingdom is merely a sideshow to what is, especially for him, the main event: the handing over of his youngest and dearest daughter to one of her suitors. Many critics are so fascinated with the division of the kingdom that they miss the import of Lear's "giving away" of his favorite daughter. For Lear, as for so many of Shakespeare's fathers-- Capulet, Brabantio, Cymbeline, Shylock, and the Duke of Milan, to name a few-- this intrinsically dark act is fraught with tension and peril. Like Antiochus, the incestuous father of *Pericles*, he impedes this giving away by instituting a contest that all but guarantees the failure of the key contestants. Boose aptly detects the subversive nature of Lear's actions, which constitute for her an attempt "to substitute the illegitimate transfer of his kingdom for the legitimate one of his daughter" (332). Such a reading portrays the division as a sort of smokescreen, designed to mask Lear's struggle with the legitimacy of his desires. Lear's strategy has precisely this effect within the playworld-- distracted by the hype and speculation surrounding the division, Kent and Gloucester leave

out all mention of Cordelia's imminent engagement. In critical treatments, too, the proposed division diverts attention from the saliency of Cordelia's approaching marriage to the novelty of Lear's departure from traditional modes of bequest.

Lear's subsequent expression of a "darker purpose" alerts the reader's suspicion to a will to wrongdoing and further suggests a desire for concealment. Certainly, the division of his estate is "dark" in that it anticipates his death; however, the immediate surprise-- a love contest-- has its own sinister undertones. At the very least, it breaks the conventions of the period by testing the "merits" of the daughters rather than giving sole consideration to those of the sons-in-law who will be in charge of any domains granted. In their opening lines, Gloucester and Kent mention only Albany and Cornwall, not Goneril or Regan. Lear's very lack of a male heir has its own dark implications; not only was the absence of a son a sign of compromised potency, but Henry VIII's similar lack constituted for him a curse resulting from prior incest.

Without hesitation, Goneril rises to meet the challenge with an ostensibly impassioned, but rather perfunctory, declaration of love for her father. Regan follows by claiming the value of Goneril's love and then upping the ante with sleight of rhetoric. As she witnesses her sister's empty words lead them away from love, Cordelia speaks in an aside, involving the audience in the moral conundrum as she struggles to find the right course of action: "What shall Cordelia speak?" (1.1.61). The falseness of the older daughters' words echoes the disingenuousness of the contest itself-- Lear awards shares of his kingdom to each of Goneril and Regan's speeches immediately after they have delivered them; he does not give all three contestants a chance to compete before awarding prizes and thus invalidates the professed purpose of the contest.

At first it appears that Lear has reserved the greatest prize for Cordelia to whom he offers the following command in the guise of opportunity: “what can you say to draw / A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.” (1.1.84-5). On this temptation, Cordelia drops the bombshell “Nothing, my lord” (1.1.86). But *why* does she say “nothing?” To shame her father publicly for putting her in an awkward position? To lose her inheritance? Because she truly does not love her father? She has answered the question of her prior aside with a resolution, “Love, and be silent” (1.1.61), to love and to maintain silence, perhaps, to love through maintaining silence. Stanley Cavell argues that to utter love in this artificial, humiliatingly public forum would be tantamount to falsifying it, not to mention extremely difficult: “. . . to pretend publicly to love, where you do not love, is easy; to pretend to love, where you really do love, is not obviously possible” (290).⁷ We soon come to learn what Lear must already have known, that Cordelia is the very embodiment of love, that, precisely *because* her “love’s / More ponderous than [her] tongue” (1.1.76-7), she “cannot,” *cannot*, “heave / [Her] heart into [her] tongue” (1.1.90-1). Does Lear know his favorite so slightly that he fails to predict her inability or unwillingness to profess her love for him publicly? Boose joins Cavell in questioning Lear’s intentions in forcing his youngest to make a public, and thus necessarily awkward and almost forcibly insincere, avowal of her love for him. I concur with an argument, suggested by Cavell: “Lear’s strategy is exactly to put Cordelia into the position of being denied her dowry, so that he will not lose her in marriage” (295). Lear’s smokescreen furthers his underlying purposes all the while it conceals them. Through the device of the contest, Lear actively places Cordelia in an impossible situation that leaves her disowned and disinherited.

⁷ All direct references to Cavell are from “The Avoidance of Love.”

It is a popular myth among critics that Cordelia says nothing in response to Lear's request for an avowal of love. While indeed her initial entry in the love contest is the word "nothing," she goes on to say quite a lot. When Lear asks her to speak again, she responds by evoking filial obligation, "I love your Majesty / According to my bond; no more nor less" (1.1.91-2). Filial obligation in turn evokes paternal obligation and the strict rules that govern both. *Lear* takes place in Britain, a Britain that, while not Tudor-Stuart, apparently features identical notions of the paternal-filial obligation, the duty of a father to dispose of his daughter in a suitable marriage and the duty of a daughter to obey her father's decisions on her behalf, indeed, his every command. In the case at hand, Lear makes it very clear that failure to meet his demand, a public display of affection, will result in diminished "fortunes," a threat both to Cordelia's dowry and her future. Cavell sees Lear's command in terms of a "bribe" (288). At stake for Cordelia is her dowry, the fortune that will allow her to marry out of Lear's control. Boose shows how Lear places Cordelia in an impossible situation using a scheme of circularity that depends on the marriage ritual's demand for separation from the father:

Lear the father will not freely give his daughter her endowment unless she purchases it with pledges that would nullify those required by the wedding ceremony. If she will not love him all, she will mar her fortunes, lose her dowry, and thus forfeit the symbolic separation. And yet, as she asserts, she cannot marry if she loves her father all. (333)

Lear tries to render his daughter unmarriageable by staking her dowry on a test that he must know she will fail. He knows it is not within her nature to make such a declaration of love, and she must offer the love to him that, as Cordelia accurately ascertains, she should be vowing to her husband.

Here, the relevance of Levi-Strauss's theory of exogamy to the social rules enacted in Act 1, Scene 1 becomes obvious. Levi-Strauss asserts the basic elements of the incest prohibition in positive terms-- a *command* to participate in the ritual of gift exchange, in this case, the exchange of women in marriage: "The prohibition of incest is less a rule prohibiting marriage with the mother, sister, or daughter, than a rule obliging the mother, sister or daughter to be given to others" (481). According to Levi-Strauss, in societies that treat women as exchange objects, the rules of reciprocity define the incest prohibition: "Like exogamy, which is its widened social application, the prohibition of incest is a rule of reciprocity. The woman whom one does not take, and whom one may not take, is, for that very reason, offered up" (51). A conception of such values as women and love as goods that can be measured and traded is compatible with an essential aspect of the incest prohibition, the "supreme rule of the gift," which belies "marriage as a discontinuous process which derives its own limits and possibilities from within itself in each individual case" (481). In a society in which women function as commodities in a system of generalized exchange, exogamy requires that women be "married out" for three main reasons: 1) to promote equal access to all women for all men in the group 2) to obey the imperatives of reciprocity, the "supreme rule of the gift" and 3) to expand alliances and power bases. The commodification of women reflects the historical reality of women in Shakespeare's England where, as discussed, many enjoyed a socio-political status equivalent to "chattel." Considered the possessions of their fathers until they were passed on, given, to husbands in marriage, women essentially constituted an object of exchange. Their social rank determined their "value" in marriage, and, as if to eradicate any further doubt of their commodity status, a dowry-- often a cash amount-- was attached to their worth as a bride and constituted an essential aspect of the

marriage transaction. The text of 1.1, in which Lear holds Cordelia to be his “best object,” clearly upholds this model (1.1.213). Lear tries to keep to himself what, in the social context he inhabits and authors, must be offered up to others.

As patriarch, Lear quantifies love from the outset. Love and money (as determined by relative portions of land) are immediately attached in Lear’s institution of a love-contest. Whoever loves the most wins the most valuable portion of land. Lear essentially sells his land to his two oldest daughters in exchange for their testaments of love. Lear’s commodification of the intangible emotion, love, reveals the similarity of his world, the playworld, to that of the “primitive” societies of Levi-Strauss’s study:

Goods are not only economic commodities, but vehicles and instruments for realities of another order, such as power, influence, sympathy, status and emotion; and the skillful game of exchange . . . consists in a complex totality of conscious or unconscious manoeuvres in order to gain security and to guard oneself against risks brought about by alliances and by rivalries (54).

Lear tries to win at just such a game, primarily “to gain security,” a maternal, conjugal companion on whose “kind nursery” (1.1.123) he can rest in his old age. In the crudest terms, Lear has a certain number of goods-- essentially land and daughters-- that he must dispose of in such a way that his needs are met. As in the societies of Levi-Strauss’s study, women, and thus Cordelia, figure into “most precious category of goods, women” (61). In Scene 1, Lear’s possession Cordelia is his crucial bargaining chip.

Cordelia’s response to Lear’s bribe indicates serious resistance to the commodification-- paradoxically, the cheapening-- of her love; she shrinks from the bribe “as

though from violation” (Cavell 288). When Lear prompts Cordelia, “Mend your speech a little, / Lest you may mar your fortunes” (1.1.93-4), she does make a speech, a speech which betrays a confusion and conflation of wifely and daughterly love:

Good my Lord,
You have begot me, bred me, lov'd me: I
Return those duties back as are right fit,
Obey you, love you, and most honour you.
Why have my sisters husbands, if they say
They love you all? Happily, when I shall wed,
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry
Half my love with him, half my care and duty:
Sure I shall never marry like my sisters,
To love my father all. (1.1.95-103)

Clinging to the precepts of filial duty, she plans to take the same type of love-- and obedience (the two are difficult to separate in societies that measure one as a function of the other)-- she feels for her father to her marriage. But, to her husband, she will only bring half her love. Critics discussing incest frequently observe that Cordelia's equation of wifely and daughterly love betrays Lear's incestuous desire that she be as a wife to her father. Indeed, like the Duke of Milan, who resolves “to take a wife / And turn [Sylvia] out to who will take her in” (3.3.76-7), Lear seems to see wifely and daughterly love as potentially interchangeable. But Burgundy, too, equates father and husband in his apology, which assumes that the loss of one leads to the loss of the other: “I am sorry, then, you have so lost a father / That you must lose a husband” (1.1.245-6). Just as feasible in Cordelia, however, is adherence to the 16th century notion that a woman should behave as a daughter to her husband, an emphasis of a very

different kind. Cordelia rightly characterizes the quality of love she feels for her father as that which she is responsible for bringing to a husband, although her understanding is naïve and incomplete.

Cordelia's speech reveals the assumption that the love her sisters claim with regard to their father is of the same genre of love a wife feels for her husband. But it is the quantity, the percentage, of love they profess that she takes to task. As the older sisters' pragmatism aims to deliver whatever Lear wants, their speeches also indicate an understanding that a profession of specifically wifely love is called for by Lear. For them, however, wifely love is sexualized rather than characterized by love and duty as it is for Cordelia. An erotic strain resounds in Goneril's "love that makes breath poor and speech unable" (1.1.59). Topping her, Regan makes similarly erotic allusions, declaring herself "an enemy to all other joys / Which the most precious square of sense possesses," and claiming explicitly that she is "alone felicitate" in Lear's love, presumably, as Cordelia points out, at the expense of her husband's love and joy (1.1.72-5). At the same time, however, Cordelia articulates her filial devotion to Lear in the terms of a marriage vow: "Obey you, love you, and most honour you" (1.1.97). Lear's need for maternal nurture from his daughter(s), the state's sanctioned conflation of wife and daughter roles, and the older sisters' eroticization of filial love point not to a specific desire in Lear for sexual attention from his offspring but to widespread confusion touching the delineation of wife-daughter-mother.

