

**Skenè Studies I • 2**

*Oedipus at Colonus* and *King Lear*:  
Classical and Early Modern Intersections

Edited by Silvia Bigliuzzi



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## Fathers Cursing Children: Anger and Justice in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*

SETH L. SCHEIN

### Abstract

This paper elucidates the dramatic and ethical significance of verbal assaults by fathers against their children in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*, especially of the angry, hateful curses they hurl at them (e.g. *OC* 421-7, 789-90, 1372-82, *KL* 1.1.109-21, 1.4.267-81). It moves from close, comparative study of the language of the curses, the dramatic contexts in which they are delivered, and the ways in which they are motivated, to a broader discussion of the family dynamics that the fathers' discourses are part of, the institutions and values they both exemplify and pervert, and the fathers' changing understanding of their own responsibility for what they do and suffer. On the one hand, such discussion throws light on the essentially positive achievement of Oedipus, who dies successfully and gains honour posthumously as, in effect, one of the Eumenides, with the power to dispense intrafamilial, retaliatory justice and to benefit Athens. On the other, it illuminates the horrifically destructive and self-destructive failure of Lear, who unleashes suffering on an individual, social, and cosmic scale that the play challenges readers and viewers to consider meaningful

KEYWORDS: *Oedipus at Colonus*; *King Lear*; curse

In this essay I reflect comparatively on the passages in *Oedipus at Colonus* and *King Lear* in which Oedipus angrily curses his sons, Eteocles and Polynices (*OC* 421-7, 785-90, 1372-88), and Lear his daughters, Cordelia and Goneril (*KL* 1.1.109-21, 1.4.267-81; cf. 2.2.335).<sup>1</sup> I am not concerned with the possible influence, direct or

<sup>1</sup> For *King Lear*, I refer to Foakes 1997; for *Oedipus at Colonus*, to Avezzù

indirect, of Sophocles' play on Shakespeare's, as argued recently by John Kerrigan, but with thematic and emotional affinities (2018: 63-82, 127-32). In both works, the protagonist's angry curses are retaliatory responses to what each father considers a fundamental injustice, a disturbance of natural order consisting of filial ingratitude. The curses serve as windows into their speakers' minds: they show Oedipus and Lear in psychological extremity, and their loss of control in the grip of anger makes their inner worlds especially visible as they shatter the bonds that naturally link fathers and children (Kerrigan 2016: 351-6). In this way the curses draw a reader or viewer into the distinctive themes and interpretative challenges of each play. Oedipus' curses mark stages in his essentially positive dramatic journey towards death and posthumous honour and power as a 'hero', a chthonic divinity resembling the Erinyes/Eumenides in his ability to dispense intrafamilial, retaliatory justice and to benefit Athens. Lear's curses, on the other hand, are early expressions of his mental disintegration and destructive and self-destructive behaviour as father and king, of his (and the play's) negative dramatic trajectory in fulfilment of a "darker purpose" (1.1.35) that goes well beyond "the division of the kingdom" (1.1.14).

*Oedipus at Colonus* affirms the existence of justice in its dramatic universe, a justice that features a special intimacy and ultimate harmony between the human and the divine. In *King Lear*, on the other hand, although some characters invoke or assert the existence of divine justice,<sup>2</sup> the play as a whole shows these assertions to be at best partial or superficial and affirms neither divine justice nor any emotionally satisfying or intellectually meaningful relationship between divinity and humanity. Unlike Oedipus' curses, which culminate in his divinely assisted progress towards death and apotheosis and illustrate his power to help friends, harm enemies, and protect Athens, Lear's curses benefit neither

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et al. 2008. All translations of Greek texts are my own.

2 E.g. Albany at 4.2.79-81, "This shows you are above, / You justicers, that these our nether crimes / So speedily can venge"; Edgar at 5.3.168-71, "The gods are just and of our pleasant vices / Make instruments to plague us: / The dark and vicious place where thee he got / Cost him his eyes".

himself nor his community.

For Oedipus, his sons' ingratitude consists in their unjust failure over many years to live up to the obligations of *φιλία* ("kinship"): he accuses Eteocles and Polynices of violating this natural, intrafamilial bond and causing his sufferings as an impoverished exile and wanderer. His accusation would have resonated strongly with a late fifth-century Athenian audience, whose legal responsibilities as citizens included caring for their parents.<sup>3</sup> Lear's curses on his daughters, however, go beyond questions of natural or legal obligations and express both his fundamental insecurity regarding his masculinity and his shame at the possible exposure of this insecurity.<sup>4</sup>

The word 'curse', at least for purposes of this essay, has two main meanings, both associated with vengeance for a (supposed) offence against moral or religious standards: first, "an utterance consigning, or supposed or intended to consign, (a person or thing) to spiritual and temporal evil, the vengeance of the deity, the blasting of malignant fate, etc." (*OED* s.v. *curse*, n. 1.a); second, "the evil inflicted by divine (or supernatural) power in response to an imprecation or in the way of retributive punishment" (*OED*

3 A law attributed to Solon in Diogenes Laertius 1.55 states, *ἐάν τις μὴ τρέφῃ τοὺς γονέας, ἄτιμος ἔστω* ("if someone does not care for his parents, let him be deprived of public rights"). Though the attribution to Solon has been called into question (Ruschenbusch 1966: 42-3, 55; Leão and Rhodes 2016: 97), it seems clear that such a law and others having to do with the care of elderly parents existed in classical Athens (Harrison 1968: 78 with n1; Leão and Rhodes 2016: 92-7). They would have been among the traditional laws examined by a legal commission between 410/9 and 403/2 and officially reaffirmed by the restored democracy in 403/2, and would, therefore, have been in the public consciousness at the time *OC* was composed (c. 407-405) and shortly before its first production in 401 (Easterling 1967: 7n1). Apart from legal responsibility, Athenians, like all Greeks, had a generally acknowledged moral responsibility to treat elderly parents well, in return for the parents having taken care of them as children (*τροφεία*); of importance for the interpretation of Sophocles' play, this responsibility included giving them a proper burial and taking care of their graves in the future (see Cameron 1971: 85-95).

4 On shame as Lear's principle motivation throughout the play, see Cavell 1987: 58-61, 67-72.



s.v. curse, n. 4.a).<sup>5</sup> At its weakest, a curse may be no more than a wish, expressed by the optative in Greek and by the subjunctive in English. Stronger curses can employ the present or future indicative and be prophetic. Because curses often call upon the gods, they frequently resemble prayers in both diction and intent. Typically, a prayer requests something desired by and beneficial to the speaker, but when this “something” involves seeing one’s enemies “perish” (ὀλέσθαι) or meet with “justice” (δίκη) in the form of “payback” (τίσις), the prayer becomes a curse. Curses are often strengthened by oaths invoking a god or the gods generally, especially the Furies, as constituting or guaranteeing the just and natural order, and sometimes what is called a curse is actually an oath, or, as in the case of Lear’s furious words to Cordelia at 1.1.109-17, what John Kerrigan calls “an oath that wants to be a curse” (2016: 351). Curses with oaths are often emotionally heightened appeals for justice and for the restoration of what the speaker sees as naturally right.

In Attic tragedy, the two main meanings of ‘curse’ sometimes combine or overlap. For example, in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, Aegisthus recalls how Thyestes kicked over the dining table, cursing Atreus for serving him the hideous feast: “thus perish all the race of Pleisthenes” (οὕτως ὀλέσθαι πᾶν τὸ Πλεισθένους γένος, *Ag.* 1602).<sup>6</sup> Thyestes’ words give rise to the ‘curse’ henceforth dwelling in the house, which manifests itself elsewhere in the play as the “abiding, terrible, treacherous / housekeeper, rising again in response, / a mindful, child-avenger wrath” (μίμνει γὰρ φοβερὰ παλινόρτος / οικονόμος δολία, μνάμων μῆνις τεκνόποιος, *Ag.* 154-5); the “revel of kindred Furies, drunk on mortal blood, / remaining in the house, hard to send away” (βροτειῶν αἶμα κῶμος ἐν δόμοις μένει, / δύσπεμπτος ἔξω, συγγόνων Ἐρινύων, *Ag.* 1189-90), whom Cassandra sees “sitting on the house . . . , and they sing a song / of the delusion that was the first origin of ruin, and in turn spit out revulsion / against the brother’s bed [that became an] enemy to the man trampling on it” (ὑμνοῦσι ὕμνον δώμασι