Lear's anger focuses on his paternal relationship to Cordelia. When past a certain age, daughters could marry and withhold any kind of love from their fathers. In his helpless anger at this prospect, Lear more than disowns or disinherits Cordelia. He claims to strike her from his memory, making her a "stranger to my heart and me" (1.1.114) and invoking the power of

all life forces, “the orbs / From whom we do exist and cease to be” to deny his role in her creation. Indeed, it is his paternity that he disclaims most emphatically: “Here I disclaim all my paternal care, / Propinquity and property of blood, / And as a stranger to my heart and me / Hold thee from this forever” (1.1.110-15). In a later moment, he reiterates his renunciation of his paternity, “Thou hast her France; let her be thine, for we / Have no such daughter, nor shall ever see / That face of hers again” and lets France carry off Cordelia without his grace, love, and benison (1.1.261-4). Denying his paternity may be what he has desired all along, because it is his role as father that ultimately stands between him and his daughter.

Lear’s violent reaction to Cordelia’s inadequate love-speech confirms his passionate desire for her whole love. And it is at this point that he reveals his original intentions: “I lov’d her most, and thought to set my rest / On her kind nursery (1.1.122-3). All along, Lear has wanted to exploit the exchange game to keep Cordelia to himself. In his discussion of “shame” as a strong motive for Lear’s arbitrary, violent reaction to Cordelia’s speech, Cavell suggests that “the *nature* of his love for Cordelia” could be said to be at the root of his shame: “It is too far from plain love of father for daughter. Even if we resist seeing in it the love of lovers, it is at least incompatible with the idea of her having any (other) lover” (299). Though Cavell self-consciously avoids asserting incest, he effectively indicts Lear on violation of the rule of exogamy. Indeed, Lear’s revocation of Cordelia’s dowry, and his subsequent efforts to defame her further, suggest the attitude that if he can’t have her, nobody will. Does he want her as a possession? lover? wife? mother? or perhaps just to remain his daughter? All of these possibilities are compatible with my understanding of incest as a violation of the rule of exogamy.

In confirmation of the exchange economy, and thus the imperatives of exogamy, Lear initiates an unusual sort of auction, placing Cordelia on the block in such a way that nobody will buy her.⁸ Before Burgundy and France enter, and the bidding begins in the “game of exchange,” Lear intentionally tries to sabotage Cordelia’s chances for marriage by stripping her of her material worth, leaving her with truth as a dowry (1.1.107). He explains to Burgundy, “When she was dear to us we did hold her so, / But now her price is fallen” (1.1.195-6). At first it appears perverse that, as auctioneer, Lear sets the opening bid for Cordelia at nothing. In depriving Cordelia of a dowry, Lear, fatally, sets Cordelia’s worth at nothing, effectively setting her price-- that is, the cost to France or Burgundy of accepting her-- very high. Lear banks, as it were, on the hope that the intrinsic value he sees in Cordelia will go unnoticed by her suitors. To his detriment, Lear sets the value of his gift at nil, so he can receive nothing in “giving her away,” an expression which even today refers to the father’s handing over of a daughter in marriage to another man. Fortunately for Lear, Burgundy can think only in terms of monetary worth and does not recognize the woman herself as, in Levi-Strauss’s words, “the supreme gift among those that can only be obtained in the form of reciprocal gifts” (65). France, however, drives a harder bargain.

In encouraging France “T’avert [his] liking a more worthier way / Than on a wretch whom Nature is asham’d / Almost t’acknowledge hers,” Lear insinuates an offence on the level of the incest prohibition in an attempt to disqualify Cordelia from France’s attentions (1.1.210-12). France, however, remembers what Lear tries to retract, that Cordelia was only moments ago his “best object,” one now curiously thrown away. His suspicions immediately point to Lear:

This is most strange,

⁸ In his essay, “Lear’s Auction,” Robert Willson offers a thorough discussion of how Lear’s world is infected by

That she, whom even but now was your best object,
The argument of your praise, balm of your age,
The best, the dearest, should in this trice of time
Commit a thing so monstrous, to dismantle
So many folds of favour. Sure, her offence
Must be of such unnatural degree
That monsters it, or your fore-vouch'd affection
Fall into taint; which to believe of her,
Must be a faith that reason without miracle
Should never plant in me. (1.1.212-22)

France, the hero of the moment, responds to Lear's unsubstantiated accusations of an offence of "unnatural degree," by reflecting the king's insinuations back onto himself. The alternative France suggests, that Lear's "Fore-vouch'd affection" might "Fall into taint" uses the vocabulary of incestuous transgression-- commit, monstrous, offence, unnatural degree, monsters, fore-vouch'd affection, fall, taint-- to threaten Lear.⁹ France explicitly places Lear's motivations and the nature of his fatherly affection under suspicion: has he discovered Lear's "darker purpose?"

The role of the rule of exogamy in this scene derives its significance from exogamy's special relationship to the incest prohibition as it pertains to father-daughter relationships. Buried within the rule of exogamy is the injunction against incest-- specifically between fathers and daughters-- primarily because the father must deliver his daughter's virginity intact to "the sanctified transgressor of the prohibitions that the father has been compelled to

his materialistic approach to family and kingdom, starting with his auctioning of Cordelia to the "lowest bidder."

observe” in a wedding service that “not only reaffirms the taboo against incest but implicitly levels the full weight of that taboo on the relationship between father and daughter” (Boose 327). As protector of her chastity, he-- who has the most direct access to her-- must not compromise it himself. To some extent, it seems that the very presence of an adult daughter in the paternal home implies wrong-doing. Picking up, like France, on her father’s unfair insinuations, she asserts that she has indeed been brought up as a worthy candidate for that goal.

I yet beseech your Majesty,

. . . that you make known

It is no vicious blot, murder or foulness,

No unchaste action, or dishonour’d step,

That hath depriv’d me of your grace and favour . . .

(1.1.222-28)

Adopting vocabulary similar to France’s-- vicious blot, foulness, unchaste action, dishonour’d step-- Cordelia dares to speak up in defense of her integrity, most fundamentally comprised in her virginity, which she asserts has not been compromised, Lear’s “fore-vouch’d affection” notwithstanding. In claiming her innocence of the most heinous crimes, Cordelia also calls attention to the extremity of Lear’s rage. Such rage, and so sudden, unfairly insinuates that she has rendered herself unfit for marriage, as by one of the three disqualifying claims footnoted by Boose: prior marriage or contract, lack of consent, and kinship or affinity (343). Lear does not deny Cordelia’s words of self-defense; he only re-articulates his regret at having fathered her: “Better thou / Hadst not been born than not t’have pleased me better”

9 Dundes suggests, “It may or may not be germane that the adjective ‘monstrous’ was in fact used on another occasion by Shakespeare to refer to father-daughter incest. The final lines of *Pericles* begin: ‘In Antiochus and his daughter you have heard/Of monstrous lust the due and just reward.’ (V,iii,85-56)” (359).

(1.1.232-33). In refraining from discrediting Cordelia, Lear incriminates himself in France's either/or observation. Cordelia exonerates herself, and the accusation, that Lear's "fore-vouch'd affection" must "fall into taint" stands. France discredits Lear and wins the "dowry" by obeying the tenets of an exchange economy, which Lear ignores.

In her prophetic warning to her sisters, Cordelia tells us what to look for as the play unfolds: "Time shall unfold what plighted cunning hides; / Who covers faults, at last with shame derides" (1.1.280). To me, the curiosity of this statement lies in Cordelia's reproach to her sisters for their "plighted cunning" and its implication, in the image of a many-folded plan, of premeditation on the part of the sisters, or, more to the point, on the part of Lear who is by no means excluded from the scope of her warning. To the extent that he stages an elaborate ceremony for the ostensible purpose of bequeathing large dowries, parcels of his kingdom, to his daughters, especially for the express purpose of depositing his youngest in a marriage, Lear defers to the imperative of exogamy. Although his display effectively acknowledges the social command of exogamy, his gestures are soon revealed as empty. The hollowness rings with France's insinuations of tainted affection.

The apparently prevailing rule of exogamy in Lear's Britain compels him to find a husband for his daughter, so he cannot straightforwardly reserve her for himself, whether or not he wants to, with or without her permission. Lear tries to sidestep the imperatives of exogamy, corollary to the incest prohibition, in order to effect the same result. Given that the mere suggestion of a bond outside of the standard patterns of filial love (whatever they may be) becomes immediate cause for suspicion among Shakespearean critics, it is easy to imagine the anxiety that must have characterized father-daughter relationships in Shakespeare's time, with its strict rules concerning possession and exchange. It is no wonder, then, that parents

rushed to have their daughters “disposed of” in marriage, and the daughters contented themselves with looking on silently, hoping that their families would find them someone they could live with. After all, as Dreher tells us, proper conduct for a young woman faced with engagement required that she not “express her preferences or even demonstrate interest, as this was unseemly in a young maiden” (27). As Shakespeare’s difficult fathers try to prolong their daughters’ childhood, keep them nearby, or press their girls into undesirable relationships, however, they protest openly. But there’s something different about the relationship between Cordelia and Lear, a note of mutuality not shared by the relationships dominated by greedy, jealous fathers easily found elsewhere in Shakespeare.

Among Shakespeare’s daughters, Cordelia alone does not express any particular concern one way or the other about the selection of a husband, or the terms of the marriage. Cordelia shows obedience (a sanctioned expression of love) to her father by approaching the prospect of marriage with indifference, the opposite of passion. Paradoxically, her measure of obedience to him implicates her in his violation of the exogamy imperative. She is neither anxious to leave the realm of her father nor enthusiastic about entering into the domain of a husband. Troubling only over her father’s request for a public declaration of her love for him, she quickly resolves on truth’s superiority to affected flattery and greets the prospect of marriage with ready acceptance, as a fact of her life-- as plain as the truth of her love for Lear - not requiring any special reflection.

Cordelia’s response to her father’s request for an avowal of love, though often misread as merely “nothing,” never goes unnoticed, but the account she gives of getting married is all the more remarkable. Unlike the Cordelia of Nahum Tate’s reparative rewrite, who wants to wed Edgar instead of France or Burgundy, Shakespeare’s Cordelia expresses no preference for either until Burgundy rejects Lear’s offer of her. The only effort she makes on her own

behalf is to have her virginity and innocence of similarly extreme crimes (i.e. murder) confirmed. She greets the prospect of marriage with calm acceptance uncharacteristic of such Shakespearean daughters as Juliet, Miranda, Hermia, and Desdemona similarly in conflict with their fathers over marriage. Desdemona presents a useful point of comparison insofar as Brabantio, like Lear, demands from his daughter a public testament of her allegiance to him.¹⁰

Like Cordelia, Desdemona struggles for a diplomatic response to her father's command, which does not compromise honesty. Both daughters encounter a "divided duty." Desdemona resolves the division by invoking the tradition of linear reciprocity of duty between generations; Cordelia aggravates the schism by inventing an unorthodox concept of woman's duty as rightfully divided. The difference between their responses attests to the unconventional nature of Cordelia's understanding of marriage.