5 Quoted by Watson 1991: 1-2.

6 For Aeschylus, I cite Murray 1957 (sometimes modified). All translations are my own.

προσημέναι / πρώταρχον ἄτης· ἐν μέρει δ' ἀπέπτυσαν / εὐνάς ἀδελφοῦ τῶι πατοῦντι δυσμενεῖς, Aesch. Ag. 1191-3); and “the ancient, harsh spirit of vengeance” (ὁ παλαιὸς δριμύς ἀλάστωρ) that Clytemnestra sings of as visible in her own form (Ag. 1500-1).<sup>7</sup> Both meanings of ‘curse’ are also present in Aesch. *Seven against Thebes* 832-3 ὦ μέλαινα καὶ τελεία / γένεος Οἰδίου τ' ἄρά (“O dark and conclusive / curse of Oedipus and his family”), ambiguous words in which γένεος and Οἰδίου can be understood as either subjective or objective genitives, so that different members of Aeschylus’ audience would probably have taken them in different ways, as have his readers.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, in Aeschylus’ *Seven against Thebes* (785-91), the chorus sing that Oedipus,

τέκνοις ἀθλίας ἐφήκεν	785
ἐπικότος τροφᾶς, αἰαῖ,	
πικρογλώσσους ἄρας,	
καί σφε σιδαρονόμῳ	
διὰ χερί ποτε λαχεῖν	
κτήματα· νῦν δὲ τρέω	790
μὴ τελέσῃ καμψίπους Ἐρινύς	

[angered with his sons for their wretched	785
care for him, aiai, let loose	
bitter-tongued curses	
that those two would actually,	
with iron-wielding hand, one day divide	
his possessions. And now I tremble	790
lest the Fury bending her fleet foot bring this to pass.] <sup>9</sup>	

<sup>7</sup> See Fraenkel 1962: 3.710-12, Medda 2017: 3.379-82.

<sup>8</sup> For example, the scholiast on 832-4 (Smith 1982: 352) apparently understands them as a kind of objective genitive hendiadys and is followed by Lupaş and Petre (1981: 256), while Wilamowitz (1914: 83) opposes Οἰδίου as subjective genitive to γένεος as objective genitive (cf. Hutchinson 1985: 186). However interpreted, γένεος Οἰδίου τ' ἄρά aligns the curse spoken by Oedipus with that already present in the family, ever since Laios’ transgression against Apollo’s oracular warning not to father a child (and perhaps ever since his kidnapping and rape of Chrysippus, if this version of the story was known to Aeschylus and mentioned in Laius, earlier in the trilogy; see Mastronarde 1994: 35-7, Kannicht 2004: 2.878).

<sup>9</sup> Here and elsewhere I borrow several phrases from Hecht and Bacon

This happens when the two brothers, meeting in combat (816-19),

διέλαχον σφυρηλάτῳ  
 Σκύθη σιδῆρῳ κτημάτων παμπησίαν·  
 ἔξουσι δ' ἦν λάβωσιν ἐν τάφῳ χθονός,  
 πατρὸς κατ' εὐχᾶς δυσπότημῳς φορούμενοι

[divided with hammered-out  
 Scythian iron their full inheritance of possessions;  
 and they will have (only) the land which they take in burial,  
 ill-fatedly swept away on (the wind of) their father's prayers.]<sup>10</sup>

It is not always easy to decide whether the word “curse” refers mainly to a spoken imprecation or to the condition caused by it, especially when the ‘condition’ consists of the evils called for in the imprecation (Watson 1991: 1-2). The Greek words ἀραΐ and κατάραι can refer equally to “imprecations” and to continuing states of divine displeasure; personified as the “Curses”, the Ἀραΐ are another name for the Ἐρινύες, the “Furies” (e.g. Aesch. *Eum.* 417), or implicitly or explicitly associated with them (e.g. Soph. *OT* 418, *El.* 111).<sup>11</sup> In *Oedipus at Colonus*, both senses of ‘curse’ are in play: Oedipus, constantly full of anger (θυμός), curses his sons in the three passages mentioned at the beginning of this essay, consigning them to mutual destruction. In so doing he creates a family curse, like the curse created by Thyestes in the *Agamemnon*, which echoes the prophetic curse traditionally attributed to Oedipus (e.g. *Thebais* frs. 2.7-10, 3.3 Bernabé; Aesch. *Sept.* 720-5, 785-91, 818-19), that Eteocles and Polynices would divide their in-

1973.

<sup>10</sup> διαλαγχάνω is similarly used of the brothers, “cursed” to “divide this house by lot with iron”, at Eur. *Phoe.* 67-8, probably a reminiscence of this passage. For the literal and figurative use of φορέω in the passive to describe ships carried away or storm-tossed, see Alcaeus fr. 326.4, Eur. *Suppl.* 144. Here, 819 πατρὸς κατ' εὐχᾶς δυσπότημῳς φορούμενοι transfers the play's nautical imagery from the “ship of state” (e.g. 3, 62-4, 208-10) to the accursed family. Cf. Aesch. *Sept.* 690-1 ἴτω κατ' οὐρον, κῦμα Κωκυτοῦ λαχόν, / Φοίβῳ στυγηθὲν πᾶν τὸ Λαΐου γένος (“Let the whole race of Laius, hated by Phoebus, / go, blown by the wind along the wave of Cocytos, as is their lot”); see Thalmann 1978: 35.

<sup>11</sup> On the terminology for curses, see Kakridis 1929: 5-9.

heritance and kill one another in war.<sup>12</sup> The words τοῦμφυλον αἶμα (407) associate this curse with the pollution arising from Oedipus' killing of his father and mating with his mother, even though elsewhere in the play Oedipus insists that he was the victim rather than the agent of these deeds (ἐπεὶ τά γ' ἔργα με / πεπονθότ' ἴσθι μᾶλλον ἢ δεδρακότα, 266-7; "for know that I suffered / more than I did these deeds"), and that he is innocent because he acted in ignorance and they were unintended (270-4, 962-90).

In *King Lear*, there is no trace of such a family curse. The angry imprecations that Lear lets loose on his daughters are self-generated and idiosyncratic; they stem from his thwarted will and frustrated need for gratification. Similarly, while the curse of Oedipus on his sons was part of the traditional myth, there is no evidence that this kind of curse was traditional in the story of Lear, who does not formally curse his daughters in *The Moste Famous Chronicle Historye of Leir King of England and His Three Daughters*, generally considered to be the main 'source' of Shakespeare's play (Anonymous 1605; Michie 1991), or in other versions of the story that Shakespeare could have known.

Oedipus and Lear curse their children as a way of trying to control them. For example, the first of the three paternal curses in *Oedipus at Colonus* is really no more than Oedipus' angry wish for mastery over his sons' destiny in the coming battle, because they did nothing to prevent him from being forced into exile against his will and are now eager to control him, in order to further their own political ambitions (421-7):

ἀλλ' οἱ θεοὶ σφιν μήτε τὴν πεπρωμένην  
 ἔριν κατασβέσειαν, ἐν δ' ἔμοι τέλος  
 αἰτοῖν γένοιτο τῆσδε τῆς μάχης πέρι,  
 ἧς νῦν ἔχονται κάπαναίρονται δόρυ·  
 ὡς οὔτ' ἂν ὄς νῦν σκῆπτρα καὶ θρόνους ἔχει  
 μείνειεν, οὔτ' ἂν οὐξεληλυθῶς πάλιν  
 ἔλθοι ποτ' αὖθις. 425

12 Oedipus' curse may also resonate with a curse supposedly pronounced by Pelops on Laius and his family, after Laius kidnapped and raped Pelops's son Chrysippus (above, n8).

[May the gods not quench their fated  
 strife, and may the fulfillment be in my hands  
 concerning this battle of theirs on which  
 those two are now set, and they are raising their spears;  
 so that neither he who now holds the sceptre and the throne 425  
 would remain, nor he who has gone into exile  
 would ever come back.]