Desdemona ultimately resolves her divided duty by relinquishing obedience to her father in favor of duty to her new husband:

I do here perceive a divided duty:
To you I am bound for life and education;
My life and education both do learn me
How to respect you; you are the lord of duty;
I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband;
And so much duty as my mother show'd
To you, preferring you before her father,
So much I challenge that I may profess
Due to the Moor, my lord. (1.3.181-89)

¹⁰ Foregrounding the two daughters' speeches as approximating wedding vows, Lynda Boose points out the usefulness of this juxtaposition, in a wider discussion of father-daughter relationships and the rituals of marriage (331-3).

Her experience of the wedding ceremony, as it continues to be ritualized to this day, reflects a woman's passing from father to husband. For Desdemona, duty is 1) unreciprocal between father and daughter-- she owes her father respect which he does not have to return in kind and 2) ultimately indivisible-- she must transfer it from father to husband wholly intact 3) linearly reciprocal between father and husband-- in accepting his wife's duty, relinquished by her father, Brabantio incurred a debt which he must repay to Othello by relinquishing his own daughter's duty. Duty ceded from a father-in-law must be given in restitution to a son-in-law.

Cordelia divides her love and duty differently in her profession of the marriage vow. Determined not to marry to love her father all, she conceives of marriage as an occasion for committing half of her love and duty, though only half, to her new husband. Cordelia understands love, care, and duty as 1) reciprocal between father and daughter-- her father has taken care of her and thus she feels the same responsibility towards him to be repaid "as are right fit," in the same quantities 2) divisible and necessarily so-- to be bestowed on a husband, these sentiments, apparently finite, must be taken away from the father and 3) chronologically linear between father and daughter-- she repays with love honor and obedience a debt previously incurred. Although Cordelia does not mention her mother, it may be inferred that Lear's wife would have given him the love Cordelia must take from him to give her husband.

At the same time she points up her sisters' professed love for her father as the type of love due a husband, Cordelia fails to distinguish wifely from daughterly love in relation to her own roles. To Cordelia, filial duty and spousal duty are identical, effectively interchangeable - she possesses only one apparently finite store of love, which must be divided equally between father and husband. Whereas Desdemona equates the duty she will give her husband to that which her mother gave her father, Cordelia equates the duty she will give her husband to that which she will continue to give her father. Desdemona's speech reflects the marriage

vow she has made to Othello and includes her vow to forsake all others (Boose 332); Cordelia's speech similarly reflects the marriage vow, but the vow-- of love, honor and obedience-- is directed to her father, only half of whose previous due she plans to forsake, for the purpose of transfer, upon marriage. Comparing and contrasting Cordelia's entry in the love contest with Desdemona's similar sense of a "divided duty" illustrates the extent to which Cordelia strays from the spirit of the traditional wedding vow, structured to signal a transfer of duty from father to husband, and forecasts the failure of her marriage as a result of her contributing resistance to exogamy, a resistance which implies a desire to remain, at least in part, with King Lear.

IV. Lear's Incestuous Fixation

In the previous chapter, I have shown that, in his efforts to prevent Cordelia's marriage to France and Burgundy, Lear disobeys the rule of exogamy, a rule tantamount to the incest prohibition. At the heart of Lear's wrongdoing is a transgression of social custom, not an infringement of natural law or any kind of actual physical violation; nonetheless, within the playworld, Lear's attempt to subvert the exogamy imperative triggers suspicion as to the wholesomeness of his feelings for his daughter. France turns Lear's insinuation that Cordelia has committed an unnatural offence back onto the king. In my reading, Lear's desperate desire to retain his daughter's love and attention is incestuous in its greed, its demand for exclusive love. Paradoxically, this interpretation of Lear's love as incestuous presupposes no sexual desire. Lear's desire for Cordelia is incestuous, rather, because-- in his avarice-- Lear aims to take his daughter from a rightful husband. Lear is incestuous insofar as he harbors an adulterous love for his daughter. In Lear's kingdom, a patriarchal society governed by the rules of reciprocity, only a husband has a right to his wife's exclusive love, a social law fatally misunderstood by Cordelia and avoided by Lear.

In this chapter, I discuss the incestuous violation described in Chapter III can be understood in the Freudian terms of an oedipal complex. Oedipal desire, like Lear's, is adulterous in that the bearer seeks to displace a woman's husband in order to gain her exclusive love. Freud's model, however, accounts for a son's desire for his mother rather than a father's desire for his daughter. Nonetheless, this model aptly illuminates *Lear* because, as Kahn argues in "The Absent Mother in 'King Lear,'" Lear yearns for Cordelia not as a lover but as a son in need of maternal nurture. Contrasting her interpretation with her

reading of Boose's, "that the emotional crisis precipitating the tragic action is Lear's frustrated incestuous desire for his daughter," Kahn asserts that Lear's struggle with "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" (40). The text central to Kahn's argument is Lear's confession, amidst his enraged casting out of Cordelia, that he "lov'd her most, and thought to set [his] rest / On her kind nursery" (1.1.123-24). According to Kahn, this definition of Lear's need leads away from the suggestion of incestuous desire. However, as Boose briefly observes, Lear's need for a daughter-mother is compatible with the notion of incestuous desire when understood in Freudian terms. She sees in Lear's phrasing, "an image in which the father pictures himself as an infant nursing from his daughter" (334). Calling the suggested relationship "unnatural," Boose explains that it allows Lear "to deflect his original incestuous passions into Oedipal ones, thus effecting a newly incestuous proximity to the daughter" (334). In this chapter, I develop Kahn's idea of Lear's role as child and need for Cordelia as a mother, which I see as consistent rather than incompatible with a reading of the incest prohibition in *Lear*. To this end, I expand on Boose's brief observation that such a need implies yet another incestuous propinquity when understood in Freudian terms.

I find Boose's analysis useful in its formulation of the transition in Lear between two types of incestuous love. Although Boose refers to these loves as "incestuous passions," neither of them entails straightforwardly sexual interest. Even in Boose's work, "original incestuous passions" refers only to Lear's desire to keep Cordelia rather than release her in marriage, "to retain rather than to reject" her despite his obvious rage (333). I develop the idea of Lear's particular brand of oedipal conflict from the initial image of the nursing infant Lear, as described by Boose, to his displacement of the father-figure France, a usurpation

abetted by the mother-figure Cordelia. Lear's above explanation of his wrathful response to Cordelia is his only explicit expression of otherwise unspoken goals; Lear is straightforward in his desire to enjoy his daughter in the comforting capacity of mother, with all the nurturing and single-minded attention associated with that role. When Cordelia withholds the wifely, sexualized love offered by the older daughters, he feels denied the love of a mother. In his attitude towards Cordelia and, indeed, the love of all three daughters, in Scene 1, Lear is like the oedipally conflicted child/adult who urgently wants "exclusive possession . . . of whatever properties are the centre of interest at the moment," in this case, his mother-child, Cordelia (Isaacs qtd in Levi-Strauss 85). Lear's general narcissism and consistently child-like demeanor combined with his hope of being the exclusive desire of the mother-figure Cordelia casts him, as Kahn suggests, undeniably in the Freudian role of "his majesty, the baby" (40).¹¹

Significantly, Freud's notion of the oedipal conflict, with its implications for repressed incestuous desire, does not assume actual transgression, except insofar as the thoughts themselves are considered transgressive. The "incestuous desire" that is a part of an oedipal complex need not be understood as literal desire to consummate a sexual relationship with a mother (or, here, a daughter-mother). I take Lear's incestuous desire, then, to refer to his desire to keep his daughter Cordelia to himself, not necessarily to have a sexual relationship with her. Freud's theory usefully accounts for the conflation of parental and sexual love in its conception of children's inability to distinguish between the two. "Anxiety in children," Freud explains, "is originally nothing other than an expression of the fact that they are feeling the loss of the person they love" (*Sexuality* 90). This anxiety finds its king-size amplification in Lear's rage at the imminent loss of Cordelia.

¹¹ This citation and all subsequent references to Kahn come from her essay, "The Absent Mother in *King Lear*."

In Act 1, Scene 1, Lear emerges as a child whose tainted affection arises from a need for security rather than sexual gratification. Ostensibly, his preparations for a foreseen and imminent loss of power comprise bestowing his “cares and business . . . on younger strengths” (1.1.38-9). However, Lear’s subsequent actions betray an insecurity that goes beyond the burden of royal duties. Lear must also safeguard his emotional future. Thus, in addition to giving over control of his political domains to his sons-in-law, he seeks security in the form of his daughters’ love by trading in his kingdom. Above all, he wants to levy the promise of royal power in his efforts to possess Cordelia as his chief source of security. Without a wife or other emotional safety net, he pictures himself about to “crawl toward death” (1.1.40) like a helpless, dying infant.

Lear’s strategies for manipulating of the exchange economy make him all the more like a child. According to Susan Isaacs’s study, children desire to be “potent in giving” because, bestowing “enormous and magnificent gifts” on others allows them to avoid the role of “the helpless puling infant . . . driven by helpless anxieties to rage and jealousy.” For Lear, like the children, “to give is not to need” (qtd in Levi-Strauss 87). Giving, for Lear, masks needing, particularly a need to possess. Because the gift he wants in return-- love-- is intangible, it seems at first that he parcels out his kingdom without requesting any form of restitution. It soon becomes clear that, in gifting his domains, Lear means to incur his daughters’ endless gratitude and affection. Unfortunately, Lear asks his daughters for a public *show* of love and that is exactly what they give him. As they have delivered their part of the bargain, they expect the kingdom in return and feel no further debt to Lear. Thus, his act of giving is not a sign of his power but of his powerlessness, betraying a desire to possess rather than give.

Susan Isaacs understands children's desire to possess as a social response, similarly characterized by powerlessness and driven by the need for security: "I want to own it because if I do not it may not be there when I need it If another has it, he may keep it forever" (qtd in Levi-Strauss 86). This attitude, Levi-Strauss observes, dissolves the opposition "between property and community and, between monopoly and sharing, between the *arbitrary* and *arbitration*," conflating them in the primitive "need for security" (86). Lear's actions towards Cordelia are characterized by the desire for property and a monopoly on her love. Even the "evil" sisters understand Lear's reaction to her refusal to give her whole love and his banishment of Kent as arbitrary, marked by "unruly waywardness" (1.1.297). But Lear's desire for a monopoly on Cordelia as property comes at least in part from the impossibility of community, sharing and arbitration.