The second passage (787-90) also springs from anger and is stronger and more vivid than the first. Oedipus tells Creon, who has come as Eteocles' agent to force him back to Thebes:

οὐκ ἔστι σοι ταῦτ', ἀλλὰ σοι τάδ' ἔστ', ἐκεῖ  
 χώρας ἀλάστωρ οὐμός ἐνναίων ἀεί·  
 ἔστιν δὲ παισὶ τοῖς ἐμοῖσι τῆς ἐμῆς  
 χθονὸς λαχεῖν τοσοῦτον, ἐνθανεῖν μόνον. 790

[That is impossible for you, but this is possible: my  
 vengeful spirit dwelling there, always in place,  
 and for my children, to obtain as their share so much  
 of my land as (suffices) only to die in. 790]

In this passage, echoing *Seven against Thebes* (818-9), Oedipus no longer wishes, but forcefully asserts, in the indicative, what will happen, from his own certain knowledge of what is and is not possible. The word ἀλάστωρ ("vengeful spirit") names the curse on the house, the malignant destiny that is here unleashed, or at least enhanced, by Oedipus' words.

In the third, more developed passage (1372-88), Oedipus angrily tells Polynices, a suppliant for his support in the expedition against Thebes,

οὐ γὰρ ἔσθ' ὅπως πόλιν  
 κείνην ἐρείψεις, ἀλλὰ πρόσθεν αἵματι  
 πεσῆ μιανθεὶς χῶ ζύναμιος ἐξ ἴσου.  
 τοιάσδ' ἀράς σφῶν πρόσθε τ' ἐξανῆκ' ἐγώ, 1375  
 νῦν τ' ἀνακαλοῦμαι ξυμμάχους ἐλθεῖν ἐμοί,  
 ἴν' ἀξιῶτον τοὺς φυτεύσαντας σέβειν,  
 καὶ μὴ ἕατιμάζητον, εἰ τυφλοῦ πατρὸς  
 τοιάδ' ἔφυτον· αἶδε γὰρ τάδ' οὐκ ἔδρων.  
 τοιγὰρ τὸ σὸν θάκημα καὶ τοὺς σοῦς θρόνους 1380  
 κρατοῦσιν, εἴπερ ἔστιν ἡ παλαίφατος

Δίκη ξύνεδρος Ζηνὸς ἀρχαίοις νόμοις.  
 σὺ δ' ἔρρ' ἀπόπτυστός τε κἀπάτῳ ἐμοῦ,  
 κακῶν κάκιστε, τάσδε συλλαβῶν ἀράς,  
 ἄς σοι καλοῦμαι, μήτε γῆς ἐμφυλίου 1385  
 δόρει κρατῆσαι μήτε νοστήσαι ποτε  
 τὸ κοῖλον Ἄργος, ἀλλὰ συγγενεῖ χερὶ  
 θανεῖν κτανεῖν θ' ὑφ' οὔπερ ἐξελήλασαι.

[There is no way  
 you will destroy that city, but before (that) you will fall  
 polluted with blood, (you) and your blood brother equally.  
 Such curses I let loose against the two of you previously, 1375  
 and now I call on them to come as my allies,  
 so that you two may think it right to revere those who begat you,  
 and not utterly dishonor them, (even) if the father is blind from whom  
 you two, such as you are, were born. For these two girls did not do this.  
 Therefore (these curses) shall overwhelm your suppliant posture 1380  
 and your throne, if Justice, revealed of old,  
 sits beside Zeus by (right of) ancient laws.  
 Away with you, whom I spit upon and un-father,  
 you vilest of the vile; take with you these curses,  
 which I call down on you, neither to dominate with the spear 1385  
 your native land nor ever to return home to hill-ringed  
 Argos, but to die by a kindred hand  
 and kill him by whom you have been driven out.]

Here Oedipus repeatedly uses the word ἀράς (“curses”) and relies on Zeus and Justice for support, pointedly specifying that it is Justice who sits beside Zeus (ξύνεδρος, 1382), though Polyneices, when supplicating his father, had opportunistically spoken of Shame (Αἰδώς), which Jebb glosses as “Compassion” (Jebb 1900: 199 on 1267-8), as the “partner of Zeus’ throne” (σύνθακος θρόνων).<sup>13</sup> Oedipus retaliates against his sons for their failure to