In a separate discussion, Levi-Strauss describes marriage as "an arbitration between two loves, parental and conjugal" (489). In his paradigm, the two loves meet as they intercross, a union at which marriage constitutes "a sacred mystery . . . verg[ing] on incest" (489). In Lear's handing over of Cordelia, the incest prohibition excises the possibility of arbitrating the two kinds of love. Although Cordelia fantasizes about sharing and does her best to mediate between the two loves in her philosophy of halves, no real possibility for arbitration exists, a reality that Lear intuits. The moment of the intersection of parental and conjugal loves is disrupted, suspending the love in the mysteriously sacred, but eminently dangerous, point of convergence where it takes on its incestuous element as a sort of "social incest" (Levi-Strauss 489). Faced with the impossibility of sharing, Lear goes for broke and ends up exactly that, bereft of security, cast further into the role of helpless child.

In contrast to Lear, Kent emerges as the adult, offering gifts without expecting a return, secure in his motivations and sense of justice even as the impetuous child Lear

threatens his life. Kent can distinguish powerful from powerless giving. Forseeing that Lear will receive nothing from his daughters in exchange for his kingdom and nothing from France for literally giving away Cordelia, he wisely implores, "Revoke thy gift" (1.1.163), only to incur Lear's wrath. In the tirade he directs at Kent, Lear makes clear how his best advisor's criticism of the wisdom of his "gift"-- both his kingdom and youngest-- shakes the foundations of his sense of power:

That thou hast sought to make us break our vow,
Which we durst never yet, and with strain'd pride
To come betwixt our sentence and our power,
Which nor our nature nor our place can bear,
Our potency made good, take thy reward. (1.1.167-71)

Lear, like a child, understands his power as derived from his gift. A threat to the integrity of his gift constitutes a threat to the integrity of his power. At stake for Lear is fundamental security.

Cordelia represents Lear's forbidden oedipal object-choice, and the question of father-daughter incest becomes conflated with that of mother-son. Having failed to safeguard Cordelia's succor, and the mistake he has made in banishing Cordelia exacerbated by Kent's insubordination and too enormous to be consciously acknowledged, the easily self-deluded Lear, who, as Goneril attests, "hath ever but slenderly known himself" displaces his child-like need for nurture from Cordelia onto her sisters (1.1.292-3). His quest for security plays itself out as a childish assertion of will for its own sake, as in Goneril's account of how he "upbraids us / On every trifle" (1.3.7-8). But, in Goneril first, Lear finds no replacement for his original forbidden oedipal object-choice, Cordelia. In response to his efforts to confirm

his ongoing monarchical potency and license, Goneril emerges as the dispenser of maternal discipline not affection: “Old fools are babes again, and must be us’d / With checks as flatteries, when they are seen abus’d” (1.3.20-1). When we first see Lear after Scene 1, her complaints about his behavior are substantiated. Lear rudely orders the servants about and demands instant gratification-- “Let me not stay a jot for dinner: go, get it ready”-- testing his powers and expecting the world to revolve around him (1.4.8).

Lear’s original conflation of daughter and mother roles in Cordelia continues in his attitude towards Goneril and Regan, as confirmed by the Fool. When Lear chides the Fool for his lyrical insubordination, the Fool throws it back in his face, attributing his cutting use of song to Lear’s casting of his daughters in the role of mother. Most importantly, he forecasts their punitive brand of maternity.

I have used it, Nuncle, e’er since thou madst thy
daughters thy mothers; for when thou gav’st them
the rod and putt’st down thine own breeches,

Then they for sudden joy did weep,

And I for sorrow sung,

That such a king should play bo-peep,

And go the fools among. (1.4.168-74)

The Fool offers an eroticized image of Lear masochistically imploring his daughters to deal him punitive blows to his bare bottom as they revel in sadistic joy. Rather than eradicating Lear’s insecurity, they emasculate their “bo-peep”- playing father. With these “mothers,” who previously offered hyperbolic love and sexual innuendo, entertaining their father’s

whims with effusive and suggestive speeches, Lear's need to confirm his "potency" and security becomes infused with thoughts of sexual gratification, as in the oedipal conflict.

When Goneril won't entertain His Majesty, the Baby, and ultimately threatens to dismiss the riotous knights that give Lear his sense of power and dignity, Lear curses her motherhood:

Hear, Nature, hear! dear Goddess, hear!
Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful!
Into her womb convey sterility!
Dry up her organs of increase,
And from her derogate body never spring
A babe to honour her! (1.4.273-9)

As with Cordelia in the first scene, if he can't have her (this time as a mother), then he wants to render her ineligible to fulfill the role for others. His attack is sexual in nature but still focuses on her maternity. Still consistent with his oedipal role, Lear understands Goneril's refusal to meet his demands in the terms of sexual rejection. Crying, "perforce," he expresses his shame that she "hast power to shake [his] manhood" (1.4.295-6).

In accordance with Freudian theory, Lear's inappropriate desire (for Cordelia, that is, a desire which he unsuccessfully tries to gratify through the surrogate Goneril) results in the experience of "psychical impotence" which counts among its causes "incestuous fixation... which has never been surmounted" (V. 11, 180):

He now becomes aware that it is some feature of the sexual object
which gives rise to the inhibition of his male potency, and sometimes
he reports that he has a feeling of an obstacle inside him, the sensation

of a counter-will which successfully interferes with his conscious intention. (V. 11, 179)

Goneril's rejection, followed by discovery of Kent's punishment in the stocks at the hands of Regan, precipitates in Lear the experience of a "counter-will," figured as the wandering womb of hysteria, a woman's disease and thus a certain threat to male potency:

O! how this mother swells up toward my heart;

Hysterica passio! down, thou climbing sorrow!

Thy element's below. (2.4.54-6)

In Shakespeare's England, Lear's self-diagnosed malady, *hysterica passio*, afflicted mostly widows and unmarried women. A woman's womb began to wander as a result of unexercised sexuality which eventually caused suffering in mind as well as body: "Womb hysteria . . . is therefore an immoderate and unbridled desire to copulate, so strong and unquenchable that the woman appears mad and delirious as a result of this excessive and insatiable appetite" (Aughterson 53). In Lear, such a disease signifies several dysfunctionalities: his sense of the compromised masculinity (beginning with his lack of a spouse and male heir) that allowed Goneril to "shake his manhood," his inability to regulate his own sexual urges, and his identification with a threatening feminine principle. As Lear feels penetrated by the disease of unfulfilled sexuality, his medical condition recalls the chastisement the Fool buries in the riddle of the snail who wisely keeps his house "to put's head in; not to give it away to his daughters, and leave his horns without a case" (1.5.29-30). His daughters' rejection has somehow left Lear with his "horns" exposed.

Lear bemoans his suffering of this choking disease as he goes from the home of one daughter to the next in search of the love of their original declarations. Lear's fear in approaching Regan similarly further aggravates his "womb," which he experiences at the site

of passion and feeling: "O me! my heart, my rising heart! but, down!" (2.4.118). Although guidebooks offering home remedies for women's ills included medicinal treatments "against the suffocation of the matrix, or fits of the mother," they suggested advice like that in Sarah Jinnings 1659 almanac for the most effective remedy: "If the patient be a maid, a husband is the best medicine, if she can get one" (Aughterson 128). Such a pre-scripted cure foregrounds the social pragmatism of the disease which recalls Boehrer's same point about incest ("*whatever else it is or does, it is a means of self-promotion and self-defense*"). The disease promotes the patriarchy's interest in women needing men. The significance of Lear's feminine affliction emerges from the disease's historical reality as an inducement to marry, to fall into line socially, to avoid the dishonorable fulfillment of otherwise irreparably indecent desires to fornicate. Winifred Frazer understands Lear's ailment as a sign that the king "feels himself threatened by love for his mother-daughter," Cordelia (270). His love is threatening because it seems impossible to attain and evokes oedipal guilt. Lear's fantasy of *hysterica passio* (and it is necessarily a fantasy) is one of sexual consummation-- the need for sexual consummation and the feeling of being consumed by sexuality both in his mind and in his body. In love's connection to a physically and psychologically threatening force, Shakespeare plants the first image of a love-death fantasy which will resound at crucial moments throughout the play to culminate in the central image of the final scene.

Tellingly, Lear suffers the pathologies of abstention (sexual frustration) and promiscuity (sexual guilt) simultaneously, the logical manifestation of unconscious, illicit desire driven inwards. The realization that he cannot undo his daughters' filial relationship to him (and thus the forbidden aspect of his desire) leads him to envision his surrogate love-object, Goneril, as embodying the symptoms of the "foul disease" (1.1.163) of sexual guilt, the sign of past prostitution. He objectifies Goneril as a symptom of syphilis (another cause

of physical impotence), which also causes madness in the vein of Lear's experiences on the heath:

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. But I'll not chide thee;
Let shame come when it will, I do not call it. (2.4.219-24)

In chastising Goneril, Lear conjures her as a symptom of his own sin, in the face of which guilt and shame he is at the same time a victim.

This eruption of the syphilitic theme resonates with the Fool's earlier prediction: "But for all this thou shalt have as many dolours for thy daughters as thou canst tell in a year" (2.4.52-3). "Dolours," with its connotation of venereal disease, puns on "dollars," evoking Lear as pander in the sex trade of his daughters, an image that also recalls the commodified wedding ritual of the first scene. "Telling dolours" also denotes counting and here suggests that Lear himself will suffer, not merely from their ingratitude, but as a result of a syphilitic, transgressive intercourse with them. At a later moment, reveling in his (over-professed) confidence of kingly impunity, he implies his own guilt of just such an act: "No, they cannot touch me for coining; I am the king himself" (4.6.83-4). "Coining" also refers to commodified sexual intercourse, which left one prone to the ravages of syphilis. In *Measure for Measure*, two gentlemen and Lucio quip on "dolours" and "dollars" as the price of diseases purchased from Mistress Overdone. Lucio adds "A French crown more" (1.2.43) glossed as meaning both "a coin" and "a syphilitic sore" (Morrison 50). Pervasive innuendo

suggests that Lear has engaged in a wide-range of sexual transgression-- that he has both prostituted himself and others-- yet, no specific act is apparent.

While Lear feels punished without reason, his daughters demonstrate one element of the "curiosity of nations"-- hypocrisy-- using the tyranny of reason to punish him further. When Regan joins her sister in the elimination of Lear's train on the basis of profligacy, Lear sees her as forcing him into a bestial existence (2.4.264-65). He condemns the injustice of her inconsistency specifically in terms of her promiscuity:

O! Reason not the need . . .

. . . . Thou art a lady;

If only to go warm were gorgeous,

Why, nature needs not what thou gorgeous wear'st,

Which scarcely keeps thee warm. (2.4.262-8)

Regan exercises general promiscuity without regard for reason; why then does she invoke reason to refuse Lear's promiscuity or to deny her own promiscuity to Lear? Regan (like Cordelia and Goneril before her) denies fulfillment of Lear's needs, though she and Goneril have led him on, not least of all with the promiscuity of their speeches, additional justification, perhaps, for his later assertion that he is "More sinn'd against than sinning" (3.2.60).