13 Easterling (1967: 7) points out that σύνθακος is a Sophoclean *hapax legomenon* and that Polynices’ language here meaningfully brings together Oedipus’ references to his sons as preferring τὴν τυραννίδα over his own desire to be recalled (418) with Eteocles’ currently holding σκῆπτρα καὶ θρόνους (“the sceptre and the throne”, 425), both sons’ choice of θρόνους / καὶ σκῆπτρα (“the throne and the sceptre”, 449) over their father, and Polynices’ “suppliant state”. Polynices’ appeal and Oedipus’ curses, which “shall overwhelm your suppliant posture and your ‘throne’” (1480-1), invite a

respect him; he assumes full power to control his and their fate and thus confirms the authority and power attributed to him by the oracles. It is, of course, appropriate by Greek ethical standards to harm someone who has harmed you, but Antigone had pleaded with Oedipus that it would not be right for him (μηδέ . . . θέμις . . . εἶναι) to retaliate against a son whom he had sired, even if that son committed the most impious wrongs against him (1189-91), and she had reminded him of his own sufferings at the hands of his parents. Although she convinces her father to hear what Polynices has to say, Oedipus' anger and confidence in his own sense of right and wrong are too strong for Polynices' persuasion. Oedipus cannot know, as the audience or reader knows, that his curse on his sons will eventually result in the destruction of Antigone too, who has, out of love, shared his harsh existence and done more than anyone to help him – though it is unclear that he would act differently, if he did know. Oedipus concludes by calling on “the hateful, paternal darkness of Tartarus” (τὸ Ταρτάρου / στρυγνὸν πατρῶον ἔρεβος, 1389-90), implying not only “his own affinity, as the father of his sons, to the chthonian deities of whom he will soon be one” (Blundell 1989: 256), but also the affinity of his curse on these sons to the ancestral curse on the family of the Labdacids.

Lear's curses against his daughters, like those of Oedipus against his sons, are made in sudden bursts of anger at what he considers his unfilial and unjust treatment at their hands. When Cordelia refuses to play her prescribed role in the so-called love test by outbidding her sisters in professing love for their father, firmly insisting on her adherence to the reciprocal bond between them, even when he threatens and disinherits her (Foakes 1997: 165, Kerrigan 2016: 350-1), Lear first asks with incredulity, “So young and so untender?” (1.1.107). Then, in response to her direct and understated reply, “So young, my lord, and true” (1.1.108), he explodes in a grandiloquent curse, intensified by an oath (1.1.109-21):

Well, let it be so. Thy truth then be thy dower.  
For by the sacred radiance of the sun,

110

The mysteries of Hecate and the night,  
 By all the operation of the orbs  
 From whom we do exist and cease to be,  
 Here I disclaim all my paternal care,  
 Propinquity and property of blood, 115  
 And as a stranger to my heart and me  
 Hold thee from this forever. The barbarous Scythian  
 Or he that makes his generation messes  
 To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom  
 Be as well neighboured, pitied and relieved 120  
 As thou, my sometime daughter.

It is unclear to what “from this” (117) refers. Does Lear simply mean “from this time on”? Does he gesture towards his heart, the map or the coronet (Foakes 1997: 165-6 on 117)? In any case, his radical attack on Cordelia stems from his frustrated need to control her as both a child and a female and from his inability to do so. His emphatic claim in lines 117-21, that he shall have more sympathy and pity for a cannibalistic parent who devours his offspring than for Cordelia, reveals the extremity of both his conscious hatred of his daughter and his unconscious identification with the most selfishly destructive of parents. In swearing by Hecate and the heavenly bodies “from whom we do exist and cease to be” (113), Lear, like Gloucester in his assertion of astrological influence on Edmund’s bastardy (1.2), elides his own parental role and responsibility for Cordelia’s life and well-being; at the same time, he tries to punish her perceived lack of filial respect by denying her the possibility of a marriage that would provide her with the opportunity for lawful procreation. Lear’s frustration and his curse stem not only from his hatred but from his love of Cordelia, which, as he says explicitly, was greater than that he felt for Goneril and Regan. He is ashamed of having been prepared, in effect, to make her his mother and of having failed to do so, in both ways compromising his own masculine authority: “I loved her most, and thought to set my rest / On her kind nursery” (1.1.123-4). Lear had been ready to give her “a third more opulent than your sisters” (1.1.86), if she were to satisfy his need for a more fulsome assertion of her love. When, however, she insists that she loves him “According to my bond, no more, no less”



(1.1.93) and goes on to explain her words with reference to the love she will bear her future husband, Lear cannot contain his fury and instantly un-fathers her. While Oedipus nurses for many years the anger at his sons' desire for power and unwillingness to care for him, which leads him to conclude, "You two are born from another, and not from me" (ὕμεῖς δ' ἄπ' ἄλλου κοῦκ ἐμοῦ πεφύκατον, 1369; see Easterling 1967: 9), Lear's furious rejection of Cordelia and of his own paternity is an irrational, sudden response to a perceived thwarting of his desire on a single occasion by the person he loves most in the world, an expression of his desperate and pathetic need for personal control at the moment when he is surrendering his political authority.

Lear later disowns his paternity in a different way, when a daughter does not live up to his fantasy of appropriate filial behavior. When Regan tells him she is glad to see him, he replies (2.2.318-21),

Regan, I think you are. I know what reason  
I have to think so. If thou shouldst not be glad,  
I would divorce me from thy mother's tomb,  
Sepulchring an adulteress.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, if Regan were not glad to see Lear, that is, if she were not living up to the image and expectation he has of her as his daughter, she would, in Lear's fantasy, be her mother's daughter – the mother whom Lear would disown for her infidelity.

The strongest link between Lear's emotionally charged effort to control a supposedly disobedient daughter and his sense that such a daughter is not really his child can be seen in 1.4. When Goneril urges him "A little to disquantity your train" of one hundred knights (1.4.240), he exclaims, "Darkness and devils!" and "Degenerate bastard!" (1.4.243, 245), as if her refusal to accommodate the hundred knights were evidence that she is aligned with the powers of evil, that she is not really his child biologically, and that (paradoxically) she has declined from his standard of

<sup>14</sup> These lines are equivalent to 2.4.130-3 in the conventional numbering, standard since the eighteenth century; 2.2 in Foakes 1997 is usually divided into three separate scenes.

nobility. Here again Lear disclaims responsibility for a daughter who thwarts his will, and when he cannot control her, he bemoans her: “Ingratitude, thou marble-hearted fiend, / More hideous when thou shows’t thee in a child / Than the sea-monster” (1.4.251-3). Then his anger at Goneril’s perceived lack of sympathy and filial love leads him to strike at her procreativity in a horrific, sweeping curse that is even more powerful than his earlier curse against Cordelia (1.4.267-81):

Hear, Nature, hear, dear goddess, hear:  
 Suspend thy purpose if thou didst intend  
 To make this creature fruitful:  
 Into her womb convey sterility, 270  
 Dry up in her the organs of increase,  
 And from her derogate body never spring  
 A babe to honour her. If she must teem,  
 Create her child of spleen, that it may live  
 And be a thwart, disnatured torment to her. 275  
 Let it stamp wrinkles in her brow of youth,  
 With cadent tears fret channels in her cheeks,  
 Turn all her mother’s pains and benefits  
 To laughter and contempt, that she may feel  
 How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is 280  
 To have a thankless child.

Lear’s address to “Nature” as “dear goddess” recalls Edmund’s “Thou, Nature, art my goddess” in 1.2, and Lear’s curse, which undoes his invocation of “Nature as a creative force”, virtually makes nature unnatural (cf. “denatured torment,” 275) and “almost aligns him with Edmund” (Foakes 1997: 208 on 1.4.267). As in the case of Cordelia, Lear tries to control a daughter by controlling her procreativity, this time by cursing her with sterility rather than by trying to block her marriage; in this way Goneril will pay the penalty for what he considers to be his own condition of not having a child to honour him. Then, as if allowing for the possibility that she may in fact give birth, he calls on the goddess to make her child “of spleen”, that is, violent and ill-tempered, which is how he experiences his own daughters.

The language in which Lear curses Goneril is fundamental to his sense of his own gender identity (1.4.288-93):

Life and death, I am ashamed  
 That thou hast power to shake my manhood thus,  
 That these hot tears, which break from me perforce,           290  
 Should make thee worth them. Blasts and fogs upon thee!  
 Th'untented woundings of a father's curse  
 Pierce every sense about thee!