Within the widespread hypocrisy and lust around him, the linear bestowal of the sins of the fathers haunts Lear despite his guilt of transgressive thoughts rather than deeds. The incest prohibition itself derives its power from the "slippery slope"-style fear that the psychological will become physical-- that one who harbors socially illicit thoughts will act on them. And when it comes to Lear's *fear* of incest insinuations, the psychological does become physical. His sensation and experience of impotence contribute to mounting insinuations of

prior incest. Lear's syphilitic suffering, aptly-- in his case-- nicknamed the "disease of France" (Morrison 51), emerges as the "plague of custom."

Lear first encounters the "unspeakable" offence of incest when he finds himself unable to articulate any self-defense against France's allegation that his affection for Cordelia must be tainted. The sexual implications of incest, as opposed to exogamy, are invoked and color Lear's "darker purpose" irrevocably, adding the weight of the prohibition to the other forces that spur his physical, emotional and mental deterioration. Lear's subsequent feelings of guilt result in large part from the taboos' tendency to "promote precisely the feelings they aim to inhibit" (Fox 19). The youngest child understands the temptation of the forbidden, even in thoughts. Lear suffers from the vertigo of incest's inherent temptation compounded by the suggestion that he has broken it. Twitchell identifies the real victims of incest as "the ones who are exposed." Like a victim rather than a perpetrator, Lear's shame is a result of exposure itself, "shame" that is "not natural guilt, but rather the effects of social banishment" (16). On the strength of a logical fallacy that confuses cause and effect, this social (and burgeoning self-) censure leads to "incestuous" fantasies in Lear. Within the play, Lear's breach of social law sparks insinuations of incest, which, once planted in the king's mind, become fueled by the maelstrom of forbidden sexuality that surrounds him. As in the case of Regan's dress, politics, it seems, governs promiscuity and sexuality, a lesson later emphasized on the heath.

As Goneril then Regan cross him, Lear learns that he cannot control divisions and separations. The lesson of his failure at political division runs parallel to a lesson about his inability to distinguish father-daughter relationships from those of husband and wife, mother and son. No more than he can successfully separate himself from his role as monarch can he separate himself from the expectation of his daughters' nursery. The impulse to divide the

kingdom and the injunction to divide, to separate one's daughter away from the paternal realm into the domain of another, have rendered Lear impotent. Faced with the loss of all potential mothers, Lear cries "women's weapons, water-drops" (2.4.275). The storm grows out of his tears, physically manifesting his impotence on the level of the natural world. Lear's curse on Goneril becomes expanded to the reproductive capacities of the whole world, which he commands the thunder to destroy: "Strike flat the thick rotundity of the world! / Crack Nature's moulds, all germens spill at once (3.2.7-8). Along with Lear, we come to understand that his potency, sexual and political, was located in his position as monarch. With the division of the kingdom, Lear has lost the political power-- and thus sexual potency-- that gave him sovereignty over, among other domains, his daughters' promiscuous love. With the separation of Cordelia from "her father's heart," Lear has also lost heartfelt, nurturing love. In Cordelia's absence, which continues until Act 4, Scene 4, Lear's incestuous fixation reveals itself in feelings of hysteria, impotence, sexual inadequacy, and lust that cannot be gratified in a world of unregulated sexuality.

In a crucial gesture amidst this sexual chaos, Lear aligns himself with Edmund's defense of the so-called illegitimate in face of the unfeeling "curiosity of nations," a phrase G. L. Kittredge interprets as "[t]he nice distinctions which the laws of nations make in defiance of nature and common sense" (qtd in Muir's edition). In an imaginary pardoning of "Adultery," the import of which is emphasized and interrogated on its own line of text (4.6.110), Lear excuses the perpetrator because he sees adultery as virtually unavoidable, with sexual transgression and general carnality pervading the natural world:

Adultery?

Thou shalt not die: die for adultery! No:

The wren goes to't, and the small gilded fly

Does lecher in my sight.

Let copulation thrive...

... To't, Luxury, pell-mell!

For I lack soldiers. (4.6.110-17)

Like Edmund, Lear hails Nature as his goddess, the determiner of legitimacy.

Punishing adultery, according to Lear's observations and newly expanded perspective, would constitute precisely "a defiance of nature and common sense." If it occurs throughout the animal kingdom, then unregulated coupling must be legitimate and deserving of legal impunity; it would follow that Edmund is right to scorn the "nice" laws that deny his legitimacy in the face of common sense.

Appreciating the saliency of Lear's defense of adultery requires recognition of Lear's love for Cordelia as an adulterous love, one that would take her from her husband. From the start, the defining characteristic of Lear's love for his daughter has been the urgent need to keep her from Burgundy and France; in justifying Gloucester's crime, Lear partially accepts his own transgressions. Understanding the close identification of adultery with incest, an equation commonly noted in incest theory (i.e. Fox and Neumann), further underscores the relevance of Edmund's initial discussion of social obstacles to Lear's particular illegitimacy. In vindicating the adulterer, Lear echoes Edmund's sense of the injustice of customary notions of adultery and bastardy, and he confirms the superiority of vitality and naturalness as criteria for legitimacy.

In a departure from the spirit of the speech that arouses Edmund to a tumescent battle cry, Lear's call-to-arms seems to confirm his lack of virulence. In his visions of lust, enjoyed by the lowliest creatures, he must be content to participate vicariously because he lacks the

means to partake. And, here, “soldiers” seems to refer to those under his command, a role lately played by his daughters, whose absence leaves him unpartnered in the orgy he envisions. Despite, or perhaps because of, his want of sexual means, a certain element of celebration characterizes Lear’s hailing of a sexual free-for-all. His impotence is redeeming as he cannot be implicated in the sin of unlawful copulation. Temporarily reclaiming monarchical power and safe from personal guilt, Lear condemns the unnatural double standard governing sexual freedom.

To Lear, women fatally embody this double standard in the geography of their bodies. Immediately juxtaposed with Lear’s expression of impotence in the midst of widespread copulation is his famous condemnation of women as deceptive, devouring, annihilating sexual creatures hiding animalistic lust behind the face of virtue. He conceives of women as discretely embodying both heaven and hell:

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! pah, pah! (4.6.117-28)

In the terms of a Freudian incest fixation, in which Lear seems bound, he separates the “whole sphere of love” into discrete categories-- that which is worthy of love is not worthy of desire and vice versa. Lear envisions women as physically divided between halves deserving “sacred and profane (or animal) love” (*Sexuality* 183). Much like his curse on nature’s reproductive powers recalled his curse on Goneril’s fertility, Lear’s debasement of women in general recalls his criticism of the inconsistency between Regan’s supposed reason and her

promiscuous dress; here, this binary shifts to the opposition of the sacred and profane. In a break from Freud's model, however, he invokes all women as sites of cruel temptation where the triggers of love and desire are fused in a deceitful contradiction leading to consumption.

Through this bout of misogyny, "the condition of debasement is fulfilled," leading to a re-invigorated "sensuality . . . sexual capacities and a high degree of pleasure" (*Sexuality* 183). Lear's tirade proves cathartic, allowing him a momentary sense of knightly sexual potency expressed in a sensuous, pleasurable fantasy of fulfilling oedipal revenge by sneaking up on his sons-in-law on a felt-shod horse and killing them all in an ambush:

It were a delicate stratagem to shoe
A troop of horse with felt; I'll put it in proof,
And when I have stol'n upon these son-in-laws,
Then kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill. (4.6.181-85)

Lear ultimately does succeed in displacing his son-in-law, France, owing largely to Cordelia's complicity.

Cordelia becomes physically separated from her husband in the service of her father, exposing her own Freudian ailments. Her growth and independence arrested at a crucial stage, her traumatic betrothal, Cordelia is one among those who "never got over their parents' authority and have withdrawn their affection from them either very incompletely or not at all." She resembles the girls who

. . . to the delight of their parents, have persisted in all their childish love far beyond puberty . . . and who in their later marriage lack the capacity to give their husbands what is due to them . . . We learn from this that sexual love and what appears to be non-sexual love for parents are fed from the same sources (*Sexuality* 93).

In the Freudian tradition, Cordelia's offer to France of half her love is a direct result of undiminished love for Lear which, though "non-sexual," feeds on the love "due a husband." Notably, Freud defuses the sexuality of incest, insofar as it feeds on non-sexual love, while emphasizing its close relationship to adultery.

In the battle, Cordelia is recast as Queen to her father's King. Significantly, France's troops are inadequate for victory. Consistent with the rules of reciprocity, in accepting Cordelia as "herself a dowry," France has incurred no debt to Lear and sends troops only out of pity for Cordelia, who acts solely in the interests of Lear and her love for him:

O dear father!

It is thy business that I go about;

Therefore great France

My mourning and importun'd tears hath pitied.

No blown ambition doth our arms incite,

But love, dear love, and our ag'd father's right. (4.4.23-28)

That Cordelia persists in childish "love, dear love" and concern for "our ag'd father's right" seems clear; that Lear revels in her return becomes self-evident. Cordelia separates herself from her husband for the sole purpose of returning to care for her father. Boose understands this return as a result of the prior failure of the first scene's quasi-marriage ceremony to enact her ritual severance from Lear. The exogamy imperfectly enacted in Act 1, Scene 1 is fully undone, consummating that original violation of the incest prohibition. Dramatizing the relationship between incest and adultery, France is symbolically displaced by Lear who, with Cordelia, leads the forces in the battle for the restoration of his kingdom.

I have two luxuries to brood over in my walks, your Loveliness and the hour of my death. O that I could have possession of them both in the same minute. I hate the world: it batters too much the wings of my self-will, and would I could take a sweet poison from your lips to send me out of it.

-- John Keats (in a letter to his lover Fanny)

V. The Reunion: “Judicious Punishment”

Lear’s relationship with Cordelia, as I have shown thus far, reflects a failure to comply with the rules of the incest prohibition as defined by the social customs governing exogamy and as evidenced by Lear’s failure to overcome an oedipal need for a mother’s exclusive love, a failure accommodated by Cordelia upon her return. Cordelia’s dedication to her father and Lear’s desire for his daughter’s exclusive nurture approximate spousal love, precluding a husband for Cordelia who fills the vacant role of wife to Lear. Although no explicitly sexual desire characterizes the pair’s love for one another, it is adulterous in its exclusion of France; the father-daughter relationship of the participants in this adulterous love renders it incestuous. Building on the convergence of adultery and incest in this chapter, I demonstrate how Lear and Cordelia’s ultimate punishment reflects and reveals the nature of their transgression. Although Edmund vindicates the social illegitimacy of the adultery, the villainy that attends his bastardy reflects his father’s act as a legacy of sin. I will argue that Lear and Cordelia’s journey towards destruction, too, reflects the ramifications of adultery and the contagious threat to the child of the father’s sins.

That the final scene of *Lear* comprises “a terrible desolation . . . an effect surpassing anything else of its kind, in Shakespeare or in any other writer,” meets with critics’ and

readers' seemingly unanimous agreement (Bloom 66). In its "intimations of a numinous oneness and . . . threat of annihilation," Lear and Cordelia's shared downfall, a paradox of separation and union, order and chaos, and life and death, dramatizes what Forker describes as "the abiding mystery of incest" (43). Before examining the final moments of the play, it is necessary to further expose the significance of how the contraries invoked by Forker grow out of the themes of division and separation in *Lear*. The proximity of incest to these motifs finally reveals the appropriateness of Lear and Cordelia's fate, one not without redemption for Lear.

Understanding more fully the significance of the battle's outcome for the King and Queen-- and their subsequent fate-- requires a retracing of the brand of retributive justice developed and executed in *Lear*. Because of the particular way offense determines punishment in the play, the punishment informs an understanding of the transgression. When Lear's will to continuing power first clashes with Goneril's desire to assume the control she's been handed, the self-deposed king questions his own identity, "Does any here know me? This is not Lear . . ." (1.4.223). Failing to recognize himself in the chastised, belittled object of Goneril's scolding, Lear posits that his "discernings / Are lethargied," but, finding no explanatory condition, reasserts his original question rhetorically, only to have the Fool tell him exactly what he is: "Lear's shadow" (1.4.228). In the truth-telling Fool's response, Lear embodies compromised "discernings." Unsuccessful in dividing his kingdom and completely unable to separate himself from Cordelia or divide her love with France, Lear has fully obscured his former identity through his inability to make and control distinctions and divisions. The Fool casts Lear in the image of his own undoing, a literal "gray area," devoid of the crucial lines and divisions that give identity to form.

Lear's delusory belief in his ability to "control the separations, divisions, and differentiations that are entailed in parent-child . . . relationships and in political matters," according to Bennett Simon, lies at the heart of his mad and "megalomaniac contest with the forces of nature"¹² (program). For Lear, the storm is one of clashing contraries, "to-and-fro-conflicting wind and rain" (3.1.11), which he tries to "outstorm." Only when the elements quit their pre-ordained bounds will Lear rest; he "Bids the wind blow the earth into the sea, / Or swell the curled waters above the main / That things might change or cease" (3.1.5-7). Faced with his inability to manage distinctions, he vies for their erasure. In the tempest, Lear experiences the stirring up, confusion, and conflation of distinctions: he revels with mad relish in role-reversal, opposing points of view and the exposure of false virtue. Yet, the very character of the storm, the "tempest in [Lear's] mind" (3.4.12), is born of Lear's guilty impotence and rage at infuriating divisions.

In the image of the tempestuous heavens falling down to earth lies an almost literal loosing of the forces of justice on earth, the judgment of the gods above on those down below. And Lear's personal tempest targets for damnation a crime characterized by the perpetrator's concerted effort to obscure the lines of his own injustice: hypocrisy. Understanding the storm as a force that will expose inconsistencies in seeming and being, he warns all hypocrites that, with the storm, their moment of moral reckoning has arrived:

. . . Tremble, thou wretch,
That hast within thee undivulged crimes,
Unwhipp'd of Justice; hide thee, thou bloody hand,
Thou perjur'd, and thou simular of virtue
That art incestuous . . .

¹² Simon's *Tragic Drama and the Family (Psychoanalytic Studies from Aeschylus to Beckett)*, Yale University

. . . close pent-up guilts

Rive your concealing continents, and cry

These dreadful summoners grace. I am a man

More sinn'd against than sinning. (3.2.51-9)

Lear's speech condemning hypocrisy is itself an act of hypocrisy. Only moments later does the Fool allude to lust as the cause of Lear's tempest-driven homelessness, singing suggestively that "The cod-piece that will house / Before the head has any" must suffer the consequences of putting his sexual appetite first (3.2.27-8). Although he ends his impassioned warning to all hypocritical sinners with the claim that he is himself a victim rather than a perpetrator, his experiences on the heath eventually lead to the disclosure of his own "pent-up guilts" and his fear of being exposed as a "simular of virtue . . .," not least of all regarding his relationship with Cordelia. In *Lear*, the innocent cannot be separated from the guilty, the virtuous from the incestuous; all divisions are false, slippery, and unmanageable. The tempest is a welcome explosion, frankly destroying all semblance of the flimsily constructed divisions between earth and sky, king and fool, man and woman, father and daughter, guilty and innocent. The "high-engender'd battles" of the storm see Lear's personal crisis of faulty distinctions mushroom to a disturbance of the natural order.

As punishment for the sins exposed by the storm, Lear envisions a form of crime-fitting justice featuring self-distribution-- taking a dose of one's own medicine. In restitution for the deplorable conditions his fathering of the state has imposed upon the "poor naked wretches" of the kingdom, he subjects himself to their sufferings, of which he has taken "too little care": "Take physic, Pomp; / Expose thyself to what wretches feel" (3.4.32-4). This

Press is cited in the program of Peter Hall's 1997 production of *King Lear* in London.

brand of justice emerges in earnest when, upon meeting Edgar in disguise, he fantasizes that only his daughters could have brought Tom O'Bedlam to such a low state:

Is it the fashion that discarded fathers
Should have thus little mercy on their flesh?
Judicious punishment! 'twas this flesh begot
Those pelican daughters. (3.4.71-4)

A confusion and fusion of "flesh" characterizes the above lines as father and daughters become conflated in one "flesh." "Their flesh" refers to the fathers' human, vulnerable bodies at the same time it refers to the fathers' children, leaving ambiguous the ownership of the wanting mercy. The older daughters have shown little mercy on their father's flesh by leaving him out in the tempest; the father has shown his own flesh little mercy, clearly, in the case of Cordelia. The circularity of Lear's question leads logically to the declaration, "Judicious punishment!".

The image of "pelican daughters" requires special attention. As pelican children grow, the story goes, they bite their parents only to be killed by the mother. But, on the third day, the mother draws her own blood, which revives the children.¹³ While Lear seems to refer to his older daughters, Kahn points out that the image of the pelican echoes Lear's renunciation of Cordelia as his daughter. In his vow, to welcome her with less warmth than he would "The barbarous Scythian, / Or he that makes his generation messes / To gorge his appetite" (1.1.116-18), Lear begins regressing to the "primitive, infantile modes of thinking" of his madness. "When Cordelia doesn't feed him with love, he thinks angrily of eating *her*" (Kahn 41-2).

¹³ References to the pelican myth come from the editor's notes which cite Wright's quoting of *Batman upon Bartholome*, ed. 1582

Kahn aptly sees this story as shedding light on the “close identification between parent and child, which possess Lear’s mind.” As played out in the *Lear* tale, the corresponding roles for children and parents are confused. And, as much as Lear is an overly loving pelican father, it soon becomes clear that, in her presumed then assumed role as nurturer, Cordelia plays pelican mother to Lear’s pelican father-son roles. As a “pelican” daughter, Cordelia fits most closely the pelican *mother* role as it is she who, ultimately arriving to offer her “kind nursery,” suffers and then dies in her maternal efforts to redeem and revive her father-son, Lear.

The essential text of the pelican tale as Shakespeare may have encountered it in the contemporary story lies in the first sentence: “The Pellican loueth too much her children.” Lear feels himself a pelican father in this moment of his anger, because he has “loved” his older daughters too much in ceding power to them, yes, but also because of his excessive love for Cordelia. In glossing the lines above, Green quotes Augustine’s Confessions, “By my own sin Thou didst justly punish me. For it is even as Thou hast appointed, that every inordinate affection should bring its own punishment.”¹⁴ For Lear, “inordinate affection” most clearly applies to the consuming love and need for Cordelia that leaves Lear with incestuous guilt. In Edgar’s later statement, “The Gods are just, and of our pleasant vices / Make instruments to plague us” (5.3.169-70), “judicious punishment” is given an explicitly sexual context-- Gloucester’s “just” punishment for adultery.

What begins as a painfully resigned observation of judicious punishment becomes a call for the same in Lear’s tirade against “Authority,” his own defining image from Act 1. Kent confirms this identity when he attributes his desire to serve Lear to the “Authority” inherent in his countenance (1.4.27-30). Immediately after condemning women’s hypocrisy

¹⁴ Also cited in Muir’s edition.

in masking insatiable, consuming lust in virtue, Lear locates hypocrisy in “The great image of Authority” (4.6.156). If Lear is the hypocrite, his condemnation of women’s hypocritical appearance of virtue places Lear in the role of “simular of virtue” like the “simular of virtue that art incestuous” of his first denunciation of hypocrisy. Having named himself as the object of his own censure, he returns to the image of the whore to condemn the man who punishes (while wanting) her: “Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thine own back; / Thou hotly lusts to use her in that kind / For which thou whipp’st her” (4.6.159-61). Frazer understands these lines as conjuring “a picture in which the ‘image of authority’ gets a sadistic pleasure from the act of punishment, all the while lusting for the flesh of the condemned” (272). The self-righteous misogynist acts with impunity because “Ribes and furr’d gowns hide all”; one need only “Plate sin with gold, / And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks” (4.6.163-4). Stripped of his own kingly trappings, Lear, too, emerges as just such a hypocrite. In addition to implicitly condemning his own misogynous speech of moments before, the image offers an exaggerated picture of Lear’s treatment of Cordelia. Lear cast off Cordelia all the while he wanted desperately to keep her to himself. He insinuated that she had committed shameful acts when only his own inordinate love compelled him to prevent her departure. When, in lieu of a dowry, she was forced to sell herself, the “great King” France (1.1.207) became the “hot-blooded” (2.4.210) usurper of Lear’s intended role. Lear’s virile fantasy of killing his sons-in-law follows hard on the heels of his defense of the “whore” and condemnation of the man who issues unjust and inordinate punishment that he himself deserves.

Having effectively riven the concealing continents of his own “pent-up guilts,” Lear further experiences a renewed sense of sexual vigor, inspired by the promise of Cordelia’s Gentlemen, that he “shall have any thing,” a promise that provides hope for the fulfillment of

his original desire for Cordelia. If he can have “any thing,” then he will not have to share her; he can keep her whole love to himself:

Lear. No seconds? all myself?

Why this would make a man a man of salt,

To use his eyes for garden water-pots,

Ay, and laying autumn’s dust. I will die bravely,

Like a smug bridegroom. What! I will be jovial:

Come, come; I am a king, masters, know you that?

Gent. You are a royal one, and we obey you.

Lear. Then there’s life in’t. Come and you get it, you

shall get it by running. Sa, sa, sa, sa. (4.6.193-200)

When we last see Lear on the heath, he enjoys a last burst of sexual vigor and, in madness, fantasizes that he will “Die bravely, like a smug bridegroom.” Lear imagines his brave death in the context of marital consummation, in the “little death” of orgasm. It is “brave” both in that it is a real and final confrontation with mortality and in that he imagines it will be in the midst of committing the very sin for which he feels himself condemned. Frazer explains Lear’s subconscious desire as for the “double death” of a sexual demise: “The line reveals the king’s feeling of guilt and love at the same moment, for ironically he fears on a conscious level that he will be punished by death, whereas he senses subconsciously that it is as Cordelia’s bridegroom that he desires to die” (268).

Lear’s guilty fantasy of dying like a bridegroom recalls the nightmarish sexual death riddling his misogynist tirade in Act 4. In that speech, Lear associates “stench” and “consumption” at the site of the “sulphurous pit” with the smell of mortality on his hand. This sexual death further recalls his fantasies of contagion, too, as he must wipe his hand so as

not to pass the sexual contagion to Gloucester via the latter's kiss. Envisioning Gloucester as the bearer of love-as-death in an earlier scene, Lear resists death by refusing love: "No, do thy worst, blind Cupid; I'll not love" (4.6.136). To love is to die, to refuse love is to resist mortality.