Lear's "hot tears" are grounded in the realization and shame that Goneril has the power "to shake my manhood" and anticipate his later calling on the heavens to "touch me with noble anger / And let not women's weapons, water-drops, / Stain my man's cheeks" (2.2.465-7). As Janet Adelman argues, "Shakespeare's heroes not only struggle against signs of femininity in themselves, but detect these signs especially in their powerlessness", particularly, as Madelon Gohlke observes, their powerlessness "in relation to a controlling or powerful woman" (Adelman 1992: 298n17; Gohlke 1980: 175).

Lear understands his own tears as dangerously feminine. A reader or viewer might understand them as one step on Lear's way to his even more terrifying "identification with his daughters and . . . fear of the mother within" (Adelman 1992: 298n17, citing Kahn 1982: 37-9, 1986: 36, 43-4), which are most clearly expressed in his exclamation at 2.2.246-8: "O, how this mother swells up toward my heart! / *Hysterica passio*, down, thou climbing sorrow, / Thy element's below." In these lines Lear tries to repress what he sees as the threat to his male identity by the archetypal female condition of the suffocating, wandering womb, known as "the mother". Elsewhere he virtually identifies "the mother" whose "element's below" with female sexuality generally, which he locates similarly in a violently obscene outburst (4.6.120-5):

The fitchew, nor the soiled horse, goes to't with a more riotous appetite. Down from the waist they are centaurs, though women all above. But to the girdle do the gods inherit, beneath is all the fiend's: there's hell, there's darkness, there is the sulphurous pit, burning, scalding, stench, consumption. Fie, fie, fie! Pah, pah!<sup>15</sup>

15 Most editions print 120-3 as irregular verse, which may be correct. Lear's lines from 110 on become metrically uneven, as "his disgust with his daughters leads to his misogynistic outburst against all women" (Foakes

Lear's repression becomes ineffective when he is forced, in the course of his madness in 3.4 and 4.6, to recognize both his own "origin in the suffocating maternal womb" and the presence of the female within him, which complements his recognition of his "complicity in the making of his daughters" (Adelman 1992: 114). Lear realizes not only that he cannot control his children – is not their "author" – but that he has lost all the authority he thought he had over "his family, his kingdom and subjects, his very own being" (Poole 1987: 232).<sup>16</sup>

I hope, even in this brief essay, to have shown how careful attention to the angry curses that Oedipus and Lear unleash against their children can open privileged pathways into the main themes and interpretative challenges of *Oedipus at Colonus* and *King Lear*. This is because the curses work in much the same way as figurative language does, allowing audiences and readers to gain an intimate sense of Oedipus and Lear in emotional extremity. Both fathers experience intergenerational conflict as an assault on patriarchal authority and, in the case of Lear, on gender identity, and they respond in language that itself breaks the bonds of natural kinship. Lear's curses signal, relatively early in the play, the catastrophic impotence with which he struggles against understanding that he has given away not only his kingship but all of what he considered his paternal power and authority. On the other hand, Oedipus' final, "terrifying curse", which angrily and hatefully condemns his sons to certain death, is "the culminating revelation of [his] power . . . to impose destiny" (Seale 1982: 135); it anticipates his ability to die on his own terms, leading the way to the

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1997: 336 on 4.6.120-7). It is interesting to contrast Lear's negative revulsion from "darkness" here and at 1.4.243 ("Darkness and devils!") with Oedipus' embrace of darkness in his invocation of the "dread goddesses . . . Daughters of Earth and Darkness" (39-40), whose grove he has entered, as γλυκεῖαι παῖδες ἀρχαίου σκότου ("sweet daughters of primeval darkness", 106), and his calling on "the hateful, paternal darkness of Tartaros" (1389-90) to enforce his curse on Eteocles and Polynices.

16 Poole (1987: 231-2) cites Strindberg's remarkable insight into the devastating effect of Lear's realization of the power within him of his dead wife, the mother of his children, whom in effect he identifies with "the mother" (Strindberg 1967: 97-8).

site of his eventual tomb (1544-8), and the power that he will wield posthumously as a hero. The curses with which both fathers respond to perceived violations of justice and the natural order help to shatter that order, characterizing them ethically and giving each play its distinctive dramatic and intellectual force.<sup>17</sup>

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