Starting with their reunion, Lear and Cordelia move through the possibility of an ideal society that enables a richer brand of father-daughter love back to the world of destructive carnality in which a sanctioned marriage between a father and daughter can only take place in death. After the violent split of Act 1, Scene 1, we do not see Lear and Cordelia together again until the last scene in Act 4. When Cordelia reappears in Act 4, she does so as the embodiment of the feminine principle, characterized by willingness to love and the embracement of opposites. The mistress of paradox, she reintroduces sovereignty over clashing contraries; she is the counterbalance of Lear. Even before Cordelia reappears, we hear about her from the Gentleman, who marvels at her management of grief. In describing how news of her father moved her, the Gentleman recounts containment and a celestial reconciliation of opposites:

Not to a rage; patience and sorrow strove
Who should express her goodliest. You have seen
Sunshine and rain at once; her smiles and tears
Were like, a better way . . .
.
Faith, once or twice she heav'd the name of 'father'
Pantingly forth, as if it press'd her heart . . .
....

. . . There she shook

The holy water from her heavenly eyes,
And clamour moisten'd, then away she started
To deal with grief alone. (4.3.16-32)

Most significantly, the Gentleman contextualizes her containment in terms of matriarchal control: "it seem'd she was a queen / Over her passion; who, most rebel-like, / Sought to be king o'er her" (4.3.13-15). Juxtaposed with her father's bipolar madness, Cordelia, in grief, is grace itself. In Cordelia, the tempest of Lear's mind becomes the miracle of sunshine and rain at once. Her tears are literally "holy water." Her "patience and sorrow" are the analog of Lear's "sovereign," "burning shame" (4.3.42,46). Only one flaw mars Cordelia's composure: the weight of her father on her heart. The image of her breathlessly uttering the name of 'father' is striking. More than as if, in empathy, she shares the affliction of the "climbing sorrow" that threatens to smother him, it seems that, for her, the climbing sorrow is Lear himself pressing on her heart, taking her breath away, repressed but dangerously threatening to emerge, needing to be contained.

Cordelia's first action towards the man who disowned and disinherited her is a fairy-tale style restorative kiss:

O my dear father! Restoration hang
Thy medicine on my lips, and let this kiss
Repair those violent harms that my two sisters
Have in thy reverence made! (4.7.26-9)

For the father-daughter fairy-tale lovers, however, this kiss signifies the restoration not of health but of an illicit alliance. "Thy medicine," as *Lear's* medicine, (as in "a dose of your own medicine"), refers all at once to punishment, cause, and cure. Restoration (of Cordelia to

Lear) hangs its medicine (in the sense of punishment) on Cordelia's lips-- as agent of the kiss, she becomes symbolically contaminated by the sin-ridden desires of her father. Cordelia is both bestowing a curative kiss on Lear and, in the same action, partaking of the cause of Lear's disturbed state, the sin of forbidden love for which she, too, will be punished as promised in Exodus 20:5. A Derridean pharmakon, the kiss foreshadows Cordelia's lips as the ultimate site of cause, punishment, and cure for Lear's love of his daughter.

Cordelia's first effort is to reinstate her father's paternal relationship to her as evidenced by her request for benediction (4.7.57-9) but Lear kneels to ask her forgiveness, an action that initiates the equalization of their relationship by undoing the strict father-daughter hierarchy previously observed. Lear's first lucid assertion appropriately acknowledges his relationship to Cordelia: "Do not laugh at me; / For, as I am a man, I think this lady / To be my child Cordelia (4.7.68-70). Many critics read this statement as proof of Lear's coming to terms with his daughter as both his child and an individual, an adult woman whose independent status does not compromise his masculinity, his recovery from the threat of incest, which conflates and confuses these aspects of identity. The construction of the sentence, however, emphasizes the woman Cordelia's role as Lear's child, an identity which she both confirms and undoes in her response: "And so I am, I am" (4.7.70). The doubling of the "I" suggests both self-possession and possession by Lear.

Curiously, Lear seems to ignore Cordelia's words and gestures of reconciliation and forgiveness. He prefers instead to extract further assurance of her continuing love by alleging her lack of love and his own willingness to make amends by fatally punishing himself: "If you have poison for me, I will drink it" (4.7.72). The "poison" of Lear's will to punishment recalls the medicine passed between the lips of Lear and Cordelia in the name of restoration. Cordelia's previous administration of her/Lear's medicine with her lips mingles with Lear's

desire for the medicine of poison bearing an image of a restorative poison that Lear will take from the lips of Cordelia.

The mythical paradox of love-as-death for the father-daughter pair is preceded by the double paradox of a luxuriously mundane freedom in captivity. Facing imprisonment with Cordelia as the chance he has been waiting for, Lear authors a vision of conjugal bliss with his daughter:

No, no, no, no! 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, and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too,
Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out;
And take upon's the mystery of things,
As if we were Gods' spies: and we'll wear out,
In a wall'd prison, packs and sects of great ones
That ebb and flow by th'moon. (5.3.8-19)

Fantasizing about a life in isolation with Cordelia, Lear contemplates captivity with nothing short of joy. For him, paradoxically, the whole world will open up within the "wall'd prison" where he will gossip on a local level as he experiences the cosmos. In Lear's vision, harmony governs contraries, from the mundane "who's in, who's out" to the "ebb and flow" of the

cosmic order. With its affable accommodation of divisions, Lear's fantasy reflects a deliberate valorization of "the mystery of things" over the "the curiosity of nations."

It is impossible to assign Cordelia any definite emotional response to Lear's fantasy. She never speaks again. Only insofar as Lear tells her "Wipe thine eyes" can we guess that she is crying as he reveals his hopes (5.3.23). What kind of love, what kind of relationship does Lear portray in his fantasy? Familial love? Romantic love? Conjugal love? Incestuous love? And what kind of tears does Cordelia cry in response? Joy? Pity? Sorrow? Horror? The impossibility of answering these questions outside of a staging of the play points up the brilliance of the work as a dramatic piece. The reader can be assured only of Lear's desire to monopolize Cordelia's attention, to be with her at the center of a world constructed from their joint perspective, "We two alone" constituting the main text of the passage. The reality of prison falls to the fantasy of seclusion. Lear constructs a scene, not of prison life, but of an alternate world, a world in which father-daughter relationships are reciprocal and inclusive of play, religion, education, conversation, speculation, and a sense of unity in the face of others. And there are other people in the fantasy, but they do not preclude the possibility of "two alone."

To me, this speech suggests a legitimate alternative to illicit father-daughter intimacy. As Kahn describes, "Parent and child are equal, the gestures of deference that ordinarily denote patriarchal authority now transformed into signs of reciprocal love" (48). I find it curious that so many critics understand this particular outpouring as the confirmation of Lear's incestuous desire for his daughter. Frazer, for example, states: "Since Freud's analysis of *King Lear*, it has been recognized that the old king's love for his youngest daughter surpasses what fatherly love should be and that the birds-in-the-cage speech is more like that of a bridegroom to his love than of a father to a daughter," a speech which, for her, recalls the

erotic death of the “smug bridegroom” line (268). Frazer’s understanding of the birds-in-the-cage speech finds partial validation in the work of such critics as Blechner: “Are they concerned with the political ramifications or the indignities of imprisonment? No. Instead, they revel in a fantasy of two lovers. They will make believe they are King and Queen” (318). I don’t read the same note of mutuality that Blechner picks up, especially as Cordelia has no scripted reaction or further lines in the play. Nor do I see a fantasy of two “lovers” specifically. To me, while Lear’s speech constructs a world of togetherness in isolation, it is most notable for the *absence* of sexual allusion. In Lear’s image of conjugal bliss, even the butterflies are “gilded.”

The part of Frazer’s statement more difficult to validate is her universalized notion of “what a father’s love should be.” This moment is one that asks us very carefully to double check our definition of incest, or whatever measure of appropriateness we may apply to a father-daughter relationship. There is nothing in the fantasy that is necessarily wrong or inappropriate or which could not have had a rightful place in their lives up until Cordelia’s departure. Equal inclusion of Cordelia in the fantasy replaces Lear’s prior narcissism and his desire to have her as a possession. Rather than trying to impose his will subversively, Lear articulates his wishes. Thrown into relief by Lear’s vicious attacks on sexuality and his own guilt-ridden fantasies, the birds-in-the-cage speech stands out as the epitome of sexless conjugality.

Cordelia’s close correspondence to the Fool suggests that only what Edmund calls “the plague of custom” stands in the way of her sharing a rich, mutually rewarding relationship with Lear. The Fool, who has often been played by the same actor playing Cordelia, (even perhaps, as it has been argued by Edith Sitwell and others, during Shakespeare’s day), allows an expansion of Cordelia’s character beyond the flat ideal

daughter, “the purest arch of love” (Cavell 295), which she seems to be in the final scenes; it gives Cordelia’s character continuity of possibility. When Cordelia all of a sudden reappears, as quickly as the Fool has disappeared, the audience is left with the impression that she has been there all along because the Fool, who derives the soul of his identity from the aspects of Cordelia that resonate in him, acts as surrogate in her absence. Because the Fool is a male (or perhaps androgynous) version of Cordelia, he can engage Lear in asking questions, using the catechismal method and conversational style denied to father-daughter pairs by patriarchal custom. Lear adopts this behavior, returning and responding to the Fool’s questions in the spirit of his request, “No lad; teach me” (1.4.136). As he warms to sharing the status of “fool” with his jester, Lear learns through the Fool the truth of his deep love for Cordelia and the hypocrisy of his punishment of her. Under the Fool’s faithful tutelage, Lear learns to crave communication with Cordelia on equal, companionate terms; his fantasy of capture entails little more than just that. In the Lear-Fool coupling we glimpse the arrested potential of Lear and Cordelia’s relationship.

Perhaps the most endearing quality of Lear’s fantasy is what at first appears to be its remarkably unambitious nature. Yet it is the very lack of ambition that runs counter to the incest prohibition’s imperatives and proves ambitious indeed. Lear and Cordelia share a unique relationship that cannot play itself out within the prescriptive bounds of the given society. On the power of his love for Cordelia, Lear unwittingly pioneers a voyage of discovery which has as its ultimate destination consummation of a relationship which cannot be consumed or enjoyed between the poles of exogamy or incest which frame the otherwise empty possibilities of father-daughter relationships in the world of *King Lear*. In this scene, we are forced to confront a supposed violation of the incest taboo, which manifests itself as potentially beneficial to both parties. We see Lear as forced to want exclusive rights to her

love, to separate her from society. In the world of custom and nation represented in *Lear*, Lear's fantasy can only exist as an ideal. It is a possibility which, introduced, sees no opportunity of fulfillment, as the next time we encounter Cordelia, she is apparently dead in Lear's arms.

In the stage picture of Lear entering with Cordelia dead in his arms (5.3), Lear emerges as the bridegroom carrying the bride across the threshold, prepared to "die bravely" with his beloved. And, as the double meaning of those lines anticipates, life and death commingle throughout the final moments of the play. In his first speech upon re-entering, Lear both confirms and denies Cordelia's death:

I know when one is dead and when one lives;
She's dead as earth. Lend me a looking-glass;
If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,
Why then she lives. (5.3.259-62)

The first of Lear's lines quoted above speaks to the most basic of all distinctions; Lear claims the ability to divide the living from the dead. But his next line calls into question even this primary difference. In comparing Cordelia to the earth, Lear invokes an image not of lifelessness but of a life-producing force, the earth, which produces life and to which life returns in death. His subsequent lines further betray the uncertainty of her death-- Lear believes she may yet live. Moments later, after again declaring her "gone for ever," Lear seems to hear her speak:

Cordelia, Cordelia! Stay a little. Ha!
What is't thou say'st? Her voice was ever soft,
Gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman.

I kill'd the slave that was a-hanging thee. (5.3.270-73)

Lear thinks of his daughter's womanly qualities as he recalls how he killed the man bringing about Cordelia's death. Lear had summoned superhuman strength in killing the last male rival who would come between him and Cordelia. This recollection immediately precipitates a memory of youthful potency just as quickly replaced by the reality of old age.

In her death by hanging, Shakespeare brings Cordelia's suffering for the supposed sins of her father to its logical conclusion. As before, when Cordelia's heart was pressed by the notion of her father, for whom she is consumed, she shows the signs of the disease previously experienced by Lear, who, as in Fox's description of the violator of a taboo, is "really *contagious*" in the fact of his breach (66). Her death mask resembles that of virgins suffering from *hysterica passio*, a disease cured through consummation. One peculiar symptom of the advanced stages of this disease was a death-like trance like that of Juliet, which made it difficult to discern whether a woman was alive or dead.¹⁵ Lear sees in Cordelia's condition hope for remedy and redemption, both for her and for himself; in her love he finds a vehicle of transcendence that melts the most fundamental divisions, as between life and death.

Through the moment of his own death, Lear literally sees the possibilities of both life and death on Cordelia's lips:

And my poor fool is hang'd! No, no, no life!

....

Pray you, undo this button : thank you, Sir.

Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips,

Look there, look there! (5.3.304-10)

¹⁵ In his efforts to determine Cordelia's condition, Lear follows precisely the instructions of early 17th century gynecologist Nicholas Fontanus: "Now to procure an assurance whether the woman be living or dead, hold a

Lear identifies Cordelia with the companion and teacher of his transformative experience in the tempest, the relationship that unfurled new limitations on bonding possibilities for Lear. Lear's "Pray you, undo this button" recalls a moment on the heath, the demand, "Come; unbutton here," of his effort to return to his origins, to imitate Tom O'Bedlam whom he admires as "the thing itself," "unaccommodated man" (3.4.104-7). His desire to unbutton speaks to his own sense of suffocation, both literal and in sympathy with Cordelia. Symbolically exposing his heart and flesh to her, Lear secures proximity to die with and through Cordelia.

From the beginning, Lear expresses his aversion to the notion of dying or living-- in isolation. In his first mention approaching death, he evokes the image of the baby who, unburdened, will be resting on the "kind nursery" of Cordelia. Ultimately, Lear welcomes death. Kent recognizes Lear's desire to be freed from "the rack of this tough world" (5.3.313). Lear assumes the bridegroom role he has feared and longed for, so he "dies bravely," living out his fantasy of "'coming' to death through love" (Frazer 275 and 277). In death, Cordelia becomes bride to her father's bridegroom. The final scenes of *King Lear* take the conjugal idealization of the incestuous and raise it to the level of the sacred where it is characterized by "consummation." In a word, "consummation" encodes the tragic, erotic, and paradoxical nature of Lear and Cordelia's death, referring all at once to death, sexual intercourse (especially towards a completion of marriage), "a condition in which desires, aims, and tendencies are fulfilled," and, through its obsolete French variant, "consumation," the disease, consumption (*OED*). Lear and Cordelia *consume* in death just as they are *consumed* by it. In fulfillment of the unspeakable, choking desire that has pressed his heart,

feather or looking glass to her mouth, if the former stir or the latter be spotted, it is an undoubted sign that she liveth" (Aughterson 64).

Lear surrenders, alone with Cordelia, to the “consumption” he envisioned in the nether regions of virtue.

Like Juliet, Lear seeks poison at the lips of his beloved, the site of Cordelia’s original kiss of restoration whereby the punishment, cause, and cure of their love fused them in an illicit bond.

Poison I see, hath been his timeless end.

O churl! Drunk all and left no friendly drop

To help me after? I will kiss thy lips.

Haply some poison yet doth hang on them

To make me die with a restorative.

....

Thy lips are warm! (5.3.162-66)

We need not guess whether Lear dies believing his daughter alive or dead. Certainly, at Cordelia’s lips, Lear beholds both life and death, a sight by which to “die with a restorative.” The marriage, between Lear and Cordelia, which could not take place at the beginning is consummated immaculately within the ancient paradigm of marriage in death. Lear offers himself to the lips of Cordelia-- where his previous fantasy of sexual devouring meets in the image of his virtuous daughter its sacred counterpart. Lear, like the adulterer Gloucester, dies “Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief” (5.3.197), at the junction of the sacred and the profane.

Conclusion

Lear tries belatedly to author a world in which he might keep to himself what must-- in the society he has created and ruled as patriarch-- necessarily be yielded to others, an incestuously adulterous love that must be "eternally denied to social man" (Levi-Strauss 497). As he is king, his pursuit of such a world, incompatible with society, finds its conclusion in the sterility of the kingdom, war, and the general dissolution of social and natural order. Lear's efforts to safeguard his daughter's whole love leads to accusations and guilt that gives way to illicit fantasies, the fulfillment/eradication of which requires death, both his and that of his beloved. As the only possible consummation of a relationship tainted by incestuous amounts of love, Lear and Cordelia's death reveals the cause and punitive cure for their transgression of customary limitations on father-daughter love. Lear's punishment is "judicious" in that he experiences joy in death as well as grief, an indication of the appropriateness of his marriage in death to his daughter. Grief at the loss of his beloved and the finality of his own death constitute just retribution for Lear's monarchical role in authoring the society that disabled the legitimacy of his love for his daughter, the potential of which Lear imagines too late in his fantasy of a life in captivity with Cordelia. In Lear's joy at the prospect of death, melded as it is with the vision of a vital Cordelia, Shakespeare forces us to confront an old taboo from a new angle. The interplay between the qualitative and quantitative restrictions on familial love in *Lear* reveals how conflation of these distinct prohibitions arrests the potential of father-daughter relationships by forcing them into extremes of proximity and detachment.

In *A Thousand Acres*, Jane Smiley presents the alternative to the reading of expanded legitimacy: the potential of a violent, abusive exploitation of daughters, the horrors of power imbalance and rape that necessarily color any modern discussion of the incest taboo. Asking us to extend our search for truth and “the whole story” to events outside the parameters of the playworld, her “interpretation of the play” (229), a contemporary transposition of the *King Lear* tragedy onto an Iowa farm, justifies, or at least explains, the extreme dreadfulness of Goneril and Regan’s crimes by reconstructing them as the victims of incestuous sexual abuse at the hands of their father.¹⁶

At the root of Smiley’s interpretation lies a notion of modern intrafamilial relationships, one that suggests they have not strayed far from the Renaissance model of possession and control:

For a lot of people, if not all people, the things that make them feel secure have to do with what they own Western culture is underpinned by this notion that you can own other living things: you can own land; in the old days you could own slaves; if you’re a man you can approach the women in your family as possessions; you possess your children in a lot of ways. I do believe that relationships between living things, based on the idea of ownership, are inherently tragic because they’re inherently an illusion. (226)

In Smiley’s conception of ownership and patriarchy, as in *Lear*, insecurity drives the need for possession, which in turn leads to tragedy. But in her novel, curiously, tragedy the magnitude of *Lear* is largely averted even though actual incestuous rape has taken place.

¹⁶ Smiley’s comments come from an interview in *More Writers and Company: New Conversations with CBC*

In her version, Caroline (Cordelia) emerges, not as the champion of truth, but as the stubborn proponent of appearances, a staunch believer in the value of ignoring the whole truth. The story is told from the perspective of Ginny (Goneril) through whom Smiley communicates a defining characteristic of the incest taboo-- it isolates all involved parties and drives the perpetrator (whose guilt begins in thought and is only worsened through action) into himself. Ginny's own transgressions allow her to come to a certain understanding of her father's ability to abuse his daughters: "I can't say that I forgive my father, but now I can imagine what he probably chose never to remember-- the goad of an unthinkable urge, pricking him, pressing him, wrapping him in an impenetrable fog of self that must have seemed . . . like the very darkness" (371).

In the world of Smiley's novel, incestuous abuse is made possible-- even indicated-- by the absence, perhaps avoidance, of overt reference to it. Similarly, for other critics and readers of *King Lear*, the lack of explicitly expressed incestuous desire, on the part of Lear towards any of his daughters, hardly discourages suspicion, despite the prevalence of obvious dramatizations of incest in Shakespeare's England. As the taboo has grown in new directions, absence of overt reference tends to suggest to the modern reader fertile ground for its presence; it becomes an explanation for the tragic outcome of *Lear*. Smiley's book suggests that where there is extremity of anger and passion that cannot be immediately justified-- regarding past or offstage events-- the potential for incest or other deviance needs to be addressed.

In not explicitly writing incest into the play, Shakespeare sets us up to impose/expose our own dirty little proclivity to see it even where may not be. In the absence of mix-and-match Renaissance incest structures, we build the scaffolding of incest into *Lear*. Though we

can no longer rely on the formulaic inclusion of incest, the violation of the incest prohibition comes into play in a relationship that we can't quite understand, in the *fact* of our inability to make out the exact bounds of the relationship. In a sense, Shakespeare robs us of the comfort afforded by clearly negative illustrations of that taboo in violation. For the modern audience, the question of incest is inextricably bound in the issues of power imbalance and sexual violence. These associations make it difficult to separate the prohibitions governing incest from incest itself. To question the social rules designed to prevent incidents of incest is to question the immorality of violating the prohibition, an act of sexual violence. We place quantitative restrictions on love in order to restrict it qualitatively. Faced with the difficulty-- or danger-- of disassociating the incest prohibition from actual acts of violence, rape, or even sex, we conflate them. We expect such violations to be punished so, for us, punishment indicates transgression.

Reading a darker purpose in *King Lear*-- or into it, in the case of Smiley-- might reveal something about our stakes in coming to terms with our own motivations, limitations, and phobias when confronted with paradoxes we cannot resolve, with the "unthinkable." Violating the prohibition governing incest and harboring incestuous thoughts and desires, Lear is an incestuous father; however, these aspects of his character do not destroy him as a sympathetic character. Shakespeare asks the playgoer and critic to push his or her notions of father-daughter relationships beyond convention and beyond social "curiosity." Here is a unique example of father-daughter love. Lear forces us to confront a possibility as unnerving for us as it would have been to the Elizabethans-- a violation of the incest taboo as potentially curative.

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